

William J. O'Brien
Reflections

Transcribed from an interview in August, 2002, in Worcester, Massachusetts

1. Keep the Faith

The amount of change that's going to take place between now and when you are sixty years old is phenomenal. I just look at the amount of change that took place in our life, in Kay's and my life, in the last twenty years. It is unbelievable. The zappers on television, the VCR's, electric windows on cars, it is just unbelievable what's happened, but

I do think there are certain eternal core truths that will prevail over the centuries.

For me, I am just so grateful to have the Catholic religion to guide me through all the unknowns. It is amazing if you go back to that little blue catechism book we had in elementary school fifty, sixty, seventy years ago, and how what they instructed us in turned out to be pretty damn good advice. I don't think any person can figure out all these unknowns without the help of some source of inner philosophy.

The Catholic Church is not it for everybody, but for me, it was the right one. I have absolute respect for someone raised in a Jewish faith to do it in a Jewish faith, or to do it in a Muslim faith, but we all have somewhere available to us a set of faith beliefs that, I think, are extraordinarily important.

The most recent generations have been submerged in a materialistic, hedonistic, technological culture. It sort of squeezed out the faith system from our raising ourselves.

I would say the old proverb, "Keep the Faith!" That would be my advice.

2. On Earth as It Is in Heaven

Two things happened to me:

First, I was raised in a Catholic family; Catholicism was a big part of the family life.

When I went to work, I absolutely loved business. It was a game; I just liked it.

I always had a dilemma in my younger years of how to get my Catholicism compatible with my love of business. I always saw business as that line in the "Our Father," "Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

That's the job of business: to build heaven on earth . . . in the material sense.

The turning point in my life: I got into some business situations where my economic life was on the line. I said to myself, "Do I want to spend the rest of my life building a political, bureaucratic, financially successful career, or do I want to dedicate my life to building Thy kingdom on earth as it is in heaven?"

When I made that decision, there was tremendous freedom. If they were going to fire me, I knew I would be fired on the right side of the issue. With some issues out there, it is not important to be right; it is not important that they work. It is most important, that on the day of Final Judgment, to be on the right side of the issue. That happened to me in my late thirties, early forties.

3. The Mysteries of Love and Death

When you build a secular, materialistic, hedonistic society, one of the detriments to it is that there are tremendous temptations to get away from the fundamental purpose of life which is your family, the passing on of certain core ideas from generation to generation.

These temptations are distractions which could be obsession with sports, obsession with entertainment, obsession with material goods, obsession with social status; it could be a lot of things.

The two richest areas to explore today, at the current stage of where humanity is, are the mysteries of both love and death. They are two subjects where there is an awful lot of learning yet to come.

What is the single, one thing that could transform a society? It would be love. That is what Christianity is all about.

The problems we're reading about in the newspaper and hearing about on television every night, if there were one single thing that could straighten out our markets, that could straighten out our social problems, that could straighten our family issues, it is love.

If there were some way of allocating the amount of media space and time that went to love versus violence or any other subject, it would be infinitesimal. It is a very rich area.

Love in business is helping everyone to complete themselves. Every single person is a moral agent who is on a journey from where they are to where they ought to be.

If we set up our businesses, our public facilities to take people and help them advance on their journeys to where they ought to be, and love were a big part of it, we could change this world to fulfill the specifications of the “Lord’s Prayer.”

The other one is death. That is one I am groping with right now.

When you get over the fear of death, you reach a level of maturity that’s a benchmark.

Secondly, when you reach the process of dying, as I have, if it done peacefully and comfortably, it is not all that bad; it’s a pretty good happy stage of your life. We’ve got all these boogiemen built up that it’s got to be bad; it is not bad.

Dying can be one of the happiest stages of life. When you reap the affection of your family, the care and love of your family, it is a hell of a good experience. It isn’t something I should be petrified of, or have a high fear of. It is not that way.

Those two subjects, death and love, there is a lot of exploration that can be done, not just in academic circles. How can you implement love in McDonald’s?

4. Happiness Is a Byproduct

Happiness is one of those things you do not get by striving for it. It is a byproduct of something else. It is being a good father, being a good husband, being a good business person. I think it is a byproduct

The other things you work hard to get you happiness never fulfill your expectations. The acquisition of material goods: once you move up from Car B to Car A, you want Car AA, then Car AAA; it never ends. It is sort of a morphine effect. You have a certain amount of it; you want more. Once you get to one income bracket, you want a higher one; then you want a higher one, and it goes on and on.

When happiness comes as a byproduct from doing something for which we are designed, for our purpose, I think it is a byproduct.

Happiness is a byproduct. It is like integrity. You can’t go out and buy five pounds of integrity. It’s a byproduct of doing a lot of other things that give you integrity. The same is true for happiness.

5. Marketing to the Poor

The whole marketing system in this country in business could be overhauled.

Kath and I have had several conversations on the fallacy of marketing to the affluent. Why not market to the poor, who really need us, and help them lead more fulfilled lives? A lot of companies could be financially successful by turning all their energies into marketing to the poor, not the affluent, helping the poor so they are not poor.

6. Family and Society

I am deeply convinced that God in designing the human person meant the family to be the fundamental unit of society. But even one family cannot do it alone.

A family needs a school system. When a school system begins to ignore its relationship to the family, it gets in trouble.

But the fundamental unit of society, as God designed society, is the family. We’ve got so many forces trying to knock that apart. They want to legitimize gay unions. Two gay people can do anything they want, as far as I’m concerned; it is none of my business, but to put it on the same plane as the family is wrong. Anyway, that falls under the list of distractions that modern society is going to offer. We can feel bad for ourselves, but . . .

Look back at what our grandfathers had to do: walk in somebody’s woods around here, figure out how to knock down all the trees, and move some rocks to grow some crops to eat. Then they had to find a place to keep warm in a New England winter.

Their struggling was more physical; our struggle is more keeping spiritually on track. We solved the physical labor problems; we’ve got hydraulics, we’ve got power mowers, power this, power that. We can get across the world in twelve hours on a jet. We’ve solved a lot of those problems. The spiritual problems we haven’t and when we talk about that great big space between our ears, love and death are the spiritual problems we still have to address.

This brings us to a sadness that we both share on what is happening to the Catholic Church. There is an enormous body of wisdom in that Church that has never been unbottled and really

distributed to the world with the same kind of energy and precision we proceeded in technical and scientific issues.

It is not just the Catholic Church; all the churches have rich bodies of wisdom to pass on.

7. Be Purposeful

Focus on the service you are delivering to the clients and to the society.

Pick a service that uplifts them, that brings them from where they are as moral agents to where they ought to be.

Give everything you have to be the best there is at making it happen.

If I were running a bank tomorrow, I'd want to make my customers rich, not the bank rich.

Everybody focus on making the customer financially sound. That means don't loan them money if they can't afford to pay you back. If they are buying some nutty thing they don't need, don't encourage them to buy something they shouldn't have and they can't afford.

I would say help the customer get to where they can go in a holistic sense of the word.

I don't know how this happened, but I was born with a sense of purposefulness. I never was attracted by doing things that were of limited, purposeful activity. I never played cards; I never played golf. If it didn't have a purpose, I didn't do it. If I was going to walk, I just walked. I wasn't going to swing a club at a little white ball.

I was this way by nature, but I have watched so many people get distracted by bullshit. I think you could take some of these big companies and triple their profits by just eradicating bullshit. I think that that much bullshit is unnecessary activity built into some of them. If you got rid of that junk, you would be more economically efficient. You would perform better.

8. Struggles

If the business being done is being purposeful, that's fine. Why be in an office if you could be on a golf course? That isn't what I mean. The person who says, "To be successful in business, I have to be a good golfer." That's not true. When I was growing up, it was a big thing to be part of a club. It was greatly exaggerated, the amount of business productivity that came out of clubs. It was something people wanted. It was prestigious; it was status.

It's not either/or, black or white.

As kids go through life, there are a lot of distractions. Keep life simple.

9. Satisfaction

The deepest satisfaction and joy I received is through my family. I can't think of anything more satisfying than the inner sense of well being from one your kids doing well. That exceeds business success, stock options, stock appreciation, capital accumulation, trips to the moon. Just seeing the next generation proceed in making a contribution to the world, to their family is great. It's the deepest sense of satisfaction Kay and I have experienced.

10. The Future

We read the daily newspaper; we listen to the news on television, and it's easy to get pessimistic about the future, but that's wrong.

Mankind continually ascends. When you think of going back over the generations where our forefathers scrounged for food in hunting expeditions every day, they didn't have any refrigeration to keep the food for a week from now. They had to hunt their food every day. They had to get a place warm and dry every night, and if they wanted to get from Southborough to Worcester, that was five or six hours on a horse and wagon.

We have a world today where we can pick up the telephone and talk to one another in a second.

We can get a jet out of here and be in London in six hours.

It is incredible what's happened in conquering hunger, conquering disease, conquering space, conquering suffering of all kinds, hardships of all kinds.

In the same degree to which we made these steps forward over the last few hundred years, we are going to make more steps forward, and I think we are going to make them forward on the spiritual side: how we understand death, how we understand love, how we relate to one another, how people join a culture and ascend to their uplifted best rather than their descended worst.

We'll cure these diseases, and this is an exciting road for your children, my grandchildren to go down and for their children to go down. The opportunity is there.

If I had to bet one way or the other, I would bet that the species is going to continue ascending.

11. Growing Straight

What are the little things?

I think a big part of our life is wrapped around language. When we use language to mislead, that's a pervasion of rightness. The temptation to use language to mislead is great when we're small; it's great when we're old, the tendency to exaggerate what we've accomplished. To get attention, we exaggerate the dimensions of a problem. All of that shrinks a person's truthfulness.

I think truthfulness is an enormous, important part of what Pat referred to as "growing straight," what Chesterton regarded as "growing straight."

I think respect for the other person is an enormous part of growing straight. When you go toward another person and you have a bias: they are from a different country or are a different nationality, that's a perversion of rightness.

We have a mode today where we have tremendous emphasis on politically correct kinds of straightness, but we don't have the emphasis on things like truth, respect for the individual.

It's picking these kind of things . . . I don't have a list of them . . . that come up in a family all the time, and raising the kids on the importance of the word, and of truth.

Part of it is being subordinate to a higher order. When we grow up and we think that the main purpose of the world is to "make man happy," the pursuit of happiness you were talking about earlier, that is a perversion from growing straight.

This should all be part of our education system and our parenting system. If you think of the amount of time we spend in society in getting from one place to another and how much time we take on classes to prepare people for parenting, it is ridiculous.

There is nothing a person does more important than parenting. How much time do we spend?

You can get a drivers' license quicker than a parenting license.

Most of that stuff's that good comes down through a culture.

12. Building a Foundation

How did I get intrigued with a Catholic high school?

Number one, I believe the evidence simply from our own kids and myself, and people I know is that the years between thirteen and nineteen are probably the most formative in our life, and it coincides with middle school, high school years.

If you get a person shaped in the realms of the truths between those years, they will be shaped for life.

If there were a single thing we could do in this country to transform this nation into what our forefathers envisioned, it would be to have paid particular attention to both the family life and the educational life of everybody between the ages of thirteen and nineteen. In other words, what we're all raising hell about, the quality of our schools.

Now, I think Catholic education, particularly as practiced by the Jesuits, has been enormously successful in the past. I think they give us a foundation on which to build.

What our Catholic Church has done in the last thirty to forty years is they put enormous emphasis on helping the poor rise above a level of material poverty. But if you want to raise a whole society, you've got to help everybody.

With the poor, you address material poverty, but up here with the affluent, we have a spiritual poverty. We have people who have lots of money. They're looking to get a bigger car, take a longer vacation, a more exotic vacation.

They don't really look at what they are doing for their fellow human beings which is spiritual, which is love.

I think the church has overemphasized the poor, and they've done a good job for which they should be commended, and they've underemphasized the paying attention to the moral level of the affluent. The affluent are the people who have the clout to change society.

We don't go out into society and say these companies have Catholic CEO's; therefore, they are better companies. They treat people differently. You go out into society and you look at the CEO's and the Catholic CEO's are just as greedy as the other CEO's. That's telling us that our Catholic education isn't taking as much as it should.

I got interested in a Catholic high school because I happen to live in an area that's a hot bed of technological and commercial innovation, MetroWest .

I just look out and say if we could crank out several hundred kids a year with the fundamentals of

a Jesuit education into our business community, how much a better world it would be for the next generation.

It is not that it's just for them; it is better for the people who work for those companies. Look, for example at companies like I.B. M. whom I've admired enormously for seventy-five years: very well run companies, good companies to work for, relieve people of a lot of onerous drudgery at work, was good for the people who invested in it, and it was a tremendous positive influence for society.

If we could put together Catholic schools that would prepare kids to lead these kinds of companies, we're not only helping the affluent, but we're helping the poor because they go to work in these companies and they benefit from it.

People deride it as trickle down economics, but trickle down economics has worked, not as fast as we like it to work, but it does work. Some of the hair-brained ideas we have to replace it just don't work.

13. Spiritual and Moral DNA

You come into the issue of the separation of church and state. I do believe that people who don't want a religious education should be able to get one, but people who want one, should also be able to get one, too. We should have the freedom to go whatever way we want to go. I don't believe in forcing spiritual beliefs down people's throats.

I don't believe in corporations forcing spiritual beliefs into people. You go out into most places, and most people really have ill formed spiritual beliefs, and they're searching. If a company picks the higher ones, honesty and public service and respect for the individual, people subscribe to them.

I think these moral beliefs are in our . . . we have a spiritual DNA and a moral DNA that makes truth attractive, that makes respect for individuals attractive. That's there. What a leader does is to get people to live up to those kinds of expectations; he espouses those kind of values, practices them

We've got to respect. If Christ wanted, speaking as a Christian, a forced religion, he wouldn't have given us all the options. He wanted it to be free choice.

We shouldn't get so aggressive in our beliefs that we violate anybody's free choice. If they don't want them, that's fine, but if the whole society decides they don't want them, we pay a high price, I believe.

Every experiment we had with Communism, with Nazism that denied God, that denied spiritual beliefs, has been a disaster. It took seventy-five years for Communism to fail.

Vaclav Havel who was President of the Czech Republic raised the question when the Berlin Wall came down, "Did Capitalism beat Communism, or did Communism go over the cliff first?" And that's what's playing out right now that question.

14. Transformation

For a transformation to occur in an institution, you have to have the right leadership in the right situation at the same time.

For example, a certain group of leaders get to be perceived as flakes, way out there. You remember in the Viet Nam War there were a number of senators who were against the war? They were postured as anti-American, unpatriotic, and all kinds of things like that. Well, if you're a leader and a popular opinion is way over here, and you want to bring them up here, you have to do some work to get them ready for those kinds of ideas.

Keep in mind when we first were establishing our values in Hanover, the picture of a successful businessman was assertive, aggressive, kick-ass, take names, tough were all the words describing the businessman.

Now if somebody from a small company in Worcester is going to pop up and advocate the value of love, he's got to move his people to be ready for it. We did that over the years by adopting a lot of other values in terms of service to our constituents, mirror openness, localness, leanness. Each value had a background that was compatible with the value of love

What drove the value of love for me in a company was brought home to me by reflecting on my own life. If I had a single thing I could do for any one of my own children to influence them, it would be lining them up with the right first boss. More bad things happen by a kid coming out of school and going to work for a fourteen carat jerk who is obsessed with power and selfishness, and more good things happen by some person who is really dedicated to the corporate mission,

knows the work, knows human nature, knows human relations, and he serves as a mentor or a coach to the young person. That first job, maybe two or three years duration, is going to have a powerful effect on shaping that youngster's entire work life of forty years.

What I was saying about getting too far ahead, was back in the early seventies, 1972 or 1973, we didn't have the culture far enough advanced at Hanover, that either Jack or I could espouse the value of love without risking being perceived as a flake or a loony bird.

It's the same today. You have a lot of people who think technology is the end-all and be-all of business. If you can computerize it, or if you can make it automatic, if you can take the human voice out of the transaction, it's better. It's a mindless bent, but someday they are going to wake up and they're going to find out with all of this technology, that some of it is going backwards. You can't lead when you are too far out in front of your troops. That's what we meant.

The single sentence that has always guided me in this "love in a corporation" is this relationship between a boss and a worker is underestimated in its influence. It is almost like husband and wife, not quite, but it's a pretty strong relationship. If the boss is always asking himself the question, "How do I help Joe move from here to here?" That's assuming the boss knew how to move from here to there. It's a very valuable relationship to help the younger person grow up, grow straight, grow mature, whatever word you want to use.

In the forum of work, I've said it in a lot of writing that the two principle vehicles for happiness for most people are family and work. I say it in that order: family and work are the two principle vehicles for happiness. It's pretty hard to visualize a happy life if you are not happy with your family, if you are not happy with your work.

When you step into a big job in a corporation, it is a big responsibility to give people the circumstances in which they can be happy. A president cannot make everybody in the company happy, but he can create the circumstances where most of them have the conditions under which they can be happy.

15. A Higher Road

I believe in eternal life. I believe there is a God. I believe that happiness is in an environment with a group of people who want to go to the higher road.

I envision that death is simply a step to go to an afterlife which will be a higher spiritual road with good people and good things to do.

The best description I ever read was C.S. Lewis who described a bus trip to hell: all the suffering going on was a result of people's own free choice, grumbling about their free choices. They were fighting with one another - who sat in what seat, who got on first, who got off first.

Hell is man created. Hell is man created.

16. Reflections

We should first understand who we are and then be it.

Every single person is a moral agent who is on a journey from where they are to where they ought to be.

What is right outweighs who is right.

Be purposeful.

Own only what you need.

Buy used cars and drive them until you die.

I choose my barbers for the conversation not the haircut.

It has been my experience that when people are free to choose between high-quality ideas or inferior ones, they inevitably choose the former.

Power is one of those rare commodities: the more you give away, the more influence you actually retain.

The pursuit of moral excellence is the most effective and enduring way to energize organizations because it taps into our noblest aspirations.

Walk the talk.

We should be constantly alert to whom we expose ourselves for mentoring.

When we were designed, we were given a DNA that makes truth and respect for individuals attractive.

I am deeply convinced that god, in designing the human person, meant the family to be the fundamental unit of society.

There is nothing a person does that is more important than parenting.

There is nothing more satisfying than the inner sense of well-being that comes from seeing your children do well.

Seeing the next generation proceed in making a contribution to the world is great. It is the deepest sense of satisfaction.

The two richest areas to explore today are the mysteries of love and death.

Dying can be one of the happiest stages of life, when you reap the love and care of family and friends.

Death is simply a step to an afterlife, which is a higher spiritual road.

The one thing that could transform a society is love.

We read the daily newspaper; we listen to the news on television, and it's easy to get pessimistic about the future, but that's wrong. Mankind continually ascends. When you think of going back over the generations where our forefathers scrounged for food in hunting expeditions every day, they didn't have any refrigeration to keep the food for a week from now. They had to hunt their food every day. They had to get a place warm and dry every night, and if they wanted to get from Southborough to Worcester, that was five or six hours on a horse and wagon. We have a world today where we can pick up the telephone and talk to one another in a second. We can get a jet out of here and be in London in six hours. It is incredible what's happened in conquering hunger, conquering disease, conquering space, conquering suffering of all kinds, hardships of all kinds. In the same degree to which we made these steps forward over the last few hundred years, we are going to make more steps forward, and I think we are going to make them forward on the spiritual side: how we understand death, how we understand love, how we relate to one another, how people join a culture and ascend to their uplifted best rather than their descended worst. . . . If I had to bet one way or the other, I would bet that the species is going to continue ascending.

**When a man is wise to his people's advantage, the fruits of his knowledge are enduring.
Sirach 37: 22**