What does it mean to retreat?

Business Retreats at the Crossroads of Religion and Performance

A one-day virtual symposium

June 15th, 2022
Presented via Zoom with a hybrid keynote

WHO IS IT FOR ?

Funded by the University of Alberta's Kule Institute for Advanced Study and the University of Calgary's Calgary Institute for the Humanities, we invite scholars to examine with us the religious and theatrical features of "retreat" and "retreating" in business through a day-long virtual symposium on the question "What does it mean to retreat?" One of the symposium's goals is to bridge management studies and the humanities to explore how ritual and the performing arts are used by and can benefit workers and organizations.

Register

More information at:
https://sites.google.com/view/businessretreatsymposium/home

Welcome

8:45 - 9:00 Mountain Time

Panel 1: Heterogeneity of Retreats as Expressed in Theatre, Business, and Religion

9:00 - 11:00 Mountain Time

- **Jean Bartunek (Boston College)**, "Spiritual Retreat Practices That Contribute to Business Retreats"
- **Stefano Muneroni (University of Alberta)**, "Retreating as Kenotic Practice: Radical Transformations in Theatre and Religion"
- **John Radwan and Paula Alexander (Seton Hall University)**, "Spirituality and Organizational Culture: Contemplative Practice in Business Retreats"
- **Nicole Edge (Mount Royal University)**, "Business Retreats: A Theatrical Process of Leadership/Followership Reiteration"

Lunch Break

11:00 - 13:00 Mountain Time

Panel 2: Impacts of Retreats on the Workings of Business

13:00 - 15:00 Mountain Time

- **Tobias Brügger (University of Zurich)**, "What Does It Mean to Retreat? The Case of Christianity and Management"
- **Louise Casemore (University of Alberta)**, "Creating Connections: Ritual and Retreat in Relationship to Immersive Theatre"
- **Alice de Koning and Joy Palacios (University of Calgary)**, "The Ritual Meaning of Social Media Resistance to Business Retreats"
- **Sarah Saddler (Baruch College, City University of New York)**, "Business Retreating in a VUCA World: Cultivating Authentic Presence in the 'Capitalist Funhouse'"

Break

15:00 - 17:00 Mountain Time

4-16 Banister Conference Room, Alberta School of Business, University of Alberta

Via Zoom and in Person

Keynote

17:00 - 18:00 Mountain Time

Performing Retreats: Unpacking the Role of Ritual, Emotions, and Place"

Dr. Tina Dacin
Stephen J.R. Chair of Strategy and Organizational Behavior, Queen's University

A one-day virtual symposium on:

"What Does It Mean to Retreat? Business Retreats at the Crossroads of Religion and Performance"

15 June 2022

Via Zoom (with a hybrid keynote)
Please register at:
https://ucalgary.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJcuc-Gvqj8qHtIKMifzQTXHBnYnk-jnDlR3

We invite scholars to examine with us the religious and theatrical features of "retreat" and "retreating" in business through a day-long virtual symposium on the question "What does it mean to retreat?" One of the symposium's goals is to bridge management studies and the humanities to explore how ritual and the performing arts are used by and can benefit workers and organizations. In keeping with the symposium's interdisciplinary intent, the papers in our program use a range of theoretical perspective(s) and research methods and analyze "business" and "retreat" broadly so as to encompass a wide range of cultural and historical contexts.

The symposium, which will take place on Wednesday, June 15th, 2022, via Zoom and in Edmonton, Alberta, is the capstone event for an eighteenth-month project on "Business Retreats at the Crossroads of Performance and Religion" funded by the University of Alberta's Kule Institute for Advanced Study and the University of Calgary's Calgary Institute for the Humanities. The project offers seminars and symposia to examine the phenomenon of business retreats and engage an international network of scholars. Our hope is that this transdisciplinary research will shed light on how individuals, communities, and businesses continue to reimagine themselves through periods of structured retreating from daily life and interrogate how business retreats function as discursive practices where creativity, imagination, and social practices construe new realities.

Welcome
8:45-9:00 Mountain Time

Panel 1: Heterogeneity of Retreats as Expressed in Theatre, Business, and Religion
9:00-11:00 Mountain Time

- **Jean Bartunek (Boston College)**, "Spiritual Retreat Practices That Contribute to Business Retreats"

   This paper discusses samples of types of retreats from the Catholic/ broader Christian tradition, including

   1. The spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius – Jesuit tradition
   2. Retreats in the Benedictine tradition with a focus on lectio divina
   3. Pilgrimage of the Camino de Santiago

   Very briefly and simplistically, the spiritual exercises include examen practices, prayer, mediation and other exercises designed to lead participants to discernment, clearer senses of direction, and transformation through love. The Benedictine tradition focuses in part on lectio

divina, a slow, contemplative reading of scripture that leads to quiet being in the presence of God. The Camino de Santiago is a several hundred-mile pilgrimage (often carried out walking) to the shrine of the apostle St. James in northwest Spain. It is designed to help pilgrims accomplish higher purposes for their lives, often including spiritual dimensions.

Organizational change leaders fostering transformation

Some organizational change consultants consciously use meditative and pilgrimage aspects in their work. For example, *Peter Senge*'s Center for Systems Awareness centers on understanding and developing self, understanding and caring for others, and understanding and caring for our world. *Otto Scharmer*'s presencing institute helps individuals, teams, organizations and large systems build the leadership capacities needed to address the root causes of today's social, environmental, and spiritual challenges. *Phil Mirvis* and colleagues describing taking Unilever leaders on the equivalent of a pilgrimage in the process of transforming their company

Individual management academics who are exemplars of business-spirituality links.

Some management academics have exemplified links between business and spirituality and carried out types of retreat activities with managers. One is *Andre Delbecq* (d. 2016), who taught courses on spirituality and business leadership to Silicon Valley CEOs and wrote extensively on links between spirituality and business. A second is Judi Neal, Founder, Chairman, and CEO of Edgewalkers International, which offers a number of programs fostering workplace spirituality. She and her coauthors just edited a book on that topic.   A third is Nancy Adler, who has written on the importance of lectio divina. She is an artist, and adds reflection on paintings to reflection on texts, especially in her management training

- **Stefano Muneroni (University of Alberta)**, "Retreating as Kenotic Practice: Radical Transformations in Theatre and Religion"

I borrow the term Kenosis (ἐκένωσεν in Greek) from theological and biblical studies in order to describe the kind of deep transformations pursued in religious and theatrical retreats. I argue that Kenosis, a concept that refers to Jesus' Incarnation as an action of self-emptying of his divine nature, lends itself to the study of retreats as transformational and regenerative sites where retreatants might discard, even if momentarily, unwanted traits and embrace new ways to be in the world. I will overlook the obvious differences between religion and theatre retreats and focus instead on their common objective, that of shifting the conditions of the present for the promise of a different and desirable future. When Roland Barthes discusses the urgency of "retreating ahead of the future," I believe he is addressing the aspirational and transformative nature of retreating, one that exists in the present but can come to fruition only in the time to come. In a retreat, one withdraws to come back as a different person. In a retreat, kenotic identities take form and new possibilities emerge.

- **John Radwan and Paula Alexander (Seton Hall University)**, "Spirituality and Organizational Culture: Contemplative Practice in Business Retreats"

  Twenty-first century business leaders have begun to recognize spirituality as a fundamental dimension of organizational culture. Where 19th and 20th century managers structured work-life balance via clear on/off the clock divisions, today's leaders take a more integrated and holistic approach. One clear indication of this trend is the growing frequency of corporate retreats. Non-workspace and time usually belong to each employee but retreats strategically alter schedules and bring a work group together within a new context for training and team-building. A second and more recent indication of holistic thought in business involves a more personally oriented "contemplative" approach. In seeking to develop mental discipline and manage stress, business-people have been adapting meditative practices from ancient religious traditions.

  This essay aspires to connect, or re-connect, group-oriented business retreats with self-development themes found in contemplation. Like today's corporate trend, ancient religious retreats also performed group and teaching functions, but they did so within a larger context of spiritual reflection, meditation, and prayer. Structured introspection can offer an important counterbalance to the more expressive modes of communication valued in mainstream management theory. Moreover, multiple religious traditions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity teach contemplative practices that, with repetition and focus, transcend self and affirm relationality. Following modern sociological and political thought, team-building training for business tends to assume distinct individuals contracting across division to coordinate meaning and action. Through spiritual discipline and focused devotion contemplatives look past and through our apparent divisions toward a more fundamental unified field. Shifting ontological perspective toward humanity's inherent relationality and shared existence has profound implications for team-building and organizational culture. Business retreats enact organizational culture and affect it, thereby creating competitive advantage for a company and enabling both personal and team transformation.
  Central Questions:

  What kinds of outcomes do businesses hope to achieve through retreats (learning new skills, personal or organizational transformation, relationship building, etc.)?
  How do business retreats incorporate ritual elements (meditation, rite-of-passage structures, spiritual or spiritualized practices, etc.)?

- **Nicole Edge (Mount Royal University)**, "Business Retreats: A Theatrical Process of Leadership/Followership Reiteration"

  Perceptions of who "good" leaders are – heroes of their time, inspiration to followers – has sparked a wealth of research in business scholarship, which has in turn transferred into a lucrative field of leadership training and professional development. Traces of this work began with investigating widely held assumptions and expectations of heroic business leadership or what Meindl et al termed early on as the "romance of leadership" (1985). Research then

progressed in a logical fashion from the leader position to attending to the commensurate followership attributes (Junker et al, 2016) that enable and sustain leadership ideals. Much of the emphasis in leadership studies has remained centered on recognition of the beliefs that business agents have and hold about leaders. There have been recent attempts to shift or reframe those beliefs to adopt more inclusive and equitable views of "alternate, post-heroic" leadership (Khan et al, 2021). Yet the focus of scholarship remains grounded in the acceptance of already existing leadership conventions and traditions. As Khan et al point out, masculinized heroic leadership is embedded as the normative baseline against which all other leadership instances are thus often fall short of the mark by comparison.

While the "what" and "who" of business leadership ideals has been clearly established, the "how" of the development of these belief systems and normative ideals merits further consideration. The process of the transferring, passing-on, disseminating or talking into being (Clifton and Mueni, 2021) the kinds of entrenched beliefs about what good business leadership is and who best performs the qualities that represent those romantic ideals, has received less attention in business scholarship. Although the "processual view" is taken up by Schweiger et al (2020) who acknowledge that "[l]eadership is socially constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by all organisational actors as they interact over time (Tourish, 2019)", they have yet to study business retreats as a specific type of development process. Ways in which leadership/ followership is constructed – through discourse, embodied engagement between leaders and followers, influence of material things or props and sites of becoming – are all aspects that can become visible by examining the practices of a business retreat through a theatrical performance lens. By considering the staging of a business retreat as a socio-cultural process, I aim to draw attention to the ways in which business agents reiterate and reperform the conventions and habits of business behavior that sustain the storied traditions and patterns of heroic leadership/ followership roles. In moving beyond recognition of "what" business leadership ideals are and thus "who" is recognized as best fitting the mold, I hope to highlight how a business retreat functions as a process of sustaining and maintaining a closed system.

Lunch Break
11:00-13:00 Mountain Time

Panel 2: Impacts of Retreats on the Workings of Business
13:00-15:00 Mountain Time

- **Tobias Brügger (University of Zurich)**, "What Does It Mean to Retreat? The Case of Christianity and Management"

  This paper puts forward an understanding of retreating as a central aspect of daily human and organizational life. The ongoing stream of our living and working is characterized by retreating from some parts of our world to move on to others. Formal retreats, as interruptions of ordinary life, can be viewed as efforts to train participants to do retreating well in ordinary life. To substantiate this point, I draw on the case of Christianity and management. In Judaeo-Christian tradition, there have long been established rituals of retreat to interrupt ordinary life, like for example regular worship services or various events during church year. These practices are part

of a body pedagogics in which individuals learn to relate to the world and to God in particular ways, not only during these formal events of retreat, but during their whole life. I illustrate this point with observational and interview data from a study of Christian business managers and show how their daily work is characterized by a dialectic tension between retreating and engagement.

- **Louise Casemore (University of Alberta)**, "Creating Connections: Ritual and Retreat in Relationship to Immersive Theatre"

  My intention to explore the areas of intersection between immersive theatre and the processes involved with spiritual practices and business retreats. Expanding on some of the existing frameworks for defining immersive theatre from UK performance scholar Josephine Machon, I will draw connections between the processes related to immersive theatre and the foundational elements present in spiritual practice. Building toward a larger argument that the environment of business retreats are themselves a form of immersive theatre, I will highlight the methodology which unites these practices: the use of breath, endowment of role, invitation for participation, presence of leader figure, and function of physical gesture. These connections aim to inspire deeper questions about the presence of spirituality in artistic fields, touching also on the ethics of responsible engagement in the immersive field and beyond.

- **Alice de Koning and Joy Palacios (University of Calgary)**, "The Ritual Meaning of Social Media Resistance to Business Retreats"

  Although business consultants, CEOs, and to some extent employees agree on the importance of business retreats, in social media one also finds a significant amount of resistance to or complaints about business retreats. Based on an analysis of Reddit threads, YouTube and TikTok videos, and blogs, this paper argues that these complaints are rooted in how business retreats place participants in a liminal situation that blurs and challenges personal boundaries without creating a clear ritual process aimed at personal transformation. Our argument has two parts. Using Victor Turner's theory of the liminal and the liminoid, we first hypothesize that business retreats often co-opt leisure or fun activities in ways that contradict secular norms for participation. Second, this cooptation refigures these secular activities as ritual forms but without embedding them in a broader context and culture of routines that build and sustain connection to the organization's community and its values.

- **Sarah Saddler (Baruch College, City University of New York)**, "Business Retreating in a VUCA World: Cultivating Authentic Presence in the 'Capitalist Funhouse'"

  This presentation explores how organizations in corporate India deploy theatre and performance games and techniques to cultivate "authentic presence," where employees are taught that eliciting vibes of magnetism, attractiveness, and style are crucial to becoming "peak performers" in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Chaotic, Ambiguous) business age. Using data gathered from participate-observation in business school classrooms at the Indian Institute of Management, a "Personal Impact" training, and a "Peak Performance" Assessment workshop, I show how promotions of authentic presence typify contemporary "body-shopping" and

demonstrates how VUCA operates as a sexualized labor economy which utilizes the transformational qualities of performance to position workers in a perpetual state of insufficiency and always-becoming with respect to the organization.

Break
15:00-17:00 Mountain Time

Keynote
17:00-18:00 Mountain Time

Dr. Tina Dacin
Stephen J.R. Smith Chair of Strategy and Organizational Behavior
Smith School of Business
Queen's University

"Performing Retreats: Unpacking the Role of Ritual, Emotions and Place"

In this talk I speak to the "role" of retreats as well as the performance of retreats. In doing so, I highlight ritual, emotions and place. Each of these three dimensions is critical in how retreats, as institutionalized practices, are enacted and evaluated. Some questions I ask explore the hierarchy, privilege, and power of actors as both custodians and consumers of retreats.

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