

Jane was the third manager in two years, and she was beginning to understand that it wasn't just the problems with the people on three, it was also Bill.

"I've just come out of an all-morning meeting with the leadership group, and I want to meet with you this afternoon."

"Sure, Bill, is there a problem?"

"The leadership is convinced that we're in for some tough times and in order to survive, we will need the best from everyone. More productivity from the same employees, or we start making changes. We talked about the corrosive effect of a few departments, where the energy and morale are so low that it pulls everyone down."

A feeling of dread descended upon Mary Jane.

"The boss went to one of those touchy-feely conferences on spirit in the workplace, and he's all fired up. I don't think it's fair to single out the third floor, but he seems to believe the third floor is the biggest problem."

"He singled out the third floor?"

"Not only did he single out the third floor, but he had a special name for it. He called it a 'toxic energy dump.' I don't want one of my departments called a toxic energy dump! It's unacceptable! It's embarrassing."

"A toxic energy dump?"

"Yes. And the boss really grilled me on what I'm doing about it. I told him I shared his concern and that I brought you in to solve the problem. He told me he wants to be kept informed of the progress. So, have you solved it yet?"

Had she solved it yet?! She only took the job five weeks

ago! "Not yet," she said.

"Well, you have to speed things up, Mary Jane. If you're not up to it I need to know so I can make the appropriate changes. The boss is absolutely convinced we all need more energy, passion, and spirit on the job. I'm not sure why the third floor needs passion and energy. The stuff you do there is not rocket science. Personally, I've never expected a lot from a bunch of clerks. I guess the third floor has been the butt of jokes for so long that he thinks if we fix it, we solve the problem. What time can you meet?"

"How about two o'clock, Bill?"

"Two-thirty, OK?"

"Sure."

Bill must have heard the frustration in her voice. "Now don't get upset, Mary Jane. You just get to work on this."

He really is hard to take, she thought as she hung up the phone. Don't get upset! He is my boss, and the problem is real. But what a jerk.

A Change in Routine

Mary Jane's mind was ablaze as she moved toward the elevators a second time. Rather than heading down the hill to the waterfront as usual, she impulsively turned right on First Street, thinking she needed a longer walk. The words *toxic energy dump* played over and over in her head.

Toxic energy dump! What next? She was walking along First Street when a small voice inside her head whispered, "The toxic energy is what you hate most about the third floor. Something needs to happen."

Mary Jane's impulsive stroll down First Street took her to a part of town that was new to her. Sounds of pealing laughter caught her attention and she was surprised to see the public market to her left. She had heard about it, but with her tight financial situation and two young children, she usually avoided specialty markets. With her need to live frugally until the medical bills were paid in full, it was just easier to stay away. She

had driven through the area but had never been there on foot.

As she turned and walked down Pike Place, she saw that a large crowd of well-dressed people was clustered around one of the fish markets, and everyone was laughing. At first she felt herself resisting the laughter, dwelling on the seriousness of her predicament. She almost turned away. Then a voice in her head said, "I could use a good laugh," and she moved closer. One of the fish guys yelled out, "Good afternoon, yogurt dudes!" Dozens of well-dressed people then hoisted yogurt cups into the air. *My goodness, she thought. What have I stumbled upon?*

The world famous Pike Place Fish market

Was that a fish flying through the air? She wondered if her eyes were playing tricks on her; then it happened again. One of the workers—they were distinctive in their white aprons and black rubber boots—picked up a large fish, threw it twenty feet to the raised counter, and shouted, "One salmon flying away to Minnesota." Then all the other workers repeated in unison, "One

salmon flying away to Minnesota." The guy behind the counter made an unbelievable one-handed catch, then bowed his head to the people applauding his skill. The energy was remarkable.

To her right, another worker was playfully teasing a small boy by making a large fish move its mouth as if it were talking. A slightly older fish guy with thinning gray hair was walking around shouting, "Questions, questions, answers to any questions about fish!" A young worker at the cash register was juggling crabs. Two card-carrying members of AARP were laughing uncontrollably as their fish guy salesman carried on a conversation with the fish they had chosen. The place was wild. She could feel herself relax as she enjoyed the spectacle.

She looked at the people holding the yogurt cups in the air and thought, *Office workers. Do they really buy fish at lunch or do they just come to watch the action?*

Mary Jane was unaware that one of the fish guys had noticed her in the crowd. There was something about her curiosity and seriousness which caused him to walk over.

"What's the matter? Don't you have any yogurt?" She looked around and saw a handsome young man with long curly black hair. He was looking at her intently, a big smile on his face.

"I have yogurt in the bag," she stammered as she gestured to her brown bag, "but I'm not sure what is happening."

"Have you been here before?"

"No. I usually go down to the waterfront for lunch."

"I can understand that—it's peaceful by the water. Not very peaceful here, that's for sure. So what brings you here today?"

Off to her right one of the fish guys, looking lost, was shouting, "Who wants to buy a fish?" Another was teasing a young woman. A crab sailed over Mary Jane's head. "Six crabs flying away to Montana," someone shouted. "Six crabs flying away to Montana," they all repeated. A fish guy wearing a wool cap was dancing behind the cash register. It was a controlled madhouse all around her, like the rides at the state fair, only better. But the fish guy at her side didn't seem at all distracted. He was pleasantly and patiently waiting for her response. *My goodness, she thought. He actually seems interested in my answer. But I'm not going to tell a total stranger about my troubles at work.* Then she did just that.

His name was Lonnie, and he listened attentively to her description of the third floor. He didn't flinch when one of the flying fish hit a rope and smacked the

ground right beside them. He listened closely as she described the many employee problems she had identified. When she finished telling her story, she looked at Lonnie and asked, "So what do you think about my toxic energy dump?"

"That's quite a story. I've worked in some pretty dreary places myself. In fact this place used to be pretty crappy. What do you notice about the market now?"

"The noise, the action, the energy," she said, without a moment's hesitation.

"And how do you like all this energy?"

"I love it," she replied. "I really love it!"

"Me, too. I'm spoiled for life. I don't think I could work in a typical market after experiencing this. As I mentioned, the market didn't start this way. It, too, was an energy dump for many years. Then we decided to change things—and this is the result. Would energy like this make a difference with your group?"

"It sure would. It's what we need at the dump," she said, smiling.

"I'd be happy to describe what I think makes this fish market different. Who knows, you might get some ideas."

"But, but we don't have anything to throw! We have boring work to do. Most of us . . ."

"Slow down. It's not just about throwing fish. Of course your business is different, and it sounds like you have a serious challenge facing you. I'd like to help. What if you could find your own way to apply some of the lessons we learned while becoming the world famous Pike Place Fish market? Wouldn't the possibility of an energized department make it worthwhile for you to learn those lessons?"

"Yes. For sure! But why would you do this for me?"

"Being a part of this little fish market community and experiencing what you see here has made a big difference in my life. I won't bore you with the personal details, but my life was a real mess when I took this job. Working here has literally saved my life. It may sound a little sappy, but I believe I have an obligation to seek out and find ways to demonstrate my gratitude for this life I enjoy. You made that easy for me by telling me about your problem. I really believe you can find some of your answers here. We've created a lot of great energy." As he said the word *energy*, a crab sailed by and someone shouted with a Texas twang, "Five crabs flying away to Wisconsin." A chorus echoed, "Five crabs flying away to Wisconsin."

"Fair enough," she answered, laughing out loud.

"If the fish market has anything, it has energy. It's a

deal.” She looked at her watch and realized she would have to walk fast in order to get back to work within the lunch hour. She had no doubt her arrivals and departures were being clocked by her staff.

Lonnie caught her glance and said, “Hey, why don’t you come back for your lunch break tomorrow—and bring *two* yogurts.”

He turned and immediately began helping a young man in a Vikings jacket understand the difference between a Copper River salmon and a King salmon.

Return Visit

At lunchtime on Tuesday she walked quickly down First Street to the market. Lonnie must have been watching for her; he immediately emerged from the crowd and directed her down a ramp past the T-shirt concession.

“There are some tables at the end of the hall,” he said, and led the way to a small glass-enclosed room with a great view of the harbor and Puget Sound. Lonnie ate a bagel and the yogurt Mary Jane brought him while she ate her yogurt and asked about the workings of a fish market. Fishmongering really didn’t sound

very appealing after Lonnie told her about a typical day; this made the attitude of the workers at the Pike Place Fish market all the more impressive.

“It would seem that your work and my work have more in common than I thought,” she said, after Lonnie described the tedious tasks that needed to be conducted each day.

Lonnie looked up, “Really?”

“Yes, most of the work my staff does can be mundane and repetitious, to say the least. It’s important work, however. We never see a customer, but if we make a mistake, the customer is upset and we receive a lot of criticism. If we do our work well, no one notices. In general, the work is boring. You’ve taken boring work and made the way you do the work interesting. I find that fascinating.”

“Have you ever considered the fact that any work can be boring to the person who has to do it? Some of the yogurt dudes travel all over the world for business. It sounds pretty exciting to me, but they tell me it gets old fast. I guess given the right conditions, any job can be dull.”

“I agree with what you said. When I was a teenager I had a chance to do a job many teenage girls often

dream about: I received a modeling contract. But by the end of the first month I was bored to tears. It was almost all just standing around, waiting. Or take newscasters. I've since learned that many do nothing other than read other people's text. That sounds boring, also—at least to me.”

“OK. If we agree that any job can be boring, can we agree that any job can be performed with energy and enthusiasm?”

“I'm not sure. Can you give me an example?”

“That's easy. Walk around the market and look at the other fish shops. They don't get it. They are, what was the phrase you used . . . toxic energy dumps. The way they approach their work is really good for *our* business. I've told you the Pike Place Fish market used to be like them. Then we discovered an amazing thing.

There is always a choice about the way you do your work, even if there is not a choice about the work itself. That was the biggest lesson we learned in building the world famous Pike Place Fish market. *We can choose the attitude we bring to our work.*”

CHOOSE YOUR ATTITUDE

Mary Jane pulled out a notepad and began writing:

**There is always a choice about
the way you do your work,
even if there is not
a choice about the work itself.**

Then she thought about the words she had just written, and asked, “Why wouldn't you have a choice about the work itself?”

“Good point. You can always quit your job, and so in that sense you have a choice about the work you do. But it might not be a smart thing to do given your responsibilities and other factors. That's what I mean by choice. On the other hand, you always have a choice about the attitude you bring to the job.”

Lonnie continued, “Let me tell you about my grandmother. She always brought love and a smile to her work. All of us grandkids wanted to help in the kitchen because washing dishes with Grandma was so much fun. In the process a great deal of kitchen wis-

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dom was dispensed. Us kids were given something truly precious, a caring adult.

"I realize now that my grandmother didn't love dishwashing. She *brought* love to dishwashing, and her spirit was infectious.

"Likewise, my buddies and I realized that each day when we come to the fish market we bring an attitude. We can bring a moody attitude and have a depressing day. We can bring a grouchy attitude and irritate our coworkers and customers. Or we can bring a sunny, playful, cheerful attitude and have a great day. We can choose the kind of day we will have. We spent a lot of time talking about this choice, and we realized that as long as we are going to be at work, we might as well have the best day we can have. Make sense to you?"

"It sure does."

"In fact, we got so excited about our choices that we also chose to be world famous. A day spent 'being world famous' is a lot more enjoyable than a day spent being ordinary. Do you see what I am saying? Working in a fish market is cold, wet, smelly, sloppy, difficult work. But we have a choice about our attitude while we are doing that work."

"Yes, I think I get it. You choose the attitude you

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bring to work each day. That choice determines the way you are at work. As long as you are here, why not choose to be world famous rather than ordinary? It seems so simple."

"Simple to understand, but more difficult to do. We didn't create this place overnight; it took almost a year. I was a hard case myself—you might say I used to have a chip on my shoulder. My personal life was kind of out of control as well. I really never thought much about it, just assumed I knew how life worked. Life was tough, and I responded in kind—I was tough. Then when we decided to create a different kind of fish market, I resisted the notion that I could choose how I lived each day. I had too much invested in being a victim. One of the older guys, who also had been through some tough times, took me aside and explained it to me, one monger to another. I did some soul searching and decided I would give it a try. I've become a believer. A person can choose their attitude. I know that because I chose mine."

Mary Jane found herself impressed with what she was hearing and also with the person from whom she was hearing it. She looked up to find Lonnie eyeing her quizzically and realized she had been daydreaming.

"Sorry. I'll give it a try. What else explains your success here?"

"There are four ingredients, but this one is the core. Without choosing your attitude the others are a waste of time. So let's stop here and save the other three for later. Take the first ingredient and see what you can do with it back on the third floor. Call me when you're ready to discuss the rest. Do you have our number?"

"It's written everywhere in the shop!"

"Oh yeah. We aren't shy, are we? See you later. And thanks for the yogurt."

The Courage to Change

The demands of her job kept Mary Jane on a treadmill of activity for the next two days. That was her excuse, anyway. But her thoughts were often on her conversation with Lonnie and the idea of choosing the attitude you bring to work. She realized that even though she agreed with the philosophy of the fish market, there was something holding her back. *When in doubt, get more data*, she thought.

On Friday, she decided to ask Bill about the con-

ference his boss had attended, the one about spirit in the workplace. It might be wise to learn more about his experience. That afternoon, she called Bill.

"Bill, how can I get up to speed on the spirit in the workplace conference the big guy attended?"

"What do you want to do that for? It was one of those 'new age' deals. They probably spent most of their time in hot tubs. Why do you want to waste your time on that?"

Mary Jane felt herself getting angry. She took a deep breath. "Look, Bill, when I took this job we both knew there was a lot to do. Now the stakes are higher, and the timeline is shorter. You are in this as deep as I am. Are you going to help me or give me a hard time?"

I can't believe I said that, she thought. But it sure felt good!

Bill responded evenly; this confrontational approach actually seemed to make him more comfortable. "OK, OK. Don't get all worked up. I have an audio tape from the conference on my desk that I'm supposed to listen to. I just haven't had time. You take it and fill me in?"

"Sure, Bill. I'll come by and pick it up."

A Memorable Commute

The commute to Bellevue was bumper to bumper, but Mary Jane didn't notice. She was mulling over her situation. *When did I lose my confidence?* she wondered to herself. *Speaking up to Bill is the first courageous thing I have done in a long time. Two years to be exact, she realized, as she finally started putting the pieces together at the edge of her consciousness. Too much to think about.* Feeling overwhelmed, she put Bill's tape into the cassette player.

From the car stereo speakers came a deep, resonant voice that was mesmerizing. The tape was a recording of verse from a poet who took his poetry to the workplace, believing the language of poetry could help us cope with the issues of the day. His name was David Whyte. He would talk a while and then recite a poem. His poems and stories washed over her. Phrases jumped out at her.

The needs of the organization and our needs as workers are the same. Creativity, passion, flexibility, wholeheartedness . . .

Yes, she thought.

We crack the windows of our cars in the corporate parking lot in the summer, not to save the upholstery from the heat, but because only sixty percent of us goes into that place, and the rest of us stays in the car all day and must breathe out there. What would it be like to take our whole self to work?

Who is this guy? Then without warning, she filled with emotion as she heard David Whyte recite his poem *Faith*. He introduced it to his audience by saying he wrote it at a time when he had very little faith himself:

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Faith

BY DAVID WHEYTE

I want to write about faith
about the way the moon rises
over cold snow, night after night
faithful even as it fades from fullness
slowly becoming that last curving and impossible
sliver of light before the final darkness
but I have no faith myself
I refuse to give it the smallest entry

Let this then, my small poem,
like a new moon, slender and barely open,
be the first prayer that opens me to faith

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So this is what is meant by the statement, "When the student is ready the teacher appears." The poem had created a moment of insight, and Mary Jane finally saw what was holding her back. With Dan's sudden death and the pressures of being a responsible single mom, she had lost faith in her ability to survive in the world. She was afraid that if she took a risk and failed, she would not be able to support herself and her children.

Leading a change at work would be risky. She could fail and lose her job. That was a distinct possibility. Then she thought about the risk of not changing. *If we don't change, we could all lose our jobs. Not only that: I don't want to work in a place with no energy or life. I know what it will do to me over time, and the picture is not pretty. What kind of a mother would I be if I let that happen? What example would I set? If I launch the change process on Monday, the first step must be for me to choose my attitude. I choose faith. I must trust that whatever happens I will be all right.*

I'm a survivor; I've proven that. I will be all right, whatever happens. It's time to clean up the toxic energy dump. Not just because it would be good for business—although I believe it will be great for business. And not just because I have been challenged to solve the problem—that is an