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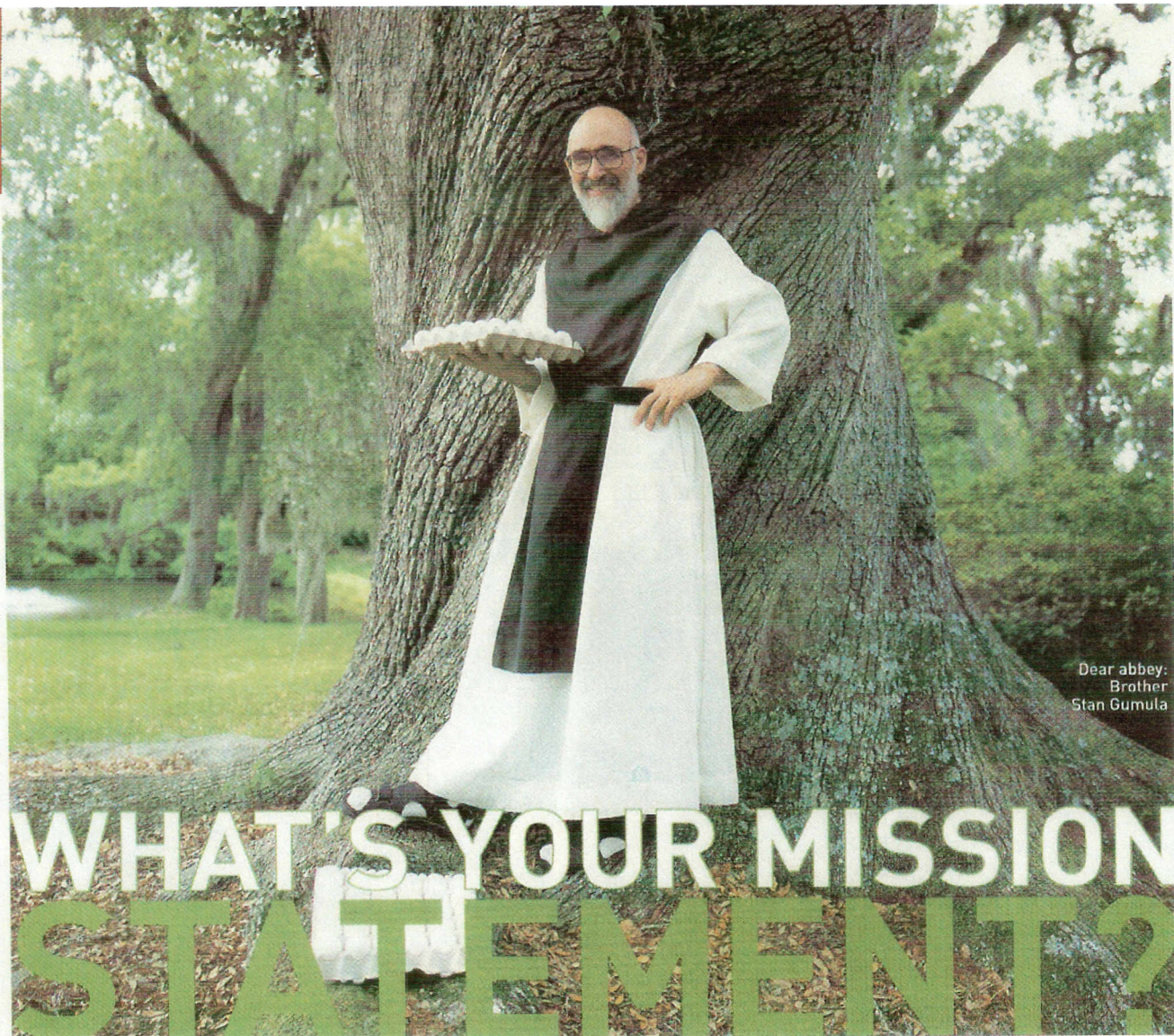
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Dear abbey:
Brother
Stan Gumula

WHAT'S YOUR MISSION STATEMENT?

IT'S MORNING RUSH HOUR IN THE EGG HOUSE, AND cartons of fresh produce are sliding off the conveyor belt faster than Augie Turak can pack them into boxes. Any minute now, the holding table will overflow with the fragile cargo. It's not the sort of predicament in which you would expect to find a software executive such as Turak. But then again, how many executives regularly take time off to work on a monastery chicken farm?

Just in the nick of time, one of the abbey's brothers quietly steps in and helps get the egg pile-up under control. The gesture reminds Turak, 47, president of North American operations for Israel-based MuTek Solutions Inc., a software-development-tools firm, of why he keeps coming back to Mepkin Abbey. "The attitude here is 'How can I help the community?,' not 'How can the community help me?'" he says.

STRUCTURE IS LIBERATING: A MONASTERY IN THE LOWLANDS OF SOUTH CAROLINA HAS SOME TRULY INSPIRED IDEAS ABOUT WORK, LIFE—AND COMPOST. BY CHUCK SALTER

A monastery may be the last place you'd expect to learn about running a fast company. And, in fact, the egg-house commotion aside, there's really nothing fast about life at Mepkin. The pace here is deliberate, the schedule is predictable, and the setting is remote. Located 45 miles outside of Charleston, South Carolina, the monastery sits on more than 3,000 acres of peaceful Berkeley County lowlands, amid stately live oaks draped in Spanish moss.

But a closer look reveals an operation that most corporate managers would envy—one with motivated workers, a strong organizational culture, and no backstabbing. And talk about a track record: Mepkin is part of the Cistercian order, which was founded in

France more than 900 years ago. Work is an integral part of these monks' faith. "It refreshes the body and mind for more-intense periods of prayer and contemplation," says Father Francis Kline, 51, Mepkin's abbot.

The self-supporting monastery has also racked up some impressive sales numbers: Its chicken farm generates annual revenues of more than \$500,000, producing about 9 million eggs and 270 tons of compost a year. The rest of the operation includes guest houses for 1,000 or so annual retreatants, a 2,200-acre timber business, a Web site and gift shop, and a recently expanded botanical garden (which will open to the public by early next year). Mepkin's proceeds support local disadvantaged residents, in addition to

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covering the abbey's operating costs.

Not bad for two dozen monks (average age: 70) whose prayer regimen allows for just six hours of work a day. How do so few accomplish so much? By working with hardly any distractions, little politicking, and no out-of-control egos, says Brother Stan Gumula, 58, the abbey's business manager. Since the monks' trust in one another is unflinching, they are not afraid to admit to mistakes. A rule for the reverent: The sooner you can pinpoint a problem, the sooner it can get solved.

That's exactly the sort of trust and personal accountability that more businesses need, says Turak, who lives in Raleigh, North Carolina and visits Mepkin several times a year. Fearful of the consequences of their errors, workers often try to hide their mistakes—a practice that eventually comes back to haunt them. "The monks understand

that things don't always work out," observes Turak. "As they say, 'It's in the nature of eggs to break.'" That's the type of open atmosphere that Turak encourages among his sales crew at MuTek. "You feel secure enough to tell me about your mistake," he says, "and that only reaffirms my trust in you."

Of course, profit isn't the primary motive at Mepkin Abbey; serving God is. That mission is reinforced daily by tasks and rituals that are both sacred and mundane: the 3:20 AM church service, the Grand Silence from 8 PM to 8:30 AM, even the shoveling of chicken manure into compost piles. Everything that the monks do demonstrates their divine service and strengthens their community.

If the mission provides clarity, compassion is the key to the monks' harmony. "Even the just man falls seven times a day," says Brother Callistus Crichlow, 51, a former Wall

Street computer technician. "If you believe that, you forgive others for their failings."

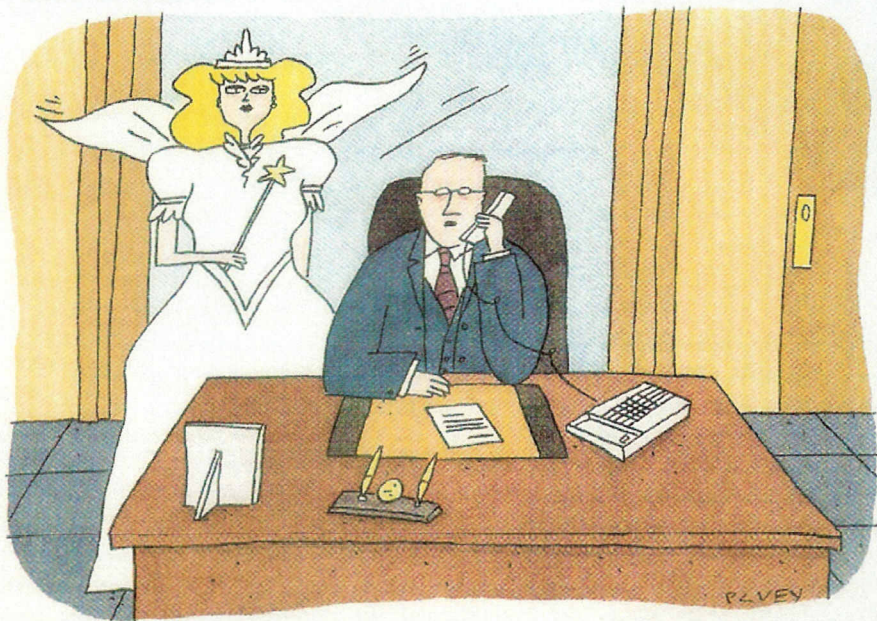
Commitment to such humble verities is what binds this eclectic group—which includes a former clinical psychologist, a chef, a stage manager, and a fisherman—and binds them for life. "It shouldn't work," says Father Kline. "The fact that we're here and that we're united says a lot about God."

Mepkin's ethos is one that overworked, IPO-hungry entrepreneurs would surely find eye-opening. "I think they may get a very different perspective on life and values other than making money," says Brother Gumula. "The monastery has a lot to teach simply by showing people the way we live."

The way the monks live also says a lot about how they treat their customers. Just now, Brother Gumula is on the phone with a woman from Florida, carefully answering her many questions about the proper use of compost on houseplants. It's a long conversation—especially for a \$7 order. (Ensuring quality and providing top-notch customer service often requires the patience of, well, a monk.) But Brother Gumula considers it time well spent. "It's not just that we want people back for another sale—we do. But they deserve to open a carton of eggs and not find crushed eggs or manure smears. What would that say about this place?"

Although a company and a monastery are fundamentally different, the monks' sense of fairness and loyalty is good business and good for business, says Turak. And their perspective on work is healthy: "It is designed to provide us with food, clothing, and security, so we can do other things with our lives," he says. "That's something that the monks never lose sight of."

FUNNY BUSINESS P.C. VEY



"Can you check with acquisitions and see if we need three wishes?"

CHUCK SALTER (CSALTER@FASTCOMPANY.COM) IS A FAST COMPANY SENIOR WRITER. VISIT MEPKIN ABBEY ON THE WEB (WWW.MEPKINABBEY.ORG).