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The Spirit of Business

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A Decade on Leadership

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Business Leader of the Decade

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Most people take up a hobby such as hiking, fishing, writing or traveling to satisfy their spare time interest. Augie Turak runs a business, Raleigh Group International, for pleasure, and he's quite good at it. So what is his basis of "making a living"? His spirituality. "I am not a businessman who happens to be spiritual, I am a spiritual person who happens to be a businessman."

Augie Turak frequently takes time away from Raleigh to visit Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist monastery outside of Charleston. Mepkin Abbey is a serene and beautiful 7,000-acre former plantation and a home to thirty monks. As a monastic guest, he takes part in the monk's daily work, which consists of keeping up the land, grading eggs produced by the 40,000 chickens living on the monastery, compiling lumber from the tree farms and making fertilizer.

Mepkin Abbey originated as a plantation owned by a Revolutionary War veteran, who was one of the presidents of the Continental Congress. It was then owned by Claire and Henry Loose. Both were writers, and Henry began *Life*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Time* magazines. They sold the land to the Catholic church in 1948, and the land became Mepkin Abbey.

Augie has always kept spirituality as the core of his life. He was born and raised in a devout Catholic family, which developed his spiritual views from a young age. Although he has always had strong Catholic beliefs, he never limited his curiosity to only Catholicism. He has studied all sorts of religions. He dropped out of college and studied with a Zen master for five years. He wanted to spread his broad views of religion to others, so about ten years ago he began teaching at NCSU, UNC and Duke on a volunteer basis. He started having Saturday night group meetings to further his lessons and to learn more from others. He became interested in the writings of Thomas Merton, a scholar in religious studies, who dropped everything in his life to join a monastery. Augie was intrigued by his writings, and he became curious about life on a monastery.

Augie was introduced to Mepkin Abbey by a former student who took Augie's advice to do something "different" with his summer. He called Augie and they arranged a time for Augie's first visit. Augie recalls, "It took that one visit and I was hooked." That was in 1996. Since then, Augie has spent three Christmases, one Easter, a whole month last August, July 4 of this year, and many weekend retreats at the monastery.

Augie thoroughly enjoys his visits to the monastery. He lives in the same quarters with the monks and conforms to their daily rituals. At 3:20 am, their day begins with a church service. They have eight church services throughout the day as well as several silent prayer times devoted to meditation and prayer. Augie comments, "You just have to go to experience the beauty of it all. To hear the chanting of the psalms at 3:30 am with nothing but silence and nature filling the pauses, no words can describe it."

Augie has learned many valuable lessons about life and business through visiting Mepkin Abbey. He explains, "It is amazing how the monks get along with one another. The average age of the monks on the monastery is 65, but they work just as hard and sometimes harder than the visitors in their twenties. It all boils down to trust. They cooperate and help each other." Augie tries to incorporate these values into his company. He feels that the biggest evil in life is insecurity. People feel constantly threatened by others and therefore get defensive. He believes that the only true cure for insecurity is spirituality, and those who have a strong handle on who they are in a spiritual sense are secure people. Augie values hiring spiritual people at RGI, because, "Spiritual people around spiritual people create mutual trust making the workplace more relaxed and productive." In the professional world, it is important to focus on the mission at hand and to leave all insecurities behind. After all, the mission is the only aspect of true importance in a business, money is just a perk. Augie concludes, "Everyone must have a higher purpose in life besides money. Mine is spirituality, and I know it will get me down every road of life." For more information contact Augie Turak at Raleigh Group International, 878-3717, or aturak@ralgi.com.



Story by Patricia Black