

CHARLES HANDY



WAITING FOR THE
MOUNTAIN TO MOVE

REFLECTIONS ON
WORK & LIFE



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Charles Handy



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THE AUTHOR

 Charles Handy was born in Kildare, Ireland, in 1932, the son of an archdeacon, and was educated in England and the United States. He graduated from Oriel College, Oxford, with first-class honors in Greats, the study of classics, history, and philosophy. Handy has said that this discipline "gave me the ability to think."

After college, Handy first worked for Shell International in southeast Asia and London as a marketing executive, an economist, and a management educator. He then entered the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. While there he became fascinated with organizations and how they work. After he received his master's in business administration from Sloan in 1967, he returned to England to design and manage the only Sloan program outside the United States, at Britain's first graduate business school, in London.

In 1972 Handy became a full professor of management development at the school, specializing in managerial psychology. From 1977 to 1981, he served as warden of St. George's House in Windsor Castle, a private conference and study center concerned with ethics and values in society. He was chair of the Royal Society of Arts in London from 1987 to 1989 and holds honorary doctorates from four British universities. He is

known to many in Britain for his "Thoughts for the Day" on the BBC's radio program *Today*.

Handy's main concern has been the implications for society, and for individuals, of the dramatic changes that technology and economics are bringing to the workplace and to all our lives. His bestselling *The Age of Unreason* first explored these changes and was named by both *Fortune* and *Business Week* as one of the ten best business books of the year. The sequel, *The Age of Paradox*, was awarded the JSK Accord Prize for the best business book of 1994. In total, his books, which include *Gods of Management*, the standard textbook *Understanding Organizations*, *Understanding Schools as Organizations*, *Understanding Voluntary Organizations*, and *Inside Organizations*, have sold over a million copies around the world. An article for the *Harvard Business Review*, "Balancing Corporate Power: A New Federalist Paper," won the McKinsey Award for 1992, and another article for the same journal, "Trust and Virtual Organization," won the McKinsey Award in 1995. *Beyond Certainty* is a collection of his articles and essays. In his latest book, *The Hungry Spirit*, he surfaces some of his doubts about the consequences of free-market capitalism and questions whether material success can ever provide the true meaning of life.

Today, Handy is an independent author, teacher, and broadcaster focusing on the changing shape of work, organizations, and capitalism, which has an impact on every aspect of our lives. He describes himself now as a social philosopher. Handy and his wife, Elizabeth, a portrait photographer as well as his business partner, have two grown children and live in London and Norfolk, England, and in Tuscany. They have what Handy has termed "a portfolio life," balancing their skills and their time to make the most of their independent careers.

Waiting for the Mountain to Move

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION . . .

“Would you like to do a ‘Thought’?” asked Robert Foxcroft one day. I knew what he meant and, because I knew, was both flattered and surprised. “Thought” was short for “Thought for the Day,” a three-minute religious reflection slotted between the news headlines and the weather every morning on the BBC’s early-morning radio program *Today*. Robert was the producer. That question of Robert’s, years later, gave birth to this book of reflections, or thoughts.

The god slot, as “Thought for the Day” was popularly known, was conventionally filled by bishops, priests, and rabbis, and I was none of those. But I was known to Robert, who acted as producer of this one daily spot as well as being vicar of St. Peter’s Church in Hammersmith, London. Robert felt that I, as a rather renegade professor of business with theological affinities, might relate particularly to the many thousands of business and professional people who regularly tuned into this program.

“Actually,” said Robert, “a few million people are listening, but don’t get conceited; they won’t have tuned in to listen to you. Half of them are in their cars and use the program to distract them from the thought of the day ahead; the others are naked in their bath or using the radio for wallpaper sound or an alarm clock as they go about their early morning chores.

Your task is to say something interesting so that they really start to listen."

I was, as I said, flattered. The first "Thought" was scheduled for months ahead. I had a holiday in Provence looming up, and I planned to use it to polish my ideas. I came back with some sample scripts. Robert read them carefully. "Yes," he said, "they're about right for length, but, well, this is supposed to be a thought for *the* day, not the encapsulated wisdom of a lifetime. Ideally, it needs to relate to something that's happening in the news or in your own life, a little nugget to chew on as they go to work." I tore them up and started again—or rather I learned not to start on them until the day before so that they would be fresh and relevant.

Sadly, Robert died not long afterward, to leave a huge gap in the lives of his many friends. I shall forever be grateful to him because he made me think—think about what mattered to me in life, think about my beliefs, such as they were, and how they came about, think particularly about how those beliefs shed light on the countless dilemmas and worries that seemed to make up the workaday world of myself and people like me.

Three minutes, 540 words or so. It doesn't sound like much, but it's the most difficult thing I ever had to do and in many ways the most rewarding—when and if it came out right. It is a great privilege to be allowed to share your personal beliefs with millions of others, whether they're listening or not, to be given three minutes with no interruptions, no questions asked, no editing. The presenters in the studio have no warning or knowledge of what I'm going to say, and the rules are that they must let me say it. I sometimes wonder what would happen if I abandoned my script and started to hurl abuse at the BBC, the prime minister, or the queen, calling down on them the wrath of God. Would anyone then interrupt?

Most of these reflections are slightly edited versions of those early-morning "Thoughts." Some arose from other occasions.


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They spread over ten years, years that saw the end of the Cold War and the start of a Gulf War, as well as the goings and comings of prime ministers and presidents everywhere. Ten years that, nearer home and the lives of most of us, saw stock markets and housing markets boom and burst, earthquakes in San Francisco, and hurricanes in unusual places like southern England; but ten years, too, that saw the ups and downs of life in home and office continue as they always have, whatever happens in the big world outside.

My task, as I saw it, was to look for the meaning or the moral in those happenings, if there was one, and to put them all to the test of my beliefs. Sometimes I have thought that everyone ought to be invited to compose their own "thought for the day" because of the way it forces one to think. These reflections, therefore, are just that, my reflections on life as I see it happening around me. They carry no authority, they may well be heretical, they do not pretend to tell anyone else how to think; but if they goad or encourage people to do their own thinking about these things, I shall be well content.

The reflections reflect me. Inevitably. I have therefore added a "personal preface," in which I try to reveal a little more of me and the way my beliefs about life and the meaning of life came to be shaped.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


 Every writer needs a friendly critic, every broadcaster a skilled producer, and every author an insightful publisher. I am lucky enough to have had all three to help bring these reflections to life.

Elizabeth, my wife, is the friendly critic. She keeps me honest and humble. "Speak from your heart," she tells me, "not from your head." And she is right because these are meant to be reflections, not sermons.

These reflections made their first appearance as "Thoughts for the Day" on the BBC's morning program. There, Robert Foxcroft was my first producer. I am grateful to him and to all his successors, most recently David Coomes, Christine Morgan, and Amanda Hancox. They coach me over the telephone lines, proving that you can have a wonderfully productive relationship with someone you never meet.

My British publishers, Gail Rebusk and Paul Sidey, made this book possible in the first place. Cedric Crocker at Jossey-Bass helped me share these thoughts with readers in the United States. I am endlessly grateful to them all for their creativity and support.

A PERSONAL PREFACE

 It started, I suppose, with the death of my father. So many things do start with a death. It makes one wonder whom and what one's own death will spring loose.

My father was a quiet man. He had been rector of the same country parish in Kildare in southern Ireland for forty years when he retired, aged seventy-two. He was tired by then, understandably. For the last fourteen of those years he had also been archdeacon of the diocese. He died two years later.

I was in Paris at a business conference when I heard that he was dying. I flew back to Ireland, but he was unconscious by the time I got there and died the next day. His funeral, like all funerals in Ireland, was arranged for the day after tomorrow, a quiet family affair, back in the country church he had served for so long.

I was very fond of my father, but disappointed in him. He had turned down big-city parishes, had settled for a humdrum life in the same little backwater. His life seemed to be a series of boring meetings and visits punctuated with the unchanging rhythm of Sundays, with old Mrs. Atkinson and Eddie to lunch in the rectory afterward. As a teenager I resolved never to go to church again once I led my own life, and never to be poor again.

And so it was that, much to the amazement of my friends and family, I became an oil executive and was posted to the Far

East to be in charge of marketing in Sarawak—a job and a country both unknown in the rectory. I had a good time in Malaysia, mostly spending money and drinking too much beer. I came back fat and rather sleek, and also engaged to a beautiful English girl whom I had met in Kuala Lumpur.

She didn't think much of an oil executive's life or of her predestined role as an oil executive's hostess, so I switched to the newly discovered academic world of business studies, going to the United States to pick up another degree and coming back to the infant London Business School. Soon I was a professor, gallivanting around to conferences, consulting, lunching, dining, on the edge of the big time. A book had been published and articles galore. We had two young children, a flat in town, and a cottage in the country. More than that, I was tremendously busy, with a diary crammed with engagements. Success!

With these thoughts in mind I followed the hearse down the country roads to my father's funeral; a quiet end for a quiet man, I reflected. A pity that he never really understood what I was doing. When I became a professor, my mother's reaction to the news was to ask whether it meant that I could now spend more time with the children.

Suddenly I noticed that we seemed to have a police escort; the local police had decided unasked to clear our route for the last few miles to the church. A nice compliment to a Protestant vicar in rural Catholic Ireland, but just as well because it was hard to thread our way between the queues of cars trying to get to the little country church. The place was packed, overflowing. How had they heard? He had only died the day before yesterday, and there had been just the one notice in the paper.

The choir looked odd too. Dressed in the little-boy surplices that I remembered from Sundays long ago but with older faces. I remembered some of them. Choir boys and choir girls reassembled from all the corners of Ireland, and from England

too. They had dropped everything to be there. The archbishop, supposed to be in the hospital and still propped on a stick, was there to say to all of us how special my father had been and how he would be missed but remembered forever by so many whose lives he had touched.

As I stood by his grave, surrounded by people he had helped to marry and whose children he had later baptized and then seen marry in his church in their turn, as I saw the tears in the eyes of the hundreds of people who had come from everywhere to say farewell to this "quiet" man, I turned away and began to think.

Who, I wondered, would come to my funeral with tears in their eyes? What is success and who was successful, me or my father? What is one's life for, and what is the point of our existence in this world? They are not exactly new questions. I had studied philosophy. I knew the theories. I had never applied them to myself before. Not seriously.

I went back to England. It was a long, hot summer that year. I resolved to change my life and my priorities. I thought I might go to theological college, might become ordained, be a priest like my father. Luckily, I now think, the bishops whom I approached told me not to be so silly. If I wanted to serve God, as they put it, I could do it much better as a professor of business than in a dog collar.

They encouraged me to apply for the post of warden of St. George's House in Windsor Castle. This small, select study center was established by Prince Philip and the then dean of Windsor, Robin Woods, to be a meeting place for people of influence in the churches and in other parts of society. It ran consultations on topics like justice, the future of work, power, and responsibility in our institutions—consultations at which captains of industry, trade-union leaders, head teachers, civil servants, and politicians mingled and debated with bishops and

chaplains and each other. It was a place of retreat and reflection for busy people in a busy world, set in a courtyard behind St. George's Chapel. It became my home and my obsession for the next four years.

From one extreme to another. I thought at first that they had left out a nought when I saw my salary. They provided me with a lovely house, but the cost of carpeting it was more than my first year's pay. What was all this about never being poor again, I wondered. Life has a way of going full circle, and as for never going to church again, I lived in the shadow of the great Chapel of St. George and attended with relish the early-morning service there in the little upstairs chapel every day of every week. "You've been to church three times this week," my startled mother-in-law said to my wife and myself once, "and it's only Thursday!"

But I was also in charge of the study center and was experiencing all the problems of moving into a new institution in a new field, a world where I was not known and where I knew not its ways. It was stressful. Before long I took myself off to a psychotherapist. "What are you seeking to achieve?" he asked me. "I just want to make the world, in some small way, a better place," I replied. "Oh, I see," he said with heavy irony, "so now we have the three of you, Jesus Christ, the Prophet Mohammed, and Professor Charles Handy!" I blushed, rebuked and embarrassed, but I got the message: here I was sitting in his consulting room, sick at heart, and talking about changing the world. There was something somewhere about taking great beams out of one's own eyes first, I recalled. I needed to be surer about myself and my beliefs if I was going to be of any use to anyone else. To put it more crisply, being is essential to doing; who I am colors what I do. Was it not Dr. Johnson who said, "Who you are sounds so loudly in my ears that I can't hear what you say"?

He said something else, my psychotherapist. I had arrived late for one session. Hampstead is a long way from Windsor and

the traffic can be bad. I got there at twenty minutes past the hour instead of on the hour. At 2:50 P.M. when I had been there thirty minutes his little alarm went "ping," signaling that the normal fifty-minute consultation was up. "Oh dear," I said, "I've only just got going. Have you anyone else coming?"

"No," he said.

"Well, then, can I stay on?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"But I've only been here thirty minutes. I got delayed by the traffic."

"That's your problem," he said, "not mine."

I went away fuming, but then I reflected that he was right. I spent my life apologizing to people for things that had nothing to do with me, like the weather, the state of our street, or the rudeness of the local shopkeeper. If people arrived late, I didn't cut short the appointment; I said, "Oh bad luck, please don't concern yourself," and would cheerfully change my plans for the day because of *their* poor scheduling, taking, as it were, their failings on my shoulders and feeling noble as I did it. This was, I now saw, to take responsibility away from them, to steal their choices. But was not this what Jesus Christ was supposed to have done, taken all our sins on himself? No, I eventually decided, that had to be a misrepresentation of Christianity. It is not an escapist religion. We can't go off and do as we like and then dump all our sins or mistakes on the deity. That's garbage-can religion with God as the garbage can.

I was beginning to realize not only that theology was not as straightforward as it had seemed in the days of my youth but that it was also highly practical. I could not get on with my life or be at peace with myself until I had sorted out some of this stuff. Being and doing are inseparable.

Two months later I was invited by the dean and canons to preach the sermon at the Sunday morning service in St. George's Chapel. It was, I was told, the first time a layman had preached

formally in that place since it was built in the sixteenth century. I was suitably overawed. I decided that it would be quite inappropriate for me to try to interpret the word of God so instead I set out to explain what I saw as the point and purpose of the study center that sat at the end of the courtyard at the back of the chapel. It was, I said, a place where we tried to connect people's beliefs with the problems of life and of work in today's world. If I am right, I said, the central message of Christianity is that religion is not about another life in another world but about our life in this world—God became Man, as the Bible puts it. The search for that connection between belief and action is never-ending and always changing because the world and its problems are always changing. The beliefs may remain the same, but their applications will always need to be rethought by each of us each year, even each day. We are forever going to be searchers after truth.

I need not have worried too much about my sermon. I had forgotten about the verger. The verger, who is the master of ceremonies on these occasions, had never been too keen on the idea. "Sit where you like," he had said when I asked him about the protocol, "and wear what you like. This has never happened before. There is no precedent." I got the distinct impression that he hoped it would never happen again. I should not therefore have been terribly surprised when the microphones failed just after I got up to speak and did not function again that morning. The ears of the faithful were not afflicted by any possible heresies that day, and I learned, yet again, that those who control the technology always wield great negative power, so it is as well to have them on your side. I was pleased when the verger came up to me the next day to apologize for a "malfunctioning of the audio system" and also to ask for a copy of my address. "Those who heard it said that it made a lot of sense." But that, of course, was afterward.

The ears of the faithful may not have been harmed, but I learned a lot. It was an Irishman who said, "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?" and I am an Irishman. It remains the best clue to learning that I know of. The need to communicate forces you to work out what you want to say, and, after that, it doesn't matter too much if anyone listens or not because what they ought to do is to work out in their turn what they want to say. Preaching, you might say, gets in the way of learning, except for the preacher.

Over four years I listened to some six thousand people in small seminars and consultations find out what they thought when they heard what they said. Some of what they said was inspiring, some was boring, some bizarre. You couldn't always predict which mouths would say which. Two years after I left the place a businessman asked me to lunch, to thank me he said. "What for?" I asked, over the drinks. "Because of that weekend in Windsor some years back. I heard myself saying that the sense of responsibility that goes with ownership is so important that it shouldn't be a minority right. I went away and thought about that and decided to share the ownership of my business with my workers. The agreement was signed yesterday, hence this lunch."

Has this anything to do with religion—I used to ask myself—with the hymns and the psalms the choir sings so beautifully in that chapel? I'm sure it does. I'm sure that our beliefs should, and do, infect our lives. If we try to live our lives in separate compartments, one for doing, perhaps, and one for being, then for part of the time we are living a lie, "the truth is not in us." That I found and still find is not very comfortable.

Since the day of that sermon I have been trying to bring my being and my doing closer together. In time I left Windsor. It was time to go anyway, but I was growing increasingly uncomfortable with the need to fit into my role. It is hard for

being and doing to weld into one when for part of your doing you have to act a part that is not totally "you." All of us, in organizations, are "role occupants," and few of us could claim that there is a perfect match between us and our role. That, I think, is part of the problem with organizations and part of their seduction. They force us, or allow us, depending on your viewpoint, to escape from ourselves and to play a part. It can be fun for a while. It can be damaging in the end.

To me the only answer, I gradually realized, was to be my own master and employer. Today I am a self-employed writer and teacher. It is financially more perilous but in every other way more secure. I can't now escape from myself in my work, but these days I don't want to so much. Being and doing are closer.

It is no part of my mission to foist my beliefs onto other people. That would run counter to my philosophy of life and learning. We each have to do the searching for ourselves. Nevertheless, some clues to my beliefs can be found in these reflections. My concern is only to point to what *I* see as the meaning in things and to the ultimate purpose in life in order to encourage other people to find their meaning and their purpose. The nicest comments I ever had on those broadcasts were from the man who said, "You set me thinking for the whole of that day," and from the woman who wrote, "I had been bedridden for three years bemoaning my bad luck in losing both my legs. After listening, I decided that I had to do something with my life so I got up and enrolled in the local college."