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The Search for Meaning in Government Service

Question: Why doesn't the civil servant look out her window in the morning?

Answer: So she'll have something to do in the afternoon.

—Carroll and Siegel (1999, 181)

This kind of joke, of course, is not exactly what government servants want associated with their work, nor do they find it especially humorous. That said, government workers remain one of the few unprotected societal groups that can now safely be maligned in such jokes. To be sure, it is not easy being a public servant in the so-called postmodern era, a time when the meaning of public service is grounded in the idea of the free market (McSwite 2002).

Doing the public's work, in my opinion, has always been a noble calling even though working in government does not always conjure up positive images among citizens. Ideally, especially in jurisdictions that are structured on democratic principles, the link between the governed and the governors should be both authentic and transparent, which would allow citizens to remain engaged with and expect only the very best from their public servants. Similarly, the delivery of public goods and services by or through government should always reflect a passion for excellence, a concern for guarding the public's trust, and a focus on advancing the public welfare.

It also seems that, irrespective of one's political persuasion or perspective on the proper size and role of government, the concept of public service should be viewed with respect rather than disdain. And public employment, it would follow, should by definition provide a path that is both honorable and meaningful.

However, the attractiveness of seeking a job in the public sector—let alone a career path—waxes and wanes. While the situation today may not be new compared to previous periods in history, its implications, especially in terms of what it portends for the future, are far-reaching and profound. Indeed, the capacity of all democratic nation-states to administer the public's interest stands at risk if they don't do an effective job of addressing the

issues confronting government service at all levels and in all categories of employment—elected, appointed, and civil service.

To be sure, there are many formidable challenges facing public-sector employment which must be tackled. In this regard, the three R's—retirement, recruitment, and retention—are among the contemporary challenges requiring action and opportunities for public-sector transformation. Likewise, it has been suggested that civil service systems may be broken, which is more than reason for alarm as we begin to contemplate the *raison d'être* and position of government service in the twenty-first century. Add to these forces the continuing challenges associated with the privatization of public services and those embedded in generations that have yet to converge on their adult identity—think Generations X and Millenium—and it is no wonder that government employment is often viewed with suspicion, ambivalence, and even disrespect.

"It's close enough for government work." "Innovation in government is an oxymoron." Statements such as these are not only indictments of those in the public's employ, but also reflections of ourselves, for, as Aristotle observed in the *Politics*, "Government is more than a legal structure, more than an arrangement of offices; it is a manner of life, a moral spirit" (cited in Pattakos 1995, 318). For public servants, Aristotle's wisdom strikes at the heart and soul of who they are and what they have chosen to do. It also reflects the concept and spirit of public service in significant ways, for it suggests that working in government really does mean something—above and beyond the obvious fact of gainful employment.

Not everyone who works in government, of course, is aware of, let alone admits to, such fundamental existen-

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tial concerns. Yet, the search for meaning at work, including that derived from government service, has moved center stage, and the need to reflect on the meaning of our work is perhaps greater today than ever before. People in all walks of life are becoming more comfortable asking the “big” questions, that is, those dealing with their meaning and purpose in life, as witnessed by the number of self-help books, organizations, and online support groups that have mushroomed in recent years. The popular media, both electronic and print, have contributed (or perhaps have reacted) to this meaning-centered dialogue in ways that have only accelerated its growth, intensity, and popular acceptance. From a distinctly organizational perspective, it has also been suggested that questions dealing with the human quest for meaning “must necessarily receive their first expression in public organizations” (Denhardt 1993, 19).

The Viennese psychiatrist and philosopher Viktor E. Frankl (1959) espoused that “man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life.” And it is this key principle—Frankl called it our *will to meaning*—that has prompted me over the years to explore the existential needs and preferences of public servants. As someone who has worked in and with government and, as a professor of public administration, has helped to prepare others for public-sector employment, the search for meaning in government service is more than a rhetorical or academic question. On the contrary, the search for meaning, I propose, is the very platform upon which the concept and spirit of public service come alive in a real, practical sense. In other words, more so than in the private sector, the search for meaning in government service is the linchpin between theory and practice.

The professional literature in public administration is beginning to recognize the importance of rediscovering the soul of government and reawakening the “spirit of public administration” in the contemporary era (Frederickson 1997). Reflecting on some three decades of government experience, Fritz Morstein Marx, as a case in point, observed in this very journal that “... those who serve the public in the nature of their employment have a particular reason to cultivate public spirit” (Marx 1960, 138). Spirituality in government, moreover, has been defined “as a search for meaning and values, which includes some sense of the transcendent” (Bruce and Novinson 1999). Further, it has been asserted that the search for meaning is an element of spirituality that “... can empower us in the government workplace” by linking one’s outer work with one’s inner work (163–64). In other words, the search for meaning at work involves aligning our core values, which are effectively, manifestations of our inner work, with our beliefs and actions in the workplace, that is, the empirical evidence or products of our outer work.

Elsewhere, I have made a case for tapping into the spirit of government service through authentic dialogue (Pattakos 1995). Indeed, it is important to underscore that the word “dialogue” actually comes from two Greek words—*dia*, meaning “through,” and *logos*, most frequently but only roughly translated as “the meaning.” Upon closer examination, the various translations of the word “logos,” a common Greek word, reveal that it has deep spiritual roots. In this regard, one of the first references to logos as “spirit” came from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus around 500 BCE. To Heraclitus, the logos was responsible for the harmonic order of the universe, a cosmic law that declared “one is all and everything is one.”

Interpreting logos in this way—that is, viewing it as a manifestation of spirit or soul—carries with it significant implications, both conceptual and practical. Dialogue, as a concept, takes on a new and deeper meaning when it is perceived as a group’s accessing a “larger pool of common spirit” through a distinctly spiritual connection between the members. True dialogue, in this connection, enables individuals to acknowledge they are part of a greater whole, that they naturally resonate with others within this whole, and that the whole is, indeed, greater than the sum of its various parts. This particular conception of authentic dialogue, interestingly enough, is consistent with the group process and organizing principles for popular government outlined by the Progressive Era’s astute political theorist, Mary Parker Follett (1918), who, among other things, articulated the formation of a “new state” through civic dialogue. Engaging in authentic dialogue, in this context, implies not only a process of continuous unfolding of shared understandings and collective decision making, which relates to its most common usage, but also a unique, humanistic process of spiritual connection and enlightenment that helps groups achieve their collective and often transcendent aims.

Sources of Meaning

Among the foundational building blocks of Frankl’s existential philosophy and therapeutic system, known as “logotherapy,” is the commitment to meaningful values and goals—the *will to meaning*. In brief, Frankl (1959) identified three categories of values that, when actualized, provide sources of authentic meaning: (1) *creative* values, that is, “by doing or creating something”; (2) *experiential* values, that is, “by experiencing something or encountering someone”; and (3) *attitudinal* values, that is, “by choosing one’s attitude toward suffering.” Actualizing such values is not only the quid pro quo of the human quest for meaning, it also provides a useful point of reference for reflecting on the search for meaning at work, including working in government.

Reflections from the Field

Against this conceptual backdrop, let me now highlight some of the findings that have emerged from interviews conducted with current and former public servants about the search for meaning in government service. These structured interviews began in 1998, so many of them pre-date the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the war on terrorism, and other recent events in the public domain. All in all, these findings draw from the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of more than 200 reflective public servants, mostly from the United States and Canada, although other countries are also represented. The questions focused on the reasons behind entering and remaining in government service and sought to uncover the ways that public servants find—or, to use Frankl's term, "detect"—meaning in their work even when public perceptions of government service conflict with their own views and experiences.

It is important to underscore up front that an awareness of meaning, even if it was not apparent at an early stage of government service, almost always evolved over time, especially for those in the career civil service. This was the case among many of those whose public service careers were short-lived, including elected and appointed officials. In other words, even if a public servant was unaware of the deeper meaning behind his or her choice to enter government work, or acknowledged the initial decision was based on something concrete such as job security or political influence rather than the search for meaning, very few of these public servants denied that such meaning ultimately became very important to them in their work.

Drawing on these personal interviews, we will now turn to a discussion of the sources of meaning in government service which can be associated with actualizing creative, experiential, and attitudinal values. As a preface to this discussion, let me first share a statement made by one interviewee, a local government employee, who referred to values as the "things that make life worth living." A personal commitment to such life-affirming values, it would appear to follow, is clearly a manifestation of Frankl's will to meaning!

Creative Values

Like their counterparts in other sectors or industries, public servants draw meaning from doing something or creating something of value. In this regard, the desire to make a difference through their work was cited repeatedly as a (if not the) primary source of meaning among the government employees or officials who were interviewed.

Importantly, and perhaps not surprisingly, money was not the primary motivator of public servants, even among those seeking so-called employment security. On the contrary, public servants at all levels and functions demon-

strated that they want to make a genuine difference through their work. Even in positions not always lauded for their public-service ethic, this desire to make a difference was quite evident. For example, I recall a postal carrier in Canada who quickly set the record straight about the nature of her government-service responsibilities in the following way: "I don't simply deliver the mail, I help to build community."

Likewise, one manager of a county government agency in the United States emphasized that the desire to do something meaningful every day drives him. Before entering the public service, he had worked for a retail holding company in the home furnishings industry. After a while, he said, "I began to fear that my legacy or epitaph would read something like, *He put a lot of cheap furniture in America's living rooms!*" While I have no intention of marginalizing the value of selling furniture, even inexpensive furniture, there is an important lesson to be learned from this fellow's experience. Upon reflecting on his long career in government, he summarized his chosen path with a great deal of sincerity and passion: "I want to do something that adds value to the community, improves the planet, so that when I leave this earth I can say that I did more than put a lot of cheap furniture on the road."

Doing something or creating something of value is not necessarily driven by images of the long-term future, such as thoughts about one's personal legacy. More often than not, government employees and public officials also find meaning in making a difference in the here and now. For example, one local government emergency services official described the meaning that he derives from his work: "I love the job I have because every day I can look back on at least one project that is going to make someone's life safer, someone's property safer, someone's community more secure." Similarly, look at what an employee of the Forest Service had to say about the nature of her meaningful work: "I enjoy a feeling that I am making a difference, slowly or some times in occasional leaps and bounds when there's a breakthrough toward a goal we've been working toward. I like jobs where I get a sense of 'connectedness' to a larger purpose ... I like working together with people in communities on projects we mutually care about."

It is also important to reflect upon the influence of the broader context when approaching the issue of actualizing creative values and finding meaning in government service. Organizational culture, for example, appears to play a defining role in the quest for meaning at work. Likewise, both the function of the government organization and the role or function of the public servant may be significant influences—either as enablers or barriers—in the quest for meaning. Insofar as the broader context is concerned, let me share a brief quote from one government worker that

demonstrates how organizational culture and role/function relate to the actualization of creative values:

What I discovered over time in working for the federal government (and what has effectively kept me here) is: (a) a high level of empowerment around what work I do and how it is done; (2) the opportunity to be impactful on issues that are important to me; (3) and opportunities for creative expression.

In this particular instance, the public servant happens to be an employee of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. During our interview, he candidly admitted that he had not made a decision to work for the government *per se*, but rather followed his passion for environmental work and his desire to do this work at the most meaningful level possible. To be sure, his quote suggests an organizational culture or context that allows employees to proactively seek and find authentic meaning in their work. Moreover, in this case, the fact that the operating values of the public servant *and* the government organization appear to be so closely aligned illustrates how public-service roles or functions can influence creative expression and, by extension, the search for meaning at work. In a similar vein, employees who are unclear about their role or function, or who don't have a clear understanding of (or are not in alignment with) the role or function of their organization are less likely to search for, let alone find, authentic meaning in their work.

Experiential Values

Experiencing something of value or encountering someone (in a value-added way) was clearly perceived to be another source of meaning among the public servants who were interviewed. Actualizing meaningful, experiential values in government service is much more common than many outside observers, especially political pundits and bureaucratic critics, may want to admit. Besides the experience of making a genuine difference through their work, public servants describe many different kinds of human encounters and other work-related experiences that clearly provide them with abundant sources of authentic meaning. All of these experiences, in one way or another, illustrate that human beings are interdependent and that the search for meaning in government service includes some sense of the transcendent.

Significantly, the public-service paths of government servants were found to be largely influenced by encounters with two key actors: parents and mentors. In both cases, the influence was viewed as a determining factor not only in the decision to enter public service in the first place, but also in navigating the choices along one's career path. Parents, in this regard, were most often cited as the basis for a sound public-service ethic (attitudes, values, and commit-

ment to help others through government service), whereas mentors were more likely to serve as role models for appropriate behaviors as public servants in the trenches. Frequently, both parents and mentors served as catalysts for finding meaning in public service and provided important strategic guideposts, through their example, during the quest. Indeed, their central influence in this way should not be taken lightly and, in fact, should point the way toward how best to leverage the three R's for the public sector's (and general public's) benefit.

Public perceptions of government and public servants also frame the way experiential values are actualized to detect meaning at work. Here's how one city manager described the challenge of his job: "I guess I just believe with a zeal that one of my most important roles (as a public servant) is to do missionary work at every opportunity I get to convince people that not all government officials deserve their criticism." Other public servants, I found, draw from the positive experiences around them, as illustrated by the following observation from a state government employee: "The longer I am employed in government service, the more I respect and support the services government provides. Given the constant government bashing, it's not always easy. However, there are sufficient examples of people being better off from interaction with government that I have come to appreciate the opportunity to contribute."

So, the glass can be perceived either as half-empty or half-full. We all have the opportunity to choose how we view any situation. We also can choose to be part of the problem or part of the solution. In this regard, many public servants, whether they are aware of a personal calling or not, choose the latter course of action and seek to alter public perceptions through the power of human encounter, engagement, and authentic dialogue with their citizens or constituencies. Let me share some examples of what I mean by quoting from a sample of public servants.

Though there is much about government that seems beyond our control, I believe peoples' cynicism diminishes when they (1) feel heard, (2) can influence opinions and actions, and (3) understand the rationale for decisions. It comes from being treated with respect.

—Federal government employee

I've found that most people see government workers in one of two lights: as politicians or bureaucrats. Unfortunately, both seem to carry negative connotations. You are automatically assumed to be either crooked or lazy.... People seem to view me a lot more positively when they understand my commitment to serving the community.

—County government employee

For me, the most thrilling times in public service are when people are working together, find some way to go beyond finding *balance* between *use* and *protection* of land.... They actually find *synergy* between themselves and a fitness with the land. I simply love facilitating the rare chances that this will happen.

—USDA Forest Service employee

At first blush, connecting with citizens as a public servant sounds both natural and expected. But, as I found out, this is not always the case. The following experience of a county government employee in the United States reveals that, although it may serve as a source of meaning at work, the link between public servants and their citizens and constituencies can also become problematic: “When you work in government, understanding who you work for is a critical factor in finding meaning in your work. I’ve always viewed myself as working for the citizens that we serve. That has always created controversy for me within the bureaucracy. More than once, I have been accused of being disloyal to my boss or the *system* because I advocated for our constituency.”

On the other hand, it is this very link that allows government workers to encounter citizens as co-creators of the services they provide and often opens the floodgates of meaning in government work. Consider the following experience from the front lines:

As an administrator, it is easy to get burnt out with all of the politics and mindless bureaucracy. When I found myself getting down, I would head to the front lines. Being among the citizens who we served reminded me of why I was there, and why it was important to keep fighting. I was fortunate to work in poverty programs because it was like going back to my youth—every time I visited a community center or Head Start center I could see my mom’s face and feel her pain. Those images fortified me when I had to deal with tough or mundane assignments.

The capability to deflect one’s attention from the problem situation to something else and to build one’s coping mechanisms for dealing with stress and change is central to Frankl’s philosophy and therapeutic approach. In the experience just cited, we can see the principle of de-reflection at work, and we can detect, or at least feel, the public servant’s path to self-transcendence. I found these kinds of experiences to be commonplace among the many public servants I have come into contact with.

Attitudinal Values

According to Frankl, whenever one is confronted with inescapable, unavoidable situations that are associated with suffering, the opportunity to actualize attitudinal values—

namely, those that involve one’s attitude toward the suffering—becomes a source of deep meaning. Obviously, a situation such as September 11 presented public servants, as well as the general population around the world, with the opportunity to actualize such attitudinal values. To be sure, this is much easier said than done, and not everyone, of course, is prepared to confront such situations from this kind of meaning-centered perspective.

Still, along the continuum of possibilities for finding meaning in situations that involve suffering, from surviving a concentration camp experience (as Frankl did), to coping with the horrors of September 11, to confronting an incurable disease, on the one side, to dealing with a job loss or similar situation on the other, the attitude that one chooses toward the given situation will largely influence both the response to and outcome from it. Public perceptions of government and government service are usually negative and cynical; as a consequence, they are often treated as givens by public servants who are responsible for the delivery of public goods and services. Under such situations, the ability to actualize attitudinal values is put to the test in order to maintain the spirit of public service.

The gravity of this situation and its potentially negative influence on employee morale and performance are illustrated by the following experience shared by an employee of the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration: “I was conversing amiably with some sort of stock broker in a pub several years ago. As he is discussing the advantages of zero coupon bonds and short maturation derivatives when he thought to ask what I did for a living. When I made it clear that I worked for the U.S. government, he swiveled around to the person sitting to his left and continued the conversation.”

Obviously, when one hears statements such as “It’s close enough for government work,” it is easy to fall prey to the notion that government employees are lazy, or that they couldn’t cut the mustard in the private sector, are dishonest, unethical, on the take, and so on. Within these constraints, it becomes the responsibility of public servants themselves to find the source(s) of their intrinsic motivation to avoid the pitfall of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. And it is at this juncture that their commitment to actualize attitudinal values toward the situation influences the search for meaning in government service in the most dramatic ways.

Here are some illustrations of how public servants deal attitudinally with such challenges in or to their work:

I recognize that many people judge governments by the behaviors of political actors vis-a-vis those civil servants who slog through day after day doing good things for community and country.

—Federal government employee

I am aware of the low esteem that many people have for public/government employees. I am proud to show them the error of their prejudice.

—City government employee

Maybe I am following an impossible dream, but my focus is in making a difference in people's lives beyond my lifetime. I believe that public service is the highest expression of democracy in action. I know my place, I know where I belong.

—State government employee

I believed that land management agencies held the public's trust to provide land stewardship on their behalf. I wanted to be part of it. I saw the job as complex, the profession as noble. After 23 years of government service, I still do.

—Federal government employee

To be sure, working in government is not viewed by many people as the most desirable career path. One local government official, in this regard, pessimistically observed that: "Public sector employment is not easy, it's not fun and it's thankless. If you are looking for psychic gratification, you'll only get it in the early years of your career. After the first few years, forget it." Or, how about this comment, which came from a county government worker: "Be prepared to suffer because few outside of government will understand or appreciate what you do." One does not need to agree with these particular assessments to see the formidable challenges that lie ahead for government recruiters who must deal with increasing numbers of retiring public servants.

Interestingly, not everyone would agree the situation is as bad as it seems from such statements. In fact, according to one positive-thinking interviewee, who happened to be a federal government employee: "The awareness that not everyone views government service as worthy of their skills is to me, the gauntlet that makes only the best and most hearted stay in the game. Perhaps it is a good thing in retrospect—if it was popular, everyone (including the most undedicated) would want to do it!"

The freedom to choose one's attitude in any situation certainly has plenty of opportunity to play itself out within the operating domain of government service. Among other things, more reflection by contemporary public servants on how to actualize attitudinal values and thereby advance the search for meaning in government service is necessary (McSwite 2002; Kiel 2003).

Implications for Government Service

What does all of this mean or suggest for the future of government service? Political posturing aside, the time has come to elevate and, in my view, return government ser-

vice to its position as a noble calling. Fortunately, there is evidence that support for such a change in status exists and that the search for meaning in government service need not be an impossible mission. Listen now to some of the possibilities that come from the unsung heroes in government who have been quietly getting things done on the public's behalf:

We have turned into a society where public service has deteriorated to become synonymous with self-service—what's in it for me? We as a society have lost our focus. I'm here to say that there are many career people like myself who are praying and working toward finding that focus.

—State government employee

There are many ways in which government service can make you crazy, and there are many ways in which government service can best meet your definition of what is meaningful. By frequently examining what is meaningful to you and evaluating whether your career is a good match, you can actively choose—again and again—to stay in government service or to switch.

—Federal government employee

I am attracted to the ideal of public service. It is fundamental to my own personal values and provides an opportunity for me to *live* these ideals. My father was a police officer for over 30 years and my mother a health professional in a hospital setting. I come from parents who believed that helping others was the best way to spend your life ... service to humanity is the best work of life ... need I say more?

—Federal government employee

I believe that government allows me to not have to compromise my principles. While I compromise on a daily basis, it is compromising over cost/benefit, greater good for the greater number, fairness versus responsiveness. I am not forced to choose between integrity and profit.

—City government employee

I believe that public service is most effective and gratifying when it is being delivered by people who have a passion for what they are doing, have influence over how it is done, and can feel their creative fingerprints on the process. At that point, public service "comes alive" and is characterized by the caring, concern, compassion, understanding and commitment we all seek from public servants.

—Federal government employee

Unfortunately, these are not the kind of comments one hears in the popular media, nor are these the kind of public servants who are showcased before wide audiences

and offered the opportunity to share their stories and messages about what they do and how they find meaning in government service. Yet, these are exactly the kind of people and messages that need to be heard if the quest to elevate the spirit (and meaning) of government service is to be fully realized (Holzer 2000; King and Stivers 1998; Riccucci 1995).

The search for meaning in government service is a process—a journey—not a product. If nation-states around the world really expect to manage the public's business effectively, efficiently, and equitably, then something is going to have to change in the way government service is perceived and treated. In this regard, the future of government service in the twenty-first century and beyond will depend on how well we prepare for the journey before us. And preparation for this journey will require all of us to respond authentically to the kinds of meaning-centered questions and issues that I have introduced in this article. In short, the spirit of public administration demands public servants who are driven by the search for meaning and who seek a noble calling through government service. It is the role of all of us to support them (and each other) in the quest.

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