



## The Business Poet

### Introduction

By Wayne Visser

It was time to leave. A bitter-sweet time. He felt sadness, but also contentment. The business he had conceived and birthed and nurtured was mature enough to stand on its own feet now. To live out its own life.

He gazed around the room at the people who were gathered for his farewell. For so many years, this had been his family. Together, they had endured; they were survivors, through thick and thin. They had been triumphant in their successes; downhearted in their failures. He did not know them all intimately, but he felt a shared sense of belonging. To many, he had been close enough to know when there was cause for some or other personal celebration. Others had trusted him enough to unveil their insecurities, to let their pain show.

But now, it was time to let go; to entrust them with the business. Ironically, the way he saw it, the company was not the legacy he was leaving at all. In fact, on the surface of it, there was not much remarkable about the business itself. It was not the biggest, nor the smallest. It was profitable, but not excessively so. It sold good quality products, but nothing spectacular. He had always maintained that the value of the business was not in its bricks and mortar, or its cash-flow or dividends. The real value was in the way in which the business lived and breathed and kept its people alive and passionate.

That was the real gift he had given them. And that was why he was leaving behind his scruffy notebooks in the boardroom cabinet - those dog-eared, tea-stained A4 pages on which, over the years, he had jotted down his ideas. Scrawled untidily were the lessons he had learned along the way: about how to make a business 'fit for human beings'; about how to survive in commerce and still sleep soundly at night; about how to create a company that served society, instead of the other way around. So many thoughts ...

It was almost time for the ritual reading. He liked rituals. It was one of the things he had tried to embed in the business, and his farewell was not going to be the exception. He always marvelled at how simple rituals were able to imbue an occasion with meaning. The little ritual he was going to perform now had been conceived by the incoming board of directors. They had suggested that he read extracts from his notebooks to the family, friends and staff that were assembled, in the spirit and style *The Prophet*, that masterpiece by Lebanese mystic and poet, Kahlil Gibran, whose writings he so treasured. He thought it was a fitting way to go. If nothing else, it would be fun.

As his friends and colleagues began to take their seats, spreading out like a fan from where he sat behind his favourite knotted wooden desk, he traced his fingers around the worn edges of his notebooks, as if caressing the contours of a beloved's face. On the cover of each book was written 'My little book of thoughts, wishes and wisdoms' - numbered one to seven respectively.





Flanking the notebooks were two simple, white candles, unlit, tall and upright, like royal guards of honour. He allowed his awareness to drift over the animated whispers that were rippling around the room. It had a soothing effect, as if he was holding a spiral shell to his ear and eavesdropping on the secret, bubbling conversation of an imaginary ocean. Gradually, the fresh breeze of anticipation subsided and a quiet calm settled over the gathering. He took the emergent silence as his cue to begin.

The lights dimmed and the match he struck flared noisily in the dusky hush that had descended. He lit the two candles, symbols of the life of the company, and invited all those present to approach this time together in the spirit of a fireside dialogue beneath a star-spangled night sky. Then he spread his arms wide and, quoting Gibran's famous invitation with a hint of playfulness in his voice, said:

"People of Orphalese, of what can I speak save of that which is even now moving within your souls."

There was a murmur of laughter, and he could see people visibly relax, perhaps relieved that the ceremony that had just begun was to be enjoyed, rather than taken too seriously.



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