



**JUDI
NEAL**

Meditation And Global Connections

Lessons From Michael Stephen,
Chairman, Aetna International

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Edgewalkers are people who walk between the spiritual world and the material world. They seem to have an uncanny knack for knowing what's going to happen before it unfolds. They are able to create new rules to the game instead of following the rules that everyone else follows. They are able to plan a strategy that seems absurd to most people at first, and is later called "brilliant" when they succeed. They operate from a worldview that is adamant about integrity and caring for others.

One of the primary skills of Edgewalkers is multiculturalism.

Edgewalkers are "multi-lingual" in the sense that they can understand the nuances of different worlds, worldviews, or cultures. They are boundary spanners and translators.

Edgewalkers know how to pick up on subtle body cues and language cues that are different from their own. They pay minute attention to people and have an open, warm curiosity about those from other cultures.

They look for the commonalities more than the differences, and they want to know more about the world of that other person. True Edgewalkers see the Divine in everyone they meet, regardless of what profession, country, or culture they are from.

Michael Stephen, former Chairman of Aetna International, is an Edgewalker with very strong multicultural skills. He spent most of his career as an executive at Aetna, a major insurance company.

What is most unusual about Michael is that he has been a daily meditator since 1974.

In his book, *Spirituality in Business* (Scottsdale, AZ: Inspired Productions Press, 2002), he describes the development of his career, as well as the development of his spirituality. He tells story after story of meeting business and government leaders from various countries, and forming deep spiritual connections.

You can feel Michael's warmth and humanity throughout the book and can easily see how his emphasis on relationships led to his extraordinary ability to expand Aetna's international business into many countries where others had difficulty.

Meditation or other contemplative practice is key to developing the sensitivity and caring that is essential to being a multi-cultural Edgewalker. In his book Michael says, "Meditation played a great role in my success. It helped me to identify the critical and essential business issues I had to face and deal with them in a productive, and most of all, humane way."

I asked Michael to describe his inner experience of meditation and how it is connected to his business success. He says, "I experience peace and quiet, and a state of being withdrawn from the multiple choices we face at work each day. I experience myself resting in the arms of God. Each day I spend 25 minutes in the peace and quiet of being with my Creator."

Michael says that we are asking the wrong question when we attempt to understand the direct impact of meditation on business success. He says, "It is a question that assumes cause and effect. Our culture is one that focuses on what is the cause, and what is the result?" His advice: "Just back away from that kind of thinking and enjoy what happens."

The following story from Michael is a wonderful example of what he means by backing away from cause and effect thinking.

"Last week I had a call from a fellow from Asia that I used to work with. He had some work in Hartford and told me that he was going to be in Ottawa and Toronto, and could he come and visit me in Toronto? We found a time on our calendars and were able to have lunch together. During lunch I asked him, 'What is the purpose of your visit to Toronto?' He replied, 'To

have lunch with you.’ He had driven all the way to Toronto from Hartford, just to have lunch with me. Who can understand the cause and effect of that? After we finished our time together, he embraced me. The Chinese never show affection or emotion in public, yet he embraced me. Who can understand that?”

He goes on to explain, “If I’m resting in the arms of God, how am I going to hurt people? If you see yourself as resting in the arms of God, you will automatically model a different understanding of life, and that will affect the way you operate in business.”

He says that a real turning point for him in his integration of spirituality and his work was the time he spent working in China and India. He adds, “It was eye-opening. It was my post-graduate education. People in China and India are very spiritual. Maybe not in the way we define it in North America, but they are deeply spiritual nonetheless. I learned so much from them. They have a real emphasis on relationship and connection and that is the essence of spirituality.”

Michael Stephen publicly announced his interest in spirituality in 1995 when he was asked to speak at the Spirituality in the Workplace conference in Toronto. There, he made his first public declaration that he had been actively meditating for 21 years.

I was there and watched his announcement, and I remember thinking that it must have taken tremendous courage to be so public about his spirituality when he was in such a high position at Aetna.

Yet he feels that it was not courageous at all. He felt that he had to do it because of who he is, and because he has a powerful message to share.

I asked him if there had been any price to pay by being public about his spirituality, and he said, “Not that I’m aware of. To be honest with you, I don’t give a damn if people think I’m weird. This is what I have to do.”

Michael has retired from Aetna and is now active in executive coaching, working with non-profits, reading, writing, speaking, jogging, and gardening.

He continues his daily practice of prayer and meditation.

Judi Neal is Executive Director of The Association for Spirit at Work, a membership organization that supports personal and organizational transformation through coaching, education, research, speaking, and publications. She is the author of a forthcoming book titled *Beyond Profit and Prophets: Creating Inspired People, Teams, And Organizations*. She can be reached at judi@spiritatwork.com. BH SmartDocs™ are published by BrownHerron Publishing and are sold exclusively on Amazon.com (www.amazon.com/brownherron).

