

virtues & vocations

HIGHER EDUCATION FOR
HUMAN FLOURISHING SPRING 2025

Civility, Courage & Conviction

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Civility, Courage & Conviction



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“Experimentation is at the heart of my art practice and ‘Candyland’ was born from chaotic beginnings that gradually resolved themselves over time through the addition and subtraction of paper and paint until the balance between colours, shapes and contrasts was achieved.”

—Charlotte Wensley

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Virtues & Vocations: Higher Education for Human Flourishing is an open invitation to a conversation, a community, and a set of contested aspirations for both how we ought to live together in this world and how higher education might serve those aspirations. It is a product of an initiative with the same name, Virtues & Vocations, sponsored by the Kern Family Foundation and hosted by the Institute for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame. The initiative—comprised of a set of publications and convenings, both virtual and in person—seeks to foster a community of thought and practice to integrate questions of character, meaning, and purpose into the fabric of higher education. The telos of this community is human flourishing.



SUZANNE SHANAHAN, EDITOR

Welcome



This issue of *Virtues & Vocations: Higher Education for Human Flourishing* focuses on civic virtue and, more specifically, civility and our ability to summon the courage to act on our convictions in difficult times.

For more than 250 years, higher education has served as an anchor for democracy in the United States. In fall 2022, Wes Siscoe, then a Virtues & Vocations post-doctoral fellow (now assistant professor of philosophy at Bowling Green State University), wrote a compelling essay on civic virtue in higher education. Wary of today's growing public polarization, Siscoe argues that, "[n]ot only is it part of the mission of higher education to prepare students for democratic citizenship, but as communities that facilitate the exchange of ideas and foster intellectual curiosity, colleges and universities have the chance to do more than simply passing on the required content knowledge." This "something more," I would argue, should include modeling and practicing honesty, courage of conviction, and civil dialogue it in and out



of the classroom. As with any other virtue, we must create spaces for practice.

Increasingly I wonder whether there is a broader cultural context to the divisive dynamics at play on campuses, in social media, and in our political institutions. I would argue that mistruths and self-censoring are prevalent in ways big *and* small in our daily lives in many domains. This is not a coded partisan political statement. Nor am I talking about wokeism, however defined. Rather, we often engage in well-meaning and calculated mistruths and self-censoring as a routine part of what it means to live together on and off campuses. Some examples are small: I lie at the Whole Foods checkout when they ask if I found everything I needed. I lie after traipsing into my office in the brutal South Bend cold when colleagues ask if I enjoyed my walk to work. These trivial, almost automatic untruths are almost a form of courtesy to make simple interactions more seamless.

Other untruths are more deliberate. Last fall, I shared with a group of visibly appalled (but otherwise silent) students in class that I lie all the time to my children. More specifically, as a mother of three young women, if they ask, I always tell them they look absolutely beautiful no matter how disheveled or unkempt they may actually look. I lie quite deliberately because I want them to know that beauty

is more than an outfit. I lie because I want them to see and understand that their beauty exists in them and entirely with or without my judgment. I don't for a minute believe this is the best strategy, but it is the one I've settled on, or the one that has settled on me.

Untruths are not just part of our daily private discourse. Following a recent and typically rancorous local school board meeting, I found myself wondering how often people really believe the claims they make. Perhaps the presentation I heard was a form of magical thinking: If we tell people often enough that a new curriculum in their failing school will bring the student proficiency rate in math and reading from 20% to 80% in a few short months, maybe it somehow will? Or maybe you say that because you think that is what people need to hear or because you want people to have something to aspire to? Or maybe you say 80% and not 30% when we don't want to convey the impression that we lack confidence in the abilities of some of our children? Demoralized people often struggle to make significant strides. Here the untruth is a policy strategy.

Truth is hard, and sometimes—as in my lies to my daughters or new school curriculum proposals—noble justifications can make truth seem worth bending for other ends. Unto themselves, small mistruths and censoring may be utterly




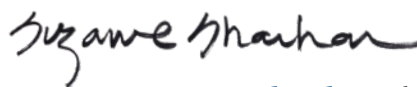
benign or even a good thing, but it is quite possible they make it much more difficult to be honest, candid, and utterly truthful when the stakes are higher and the questions are harder. They might mean we will struggle even more in contentious circumstances. These recent experiences, public and private, have me pondering: how often do people say things they don't actually believe or avoid saying things they do believe throughout their day? Why do we routinely utter untruthful or dishonest statements, and have we paused to consider the second-order consequences for our public life of this prosaic, everyday, low-stakes dishonesty?

We need to practice truthfulness/truth-seeking, and higher education creates an ideal space to grapple honestly with issues big *and* small. Civility requires a certain set of skills, but honest discourse requires still more. And so we not only asked our authors to write on civic discourse but also courage. The broad range of scholars who have written for us reflect varied disciplinary

traditions and professions, different institutional contexts, and unique personal experiences. Despite significant variations in emphases and analysis, they share a keen belief that thought and action that is animated by conviction and conveyed with civility is essential to the continued thriving of our educational institutions and our communities.

We are particularly excited about the interlude in this issue. Here we offer brief reflections from six university leaders and public intellectuals grappling with the current challenges and opportunities of civil disagreement and courage of conviction on and off campuses in the United States. They each address both signs of hope and challenges to overcome.

The art for this issue emphasizes the important opportunities for our shared flourishing that emerge when borders and boundaries intersect or overlap. We hope it provides inspiration at a time when civility and conviction often appear at odds. 



Suzanne Shanahan is the
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PART I

Defining Virtue

“The value of higher education should surely be seen in the lives of university students—not only in what they do or which professions they go into, but in what they contribute to society and who they become.”

JAMES ARTHUR

Founding Director and Professor Emeritus,
The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

JAMES ARTHUR

Student Civic Virtues and the Conviction of Courage



niversities are places that can offer opportunities for students to examine and test their convictions and perhaps even confirm which might be worth holding. Students in a university community are often contented, well-mannered, friendly, and polite, expressing goodwill to their fellow students and visitors. And universities can time and again be idyllic and vocal places with strong views about a just society, but they can also be places that engage in “virtue signaling” that does not require anything that is actually virtuous. Such utilitarian forms of higher education are based on forms of reciprocity that prioritize exchange and transaction rather than a deeper sense of fellow-feeling that is central to civic friendship.





Left unattended, students can become concerned with their own narrow interests, with their idea of civic friendship becoming ever more utilitarian in the sense that they help others in the full expectation of a similar return later.

Yet, recently the attention to friendship within the *Nicomachean Ethics* has led numerous scholars to argue that Aristotle views friendship as playing a significant role in human flourishing, that ‘living well’ and the development of virtue cannot be achieved through isolation. A broad definition understands civic virtues as positive character traits that enable citizens to participate positively in the public life of their communities. Participation in the various institutions and organizations of political and civil society can be central to a citizen’s health and well-being. Civic virtue is about going beyond the necessary minimum, it involves an inner state of character that regularly expresses itself in praiseworthy action. So, thinking about civic virtues involves asking: What kind of

attitudes, practices, and activities among students should we esteem, welcome, and respect? What states of civic friendship make students function *well* in their civic role? How can we encourage the development of these virtues in universities?

The value of higher education should surely be seen in the lives of university students—not only in what they do or which professions they go into, but in what they contribute to society and who they become.

CIVIC VIRTUES

Civic virtues, informed and underpinned as they are by moral and intellectual virtues, have as their aim the cooperation and mutual goodwill so vital to living well together. I consider civic virtues to be a subclass of moral virtues; that is, as moral virtues applied in larger societal contexts, as distinct from more intimate personal relationships. I see education as concerned

with the formation of a person through the realization of certain potentialities that lead to a mature human being. The educational process behind this formation becomes a practical expression of our commitments and will influence how we believe, think, learn, act, and

The value of higher education should surely be seen in the lives of university students—not only in what they do or which professions they go into, but in what they contribute to society and who they become.

treat each other. It is why formation in virtue ought to be a key feature of higher education. It is not simply about what ought I to do, but also what ought I to *be* and *become*. Today many universities operate on the belief that there is a clear separation between intellectual and moral purpose, and they often pursue the former while largely ignoring the latter. It is incumbent on educational settings and educators to provide practical opportunities for civic engagement, and to appreciate where students are already demonstrating civic virtues in their lives; effective—and indeed courageous—leaders and leadership are needed to realize the educational goals of educating an active, informed, and virtuous citizenry.

Civic virtues are not necessarily separate from other types of virtues. Philosophically, as suggested above, “civic” virtues might best be considered as comprising the expression of moral virtues in the civic realm, coupled with the intellectual virtues in so far as they guide the moral virtues in the right direction. This noted, the use of the adjective “civic” is important for at least three reasons. First, it provides a reminder that the scope of virtues education should never be solely on the individual and should recognize the social connectedness of humans to their wider communities. Second, focusing explicitly on the civic permits a particular vocabulary that might be otherwise missed or

underemphasized within discourses of character. Third, promoting the importance of civic virtues can act to re-affirm and reinvigorate the civic aims of higher education and the need to cultivate intentionally active, informed, and responsible citizens of good character.

CULTIVATING CIVIC VIRTUE

To understand civic virtues, it is necessary to be clear about the spaces and associations that comprise the public domain. The public domain consists of the wide and vibrant array of institutions, organizations, and processes that exist within communities and societies. For some, the public domain can be separated from the personal interests and lives of individual citizens. While not wishing to encroach overly into personal lives, the public domain should be understood as distinct from, but closely connected to, more intimate associations such as family and friends. Indeed, the public domain and the civic virtues central to it stem from these closer-knit associations. In a flourishing public domain, different interests, ideas, and perspectives are shared and discussed. Where conflicts arise, remedies are sought. Universities are clearly associations in the public domain. It cannot be assumed that the civic virtues needed for engagement in the public domain will develop without





In addition to intellectual virtues, the cultivation of civic virtues, such as service and civility, should be part and parcel of this outward-looking dimension of higher education. What is more, where universities focus on educating professionals for a specific sector or seek a specific social impact, certain domain-specific virtues will come clearly into view.

deliberate and reflective effort. Indeed, cultivating civic virtues is a core aim of education and has always formed part of a good education.

In recent years, many universities have expressed their commitment to a holistic, socially engaged vision of higher education. Terms such as “fulfilling potential,” “flourishing,” “thriving,” and “well-being,” applied both to students and to university communities, feature prominently in policy documents and mission statements. Listen to graduation speeches or scroll through university websites and mission

statements, and today’s universities, in all of their diversity, are eager to encourage students in directions that help them lead flourishing lives as citizens, professionals, and human beings—lives that significantly contribute to the public good and provide an authentic sense of purpose and meaning. Flourishing involves various contingent socio-economic and political factors, but it also relies centrally on the actualization of human excellence through character strengths or virtues: stable dispositions that combine perception, cognition, emotion, motivation, and action to respond in admirable ways to different

situations in different spheres of human life.

Some universities join intellectual inquiry to an important civic mission to educate a new generation of responsible citizens and leaders and contribute to the societies around them. In addition to intellectual virtues, the cultivation of civic virtues, such as service and civility, should be part and parcel of this outward-looking dimension of higher education. What is more, where universities focus on educating professionals for a specific sector or seek a specific social impact, certain domain-specific virtues will come clearly into view. Compassion is important for future healthcare professionals, for example, and creativity and perseverance are necessary for aspiring entrepreneurs. Where universities focus on sustainable development as part of their institutional mission, this will require staff and students to exhibit responsibility and social justice.

CHARACTER IN THE UNIVERSITY PRACTICAL WISDOM

Of course, the intellectual and civic aspects of character cannot be separated from consideration of what makes for a good life and a flourishing society. They are bound up with moral virtues such as justice, courage, charity, honesty, humility, and

compassion. While the idea of modern universities intentionally cultivating moral virtues in their diverse student populations is not without its difficulties, in reality, all institutions have a formative effect on those who inhabit them. A fundamental character virtue at the university level is practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Practical wisdom is an intellectual meta-virtue that binds together and integrates the intellectual, civic, moral, and performance virtues. It is the overall quality of knowing what to want and what not to want when the demands of two or more virtues collide and integrating such demands into an acceptable course of action. For example, virtues relating to entrepreneurialism might seem to conflict with virtues of service and care. Practical wisdom is the capacity to reason well regarding the right thing to do and to integrate competing emotional, motivational, and situational pressures into an appropriate course of action. Without practical wisdom, any conviction to be courageous will be misguided and will likely fall short of the mark.





Living with practical wisdom entails considered deliberation, well-founded judgment, and the vigorous enactment of decisions. The ability to learn from experience (mistakes and failure as well as success) is at its center. To live with practical wisdom is to be open-minded and to recognize the true variety of things and of situations to be experienced. Practical wisdom entails the active, thoughtful pursuit of what is right and good and is cultivated through experience and reflective deliberation. It comes into its own in higher education as students take ownership of their identity and purpose in the world, having the courage of conviction to do so.

COURAGE OF CONVICTION

This is all set against a background in which many are keen to point to a decline in civic virtue. They say that the commitment to public life has declined as societies have become larger, more market-oriented, and individualistic with citizens retreating into the private realm. Others have identified


a concerning trend towards incivility in political discourse. Whether this decline in civic virtue is real or not, it does seem that contemporary public life holds many challenges for citizens. Within this context, a positive, renewed focus by universities on the meaning, significance, and development of civic virtues is vital for increased participation in the public domain and for the flourishing of healthy, liberal democracies. Universities have a role to play, not all students will be responsive to the cultivation of civic virtues but enough, perhaps even a critical mass, may in return become leaders who will encourage a virtuous citizenry conscious of their civic duties.

Aristotle says that you cannot improve life in a city unless the citizens know and practice the virtues, both moral and civic. Indeed, he says that citizens cannot flourish or be happy if they do not practice the moral and civic virtues. This requires an education that cultivates civic friendships that aim to constrain selfishness and promote the common good of all. Courage is an essential virtue for civic friendship, and it needs commitment to make our convictions a reality. Courage involves intention and can set goals to achieve our intentions. Indeed, this courage must become commitment to engage in civic life. Courage is standing up for what is right and ought to bring out the best in us by helping to provide the meaning and purpose necessary for a flourishing life.

However, this is a morally and educationally complex thing to do, and some think universities may not be the best locations to achieve this. I end with a familiar story of the sinking of the Titanic. Frances Wilson's excellent book, *How to Survive the Titanic or the Sinking of J. Bruce Ismay*, offers us insights into moral ambiguity, moral cowardice, and moral failure by focusing on one single incident in a man's life. J. Bruce Ismay was the owner of the White Star Line and was on board the fateful voyage of one of its ships, the Titanic in April 1912. Ismay jumped into a lifeboat as it was lowered into the ocean leaving behind two-thirds of the innocent passengers on the ship to drown. This one act was seen as a moral failure and consequently dishonor hounded him for the rest of his life. While Wilson is not sympathetic to Ismay, she does raise questions for each of us. For example, was it immoral to survive in such circumstances? She depicts Ismay as a troubled soul suited to our own uncertain times writing: "There is a difference between surviving and living—and Ismay



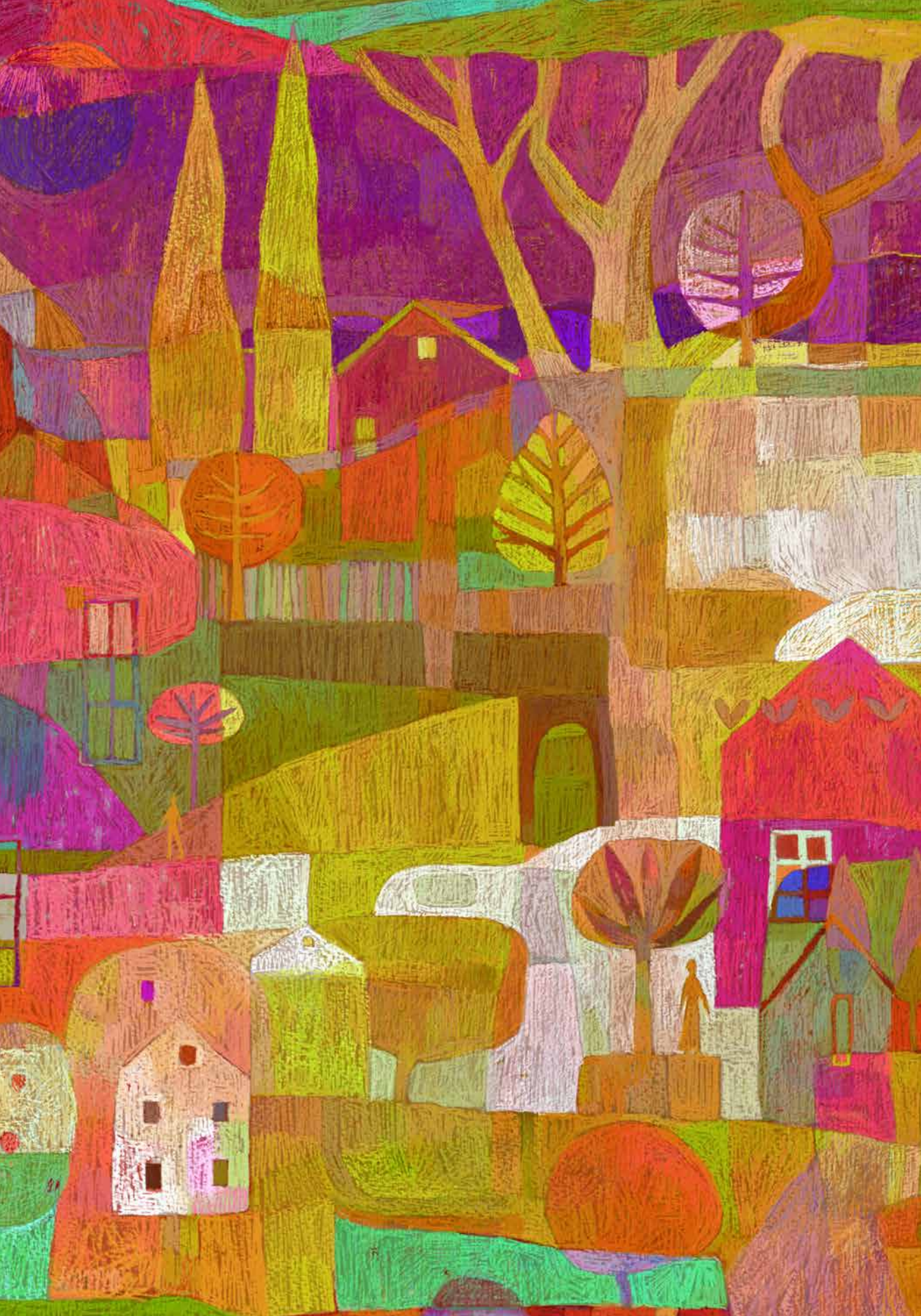
was a survivor . . . Ismay is that figure we all fear we might be. He is one of us."

What would we sacrifice our lives for? What are the limits to our civic friendships? 

Readers who are interested in more information can consult the statements on Civic Virtues in the Public Domains and the Framework on Character in Higher Education of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham that are freely available online.



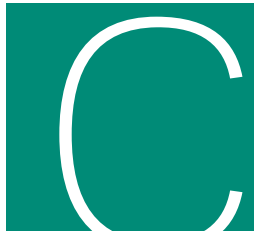
James Arthur is the former Director of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues between May 2012 and October 2023. He holds numerous honorary titles and Fellowships in the academe, including Honorary Professor at the University of Glasgow, Faculty Affiliate at Harvard University, Senior Fellow of Boston College, and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Oxford. He advises a number of international charities, particularly the Kern Family Foundation, of which he is a Senior Fellow and consultant. He serves as Professor Emeritus within the Jubilee Centre.



DAYNA L. CUNNINGHAM

The Spirit of Freedom

Black Thought, Civic Virtue, and the Courage to Transform Democracy



Can an courage of conviction co-exist with civic virtue? This seems to be a rather urgent question of our time. Achieving high-minded civic ideals is never easy, not least among those who have faced what Rogers Smith calls ongoing “civic estrangement,” an experience he says underlies the appeal of exclusionary populism, which it turns out, just won the last election.¹ Salamishah Tillet describes this state for African Americans as “the protracted experience of disillusionment, mourning and yearning” that continued even after the Civil Rights Movement.



African Americans, are “simultaneously part of and tangential to the citizenry. . . subject to the continual repression of their economic and material contributions, [and] ‘busily disavowed’ in and by civic myths.”² Yet, since the beginning of our republic, a distinct African American intellectual, moral, and cultural tradition has sought to reconcile the duality of unwavering belief in and advocacy for black freedom with the deep commitment to building robust and inclusive multi-racial democracy for all.

Two African American institutions, black universities (HBCUs) and the black church, have been paramount in this quest. Founded after the Civil War during a period of extreme violence against African Americans and division within the US, black colleges and universities have served as critical venues for preparing a dispossessed people to become active citizens in a troubled democracy. For the broader mass of African American people, the black church, once the sole institution for black learning, enabled the cultivation of a liberating spirituality to inform African

American public and civic lives. Within these institutions’ traditions are found rich character and leadership development lessons for the present moment.

Like many black families, my own family history is imbued with influences from these institutions. My grandfather, William Wallace Brooks, left Virginia in 1914, during the ragged decades after the end of Reconstruction, when he was only 14 years old. At that time, vicious violence against African Americans was both random and endemic. My grandfather never talked about why he left home alone as a mere child. It might have been any number of things. My grandmother’s whole family moved North around that time after her older brother winked at a white woman. Or perhaps, he got a speck in his eye and blinked in the vicinity of a white woman. Whatever happened, facing the prospect of a lynching for disrespecting the virtue of a white woman, the entire family picked up and moved.

There is a part of my grandfather’s story that has always intrigued me: whatever

caused him to leave Virginia, and whatever hardships he faced growing up on his own in the urban north, as an adult, one of his hobbies was writing patriotic songs—songs about the greatness of America, about its beauty and freedoms. Maybe for him, like many other immigrants who flee repression in their homeland, the North offered the absence of fear and that was enough. Yet, we know that the North presented its own challenges: among other things, my grandmother looked white, and at times they faced scrutiny as a supposed interracial couple.

I found my grandfather's songs—handwritten sheets of music and lyrics that were a bit more like beer jingles than exultant paeans to his country—after he died. And I've always wondered what they meant to him. His brothers and sisters, my great uncles and aunts, stayed behind in the South, attended recently-founded black universities, became professionals, and eventually made their way North. They had stiff backs, big vocabularies, and a gravitas about them that I could not have described as a child. The men, especially, were given to holding court on wide-ranging topics of history and individual character at holiday dinners and family gatherings. Full of pride

Yet, since the beginning of our republic, a distinct African American intellectual, moral, and cultural tradition has sought to reconcile the duality of unwavering belief in and advocacy for black freedom with the deep commitment to building robust and inclusive multi-racial democracy for all.

and optimism, they talked about what *we* ought to do. Perhaps like my grandfather, they read the dictionary daily, pronouncing the words as if they were lines of poetry.

I was fairly young when most of my grandfather's siblings died, not old enough to ask who this *we* was. But when his younger brother died, we found among his things onion-skin papers of various proceedings of the Niagara Movement that seemed to be originals. A predecessor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Niagara Movement was named for the "mighty current of change" against segregation and disenfranchisement it hoped to create.³ Word had it that his eldest





brother, Phillips Brooks, named after the famed Episcopalian theologian, had been involved.

My grandfather and his siblings came of age in the wake of a robust conversation among black educators and intellectuals, begun after the Civil War, about the intellectual, political, and moral future of African Americans. Even more than now, the nation was bitterly divided and there was no clear path forward for establishing a coherent American identity. As a people, African Americans were barely freed from the depredations of chattel slavery and they still lived with the betrayal of Reconstruction. They would need to become citizens in a shared effort of self-governance with people who, for generations, had treated them savagely. What's more, if the country were ever to become the true democracy it said it wanted to be, using their first-hand experience with its abject failures, formerly enslaved people would have to help. They faced this in addition to a debilitating failure of democratic imagination in the larger society: for most whites, the idea of black people as fulsome members of the American civic body was inconceivable.

The black civic project thus demanded that African American-serving institutions inculcate at least three essential citizen capacities: criticality, compassion and imagination.

Douglass and Du Bois embodied the ethos of criticality. Their speeches and writings praise the “genius” animating American institutions while unsparingly denouncing their foundational flaws and racial authoritarianism. They characterize democracy as an idea or experiment, but not a reality. And they cast the Constitution and Declaration as instruments to achieve their goal of black freedom. Time and again, they return to the language of the documents and point out the rupture between the founding ideals and African American experience, advocating that the ideals should apply to African Americans as well.

In his monumental 1852 speech, “What, to the Slave, Is the 4th of July,” Frederick Douglass abundantly praises the founding fathers while fiercely condemning slavery: “[t]he right to hold and to hunt slaves is a part of that Constitution framed by the illustrious Fathers of this Republic.” He addresses his audience as “fellow citizens,” but makes plain that the freedom he hails on the 4th of July is theirs, not his own. For Douglass, the celebration of the holiday “only reveals the immeasurable distance between us.” Yet, “drawing encouragement from the . . . great principles” of the Declaration of Independence, Douglass warns, “the doom of slavery is certain.”⁴

Half a century later, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois asserts that African Americans will have to “fight for the

rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to the great words” of the Declaration of Independence. He articulates a prominent role for black people, suggesting that they must study the problems of democracy, develop independent perspectives, and *lead* the South, “by candid and honest criticism, to assert her better self and do her full duty to the race she has cruelly wronged and is still wronging . . .”⁵ He proposes an active and transformative citizenship that pushes US institutions to end racial authoritarianism and fully extend democracy to all members of the polity. Carter Woodson, in *Miseducation of the Negro*, would further elaborate that this could not be accomplished unless black higher education achieved a distinct philosophical and ethical break from American educational traditions that historically justified subjugation.⁶ Along similar lines, Toni Morrison proposed that traditional scholarly fields could be enlivened in conversation with an African American studies discipline that invited purposeful engagement with the “black topic” at the heart of “every one of this nation’s mightiest struggles.” Such engagements could further criticality by helping to reveal “paradox, ambiguity . . . omissions, repetitions, disruptions, polarities, reifications, violence” within established academic discourses.⁷

Du Bois, and later Woodson, famously feuded with Booker T. Washington, the



founder of Tuskegee Institute, over the purpose and direction of black higher education. In Tuskegee, Washington built a formidable institution to rigorously hone his African American students’ marketable technical skills as the pathway for black economic independence and social acceptance during the breakneck industrialization and wealth accumulation of the post-Reconstruction Gilded Age. While Washington created trailblazing programs—Tuskegee’s brickworks taught students an invaluable trade, and manufactured bricks for black schoolhouses around the US while generating a revenue stream to support the Institute; and its agricultural programs meaningfully improved productivity of farming practices across the South—his approach traded economic opportunity for political rights and full citizenship. In his speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta in 1895, he criticized African



Americans' quest for political gains during Reconstruction as driven by "ignorance and inexperience," and asserted that "the wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest [sic] folly."⁸ Du Bois contemptuously dismissed Washington's Atlanta Exposition speech as the "Atlanta Compromise" (a sobriquet by which it is still known), calling Washington's approach "civic death" for black people.⁹

For all of its critique, Du Bois opens *Souls of Black Folk* with the promise to "sketch . . . the *spiritual world* in which ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive." [emphasis mine]. He identifies and articulates a particular African American

sensibility: that formerly enslaved people bear a responsibility not only to themselves and the nation, or even to "the darker races of men whose future depends so largely on this American experiment," but also, remarkably, to the children of the enslavers: "we have no right to sit silently by while the inevitable seeds are sown for a harvest of disaster to *our children, black and white*"¹⁰ [emphasis mine]. He locates the failure of the Reconstruction-era Freedman's Bureau in the context of white Southerners facing "the spite and hate of conflict, the hell of war, when suspicion and cruelty were rife, and gaunt Hunger wept beside Bereavement."¹¹ While both Du Bois and Washington understood the political necessity of African Americans,

as a small and marginalized minority engaging with a hostile majority, rather than Washington's conciliation to the existing order, Du Bois proposes critique as well as compassion.

Cultivating compassion towards those who have inflicted great suffering requires a distinct kind of spiritual preparation. Martin Luther King's teacher, Howard Washington Thurman, drew on deeply embedded values within black spirituality, to theorize a distinctive black theology. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman said that Jesus, as a poor Jew in Rome, understood a lot about subjugation, and his teachings had special import for "those who stand, at a moment in human history with their backs against the wall."¹² These teachings weren't based on the interpretations of the slaveholders, whose exhortation to turn the other cheek meant God wanted black people to accept inferiority and abuse, seeking respite in the afterlife. Instead, Jesus offered "a technique of survival of the oppressed"; a method to nurture inner resources in the face of violence and insecurity so as not to turn to hatred and violence themselves. "Hatred is destructive to the hated and the hater alike," Thurman wrote.¹³ The inner work required is "a painstaking discipline, made possible only by personal triumph" over fear, hypocrisy and hatred so as to live in the present with dignity and creativity.¹⁴ The ethical demand of this discipline,



Cultivating compassion towards those who have inflicted great suffering requires a distinct kind of spiritual preparation.

which forms the foundation of the philosophy of non-violence, is the same for the powerful and the powerless, captured in Jesus's admonition to love the enemy.

Beyond steely discipline and self-cultivation, the black civic project also demands abiding creativity. In *Sites of Slavery*, Tillet argues that for African Americans, civic estrangement gave rise to a unique kind of imagination imbued with criticality, a resource that drove the quest for black freedom. She cites Ralph Ellison, who said, "the society is not likely to become free of racism, thus it is necessary for Negroes to free themselves by *becoming their idea of what a free people should be*"¹⁵ (emphasis mine). Ellison's observation is in some ways a response to the absences found in slave narratives, the earliest African American literature. So as not to offend white sensibilities, these




Beyond steely discipline and self-cultivation, the black civic project also demands abiding creativity.

accounts, in great demand during the height of the abolition movement, assiduously avoided mention either of the visceral brutalities of enslavement or the enslaved people's own reflections on such cruelties. In her essay, "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison laments the "deliberate excising" of enslaved peoples' self-reflection from the narratives they themselves told. In the quest in her own writing, to gain "total access to the unwritten interior life of these people . . .," she says, "only the act of imagination can help me."¹⁶

Morrison also sees imagination as an essential practice for cultivating empathy, locating the source of racism itself in the "deplorable inability to project, to become the 'other,' to imagine her or him."¹⁷ She specifically critiques scholars who dispassionately cataloged slavery's barbarisms as inevitable requirements of the trade without any consideration of the humanity of enslaved people. In her 1988 commencement address to Sarah Lawrence College, Morrison implored students to hone their capacity to dream so as to enable them to "visualize the Other . . . 'with unusual

vividness, clarity, order and significance." This, Morrison says, is a necessary "preamble to problem solving" in the roles they will play as leaders making decisions about who will flourish and who will not.¹⁸

Our present moment, with heightening struggles over national identity and direction, great wealth disparities, and rising white nationalism, has resonance with the formative years of the black civic project. And in this context, a growing current within our field—reflected in changing university ranking systems¹⁹—to prioritize career readiness and increased earnings potential, though understandable in times of economic uncertainty, is cause for concern. The focus on social mobility is warranted given the current cost of a college degree. Yet, traces of the Washingtonian approach that Du Bois warned could risk civic death seem inescapable. Even elevated, highly marketable technical problem-solving skills taught in undergraduate and graduate classes today are insufficient without the higher-order discernment urged by Thurman. In an increasingly at-risk world, the instrumental approach will leave our students bereft of the leadership qualities and emotional/moral dispositions they'll need to preserve human freedom and flourishing in real terms, not just as a hoped-for future state. The risk inevitably will grow more urgent as artificial intelligence fully takes hold.

In her Sarah Lawrence address, Toni Morrison helps us consider what we as educators should do. Humans, she says, are the “moral inhabitants of the galaxy” and we have a “magnificent obligation” to act with humanity. This requires disruption of a higher education ethos that “produce[s] generation after generation of people trained to make expedient decisions rather than humane ones.” We cannot be deterred by those who say that the world must remain the way it is. Instead, braiding together criticality, compassion and imagination, she argues, “it must be the way it ought to be.”²⁰ 

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JED W. ATKINS

Liberal Education, Intellectual Play, and the Virtues of Civil Discourse

Earlier this Fall, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill included in its first-year orientation activities a session on the freedom of expression and civil discourse. Co-sponsored by the offices of the Provost, Student Affairs, and the School of Civic Life and Leadership (SCiLL), SCiLL faculty introduced 130 students to the principles of freedom of expression and their history at Carolina, and gave them practice in the charitable disagreement about ideas that are hallmarks of a university education.¹ A post-orientation survey revealed that students' desire to participate in civil discourse far surpassed their confidence in their abilities to engage in such conversations.





This should not surprise. Learning to engage in reasoned, free, and civil conversations about important political, moral, and religious ideas requires practice, and students are not arriving at universities with the knowledge, experience, or habits of heart and mind required to have such conversations. Increasingly, universities must provide the institutional support necessary for students to engage fully in the search for truth and the discovery of knowledge that constitute its primary purposes.

Post-secondary institutions come in a variety of shapes and sizes. As I have learned through listening to the experiences of faculty at 70 diverse colleges and universities in the Duke Teaching Civil Discourse in the Classroom Summer Faculty Seminar the past three summers, the obstacles to civil discourse in the classroom vary among institutions. For the institutions in which I have worked, a private research university and a flagship state university, three obstacles to civil discourse are especially prominent.

First, critics argue that civil discourse, by imposing limits on speech in the name of civility, excludes the viewpoints of minority groups.² Some of these scholars argue that in majority-white countries, such as the United States, calls for civil discourse have been used to perpetuate white supremacy by enforcing norms of “politeness” that

exclude minority voices.³ Other critics contend that civil discourse is *too inclusive*. In the view of Sigal Ben-Porath, “the bar of civility is set too low in that it allows noxious ideas free rein as long as they are voiced in proper and decorous ways.”⁴

However, civil discourse is not synonymous with polite speech. The word “civil” comes from the Latin, *civilis*. *Civilis* means civic, public, or political. Derived from the same root as “citizen,” speech that is *civilis* is that which affects or pertains to other citizens. Civil discourse is speech addressed to fellow citizens as shared members of a common community. It entails a commitment to working out our differences with words, not violence. As Cicero memorably wrote, “there are two ways of contending: one proceeds by discussion, the other by force.”⁵ My former Duke colleague Deondra Rose prefers the term “civic discourse” to stress that “civil speech” does not necessarily require “polite speech.”⁶

Civil discourse as speech between citizens underscores why universities are well-suited as training grounds of democratic speech. Universities are large, complex, and diverse institutions, but not nearly as large, complex, and diverse as a nation such as the United States. In a large republic, it can be difficult for me, as a North Carolinian, to imagine myself engaging in a common enterprise with a Californian. The university provides its members with

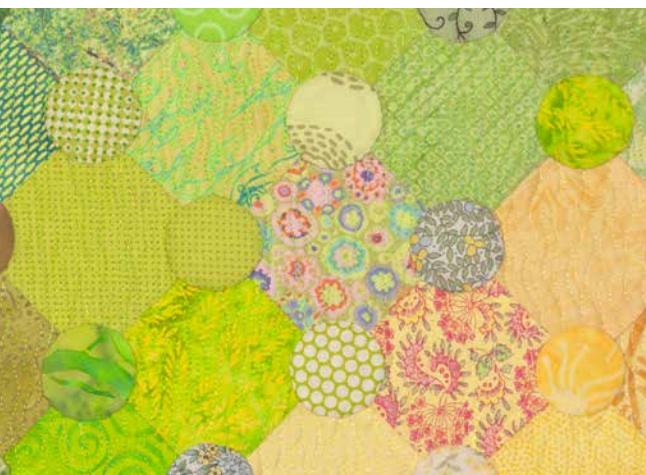
different forums offering different types of speech depending on their specific ends and goods. For instance, in the classroom students participate as community members possessing a common good—the search for truth or the discovery of knowledge; in student government, students deliberate about school policies; in other common campus spaces, students recruit for their organizations, demonstrate, attend and speak on panels, and much more. In offering these and other forums, universities direct speech to different and more specific goods than the civil discourse about the good of the nation. Still, speech that seeks truth among a plurality of opinions in the smaller classroom community—the forum I will be focusing on here—can have the salutary byproduct of training students to engage in civil discourse with their fellow citizens in the broader civic community. By learning to speak as members of the smaller classroom community, students develop capacities and gain knowledge useful for participating in the larger communities of state and nation.

The other two obstacles to civil discourse are interconnected. One is the pre-professionalism lamented by William Deresiewicz in his book *Excellent Sheep*.⁷ Deresiewicz argues that students at our elite institutions are high-functioning sheep, cultivated for professional success from an early age. Shepherded along the tried-and-true

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path of achievement by well-intentioned elders, such students fear the failure and risk that may come from straying from the flock. Speaking and writing freely in pursuit of truth—the hallmark of a





traditional liberal education—has always been risky; after all, you will be asked to analyze your most cherished beliefs. For pre-professional strivers, the normal risks are compounded by the fact that by virtue of social media and smartphones, anything you may say inside or outside of the classroom risks being recorded and reported to future employers. No surprise that for many students the risk is not worth it.

Civil discourse-thwarting risk aversion also takes the form of what Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff call “safetyism.” Haidt and Lukianoff note how concern for promoting children’s safety has extended from physical to emotional harm. By the early 2000s, trauma increasingly came to refer to the subjective, internal, individual state in which one experiences words or actions as physically or emotionally

harmful. Psychologized and applied to speech, this protective mentality against “harm” has led to the restrictions and even punishment of speech in the name of campus safety, especially for the vulnerable and marginalized.⁸ This focus on fragility has denied humanity’s anti-fragile nature.⁹

The challenges of pre-professionalism and safetyism force educators to search for more robust supports for the practice of civil discourse in the classroom. I suggest that considering these pressures, the Ciceronian civic dimension of membership in a common community bound by a shared commitment to discussion rather than violence finds support in the Platonic understanding of education as the playful search for the highest truths about the human condition and our world.¹⁰

Plato’s discussion of intellectual play shows that its proper objects are the most serious matters of human investigation that would become the backbone of a liberal education: the good political community and society, the human person, the gods and transcendence, and the cosmos and natural world. The intellectual play of liberal education has its own goal—seeking the truth—which directs play’s end and transforms it into a morally serious enterprise: the search for truth is among the highest human goods. While it may have other benefits (such as making one a more interesting person, a wiser, more informed

citizen, a better employee, or more adept at civil discourse), the pursuit of truth by intellectual play is worthwhile for its own sake. It shares this auto-telic nature with other forms of play¹¹—perhaps these even include worship, which Robert Bellah argued is a form of play that seeks communion with the Divine as an end-in-itself.¹²

Those who participate in intellectual play about serious matters are aided by virtues. One of these virtues includes the courage to take risks by holding up for consideration new ideas, thereby allowing that they may have a claim on you,¹³ another is the humility to recognize that you are not intellectually self-sufficient and can learn and grow from others. Inasmuch as you seek the truth in an intellectual community, such as the classroom, you need to trust others with the vulnerability and neediness you invite by pursuing truth, an act which follows from the recognition that you are not complete in yourself. This trust strengthens the shared bonds of humanity, cultivated by the intellectual hospitality of making space for those who think differently from you. So too intellectual play involves patience and charity in light of the mutual recognition of our common weaknesses and hospitality that welcomes the fellow truth-seeker.

One can better see the structure of intellectual play and how it facilitates civil discourse as a byproduct of truth-seeking

by comparing it to another form of play especially prominent in the Durham-Chapel Hill area: basketball. I actively draw on the metaphor of basketball to describe to students what we are trying to achieve through our intellectual play in the classroom. As with any metaphor, there are disanalogies: the truth-seeking of intellectual play is a non-zero-sum ongoing process, whereas basketball games have clear endings and winners and losers. Still, the metaphor illuminates several benefits

Civil discourse as speech between citizens underscores why universities are well-suited as training grounds of democratic speech.

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of seeing civil discourse as flowing from intellectual play.

College students, typically so inexperienced in the sort of civil discourse that characterizes intellectual play, cannot expect to possess the relevant virtues straight off. As in youth basketball, we can expect awkwardness at first. Just as beginning basketball players may miss an easy fast-break lay-up, so students in class discussion may express themselves inelegantly or in confused, muddled, or offensive ways. They will display ignorance of facts, history, religion, science, and moral and political arguments. Professors must be patient with students, and students must extend that same patience to one another. We are all learning and growing. We are not now what we will become, and we will hardly grow intellectually without subjecting our views to scrutiny. Just as youth players may take selfish and ill-advised shots or fail to take good shots when given the opportunity, so in the classroom game of civil discourse students may alternate between being overly argumentative (thus robbing themselves of the opportunity to learn from others) or they may too frequently self-censor (thus robbing others from learning from them).

As patience must be extended to individuals in civil discourse, so too charity. Just as at an early season practice, teammates may miscommunicate and throw the ball

out-of-bounds, so in our conversations we may miscommunicate and misunderstand one another. That is to be expected and is part of learning to play with ideas. Over the course of a semester students will grow in their trust of one another and ability to communicate just as a basketball team will improve in these areas over the course of a season. This collective growth will not take place if we do not extend the charity of taking others' arguments at their strongest (sometimes called "the principle of charity") and attribute the best motives to the speech of conversation partners.

Skillful civil discourse, just like basketball, requires knowledge of one's interlocutors. Just as basketball teams hang-out off the court to build strong culture, so classmates and professors need to have opportunities to get to know one another inside and outside the classroom: I have come to think that conversations outside of the classroom are especially important due to the depth of the cultural challenges to civil discourse. Shared meals with classroom speakers of diverse perspectives enable students to carry on an intellectual conversation via the shared humanity of a common meal. The hospitality of sharing a meal reinforces the intellectual hospitality of sharing an intellectual conversation.

The metaphor of basketball to describe the classroom activity as intellectual play also helps students to prepare to navigate



some of the trickier aspects of classroom conversation involving inclusion, equality, and the charge that civil discourse may lead to harm. Play requires an element of reciprocity and equality, even among those who are in some respects unequal. In *Religion in Human Evolution*, Robert Bellah observes how when wild animals play, even those naturally dominant partners will restrain themselves to allow for a degree of reciprocity and mutuality.¹⁴ A classroom conversation that practices civil discourse, one that aims at “truth not victory,” will similarly admit of reciprocity. Students will not seek to dominate the conversation and their classmates but will aim to enable all to speak fully, freely, and strongly. Freedom is a gift that students must give to one another.

Moreover, the basketball metaphor helps ground claims of “trauma” and “harm” in some degree of objective, common experience while also recognizing that there are powerful subjective aspects to these experiences, which should not be entirely dismissed. As in basketball, so in the classroom I deny neither that past injuries can impact one’s ability to participate nor suggest that words cannot injure. Anyone who has been bullied knows that words can wound and can cause long-lasting pain. There is no place in civil classroom discourse for bullying, from which civil discourse is readily distinguished,¹⁵ and surely professors need to be aware of how

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present dynamics in the classroom may make speech difficult for past victims of bullying. I see nothing wrong with allowing students who have suffered a painful, even traumatic, event related to the topic of discussion to be able to “sit out” of the classroom session, if after reflection they are not able to engage—just as basketball players at times need to sit out a half or a game.

But at the same time and on the same analogy, the student who sits out the class does not demand that the discussion be shut down for others. The game must go on. Moreover, as in basketball, so in the classroom discussion when one is dealing with an injury, it is not healthy to avoid discussing the related event for the rest of one’s life. The goal is to rehab with a



If universities are going to produce citizens who can disagree well, they should aim above all to promote a liberal education that invites students to risk playing with the most important ideas as they seek the truth about themselves and their world.


trained professional—a trainer in basketball or perhaps a therapist for difficult life events—to overcome the injury and get back in the game. I have witnessed how my students have learned to cope with hardship by discussing texts on death and suffering by religious and philosophical

thinkers in a community of intellectual friends. Participating in intellectual play can move students to develop the convictions needed to live courageously in the world in their personal and civic lives.

Indeed, the liberal enterprise of intellectual play has a distinctively civic benefit. For many years UNC Professor of the Practice John Rose taught at Duke a highly successful course that stresses promoting the intellectual virtues to tackle political polarization and the crisis of civility. One student arrived in the class feeling alone, isolated, and angry because of mistreatment at the hands of other students for her political beliefs. In the class she and her classmates discussed issues such as transgender sports, abortion, pronouns, and race in a welcoming environment in which “no one was ostracized, everyone shared, and everyone listened.”

Meeting and interacting with my fellow students gave me a hope I had never had before for the future of our country. . . . More than that, however, I realized that courage is a virtue that is critical to the future of our nation. Seeking the truth is vital and seeking the truth takes courage. It takes asking questions, and it takes being uncomfortable. It also takes courage to stand strong in your beliefs. It takes courage to be gracious with those with whom you disagree, and courage to have

the humility to admit when you are wrong. Our world needs more people of courage, and I am honored to have been in a classroom among those with genuine courage, humility, and grace.

If universities are going to produce citizens who can disagree well, they should aim above all to promote a liberal education that invites students to risk playing with the most important ideas as they seek the truth about themselves and their world. Universities must equip students to “play gracefully with ideas,” as Oscar Wilde once described the benefits of an Oxford Education in *De profundis*. Such an education, pursued for its own sake, has the resources to combat the pre-professionalism, safetyism, and fragility that currently hinder our universities from producing the reflective citizens our polarized country so desperately needs. 

NOTES

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2. Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 83–84.

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Jed W. Atkins is the inaugural director and dean of the School of Civic Life and Leadership at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of several books including the recently published, *The Christian Origins of Tolerance*.



Good Reads

We asked our authors to recommend a book they had read over the past couple of years. Here is what they said:



A Framework for Character Education in Schools

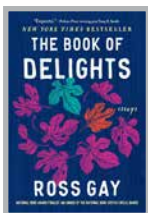
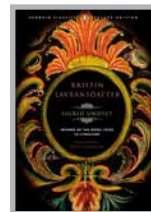
JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER AND VIRTUES

The necessity of forming civic citizens has been a long-standing concern of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. As the Centre's *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* states, "character education teaches the acquisition and strengthening of virtues: the traits that sustain a well-rounded life and a *thriving society*." The Framework also makes clear that "schools should aim to develop confident and compassionate students, who are *effective contributors to society*, successful learners, and *responsible citizens*," and that students "need to *develop a commitment to serving others*, which is an essential manifestation of good character in action. —JAMES ARTHUR

The Kristin Lavransdatter trilogy

BY SIGRID UNDSET

Set in 14th century Norway, these novels trace the life of a fictional woman, Kristin Lavransdatter. They raise profound questions about the relationship between the individual and community, hope and despair, betrayal and forgiveness, and the past and future. —JED W. ATKINS



Book of Delights

BY ROSS GAY

A daily meditation on finding wonder in the most commonplace things. Succor for the soul in these troubled times. —DAYNA L. CUNNINGHAM



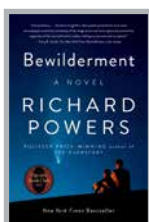
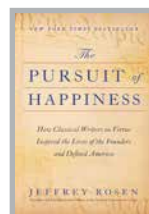
The Pursuit of Happiness

How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America

BY JEFFREY ROSEN

The Pursuit of Happiness is an incredible meditation on ancient wisdom and indispensable for anyone who wishes to lead a happy and fulfilled life.

—GREG LUKIANOFF



Bewilderment

BY RICHARD POWERS

Bewilderment, by Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Richard Powers, is the remarkable story of the love between a father and a son grieving for their wife and mother and trying to understand our wonderful, terrifying, imperiled planet.

—SUZANNE SHANAHAN

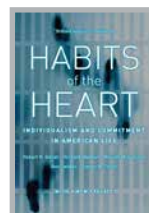
Habits of the Heart (with a new Preface)

Individualism and Commitment in American Life

BY ROBERT N. BELLAH AND OTHERS

While this book was written quite a while back, it does resonate today as we think about the present and future of American democracy. What binds us together as a nation, and where do we go from here?

—NAJEEBA SYEED





Too Many Convictions, Too Little Civic Virtue



When you are instructed that you should have the courage of your convictions, it can often feel like an inspiring, even thrilling, directive. After all, America was founded by people who had the courage of their convictions so much so that they were willing to risk their lives in order to free the Colonies from British control.

In fact, when we think about the courage of those we admire, we almost never divorce it entirely from the convictions we admire. And the good news is, the founders of the United States were rooted quite firmly in ideas arising from the Scottish Enlightenment that emphasized personal



autonomy, freedom, procedural fairness, and rights—not yet understood as universal, but far more expansive than any preceding idea of rights. These are impressive and inspiring convictions to this day.

Courage in a conviction that holds up to scrutiny is noble. On the other hand, we generally don't give a lot of credit (and rightfully so) to people who might show courage in the face of opposition when their convictions are fundamentally immoral and repugnant.

Did the Nazis show a kind of courage when, in 1923, they took over a beer hall in Munich in the famous Beer Hall Putsch? Well, yes. They put their lives at risk. Do we think this particular kind of courage is commendable? Absolutely not, because their convictions were both racist and tyrannical.

Do we look at the followers of Vladimir Lenin, who ordered land-owning peasants should be hanged in public (to send a message) or “shot on the spot without trial” after World War I because they might have disagreed with his vision of a communist utopia, as courageous? After all, most of them fought in the incredibly bloody Bolshevik Revolution. Unfortunately, some on campus today probably *do* think of Lenin's followers as not just courageous but commendable, because we don't adequately teach about the Red Terror. But that aside, the Bolsheviks' convictions extended to the superiority of their facile utopian ideology over the lives of at first thousands, and eventually, millions. They believed in the subjugation of human rights and individuality in the name of a larger theoretical idea of the classless society—or really, a society with two classes: the party and everyone else. And they were willing to murder, starve, torture, and terrorize their way to that utopia.

What about the 9/11 hijackers? The comedian Bill Maher's original show on ABC, “Politically Incorrect,” was canceled after he made the point that the terrorists who flew planes into the World Trade Center were a lot of things, evil included, but they “certainly weren't cowards.” True, but the public recoiled, because it's generally unacceptable to compliment the courage of fanatical mass murderers.

So while I would like to heartily endorse the idea that all of you should have the courage of your convictions, the simple truth is, it badly depends on what those convictions actually *are*. And the way that you learn if your convictions are worth courageously defending is by exercising several of the civic virtues, including, most importantly, humility.

In its simplest form, humility in a democratic society means you don't believe everyone else is simply stupid or evil, but instead that they are equal citizens who are likely to have good values. Another form is epistemic humility, which is the recognition that our knowledge is filtered through perception. (I use this term over the simpler "intellectual humility," because epistemic humility conveys the idea that there are not just limits to what is known, but even to what can be known.) In some cases, we disagree with our neighbors because things look differently from where they're standing. And a really serious thinker should admit that it's at least possible that, at times, our neighbor's vantage point is better than ours.

Humility and its fellow civic virtues—such as honesty, respect, tolerance, and compassion—create an environment that enables us to figure out when our neighbors have developed their convictions from a better understanding of the world. Through discussion, thought experimentation, devil's

advocacy, and counterfactuals, we can test and refine our convictions.

These are the things that higher education is meant—but in today's polarized times often fails—to deliver. Instead, it and many other institutions have retreated from their historic roles as crucibles of truth and now operate as protectors of the faith. Ideological litmus tests in admissions, hiring, and tenure filter out heretics. Bias response teams, which often provide hotline numbers that allow you to report your professors and classmates anonymously, wait to investigate wrongthink. Unfortunately, many college

So while I would like to heartily endorse the idea that all of you should have the courage of your convictions, the simple truth is, it badly depends on what those convictions actually *are*.





administrations are animated by the spirit of inquisition rather than inquiry, awash in conviction but devoid of civic virtue.

Examples of debatable convictions and an absence of civic virtue abound in higher education. When Fifth Circuit Judge Kyle Duncan went to speak at Stanford Law School last year, students shouted him

You are better off and safer knowing what your fellow citizens genuinely believe, not even if, but especially when their convictions are troubling.

down before he could even deliver his remarks. An administrator read a performative soliloquy in the middle of the circus, asking whether Duncan's free speech (that is, his ability to write judicial opinions elsewhere) was really worth all the pain it was allegedly causing law students. What courage does it take to join with almost one-fifth of the entire Stanford Law community to shout down an extremely unpopular guest before he speaks? This looks more like enforcement of the "general will" than bravely speaking truth to power. There's nothing courageous about

"enlightened censorship," or, as in this case, enlightened bullying.

Civic virtue begins with listening to each other. I believe in what I call the pure informational theory of freedom of speech, which I also call the "lab-in-the-looking-glass theory," which means that we should permit free expression so that we can know what people really think. You are better off and safer knowing what your fellow citizens genuinely believe, not *even if*, but *especially* when their convictions are troubling. Groupthink and cancel culture silence people with dissenting ideas, but as John Morley observed, "you have not converted a man because you have silenced him," and unexposed convictions go unchallenged and unquestioned.

Once those ideas are expressed, we need to consider them with epistemic humility, hear criticisms with grace, show compassion for their wounds, and be honest with our evaluations of their convictions. And when our neighbors indulge our beliefs with the same assumptions, we can work together productively. That's the work of civic virtue, and as long as it continues, we will learn from each other.

Our convictions might still differ. It might be the case that we never resolve the tension between them. We will certainly generate a lot of art, wisdom, and science in the pursuit; that's how it has ever been.

It might also be the case that some convictions will fail when tested. But if we don't have the faith in our convictions to subject them to public scrutiny, we should probably abandon them.

This wisdom repeats in history again and again. In his "Faith and Reason" encyclical,

Pope John Paul II observed that "reason too needs to be sustained in all its searching by trusting dialogue and sincere friendship." It might not be terribly shocking that the Pope had the courage of his convictions, and believed very strongly that the Church had nothing to fear from the pursuit of truth, because he believed the truth of his





We should always support and find admirable the courage of conviction of anyone who believes to the heart of their being that life is a process in which truth is hard to know.

faith. That he also had the insight that the search for knowledge requires civic virtue is impressive.

The law recognizes this too. Legendary jurist Learned Hand said in a 1944 speech that “[t]he spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women[.]” Judge Hand was invoking the role of civic virtue in making the kind of patriotism that merits

conviction. That we get closer to the truth by listening to each other is a nontrivial part of the entire adversarial system of common law.

Neuroscience supports civic virtue as well. Studies show that individuals who exhibit “openness” (a willingness to explore ideas and values other than their own) as a personality trait tend to be more creative, better leaders, and make better decisions. They also have stronger minds as they age. There are very few humans who genuinely function better in total isolation. The rest of us are social creatures and improve through interaction with others.

Many people believe they have the courage of their convictions. In the age of the Internet and social media, so little is actually at risk when you call for someone to be canceled that calling it “courage” seems excessively self-congratulatory. Even those with the courage to stand up face-to-face against their opponents might not



have the commendable kind of courage if they've never been willing to examine those convictions and subject them to the scrutiny of both external critics and internal reason.

We may have a situation where large numbers of people have too many convictions and insufficient courage to question them the way a brave and open person should be willing to do.

We should always support and find admirable the courage of conviction of anyone


who believes to the heart of their being that life is a process in which truth is hard to know. The pursuit of truth is an arduous, never-ending struggle, chipping away at little pieces of falsity to hopefully inch close to an appreciation of Truth. This habit requires great discipline, self-control, and, well, conviction. But cultivating this kind of conviction in the citizenry is how you have a free and open society that respects fundamental human rights, and also the only type of society that has a fighting chance to understand the world as it actually is. [V&V](#)



Greg Lukianoff is the President & CEO of The Foundation for Individual Rights & Expression (FIRE) and New York Times bestselling co-author of *The Coddling of the American Mind* and *The Canceling of the American Mind*.

NAJEEBA SYEED

Chaplaincy for Everyday Democracy

 recently sat across a room of 500 students and faculty from around the country, gathered for the annual Interfaith America summit. My own student was in the audience. I have looked at thousands of students, across hundreds of rooms in the last 15 years of my career as a professor.

I have also had the honor of serving as a staffer to an elected official, and have mediated dozens of conflicts in many contexts. Imbued in all of these spaces, and in the most recent times, I have begun to understand how much we must think about democracy with an everyday lens. How do people express their opinions on policy, how do they organize to have their voices heard, and why is decision-making often left to those who have formal power?





Where have the voices of everyday people gone? Maybe it is time to think about a model of:

Everyday democracy, coupled with the skills of care, and built on an ethic of hope.

What would it mean to be a chaplain for everyday democracy?

SPACE FOR HUMBLE LISTENING

A chaplain for democracy listens, does not bully someone into engagement with

others. They are curious; they walk with the person; they hear the pain. Listening is a practice of everyday democracy. One of the students in my interfaith scholars class last semester, Vernis Campbell, talked about learning to listen, what she called *humble listening*. To listen humbly is to set aside the ego and hear the pain of another. She captured a foundation of engagement that is often missed. In this spirit, humble listening is one way of understanding how past policies have caused harm.

When we try to build spaces for exercising civic engagement, we should also pay attention to the barriers that people face. Some are resource-driven, and some are trauma-induced. Engagement in systems takes vulnerability. We open ourselves and communities to the gaze and eyes of power that may be connected not just to decisions we disagree with, but decisions that hurt us or our communities.

I often ask people in conflict, “Who is human?”

We must open our own hearts to understand how we dehumanize others and how we are dehumanized. Policies built on dehumanization are the enemy of democracies. Let us learn to listen in a manner that humanizes everyone and builds societies predicated on common humanity. We may never reach common ground, but let us start with common humanity.

One of the greater gifts of religious communities to the practice of democracy can also be the recognition that humans operate and create meaning in communities. Spiritual spaces and organizations offer models of communal chaplaincy and the creation of common identities. In one of his speeches, Robert Bellah offers this reflection on religious communities:

“What I think is a healthier outcome is not that that internalization doesn’t happen—it must happen—but that it then moves back into a strong sense of commitment to community and the realization that one cannot fulfill one’s religious understanding except in and through community and that it is one’s common commitments.”¹

How does one serve as a chaplain to a group and people fostering belonging in the process? Bellah suggests that our meaning happens *in* and *through* community.

In an increasingly polarized and pluralistic society, can we apply the lessons we learn from our home communities to the broader social system and network.

LESSONS FROM LAST NOVEMBER

At Augsburg University, one of the most diverse campuses in the country, I talked to two colleagues about pedagogies for

We must open our own hearts to understand how we dehumanize others and how we are dehumanized. Policies built on dehumanization are the enemy of democracies.



times of high stress as we navigated the presidential election last fall. The day after the election, I spent time with faculty and staff colleagues in a gathering, facilitating discussion on that moment, then I led similar groups with graduate students in one discussion and undergraduates in another, and a meeting with student-facing services colleagues. From those meetings, I observed a few things about how universities can encourage community in service of democracy:

1. Cooperation

Augsburg has a cooperative approach between various offices on campus related to students. We met, across academic units, multicultural life, the dean of students office, campus life, athletics, campus ministries, and community wellness programs to think *together*, divide the labor, and be *strategic*. It is so important in



times of crisis for an organization to have internal cohesion.

2. Our business is the care of our students

They are not the “problem” and they are not our enemies. The basic mission and function of the institution is to be caring, consistent, and effective in building community, hence the many gatherings of various types. We do not demonize any students, no matter what their viewpoints

may be, they find a table to join and share. We must approach times of stress with a chaplaincy stance, open and curious. Organizations can begin to think about this viewpoint-diversity as a key strength for how we offer care. An invitation to share and learn encourages a process to collectively discuss and grow together.

3. We learn from our students

Honestly, this one is so important to me. As one student said, “I am so grateful to

be in a space where we hear each other out.” I walked into rooms where students were having profound, in-depth conversations on their own as part of their natural way of interacting. Listening to mostly 17–22-year-olds deftly manage nuances in their analysis made me realize, they have skills to chaplain democracy. In fact, lived experience is expertise. In such a diverse environment, the depth and breadth of experiences become a well of knowledge and potential for a laboratory to learn in ways we can’t even imagine. This ultimately is the educational gift diversity gives an organization: a vital set of rich knowledge everyone can benefit from in a learning community. An intellectual opportunity for collective growth.

I am grateful for my colleagues, in awe of my students, and wishing we had more spaces like this one in other parts of our society and lives.

Compassion, critical thinking, and community can, indeed, support us all and build stronger bonds even in the most difficult and aggravating circumstances.

MULTIPLY POWER, NOT SUBTRACT

We live in a time and space where the notion of power is a zero-sum game. How can we spiritualize this discourse

One of the greater gifts of religious communities to the practice of democracy can also be the recognition that humans operate and create meaning in communities.

on power? Engage with people in ways that multiply a notion of power that is co-created?

Interdependence as the core of a chaplaincy for democracy is built on getting to our underlying interests and not just our status or title. We build processes and convenings not just focused on expressing the transactional, extractive modality of building power but also the collective care that people and communities seek. We build connections between communities





Interdependence as the core of a chaplaincy for democracy is built on getting to our underlying interests and not just our status or title.

across differences, with people who are able to hear, see, feel, and hold the other for a moment. It is often called “perspective-taking,” understanding a situation from the point of view of another.

I am hopeful that we can build an approach to dialogic engagement that is beyond the accumulation of power for one group, one community, and one candidate, and begin to think about chaplaincy as a model for power: an open-ended conversation that seeks to empower everyone, a non-judgmental open stance in the posture of the convenor and facilitator, a coaching of leaders to understand that values can be shared, but that it takes vulnerability to trust one another over time. Trusting another is not a weakness, but actually a mutual strength.

BEYOND THE POLLS

Understandably, we focus on the ballot box as the generator for democracy. It is often the case that once someone is elected the fervor for them dies down. From campaigning to governance, one loses that connection to communities and individuals slow down in their engagement with democratic processes.


One of the roles we envision for higher education is a center for exercising democratic processes and principles. How do we build institutional capacity for diverging viewpoints and long-term disagreements? I’ve been very curious to see that many institutions who have an affiliation with religious communities or bodies have been spaces for conversations on ethics and values in the past year. Perhaps our chaplaincy of care and commitment to mutual flourishing means the university can become a space to protect all students. When values related to the big questions in life are embedded in how an institution runs, in how teachers educate, in how administrators make decisions, the bottom line is a human line. Are we building curricula that ask these moral and

ethical questions in ways that are inclusive of students with different religious, spiritual, and non-religious commitments? A concern for the humanity of our students should be the guiding principle.

As we begin to think about the day after the next election, perhaps we spend less time gloating for whatever side wins, and begin to think more about how we create communities of care, resilience and everyday democracy, together.

I often ask parties in conflict, “are you in each other’s future?” When we are in conflict, it is the painful present and past we are most focused on and the future eludes us.

I am in this for the long game, a future that includes you and me. Between elections, let’s listen, build, disagree, and co-create. Many spiritual traditions draw on the notion of making decisions with the next generations at the table. Engage with your body, your community, and the many who will come next, as if they are all on the line. Sometimes the way through is to open your line of vision to a future you cannot see yet; find uncommon allies and use hope as your fuel to get there.

Our futures depend on it. 

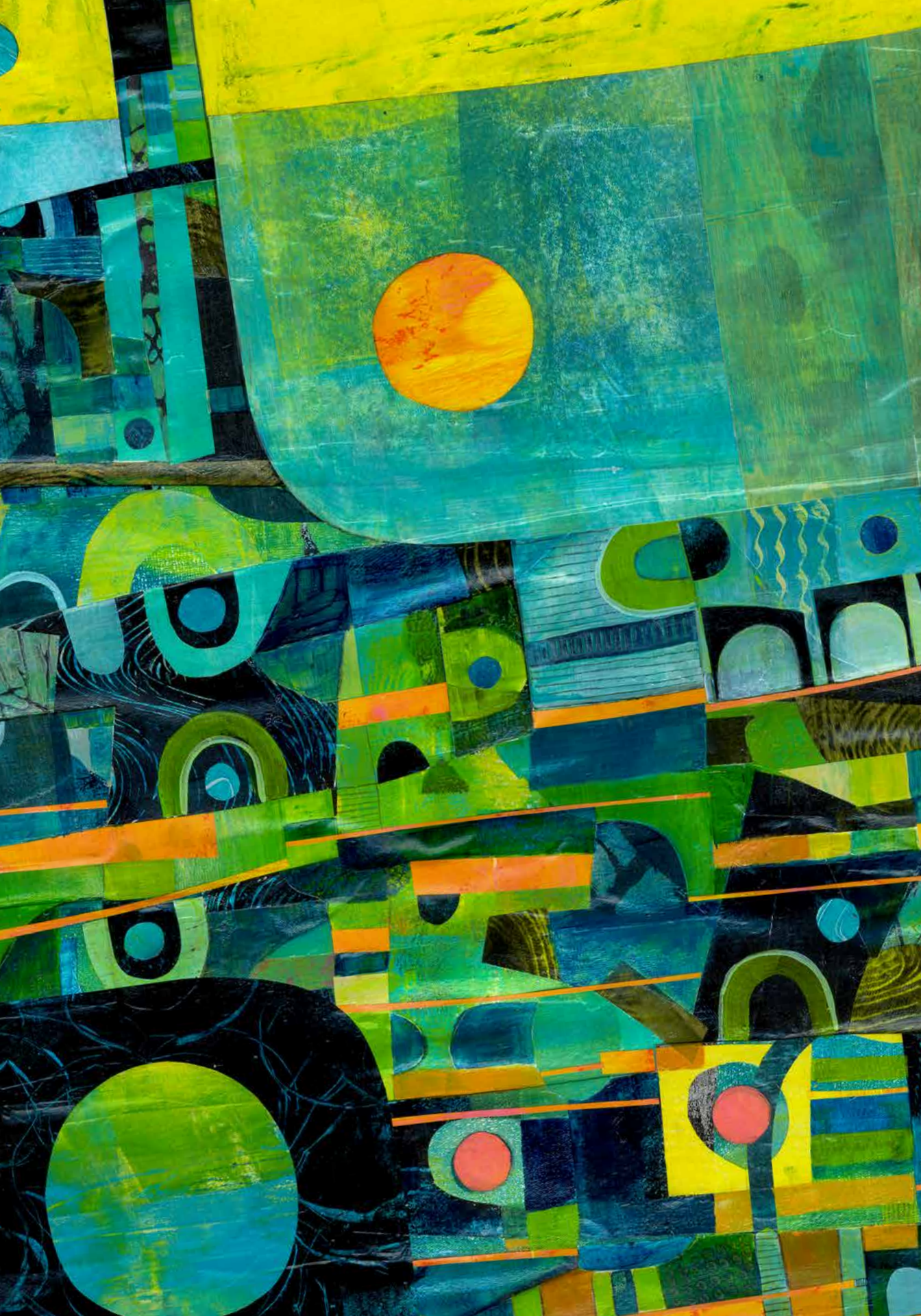
NOTE

1. Bellah, Robert N., “Habits of the Heart: Implications for Religion,” lecture (1986), robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm.



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Jon Anson Ford Award for reducing violence and was named Southern California Mediation Association’s “Peacemaker of the Year” in 2007.





INTERLUDE

Defining Moments

“The fusing of faculty expertise with courageous and curious young people is why universities remain the crown jewel of our nation.”

—SIAN L. BEILOCK
President, Dartmouth

When we talk about cultivating civil disagreement and courage of convictions on and off campus what are signs of hope? What are challenges to overcome?

We asked campus and cultural leaders to respond to these questions and share their perspectives on the current climate. Here’s what they said.



Sian L. Beilock

President, Dartmouth

SIGNS OF HOPE

Cultivating dialogue is at the heart of the university's mission. At Dartmouth, it's also integral to our north star—finding the most promising students from the broadest swath of society, teaching them how to think (not what to think), and giving them the skills to debate and disagree productively so they can go out and be the next leaders of the free world.

There are a growing number of institutions that are committed to increasing

opportunities and creating more spaces on campus for freedom of expression and dialogue across difference. These efforts are critical. But just as often, it's our students who are leading the way.

At Dartmouth, groups like the nonpartisan Dartmouth Political Union are only one example of students actively working to bridge divides and to create spaces for respectful dialogue. With support from faculty, staff, and alumni who care deeply about their success, these students are not only

engaging in civil disagreement themselves but are encouraging their peers to do the same, setting an example of what constructive engagement can look like. Their efforts, often overlooked in depictions of campus life, demonstrate the importance of listening to and learning from others—even when views diverge. They should be held up and celebrated for cultivating brave dialogue on our college campuses.

The fusing of faculty expertise with courageous and curious young people is why universities remain the crown jewel of our nation. Our institutions have always been the center of academic discovery and innovation when all ideas



Jennifer Frey

Dean of the Honors College and Professor of Philosophy, University of Tulsa

Civility is a key virtue for any community, because without it the mutual respect necessary for communities to thrive is absent. Civility is a civic virtue, and so ordered to the common good of some community. A civil person is disposed to see others as their moral equal—as possessing equal value and dignity as oneself—and thus is disposed to treat others with the respect they

are owed in light of that perceived equality. This perception of equal value and worth is not conditional—the perception of the dignity and value of the other does not change considering how the other person behaves or what the other person believes.

Civil discourse, then, occurs between persons who see their interlocutors as deserving respect unconditionally. This respect is based

in the recognition that both conversation partners are searching for the truth in good faith and are open to being wrong and changing their mind. A civil exchange might be heated and frustrating, but it will not involve treating the participants in the exchange as unworthy of respect. Exchange becomes uncivil when participants resort to name calling, yelling, ad hominem attacks, or other forms of behavior that violate norms of respect that are recognized in the community.

One **challenge** that arises on our campuses today is that civility is no longer a norm

can flourish. Research shows a diversity of viewpoints at the table, working together, leads to better outcomes. When universities do this well, we expand our ability to create new knowledge and solve the world's most pressing issues.

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME


Achieving a community where civil disagreement and courage of conviction can thrive requires overcoming formidable challenges—polarization chief among them. This growing phenomenon in all of our lives has intensified societal divisions, making it harder

for students to feel comfortable engaging across lines of difference. Social media often amplifies this challenge, creating echo chambers that discourage nuanced conversation and that reward quick, impassioned reactions over thoughtful engagement.

To create environments where students can disagree civilly, universities must help them develop and practice the skills to listen actively, empathize, and find common ground, even when opinions differ sharply.

Faculty can play a critical role in this work by modeling civil discourse for students as well as creating classroom environments where

respectful debate can thrive. At Dartmouth, our Jewish Studies and Middle Eastern Studies faculty have a long history of co-teaching classes, and set a powerful example for students by demonstrating how to learn and engage with one another on complicated, emotionally charged issues. Those models are further strengthened if academics and administrators leave our own personal political opinions at the door.

Just as we train our bodies for vigorous workouts, we can train our brains—and our students—for vigorous debate while also respecting the humanity of the person sitting across from us. 


that is valued but is actively contested and opposed. It has frequently been labeled as racist and connected to white supremacy, for example, and cast as a tool for silencing dissenting voices focused on bringing about just ends. Another challenge is that many debates take place in online spaces that not only do not encourage civil exchange, but are structurally set up to undermine it. Finally, there is the challenge of polarization and the lack of shared common ground. These are conditions in which civility is difficult to cultivate.

While these challenges are formidable and complex,

there are **signs of hope.**

Many students are hungry for spaces where civil exchange and fearless pursuit of the truth is not only valued but actively encouraged and cultivated. Students want places where they can freely explore ideas and arguments without fearing reprisals or condemnations, and they are also eager to learn the rules of respectful engagement. In short, they want to learn and grow as thinkers and citizens. Precisely because civility is being challenged in the contemporary academy, we have an opportunity to explain what civility is and model how it should function in practice. While calls for

civility have been miscast or misused in the past, this should not discourage us from addressing the connections between civility, justice, courage, and humility.

As we proceed to build civil spaces of disagreement on campus, we must remain focused on the role of civility to our learning communities, and how civility functions to help us learn and grow together as seekers of truth and wisdom as a common good. While civility is not always easy, it is necessary for us to learn, grow, and belong on campus. 



Roosevelt Montás

Director of the Center for American Studies' Freedom and Citizenship Program, Columbia University

SIGNS OF HOPE

In the fall and spring of every year, I teach American and Western political thought to undergraduates at a highly selective college. During the summers, I teach the same material to high school students from low-income households who aspire to be the first in their families to attend university. With almost every classroom conversation I have with these young people, my faith in the possibilities for democratic

life and civic renewal in our society is strengthened. Grappling with fundamental questions through reading and discussing texts that shaped the contemporary world proves to be, again and again, transformative for the civic life of my students. This happens not only because of the power of the provocations that the texts offer us, but because of the character of the community of discourse that these courses naturally spawn. As the teacher, my

primary role is to set the tone for the classroom conversation—one in which my own authority on the most important questions is necessarily tenuous and tentative, driven more by curiosity about how others view the world than by convictions in the correctness of my views. In my experience, students slip into this same mode of inquiry and “debate” quite naturally. Once this affective community has taken hold, the kind of civility, humility, and interest in the views of others that makes democracy possible follow as a matter of course. It is the witnessing of this miracle that continually



Eboo Patel

Founder and President, Interfaith America

SIGNS OF HOPE

For the last ten years, the social change sector has been symbolized by the raised fist. For me, the message that sends is simple: *I'm going to pound you into agreeing with me.* I don't think that's a good approach to sustainable social change. It generates too many enemies, and even the people who comply may

do so because they felt forced. One of the principles that social change greats like Gandhi, Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. understood was the importance of turning enemies into friends precisely because you have to live with the people you defeat. I prefer the diverse hands clasped together approach to social change, rather than the raised fist mode, and I'm seeing more of


it. You hear it in the commentary of media figures like Van Jones and nonprofit leaders like Tulaine Montgomery of New Profit. You also see it on shows like FX's *The Bear* (also available on Hulu). It's a show about people from a range of different backgrounds working together to create a great restaurant. That's the spirit that we should be taking into all of our social change work – diverse people cooperating together to lift everyone up. It is especially meaningful to me that *The Bear* is based in the city of Chicago, the same city that

fortifies my faith in the possibilities for our future.

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

Strong convictions are not rare among students. The courage to express them is harder to come by, and requires cultivation and encouragement. But this is not the primary challenge I encounter as a teacher. Much harder to cultivate, and more important, is the courage of uncertainty and doubt, the capacity to

sit with tentativeness and confusion. To achieve truly civil disagreement and truly productive dialogue about these disagreements, it is the loosening of convictions, not the courage to hold them, that we must cultivate in our students. The idea that intellectual authority comes from certainty, self-confidence, and strength of conviction is in fact an anti-intellectual posture that impedes inquiry and growth. Strong convictions and settled beliefs are precisely what true education destabilizes, creating the


space in which new ideas and insights can emerge. We should teach our students to seek, and seek ourselves, the thrill of discovering that we are wrong. We should teach our students, and practice ourselves, the seeking out of contrary points of view and the enriching of our opinions by generous intercourse with their opposites. Conviction and certainty—in our students in ourselves—is a primary obstacle to our capacity to tackle together our common problems. 

the great poet Gwendolyn Brooks called home. She wrote one of my favorite lines of all time about social change: “Even if you are not ready for day / it cannot always be night.”

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

I was reading an article a few years ago on how our cultural divide maps onto our geographical divide. Over 70% of counties that have a Whole Foods vote for Democrats, and roughly the same percentage of counties with a Cracker Barrel vote for Republicans.¹ I was so taken by that datapoint that I mentioned it at dinner

with my family that night. My son’s response: “What’s Cracker Barrel?” That tells the whole story. It’s not just that we live deep in our own territory, it’s that we basically ignore people from across the cultural/geographic divide. A diverse democracy rests on its citizens, even as they advocate for different causes and vote for different candidates, expressing the conviction that the lives of their fellow citizens matter. That requires that we are curious about one another. But the geographic/cultural divide, symbolized by the Whole Foods/Cracker Barrel datapoint, makes it hard to come to know one another. We live too far apart to go to the same schools or play in the same basketball leagues. And social media, which

could theoretically transcend the divide, has seemed to only harden it. We are even farther apart when we are online than we are when we are on our drives to work. In previous generations, military service offered a common experience, and key figures like Walter Cronkite served as common cultural reference points. The closest we come now, I think, is the Olympics. But that’s only for two weeks every two years. We’re going to have to figure out how to bridge across the divide far more often than that. 

NOTE

1. medium.com/@michael_hendrix/why-2016-came-down-to-whole-foods-vs-cracker-barrel-4361cb9b1e5f



Deondra Rose

**Kevin D. Gorter Associate Professor
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Public Policy, Duke University**

SIGNS OF HOPE

As a scholar of U.S. higher education politics and policy, I spend a great deal of time thinking about the purpose of higher education and the relationship between higher education and democratic citizenship. Fostering civic dialogue on campus and beyond strikes me as one of the greatest contributions that colleges

and universities can make to society. Between 2021 and 2024, I served as the director of Polis: Center for Politics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, and during those years our team built our programs and activities around the theme of "Discourse for Democracy." Through formal events, informal conversation sessions, workshops, and even an arts competition, we

provided numerous opportunities for students and our broader community to develop and practice skills that are crucial for having transformative conversations across differences—such as active listening, dissenting effectively, demonstrating respect for others, displaying authenticity, approaching conversations with an open mind, and making space for others to contribute to conversations. I was struck by the ever-expanding landscape of organizations willing to partner with such efforts and the plethora of resources available to faculty, staff, students, and community members committed to



Michael Roth

President, Wesleyan University

So many are by now tired of organized efforts to have us exclude another person or group as "beyond the pale." While it may be that demonization works for political consultants, it is poisonous for our political culture. When you can turn your opponent into an existential threat, or when you can claim that your opponent is allied with the mortal enemies of your way of life, you may have a better chance of gaining supporters. But you are eroding the

possibilities for the collaborative work we so desperately need.

I find **hope** when I see that many of my students are eager to understand people with whom they believe they disagree on fundamental questions. They seem to realize that even if we don't agree about a military conflict or about other political issues, we can work for peace, for mutual understanding, and for the ability to continue

to learn together. Many have begun to recognize that living in a bubble of like-mindedness does not facilitate understanding; it simply rewards complacency. If all participants in the conversation share the same assumptions, one never has to legitimate them (and thus understand them more profoundly). That's why diversity is an educational issue and not just a question of political fairness.

There are signs that students want to do better. Instead of rewarding condescension toward those with whom they disagree, many schools are eager to enhance

fostering civil and potentially transformative dialogue. Moreover, the willingness of students, faculty, staff, and alumni to join in intergenerational conversations also gave me much hope.

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

To cultivate civil disagreement and courage of convictions, we must overcome two challenges. First, we must create environments where interlocutors feel comfortable approaching conversations with an open mind and engage to achieve greater understanding. For students—and faculty, staff, and community members—this may require important behavioral shifts. For many

students, the pathway from high school to college was forged by their ability to “win,” to be “right,” and to show that they had all the answers. As college educators, our job is to foster an environment of intellectual humility where students feel free to bring their full, authentic selves to conversations, to consider the merits of differing opinions (even if they do not ultimately agree with them), to admit when they don’t know something, and to change their minds. Helping students get there will take intentional guidance at every stage of the college experience.

The second challenge is figuring out how to effectively foster free expression and belonging in increasingly diverse communities. Many

conversations about civil discourse fail to venture beyond extolling the virtues of respectful dialogue and enumerating best practices for ensuring that difficult conversations remain constructive. Discussing difficult topics with diverse groups can be challenging. When conversations touch directly on some participants’ identities and/or lived experiences, the risks incurred by participating are different than they would be if the topic were simply of abstract or theoretical relevance. An intentional approach to guiding these conversations is imperative. **V&V**

the consideration of alternative perspectives on culture and society. As civil discussion becomes increasingly rare in the public sphere, it is more important than ever to cultivate the soil for it on our campuses.

The **challenges** to civil discussion are everywhere apparent. America is in another period of organized parochialism, and so it’s not surprising to find this on our college campuses. All across the country, groups are enclosing themselves in bubbles for protection from competing points of view, even from disturbing

information. This has always happened to some extent; it’s easier to be with people who share your views.

Today, however, we are able to curate the information we receive so that we are validated more than we are informed. These days some have noted that we live in a “winner take all economy” in which people seem to feel that if they don’t hoard resources, they will just be losers. Similarly, many seem to think that entertaining ideas from those who don’t share all your views is a sign of weakness. Rather

than opening ourselves up to difference, many seem to look to the exchange of ideas merely as a path to confirming their own views.

We must overcome our fear of the other and our fear of being wrong. We can develop strong convictions while maintaining an openness to civil conversation with those who might disagree with us. We must overcome the notion that it is a fault to discover that one is mistaken, or just different. We must instead see this discovery as a gift. **V&V**

CONTRIBUTORS



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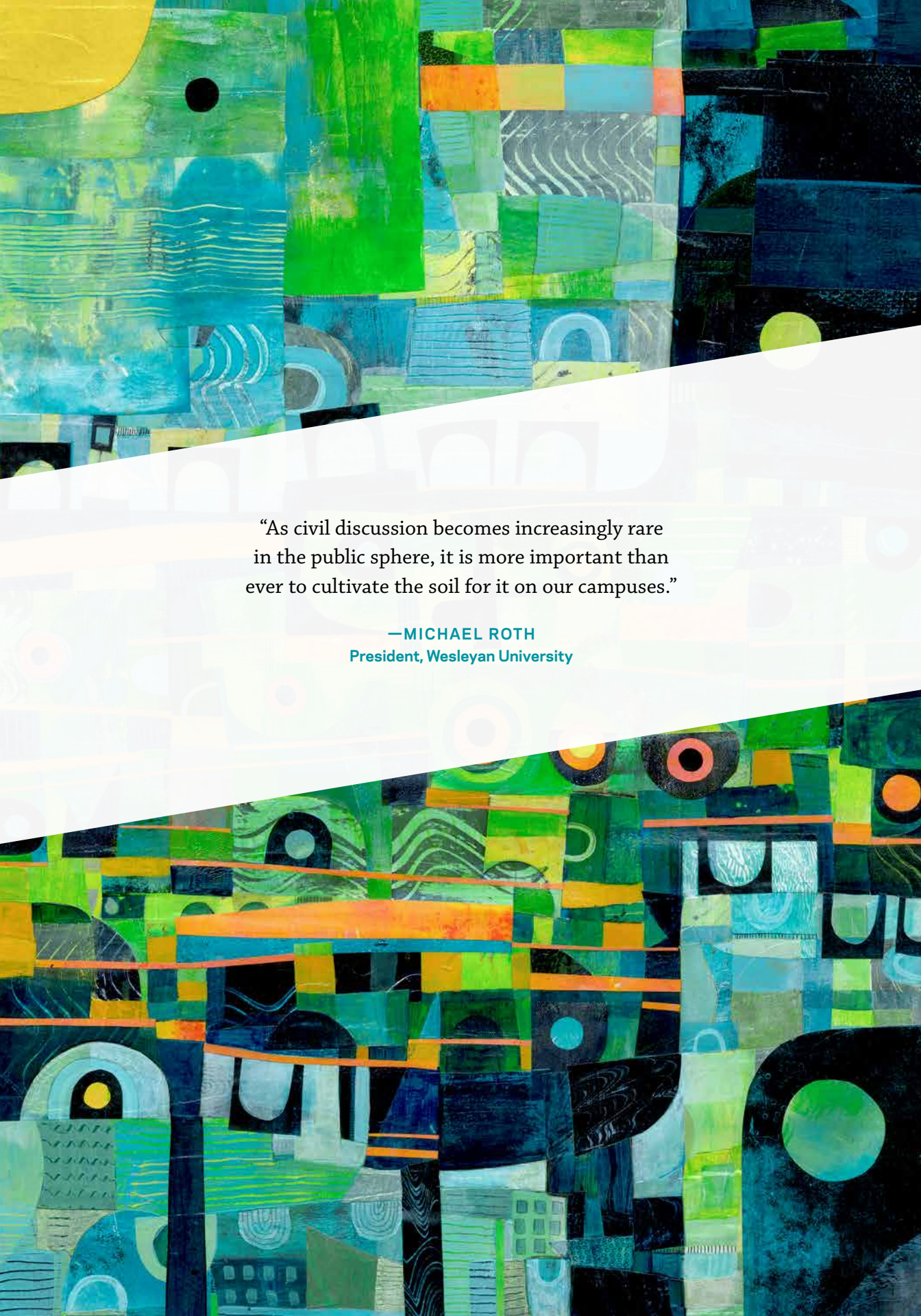
Deondra Rose is the Kevin D. Gorter Associate Professor at the Sanford School of Public Policy with secondary appointments in the Department of Political Science and the Department of History. She is the author of the new book *The Power of Black Excellence: HBCUs and the Fight for American Democracy*.



Eboo Patel, Founder and President of Interfaith America, is working with universities, government officials, civic leaders, and corporations to make faith a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division. He is the author of five books, including *We Need to Build: Field Notes for Diverse Democracy*.



Michael S. Roth has been president of Wesleyan University since 2007 and has taught in the humanities since 1983. He was the founding director of the Scripps College Humanities Institute and the president of the California College of the Arts. He is the author of eight books, the most recent of which is *The Student: A Short History*.



“As civil discussion becomes increasingly rare
in the public sphere, it is more important than
ever to cultivate the soil for it on our campuses.”

—MICHAEL ROTH
President, Wesleyan University

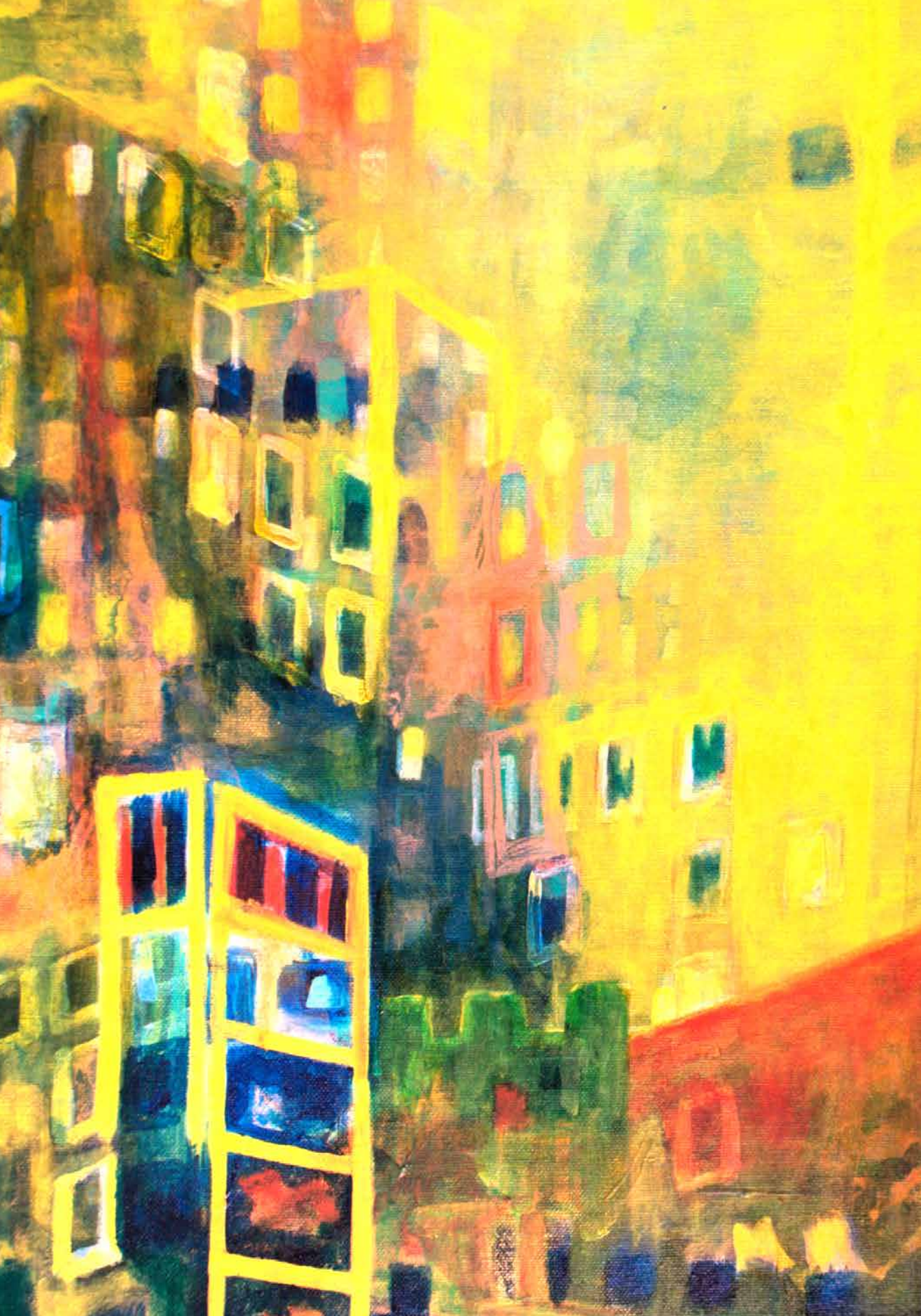
WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

The Second Coming

Source: *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Macmillan, 1989)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?







PART II

Defining Vocation

“When lives become interwoven, our rougher edges are smoothed by healthy friction. But this can only happen when our relationships take priority over our assertions.”

LESTER LIAO

Physician

ERHARDT GRAEFF

Civic Virtue among Engineers

My undergraduates at Olin College of Engineering want to make a positive impact. They see engineering as a career path to building a better world. Their initial theories of change are often naive. But I want them to hold onto the hope of positive impact through four years of equations, prototypes, and internships, and feel like they can live their values wherever their careers take them.



A CULTURE OF DISENGAGEMENT

The fields of engineering and computing have been experiencing a rightful reckoning with the negative impacts of emerging technologies. Their traditional models of personal, professional, and corporate ethics have long been lacking. Now citizens and their governments are realizing their inadequacy.

New research, curriculum, and ethics codes have emerged in response to the global focus on technology ethics. I've participated in countless conferences and meetings with scholars, educators, and practitioners trying to figure out how higher education can cultivate the necessary critical mindsets and ethical skills of technologists. I've introduced many of the novel ideas, frameworks, and approaches into the design, computer science, and social science courses I teach.

I'm reaching some students, but not all, and not always in the ways I hope to. Student reactions seem to fall into a few, rough categories: (1) Woah! Engineers have done some really bad things. I don't want to be an engineer anymore. (2) Ethics and responsibility seem important, but it doesn't seem relevant to the kind of engineering I want to do. (3) You can't anticipate how people will misuse technology. This is just the cost of innovation and progress. (4) Building

technology in an ethical way sounds like exactly what I want to do. But I'm not seeing job postings for "Ethical Engineer." Can I get a job doing this?



Sadly, most reactions are not in the minor success that is Category 4. Most are in the spectrum of failure represented by Categories 1–3. In these failure modes, critical examination of how technology is created and its impacts on the world erodes responsibility and the hope of positive impact and elicits defensiveness.

Four years isn't much time, and the mentorship my colleagues and I offer is only a sliver of the learning experiences

students will have during their undergraduate education. I want to make the most of it. I want to increase the likelihood that I cultivate their fragile hope and equip them with sophisticated theories of change.

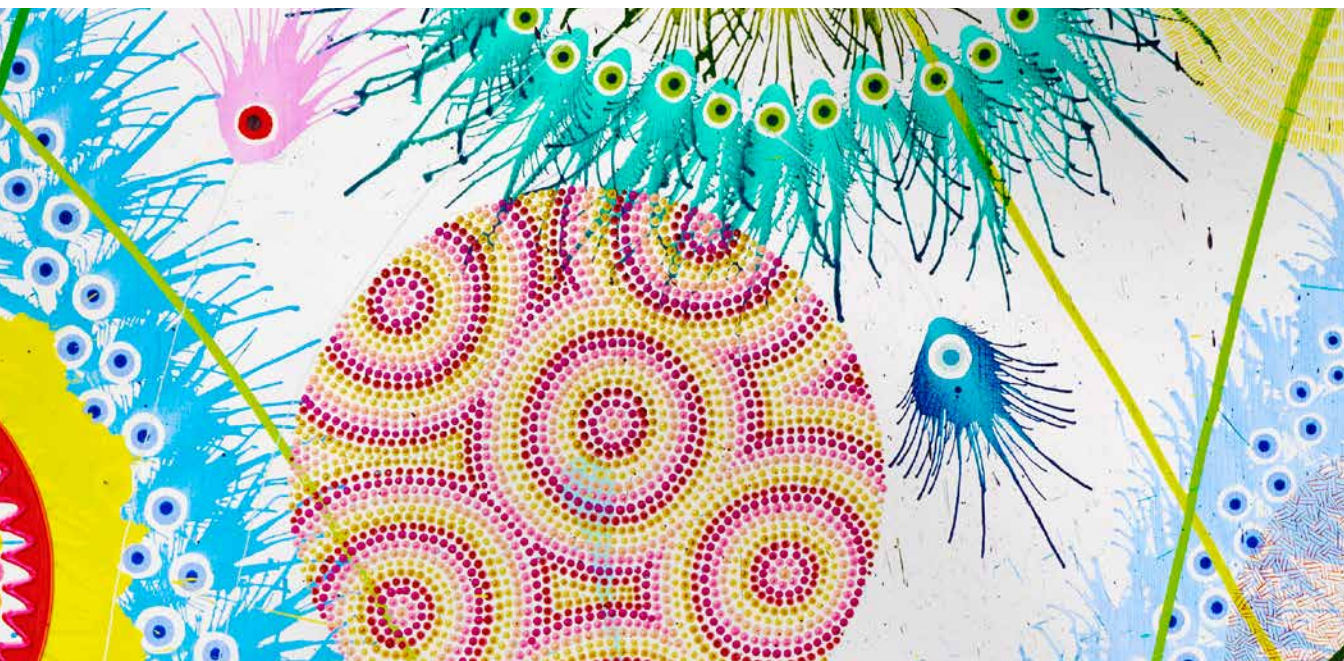
My motivation for studying and promoting civic-mindedness in engineering education arises partly from sociologist Erin Cech's survey research showing students' commitments to public welfare concerns erode after their first year of undergraduate engineering.¹ She argues this is a result of "a culture of disengagement in engineering education."² Olin was one of the schools she studied, afflicted by a culture of disengagement despite its innovative pedagogy.

I take pride in Olin's history of innovation in undergraduate engineering education, with its longstanding emphasis on project-based learning, human-centered design, and entrepreneurial thinking. The college was incorporated by the Franklin W. Olin Foundation in 1997 "to establish a new paradigm for engineering education."³ In their petition letter to the Massachusetts Board of Education, the Foundation directors emphasized how they "see a future in which an undergraduate engineering education becomes the true 'Liberal Education,' i.e. an education which liberates one to lead a personal and professional life of full citizenship in one's local, national and global communities."⁴

I believe the next chapter of engineering education requires making good on the promise of a liberal education and recommitting to a holistic definition of higher education's public purpose.

I believe the next chapter of engineering education requires making good on the promise of a liberal education and recommitting to a holistic definition of higher education's public purpose. Engineers may run experiments in a vacuum, but their work does not exist in one. There is no dualistic separation of social and technical concerns as Cech and decades of science and technology studies scholarship note. This demands we prepare engineering and computing students in ways that integrate their personal and professional identities into what educational philosopher Carolin Kreber calls an "authentic professional identity."⁵





AUTHENTICITY AND CIVIC PROFESSIONALISM

Authenticity for Kreber is an integral part of the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*, often translated as “human flourishing.” Living to one’s fullest potential requires living in accordance with one’s values—living authentically. I find Kreber’s book *Educating for Civic-Mindedness* compelling because her goal is reinvigorating professional education by emphasizing its public purpose—to cultivate civic professionals who practice their professions authentically.

For Kreber, civic-mindedness is “an overarching professional capability.”⁶ She builds her definition on the ideas of theorists Harry Boyte and Albert Dzur. Boyte’s “citizen professional” does not readily distinguish between their civic identity and their professional identity; they understand their work to be about strengthening communities and aim to co-create and jointly solve public problems with other citizens.⁷ Rather than playing the role of technocratic custodian, Dzur’s “democratic professional” similarly shares power with citizens—the many people who have a stake in professional decision-making.⁸ This is the external component of civic professionals,



which according to Kreber must be synthesized with the internal self-cultivation of virtue to achieve an authentic professional identity, relying on:

Openness to experience, allowing professionals to cope with the uncertainties and challenges of their work,

Moral commitment, driving professionals to use critical reflection to work towards a more just world, and

Responsible community engagement, connecting professionals to their communities and motivating them to work for the common good.

Kreber leans on Aristotle and Martha Nussbaum for her definitions of virtue. But for engineers, it's imperative to update our ideas of virtue in the way Shannon Vallor does in her book *Technology and the Virtues*. Vallor argues that emerging technologies pose unprecedented ethical challenges.⁹ Our traditional virtue frameworks are not up to the task of promoting human flourishing in a world interconnected by opaque sociotechnical systems. I want to touch on 4 of her 12 technomoral virtues that resonate strongly with how I have been adapting civic professionalism: Humility, Courage, Care, and Civility.

Technomoral Humility involves recognizing the limits of one's own knowledge and understanding of complex technosocial systems, being mindful of the potential for unintended negative consequences, and avoiding techno-optimism or solutionism.¹⁰

Technomoral Care is "a skillful, attentive, responsible, and emotionally responsive disposition to personally meet the needs of those with whom we share our technosocial environment."¹¹

Technomoral Courage is the willingness to take considered risks and to speak up against injustice and unethical practices in the development and use of technology. This can mean making difficult decisions, challenging powerful interests, or simply refusing to go along with the crowd.¹²

Technomoral Civility involves valuing and engaging in ethical, communal life with one's fellow citizens. It goes beyond mere politeness and requires actively fostering understanding, cooperation, and respect across diverse perspectives and cultures.¹³

CULTIVATING CIVIC VIRTUE THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

So how can we cultivate these virtues in our students? Kreber argues civic professionalism can be fostered through transformative educational experiences. These experiences should be action-oriented, provide opportunities for students to engage with their communities, and challenge their assumptions about the role of technology in society. For the past five years, I've been trying to create such learning experiences with my Olin students both outside and inside the curriculum.

In 2019, several students and I co-founded a public interest technology clinic.¹⁴ The students named it “PInT.” I have served

as faculty advisor, facilitated discussions, guided students toward resources, and provided administrative and intellectual support. However, I also intentionally relinquished control to students, emphasizing student leadership and ownership of the clinic. I wanted them to wrestle with key organizational decisions and work through the complexity of managing client relationships.

The founding team wanted to create a space for students to develop more than technical skills, and to explore the social and ethical dimensions of engineering work not covered in most of their courses. They chose to foster a culture of care within PInT, prioritizing emotional well-being and open communication, which contrasted with their previous experiences in technical spaces where emotional expression was often discouraged. They created a supportive environment that encouraged vulnerability, empathy, and honest feedback.

PInT challenged the traditional engineering emphasis on rapid work and efficiency by encouraging thoughtful reflection and deliberation. Students critically examined the potential consequences of their work, moving beyond a narrow focus on technical solutions. In their clinic work, they engaged in meaningful dialogue with community partners, considering the needs and perspectives of all stakeholders.



Having ownership of PInT fostered a sense of responsibility and agency for the students, helping them see themselves as active agents of change. This encouraged them to confront uncertainty and ambiguity and develop the confidence to navigate complex situations without relying solely on faculty guidance.

The founding of PInT and the experiences of the student organizers turned out to be a potent case of transformative education, integrating civic professionalism into engineering education. By fostering a culture of care, deliberation, and student ownership,¹⁵ PInT provided opportunities for the students to develop technomoral virtues such as humility, care, courage, and civility, and enabled them to engage in responsible innovation and confront ethical challenges effectively.

One of PInT's first clinic teams, working on the issue of human trafficking, acutely demonstrates how students developed civic-mindedness and technomoral courage. The team was asked to design a web scraper for an anti-trafficking organization. They started by looking at the technical challenges of scraping and storing images from sites known to advertise trafficked women. As I coached this team, I encouraged them to research the larger context of sex work and the use of technology to address trafficking. They learned about the potential harm to sex workers, whose data would



be collected and shared with law enforcement without ensuring their safety and well-being, and the ethical implications of designing technology that could be used for surveillance and potentially contribute to the criminalization of vulnerable populations.

As a result of their research, deep conversations, and reflection, the team refused to design the web scraper. They communicated their decision to their partner in a detailed letter, discussing their research insights and discomfort with the approach the organization was taking. They also produced an event for their fellow Olin students where they presented on their project and the choices they made, encouraging others to “design no harm.”

As the students involved in the project would later confess, they thought they were failing by taking this route. While they might be reducing the chances of potential harm, they also weren't helping anyone as they had intended. And being one of the early clinic partnerships, they



I encouraged the students to spend time diving into the social, political, and ethical realities, and to get uncomfortable.

felt a responsibility to model what the public interest technology clinic was created to do.


Their design refusal exemplifies technomoral courage. They put into practice emerging commitments to prioritizing the well-being of those potentially affected by their work, as highlighted by Vallor’s concept of care and Kreber’s emphasis on moral commitment; critically evaluating the ethical implications of technology beyond its intended use, recognizing the potential for unintended consequences, exercising humility and perspective; and taking a stand against powerful institutions and advocating for justice, even when it meant defying expectations or jeopardizing partnerships.

Lessons I’ve learned from advising PInT have deeply informed how I teach capstone

design students. From 2019–2024, I advised a capstone project focused on designing data tools with community partners to address racialized mass incarceration in Massachusetts. The criminal legal system is a complex sociotechnical system rife with ethical pitfalls—fertile ground for experiential education. I witnessed many of my capstone students have transformative experiences in meetings with our community partners, comprehending the injustices of the current criminal legal system, and wrestling with our responsibility as engineers and civic actors when proposed solutions seemed insignificant against the scale of the problems.

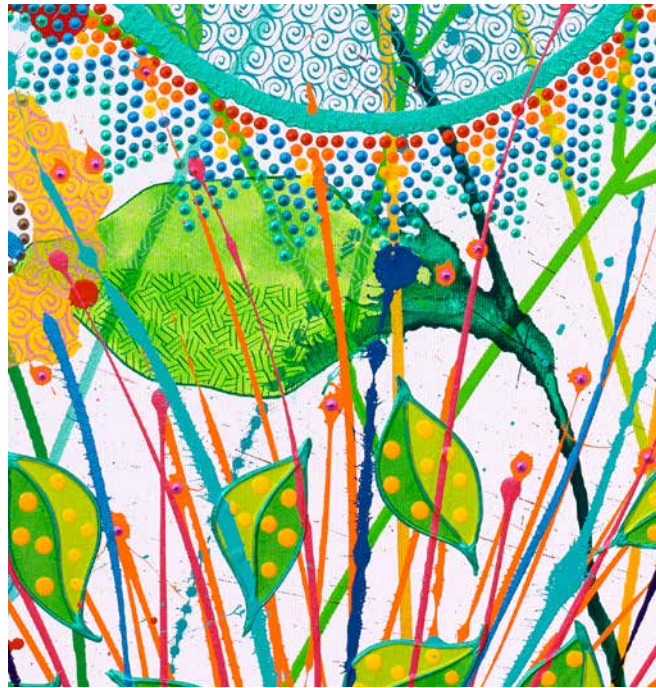
We endeavored to never reduce our project to its technical dimensions. I encouraged the students to spend time diving into the social, political, and ethical realities, and to get uncomfortable. Kreber cites the transformative potential of what educational philosopher Ronald Barnett calls “strangeness”—the tensions we want students to wrangle with as they digest novel ideas and frameworks.¹⁶

I agree with Kreber that civic-mindedness should be a core outcome of higher education. And I believe community-engaged, experiential learning might be the most reliable way to cultivate civic virtue in engineering education and challenge cultures of disengagement. I hope higher education can summon the courage to

advance a virtuous model of STEM professionalism. We desperately need civic professionals with technomoral wisdom to build the systems that will ensure we all flourish. 

NOTES

1. Cech, Erin A. "Culture of Disengagement in Engineering Education?" *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, vol. 39, no. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 42–72.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
3. Milas, Lawrence W., et al. *Petition to the Board of Higher Education, Pursuant to 610 CMR 2.00 (Degree Granting Regulations for Independent Institutions of Higher Education)*. 6 Oct. 1997, p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
5. Kreber, Carolin, *Educating for Civic-Mindedness*. Routledge, 2016, p. 9.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Boyte, Harry C. "Citizen Professionals." *The Citizen Solution: How You Can Make A Difference*, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008, pp. 143–57.
8. Dzur, Albert W. *Democracy Inside: Participatory Innovation in Unlikely Places*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
9. Vallor, Shannon. *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 125–127.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–140.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 129–132.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 140–145.
14. See Chowdhary, Shreya, et al. "Care and Liberation in Creating a Student-Led Public Interest Technology Clinic." *2020 IEEE International Symposium on Technology and Society (ISTAS)*, 2020, pp. 164–75.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Barnett, Ronald. "Recapturing the Universal in the University." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 37, no. 6, 2005, pp. 785–97.



Erhardt Graeff is an Associate Professor of Social and Computer Science at Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering and a faculty associate at the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University. You can find more of his work at erhardtgraeff.com.

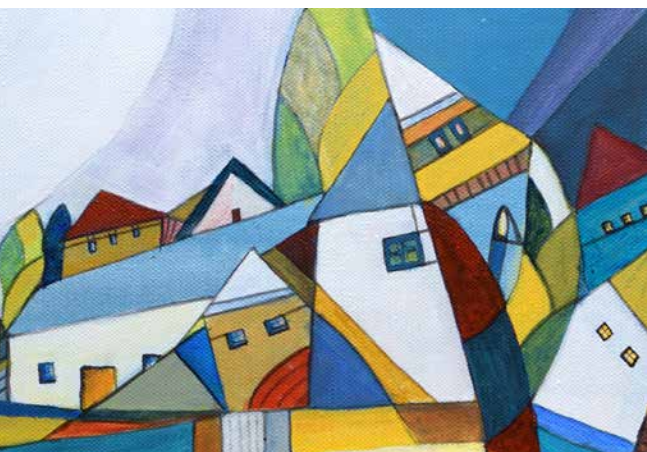


DAVID E. CAMPBELL

Fostering a Healthy Democratic Culture

I teach a large lecture

course on the state of American democracy, called “Keeping The Republic.” For the final lecture, I (half) jokingly tell my students that I am going to deliver a sermon. As a professor of Political Science, much of my class content is about the nuts and bolts of how American politics works (or not).



That is, I generally strive to be neutral. There is one exception, however, as on one matter I am decidedly not neutral. I am an unabashed advocate for greater political engagement. But, as I preach in my sermon, engagement of a certain type: informed, impassioned, and civil.

To illustrate what I mean, I tell my students the story of the *Vasa*. This was a ship built by Sweden in 1628. At the time, Sweden's King Gustavus Adolphus was determined to demonstrate his nation's military power by constructing a mighty warship. But on its maiden voyage—a leisurely tour around Stockholm Harbor—the *Vasa* was caught in a high wind and sank, eventually disappearing into the silt at the bottom of the harbor. At least thirty people perished, likely including some family members of the crew who were aboard for this celebratory cruise. As you can imagine, this

In other words, they need to know what they believe. To do so, they need to clarify their own values—not just form opinions on the immediate issues of the day—but think about the principles that will guide them, whatever issues may arise.

nautical debacle was a major embarrassment for Sweden's king. (Today, the *Vasa* has been recovered and is on display in Stockholm).

Why do I tell a story about a Swedish ship in a course on American democracy? My point lies in the reason why the *Vasa* sank. Most experts believe that the ship did not have enough ballast. When the wind blew, it toppled over, quickly filled with water, and fell to the sea floor. I use the story of the *Vasa* to impress upon my students that they need to have enough “ballast in their bilge” so that they do not topple over when faced with high winds and choppy waters. In other words, they need to know what they believe. To do so, they need to clarify their own values—not just form opinions on the immediate issues of the day—but think about the principles that will guide them, whatever issues may arise.

I emphasize the need to clarify one's own values because of the dangers of polarization. That word is almost universally used to describe the current state of American politics but in political science circles has a specific meaning, often described as "affective polarization." In plain language, this refers to partisan animosity. Republicans dislike—and distrust—Democrats; Democrats feel the same way toward Republicans. And do not be mistaken, while many Americans describe themselves as independents, most of those alleged independents nonetheless have partisan sympathy toward one party and antipathy toward the other. I thus urge my students to be their own form of counter-culture—to demonstrate that it is possible to be civically engaged without being politically polarized.

However, I worry that simply preaching the evils of polarization can result in a perverse unintended consequence: silence in the public square. While the public image of college students might be protests and encampments—and, certainly, campuses have their fair share of such activity—in my experience, most young people are often reluctant to share their views. They are especially reticent amidst peers whose views may differ from their own. There are many reasons for such reluctance to speak one's mind. Most people are naturally averse to conflict in general, and politics specifically. Young

people in particular are worried about how they are perceived by their peers, a worry that is no doubt exacerbated in a world saturated with social media. Because they are already predisposed to avoid contention, telling them about the problems of polarization may be "pushing on an open door," giving young people all the more reason to give up on engaging in any kind of political discussion.

A major reason for the polarization we experience is precisely this reluctance to share one's views. That may sound counter-intuitive. Isn't the problem that too many people are sharing their opinions on everything all the time? Not exactly. Our hyper-connected world does allow for





the near-constant expression of opinions, but rarely is this in the form of a dialogue among people who have differing views. First, it is rarely a dialogue. Posting on social media is often more like a monologue—or perhaps shouting into a void. Second, to the extent that there is any sort of back-and-forth, most people are only voicing their views within an echo chamber of the like-minded. To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with sharing political opinions among people who agree with you. The flip side of most people’s aversion to conflict is the appeal of comity.

Talking about politics with co-partisans fuels the passion that is integral to political engagement. The problem occurs when people only ever converse with people who share the same views. They are not put through the refiner’s fire of articulating, defending, clarifying—perhaps even revising—what they believe. Furthermore, they are never confronted with the actual opinions of those on the other side. Instead, they are left with caricatures of what the other side believes, which in turn adds fuel to the fire of polarization. Can you believe that *they think that*?

My objective is to encourage students to have the ballast in the bilge so that they know what they believe, and are confident enough in that knowledge that they can discuss and debate those beliefs with others. When faced with the winds of political disagreement, they do not topple over and sink out of view. Instead, they engage with others. They are both informed and impassioned.

Fortunately, a recent survey of undergraduate students at the University of Notre Dame, where I teach, suggests that there is hope. Our students report discussing politics with others more often than the general population of the United States (that is, people of all ages). Roughly 60 percent of Notre Dame students say that they discuss politics at least weekly with people who share the same views,

compared to just a third of all Americans. (Note that the survey was done in the spring of 2024, and thus well before the presidential election campaign was in full swing). While political disagreement is less common, compared to the population as a whole our students are also more likely to report weekly conversations with those who hold different views—34 percent vs. 18 percent. Where are those conversations taking place? By far, the most common response is with their friends. The least common? With their professors.

There is good news and bad news in these numbers. On the one hand, a majority of our students regularly discuss politics, and a sizable percentage even do so across lines of difference. That suggests that political discourse is not dead. On the other hand, though, conversations with professors are relatively rare. We in higher education can do more to engage our students in the sorts of conversations we want them to have.

This survey raises as many questions as it answers. Are Notre Dame students unusual, or would we find comparable results on other campuses? Hopefully, other institutions will survey their own students to enable that comparison. Whether at Notre Dame or elsewhere, further research is also needed to learn what these conversations are like. Are they heated arguments or are they civil?

Civility means treating your interlocutors with respect, and a willingness to learn from them—perhaps even to compromise. It does not mean, however, that compromise is always the answer.



To be civil is the third dimension of the sort of engagement I preach to my students. Without civility, discourse devolves into ad hominem attacks. However, I fear that, like the emphasis on the problems with polarization, appeals for civility also run the risk of unintended consequences. Civility means treating your interlocutors with respect, and a willingness to learn from them—perhaps even to compromise. It does not mean, however, that compromise is always the answer. For some issues, it is simply not possible to find a position in the middle. Or perhaps it is theoretically possible but, owing to one's convictions, not something on which you can, in good conscience, yield. This is why it is important to have ballast in the bilge. If you know your values, you can determine where compromise can be reached. Where compromise is infeasible, one needs to engage in persuasion. If persuasion fails, it is



important to recognize the fundamental democratic principle of loser's consent. Whether it is a policy debate, a piece of legislation, or an election, a democracy only functions when the losing side accepts its defeat, knowing that there will always be another debate, another bill, another election. After the 2020 election, we saw what happens when losers do not acknowledge their defeat. In the wake of the 2024 election, the nation has been spared the turmoil, and violence, from four years prior, but the question is what happens when the tables are turned in future contests.

Which brings me back to my sermon. After telling my students that they should be informed, impassioned, and civil, I close with words that, appropriately, are widely used in theological circles, even if their origin has been lost to history.

In the essentials, unity.

In the non-essentials, liberty.

In all things, charity.


In a democratic context, these three statements remind us that there are essential

rules and norms to which we can all agree; that a free society enables individuals to form their own views; and that a democracy will only endure if its members act charitably—civilly—with one another, including and especially those with whom they disagree.

Frankly, higher education has room for improvement in fostering a healthy democratic culture. While there are many exceptions, I nonetheless fear that too many professors do not encourage their students to put the ballast in their bilge and provide an example of political engagement that is informed, impassioned, and civil. The campus ought to be a place where young people learn how to discuss and debate from conviction—but without demonizing those who believe otherwise. I fear that the current climate has made that difficult. In this, our campuses reflect the broader culture of the nation. At a time when many Americans are losing confidence in higher education, one way to restore that confidence is to have our campuses model a different kind of culture, in which norms



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are agreed upon, informed opinions are exchanged, and civility prevails. 



David E. Campbell is the Packey J. Professor of American Democracy at the University of Notre Dame, and director of the university's Democracy Initiative. He is the author of multiple books on civic engagement, including the forthcoming *See Jane Run: How Women Politicians Matter for Young People* (with Christina Wolbrecht).

Good Reads

We asked our authors to recommend a book they had read over the past couple of years. Here is what they said:



The Architecture of Happiness

BY ALAIN DE BOTTON

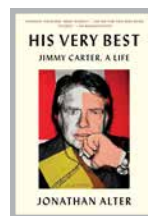
The author explores how the spaces we inhabit influence and mirror our inner lives, shaping who we are and aspire to be. While many consider architecture and design to be either frivolous or merely functional, de Botton proposes that it is profoundly emotional and an embodiment of our ideals, values, and essence of self. By reflecting on the relationship between beauty, purpose and human flourishing, the author illustrates how our built environments can inspire growth, contribute to well-being, and act as a participant in the lifetime process of becoming. I believe this is a valuable perspective for educators and institutions to consider as we're identifying and designing ideal spaces for learning. The environments we create—physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually—are interconnected and equally valuable. —CRISTY GULESERIAN

His Very Best Jimmy Carter, a Life

BY JONATHAN ALTER

Jimmy Carter is often described as “America’s best ex-president,” celebrated for his good works out of office rather than his policies while in office. This book complicates that story. Alter argues that, as president, Carter was often prescient, enacting policies that have stood the test of time. Readers will also be interested to learn about his personal side. Come for the discussion of Carter’s foresight on issues like the environment; stay for fascinating stories like Carter’s long-standing friendship with the Allman Brothers Band and . . . Bob Dylan.

—DAVID CAMPBELL



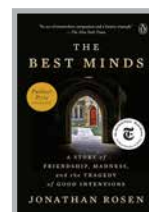


The Best Minds

A Story of Friendship, Madness, and the Tragedy of Good Intentions

BY JONATHAN ROSEN

This book by the novelist Jonathan Rosen is a nonfiction account of his childhood friendship with a gifted young man who suffers from schizophrenia and the way his genius masks his deep troubles even as a student in Yale Law School. The book also traces immense changes that were taking place in the policy world of mental health care that precipitated new and often poor approaches to the care of this vulnerable population. Rosen is a talented, introspective author who is brutally honest and wrote a book that's hard to put down. —ERICA BROWN



Klara and the Sun

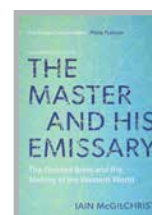
BY KAZUO ISHIGURO

I enjoyed reading and sharing with students this brilliant and timely novel that touches on several thought-provoking ethical questions like: In what circumstances are caregiving robots appropriate? What happens when human augmentation is common, but produces side effects for a percentage of people, like any medical procedure? And, when AI and robots are sufficiently human-like, perhaps crossing some philosophy of mind line, do they deserve certain rights rather than simply serving as discardable appliances? —ERHARDT GRAEFF

The Master and his Emissary

BY IAIN MCGILCHRIST

In this mix of neuroscience and cultural history, McGilchrist argues that inherent in the division of our brain hemispheres in humans is a way of looking at and building the world. At the heart of his concern is the dominance of the left brain's technical orientation that has broken free from the contextualizing right brain, which leads to an imbalance in our world. —LESTER LIAO



CRISTY GULESERIAN

A Framework for Civil Discourse Found in the Lines of a Prayer



Recently, while rummaging through a box of memorabilia from my youth, I found a high school paper I'd written on a Prayer of St. Francis. As I cringed through this adolescent relic of my emerging identity, I grew curious; though I consider myself spiritual, I wasn't raised within any particular faith. I don't recall studying this prayer in class, nor do I know how it became my topic.







Standing firm in our beliefs can be a strength, but when taken to extremes, it risks stalling conversation, collaboration, and relationships.

Maybe my younger self sought a deeper connection to something beyond myself, or maybe it was a last-minute assignment I spun into something that sounded thoughtful. Either way, this paper has survived countless moves, closet purges, and intimate weekends with my shredder. Its endurance suggests I've placed some hidden value on the topic, worthy of reflection and exploration.

Revisiting this prayer through a more mature lens, I saw it as an anthem for what we need more of on our college campuses and in the world. It embodies the values I aspire to bring to others, a way of responding to life that is openhearted, altruistic, and oriented toward the greater good. The prayer encourages empathy, civility, and understanding, urging us to respond with kindness, compassion, and love. It could be a guide for creating learning communities that embrace pluralism, provide space for students to explore their values through civil dialogue,

and foster a culture of understanding, inclusivity, and belonging.

Our society today mirrored in the microcosms of our campuses, has shifted away from considering the needs of others, focusing instead on defending our own perspectives, wants, and desires. Standing firm in our beliefs can be a strength, but when taken to extremes, it risks stalling conversation, collaboration, and relationships. When convictions are coupled with defensiveness and closed-mindedness, they deepen divides and can provoke aggressive reactions toward others' perspectives and humanity. Civic virtues like civility, openness, humility, and grace are often overshadowed, dismissed as "old-fashioned," or even criticized as tools of privilege, but in a pluralistic society, these virtues must accompany our convictions if we hope to pursue the common good.

How can we hold strong convictions and practice genuine civility and civic grace?

As educators, are we modeling and encouraging humility and openness to ideas, or are we fostering generations more inclined to seek being understood than to understand?

I believe we can stand firm in our beliefs while committing to the common good and practicing civility. In fact, I find reassurance in the message of St. Francis.

*Lord, make me a channel of thy peace,
that where there is hatred, I may bring love;
that where there is wrong, I may bring the
spirit of forgiveness;
that where there is discord, I may bring
harmony;
that where there is error, I may bring truth;
that where there is doubt, I may bring faith;
that where there is despair, I may bring hope;
that where there are shadows, I may bring
light;
that where there is sadness, I may bring joy.
Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort,
than to be comforted;
to understand than to be understood; to love
than to be loved.
For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.
It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal
Life.*

His words, grounded in empathy and understanding, offer a simple yet profound framework for civil discourse that emphasizes personal responsibility, engages

humility, embraces pluralism, and respects the humanity of others—a model we can apply even from a secular perspective. Our society deeply needs this, and each of us can consider our personal responsibility and influence within the university community to model civil discourse and foster the dispositions needed for it. This involves not only nurturing these qualities in students but also creating environments that make them possible, building a culture among faculty, staff, students, and administration that fosters open engagement with diverse perspectives, self-examination, and a deepening of identity for all.

UNDERSTANDING COURAGE OF CONVICTIONS

Navigating today's ideologically diverse college environments requires students, and those of us responsible for their educational experience, to balance conviction with respect for others, expressing our beliefs in ways that do not harm or silence. Developing both courage of conviction and discernment is crucial as students define their values amidst new ideas, challenges, and opposition.

Colleges have a responsibility to foster environments that encourage this development. Faculty and staff need to model openness and create spaces where students feel safe





How can we hold strong convictions and practice genuine civility and civic grace?

sharing their perspectives. This begins with faculty and staff themselves embodying the qualities of trust, inclusion, and belonging, while institutions provide the structures and leadership that reinforce a culture supportive of character development, community, and freedom of expression.

Students, too, have a responsibility to articulate and defend their beliefs thoughtfully and humbly. Campus diversity in backgrounds and ideologies offers students valuable opportunities to refine their worldviews through interactions that challenge and expand their perspectives. With supportive relationships and spaces for reflection, students can learn to engage civilly, even amid disagreement, building the practical wisdom and resilience needed for genuine discourse.

In an era of rapid information and diverse ideologies, students are often overwhelmed by the need to defend their views, sometimes in response to pressures from social networks or movements.

Developing reflective practices in conjunction with character dispositions allows students space to critically evaluate information, stay true to their values, and engage compassionately with differing perspectives. Such habits prepare students to carry these values beyond campus, equipping them to navigate societal tensions between conviction and pluralism with empathy and resilience.

It can be challenging to stand firm in one's beliefs when they conflict with the broader campus community's values or needs. This tension often appears in debates over free speech and activism. Increasingly, we're also noticing this friction between individual wellness and community well-being. Amid a fast-paced campus climate, where rigorous demands often overshadow the

call for self-care, students, faculty, and staff alike must navigate competing pressures: advocating for their convictions, striving for excellence in work and studies, maintaining personal well-being, and fostering a compassionate community. Courage is essential—not only in expressing one’s beliefs but also in setting healthy boundaries around work and balancing self-care with collective goals. While advocacy for causes such as social justice or work-life harmony is vital, the energy needed to sustain it can be draining. In moments of exhaustion, our ability to engage civilly may falter, creating discord instead of cohesion. By prioritizing compassion, reflection, and authentic relationships, we can foster a campus culture that supports enduring advocacy and encourages innovative, collaborative solutions to shared challenges, nurturing both individual and community resilience.

FOSTERING COMMUNITIES OF CARE AND COMPASSION

Care and compassion can be nurtured through intentional practices and authentic relationships that require individuals to take personal responsibility for creating a caring community. Both self-care and compassion for others are essential; practicing self-compassion can inspire similar


expressions in our interactions. This foundation is crucial for bridging divergent ideas. Regular pauses for observation help us develop awareness of our own needs and those of others, allowing us to navigate emotions that might lead to aggressive reactions. Instead, we can engage strategies that help us to respond with curiosity, humility, and empathy. Practices like a 90 second pause at the beginning of meetings and classes can foster a habit of awareness, mindful breathing, or noticing and identifying emotions. When we notice feelings of overwhelm, we might prioritize basic needs such as resting, eating, or connecting with supportive friends or colleagues. Shifting one-on-one meetings from a virtual or office space to a walking meeting can foster both connection and well-being, while the movement supports creative thinking. The aim is to prepare ourselves to move beyond reactive emotions that hinder connection, and instead foster dialogue grounded in peace and understanding. Highlighting the interconnectedness of self-awareness, self-care, and care for others creates a nurturing environment where civil dialogue can thrive. These foundational practices prepare us to align with the message of St. Francis.

Make Me a Channel of Peace

Setting the intention to be a channel of peace embodies personal responsibility for modeling the culture we wish to foster.



To promote peaceful spaces on college campuses, we must embody a disposition of peace ourselves. Simple daily practices—such as morning observation, mindful walks, or brief pauses at the start of meetings—can help clear our minds and cultivate a calm internal environment. When we cultivate inner peace, we are more likely



It can be challenging to stand firm in one's beliefs when they conflict with the broader campus community's values or needs.

to bring that serenity to our interactions with others. While it may feel unrealistic to create time for this practice amidst our busy lives, we each have some autonomy to influence our surroundings. Identify where that autonomy exists and begin to model and share a calm disposition with others. Leaders should leverage their positions to promote well-being through supportive communications or policies while ensuring their own actions align with these values. Inconsistencies between words and actions can diminish trust, so it's vital to align our intentions with our behaviors. Observe how these subtle changes impact your relationships and approach to work and life.

Though change may be gradual, consistent focus on these practices, combined with patience and acceptance, can lead to a cultural shift.

Where There Is Hatred, I May Bring Love

This call reinforces the importance of personal responsibility in addressing feelings of hatred, anger, or resentment. Examine the roots of these emotions: Am I navigating this anger productively? A useful exercise is to identify a specific person or institution you feel negatively towards and reflect on the reasons for these feelings. Look for aspects of that person or system that don't evoke strong negative emotions. With an individual, focus on common interests, or invite them to coffee and listen to their story. Get to know the landscape of their life outside of the tension. The goal is to shift your perspective from hatred to a more loving view, humanizing others in the process.

Where There Is Wrong, I May Bring the Spirit of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a powerful act of self-compassion that allows us to release anger and accept that we cannot change the past. Holding onto resentment harms us more than the wrongdoer. Forgiveness is a



personal choice requiring time, intentionality, and sometimes support from friends or professionals. Recognize that forgiveness can also be inward; carrying our own guilt or shame can hinder our ability to forgive or connect with others. This process is reciprocal: forgiving others can lead to forgiving ourselves and vice versa.

Where There Is Discord, I May Bring Harmony

Bringing harmony to discord requires a willingness to confront and understand the chaos. Explore the tensions between the current state and how things ought to be. Creative tension can generate the

most productive ideas. Embrace discomfort and vulnerability to create spaces where experiences and beliefs are shared. Understanding and connection can reveal common ground while embracing differences, allowing the various parts of a community to interact harmoniously.

Where There Is Error, I May Bring Truth

Begin with self-reflection: Am I creating false narratives about others? How do I know these stories are true? Are my beliefs and perspectives informed by evidence-based resources? Too often, we act on misinformation or partial truths, hindering



progress. Conversations can dramatically change when grounded in accurate information. Recognizing our own biases and truth-seeking fosters understanding and allows for informed decision-making.

Where There Is Doubt, I May Bring Faith

Faith can be understood in various ways, even secularly. We all have faith in certain aspects of life, whether it's the reliability of technology or the predictability of paychecks. When doubt arises, shift your focus from what could go wrong to what could go right. Reflect on past experiences where doubt held you back. Embracing uncertainty can reveal strengths and connections previously unrecognized. Cultivating trust creates a foundation for vulnerability and exploration in relationships, opening pathways to creativity and understanding.

Where There is Despair, I May Bring Hope

A negative perspective can cloud our view of the world, making it hard to see the potential for positive change. Hope is a vital fuel for growth and renewal. Always seek opportunities to bridge differences and foster understanding. Sometimes, creating hope means changing your environment or perspective. It requires

intentional effort and a willingness to act. The reality might also be that some exist in systems or structures that are inherently designed for inequitable outcomes that are out of the control of an individual. If you know you have power within these systems, use it in a way that gives others an opportunity for hope. Providing hope for others does not need to mean despair for yourself.

Where There Are Shadows, I May Bring Light

Consider what you might be missing. Whose perspectives do you need to engage with to understand differing viewpoints? Operating in darkness limits our understanding; we often jump to conclusions without recognizing what we don't know. Seek clarity and be willing to explore unconscious biases, as these discoveries can pave the way for deeper connections.

Where There Is Sadness, I May Bring Joy

When defeated, emotions like sadness can cloud our judgment. Joy can act as an antidote, but it's crucial to navigate these feelings without suppression. Start by identifying your emotions, understanding their wisdom, and finding ways to transform discomfort into comfort. This process

can illuminate your needs and help you approach situations as opportunities for learning and growth.


Comfort Rather Than Be Comforted. Understand Rather Than Be Understood. Love Rather Than Be Loved.

This emphasizes selflessness in relationships. In moments of disagreement, we may feel uncomfortable, vying for our own needs rather than considering others. By extending understanding and compassion, we invite reciprocity. Seeking to love rather than be loved opens pathways for connection and civil discourse.

Self-Forgetting Is Where One Finds

Letting go of selfishness enables us to contribute to a larger community while still recognizing our own needs. Suspending judgment creates space to listen to others, facilitating identification and collective

progress. This does not require abandoning our convictions but rather embracing diverse perspectives and seeking collaborative solutions amid tensions.

Empathy, reconciliation, and service can guide students in their experiences with peers and the campus community. By modeling these practices, we help them cultivate their personal convictions within a healthy civic environment. Creating a culture that values empathy and understanding over competition will foster positive change, enabling individuals and collectives to engage in meaningful dialogue and navigate uncertainty with civility and creativity. Together, we share the responsibility to foster a campus culture where everyone feels they belong and can be seen, heard, and valued. 



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LESTER LIAO

Know Thy Neighbor

How Community Rehabilitates our Assertions

For the past several decades, our youth have been encouraged to make their voices heard. Those youth have become the adults of our world who bring their assertions to the public square. Yet while we have developed our ability to make our thoughts known, we have subsequently lost the ability to consider the impacts of those very assertions on the people we live with in our society. Our words have become aggressive. While it is inevitable for disagreements to arise in pluralistic societies, how we assert ourselves matters. It is in attending to how our words interact with the real people around us that we can restore the life-giving effects of assertions that are winsome, loving, and wise.



While it is inevitable for disagreements to arise in pluralistic societies, how we assert ourselves matters.

Western societies have long been forming a particular type of citizen. On one hand, the process has been very understandable. There was a democratic, normative mindset that drove our vision of civic education. As a society, we wanted to honor individual opinions. Everybody could and would have a voice at the table. In his essay *Democratic Education*, C.S. Lewis called this the desire for “fair play.” This was important because it would enable our democratic political system. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, John Locke warns against children interrupting conversation because it sets the stage for chaotic discourse. He

viewed it as an “impertinent folly” to answer a person before hearing his case fully and as extremely disrespectful. We have been careful in how we strive for democratic ideals. From classrooms to roundtable discussions, we were, in theory, fostering the conditions for civility in the public square. The intention was noble.

But there was another side to this process. As speaking out became the norm, we forgot something that ancient thinkers have cherished for centuries. We penalized silence, and in so doing we assumed it lacked merit. Students were not simply docked marks for saying nothing, they were taught through the very pedagogical structure that being silent was less valuable. Speech and participation for its own sake was enough. Thus, we have discouraged contemplative habits. Rather than preparing students to dive gracefully into civic discourse, we told them to get moving.

In developmental pediatrics, I work with many families who struggle to steer their children through the academic and social gauntlet of schooling and public life. My active participation in our encounters requires silence. Rather than immediately asserting my perspective and interrupting (a notorious physician practice), I listen and learn about complicated home dynamics, parental guilt and concerns, and more. I learn things I would have never

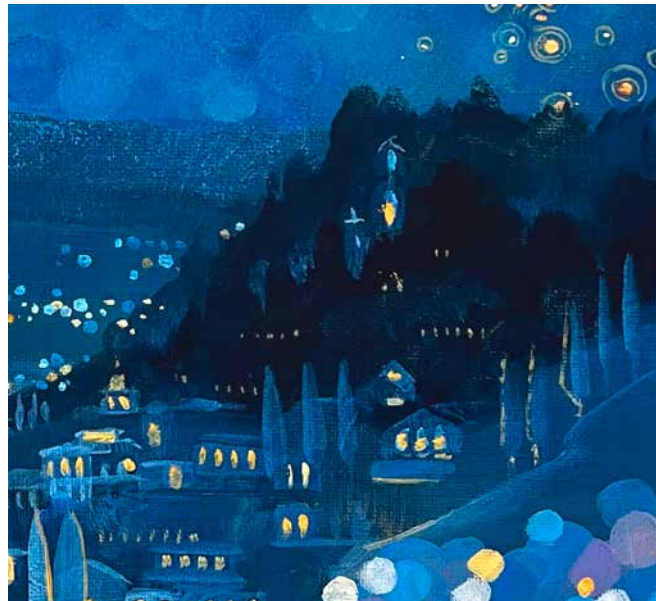
elicited with my questions. This information is not only necessary to accurately understand the issue, but its sharing builds rapport. The more families see that I am genuinely listening to them, the more they are willing to listen to me. Ideally, both of our understandings of the situation will be enriched and a path forward will be found for the child.

There is genuine value in learning to express one's opinion. Those who are shy may need simple encouragement. But, we seem to have gone too far. Self-assertion has become a virtue in its own right, regardless of the content. It is the public square outgrowth of the individual ideal of authenticity that Charles Taylor has elucidated in *Sources of the Self*. One opinion is always as good as another. The result has been an epistemological disaster, and Tom Nichols has highlighted the crippling effects on expertise in *The Death of Expertise*. The efficacy of vaccines becomes a matter of preference. The individual experience is upheld as the arbiter of truth, and the possibility of self-deception is never considered. Holding our tongue is seen as a weakness rather than an essential step of critical thought. Our postmodern suspicious disposition is aimed at others and institutions, but hardly ever at ourselves.

The greatest consequences of this approach have been on community. First, we have a hard time hearing when cacophony reigns.

We no longer know who to trust. Our angry words can leave a path of destruction because we assert and attack before we understand. An author's reputation is ruined over misquoted words. Jobs are lost. Even if the accusations are later corrected, the damage is already done. When we assert ourselves religiously, we fail to enter the Other's experience. We fail to see another person at the end of our assertions.

In destroying trust, self-assertion also elevates the individual over the community in unhealthy ways. We grow accustomed to a world on our terms, focusing on our personal needs as opposed to what might benefit our neighbors. The language





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of rights immediately postures us to notice violations and to focus on the things to which I am entitled. We think of infringements rather than the uses of rights, the negatives rather than the positives. While rights are a good thing, combined with self-assertion, a shallow view of

self-esteem, and a culture of fraying trust, they too go askew and contribute to a culture where bridges are increasingly difficult to build and sustain. Simone Weil preferred to think in terms of obligations we have to one another by nature of being eternal creatures. But we are individuals today. Rather than deep communities, we form what the late sociologist Robert Bellah called “lifestyle enclaves.” We no longer gather in mutual dependence but simply to be around people who share our interests from yoga to sipping tea.

This damage to our communities is not only a consequence. It is likely a cause. In *Bowling Alone*, the political scientist Robert Putnam noted the many ways in which our contemporary culture impoverished

social capital, ranging from generational mindsets to technology and the rise of the suburb. He did this two decades ago before social media took the world by storm. Many things have weakened communities. But the forms of self-assertion we confront today could only grow to such cancerous proportions in relationally impoverished environments. Without strong relationships, we must look to ourselves for worth. I am not referring to casting off traditional societal structures that confined people to their social roles. One can reject an oppressive structure and still have basic, healthy attachments. We lack the warm approval of a familial embrace or even the respectful dissent of a friend who reminds us she has taken our words seriously. Approval is a necessary human good, but with nowhere to find it we must turn within.

We have a name for approval when its object is the same as the subject: self-justification. Here the theological eye can help us to see what is at stake. We need to know that we have value, that in some cosmic sense we stand declared right and even vindicated. This impulse is itself not a bad thing, for it reminds us that we are aware of our inadequacy. The Christian faith answers this precisely. God reminds us that the need is real, but that we cannot fulfill it ourselves. Our justification is given to us from on high as an act of pure grace. But our society at large does not accept this gift. If we do not find justification in

him, we will look elsewhere. While many societies have tried to vindicate self-worth through one's duty and role in a social group, we mostly reject communitarian approaches in the West. And if we spurn our neighbors, we are left with ourselves. And all the weight of the approval of God will fall on our tiny shoulders. No wonder we speak so loudly.

A warmer form of discourse and all the relational richness it entails is something our culture craves. This is in part what makes the Church a light in our world. We are to be known for the ways we love and support one another. Of course, in reality, churches are not perfect places. Orthodox Christians often refer to the Church as a hospital for the sick. As someone who spends most of his days in hospitals, I think the metaphor is apt. Patients' realization of their own weakness is precisely why they are there. Both church leaders and members walk with the most integrity when they remember this truth and live out of it. The church cannot excuse evils within (or without) its walls, but nor can





modern-day cynicism drive exacting evaluations of it.

In the spring of 2022, I was rattled watching the news about the uptick in anti-Asian hate crimes south of the border in the United States. With such a healthy percentage of Asian members in the congregation like myself, I expected there to be tension and anger at the first Sunday service after news of the attacks broke. To an extent, there was that. But what surprised me was the very first thing that we were met with that Sunday: A prayer of repentance and reconciliation. We prayed for safety and justice in Asian communities. We asked for forgiveness for ways in which we haven't acted with truth and integrity. We also prayed for forgiveness for the ways in which we feed the fires of contempt through words and reactions. The point being, even in our political disagreements and racial differences, my church tried (imperfectly) to be united. Our words were anchored in a community of prayer, not first and foremost in self-assertions. Yet it was precisely this anchoring that then allowed those words to still come. Injustices could be decried without fracturing the community because we recognized our shared posture as fallible before God.

Even if our culture rejects God and Church, we would still benefit from moving toward a more communal notion of approval over

our siloed individualism. Communities remind us that we are insufficient and that we must be open to a personality outside ourselves to shape who we are. In many ways, we see this most clearly in children. Many of the kids I see struggle with integrating socially because they are so preoccupied with their own perspectives that they alienate their peers. I think of Eloise, a preteen girl, who only truly began to realize that she needed to be less adamant in her point of view after being surrounded by peers who outright told her she was being rude. Many children have no choice but to be refined by social interactions. They interact with real peers and have not yet been fully launched into cyber networks where words elicit less relational feedback. In fact, being part of a regular school community is one of the best recommendations that I give for children who are having social and relational difficulties.


When lives become interwoven, our rougher edges are smoothed by healthy friction. But this can only happen when our relationships take priority over our assertions. Eloise cared for her friends, and this in turn helped her to see the danger of her unrefined assertions. The love of the person before us must be more important than the desire to justify ourselves. Ironically, in beginning to free ourselves from the oppressive need to constantly declare our worth, we will begin to see that

our relational nature thrives on being in community. If we always put ourselves first, we will lose those cherished friendships that build who we really are.

We have trained a generation to assert indiscriminately, but this need not be the end. In communities, we will necessarily learn to check our egos. We see that our words affect real people, not Twitter trolls. Fail to learn this, and we will see that there is nobody around to hear us at all. Knowing our neighbors makes us reconsider. A relational context will rehabilitate many of our self-assertion ills, and it will prepare us for wisdom.

My wife and I recently sat with a group of friends discussing everything from Scripture, to the housing market, adult relationships with parents, to the results of the U.S. presidential election. Strong opinions were put forth on the latter topic

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in particular, and there were definitely disagreements. What tempered the words, and barred a superficial estimation of the “opposing party,” was the fact that this was a community. We know each others’ children and eat in each others’ homes. This context shapes the things we declare because we no longer speak into a void. Tangible lives will be affected, and this makes us pause. The monologues can still come. But when they do, they will be as salt on a poached egg. They will deepen the discussion, drawing attention to its flavors and textures. And we will all be better fed for it. 



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ERICA BROWN

Leadership through Listening

Listening has never been more important.

We are at a time of profound reckoning for higher education. We have not successfully taught students to listen well. Listening is at the heart of civic virtue. Universities pride themselves on nurturing students to develop their own unique voices and express the courage of their convictions as they individuate from parents and peers intellectually and emotionally. We've done a great job, for the most part, at educating students to speak out. But we've been less adept at helping them be actively silent. We need to cultivate the virtue of deep listening that enables them, not only to co-exist with others radically different from themselves on campus, but to flourish in an environment of genuine diversity.







CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP THROUGH BETTER LISTENING

“This is really hard,” quipped Hannah, a sophomore, after listening intently to her partner without interrupting for one timed-minute. “I kept wanting to cut into the conversation and add examples. That minute was really long.” The conversational need to jump in and interrupt has been termed “high-involvement concentric overlapping,” by professor of linguistics and best-selling author, Deborah Tannen. And it’s legion. In *Across the River and into the Trees*, Ernest Hemingway wrote, “When people talk listen completely. Don’t be thinking what you’re going to say. Most people never listen.”

Listening well is a spiritually significant skill. That’s why one of the first and most important seminars we give to students in our three-year leadership and

character-building cohorts is how to listen more effectively and attentively. Hannah was participating in an exercise that gets repeated over the course of her leadership training. Listening well is a form of leadership contraction, making oneself smaller to make others larger, that allows for genuine human expansion.

Hannah, and half of her class, were given an index card that asked a question that creates a tolerable level of vulnerability or controversy, and then given a timed-minute to write down their thoughts. That question may be as innocuous as describing the best gift they’d ever been given or something more personal like how they manage anger. They might be tasked with describing a time they had to ask for forgiveness or who they are voting for and why.

The actual exercise takes less than five minutes but opens a universe of

conversation. Listening well is at the center of good pedagogy.

After that first minute is over, students are then asked to identify a person in the room they know least well and walk over to that individual. Then they are asked to sit on chairs that face each other directly and make sure that they are physically open to the conversation by not crossing their arms, legs, or even their ankles. They are advised to keep eye contact steady for the brief dialogue. They choose which one of them begins; that student has a full and uninterrupted minute to explain what's on the card. The listener can only give non-verbal cues of attention. The pair can take the conversation in any direction. If the explanation takes less than a minute, they can both sit in silence, or the speaker can go deeper into the telling.

Once the minute is up, the listener in the pair is given 15 seconds to ask a probing question to the speaker about the content and then the listener must be attentive for another full and uninterrupted minute. Only then do they switch places. When the pair has finished sharing, they are asked to thank one another for the conversation.

As a group, we then engage in a meta-conversation about what just happened. Students, especially extroverts, regularly confess that listening—even for two minutes—was really challenging. They

often realize, in the moment and with some embarrassment, that they may have never listened attentively to anyone for that long, not friends, not family, not fellow students. Our discussion often raises the specter of social media and how the many platforms we have for self-expression may be chipping away at our personal capacity to make mental room for others.

Listening well is a spiritually significant skill.

I also ask them to name a person they consider a good listener and reflect on and describe their choices. More often than not, students offer the name of someone who is skilled and disciplined at making the thoughts and opinions of others shine and checking in for understanding.

After that, I explain our steps. The writing time was to give every participant a short time to think alone before speaking. The direction to speak with someone they did not know or did not know well, to my mind, is one of the critical steps in this activity. It captures the distinction between leading and socializing. Real leaders walk into a room and identify those they do not know. Too often in leadership, people gravitate to their supporters, those they already know or those who are pleasant. There is





ease and pleasure in the familiar. But there is genuine leadership in expanding one's circle of influence and helping strangers become friends.

We encourage our students to think differently about what dialogue is. It's not a ping-pong match where we await our turn to react and take back the conversation; instead, it is a slow, unraveling act of revelation where difference is approached with curiosity and respect. Ideally, it should be an attempt to go out of a comfort zone to hear and intake the views of another, especially those with whom you most fiercely disagree. There is a luxury in being truly heard, even if it's only for two minutes. It is where understanding lives.

LISTENING AS ATTENTION

It is in the discomfort where listening does its hardest and most sacred work, as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, my teacher and mentor, writes, "Listening is an art, a skill, a religious discipline, the deepest reflex of

the human spirit. One who truly listens can sometimes hear, beneath the noise of the world, the deep speech of the universe, the song creation sings to its Creator." Elsewhere, he writes that listening is axiomatic to the person of faith: "Religion is more than a system of beliefs. It is an act of focused listening. . . ."

We find this call to listen and to be heard all over the book of Psalms. Petitioners beg God to hearken to their words: "Give ear to my speech, O Lord; consider my utterance. Heed the sound of my cry...Hear my voice, O Lord, at daybreak; at daybreak I plead before You, and wait" (Ps. 5:2-4). In a beautiful anthropomorphic depiction, a supplicant develops love for God as the Divine Listener: "I love the Lord, for He heard my voice; He heard my cry for mercy. Because He turned His ear to me, I will call on Him as long as I live" (Ps. 116:1-2).

There are, of course, different ways to listen. Active and accountable listening capture two different listening habits. Active listening indicates to the one speaking that you are attentive, hear what

is being said, and can “parrot” back what you heard. This involves not only speech but attentive body language, eye contact, and aural indicators that you are paying attention. Even if it initially irritates the speaker to have words repeated, it does demonstrate the totality of the listener’s attention. It’s oddly both annoying and satisfying at the same time.

We’ve all been part of conversations where someone looking at a phone or computer screen says, “I’m listening,” but what we really want from them is listening with their eyes and with deep focus. That’s a mortal fault line: we pretend to listen on the phone with half an ear while also scrolling mindlessly at the same time.

Accountable listening is higher-order attention. It’s listening with a sense of personal or professional responsibility to the future. For example, someone might tell you they are unwell. Because you are an accountable listener, you will be in contact at a future time to ask how the speaker is currently feeling. On a professional basis, you might hear a patient, client, donor, stakeholder or customer tell you a piece of information about a need or want and follow up later with ideas, answers, or results.

Both forms of listening—the active and the accountable—demonstrate curiosity. Only one demonstrates responsibility.

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Jewish religious study, two thousand years ago, began and is sustained today by deep listening that leads to argumentation. The *havruta* method pairs students who have different educational skill sets to prepare sacred texts—the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, later rabbinic commentaries, or arenas of Jewish philosophy—together in an atmosphere of argumentation. The Hebrew root word for *havruta* means to join or connect. It shares the same root with the Hebrew word for friend, communicating subtly that the highest level of friendship is among those with whom we connect to through the process of argumentation.

There is a marvelous Yiddish expression that captures this kind of sincerity and





The next stage of civic virtue is an intensive effort to encourage understanding. Students can learn that you do not have to agree to understand. But you do have to listen.

directness: “You don’t die from a question.” Be curious. Be courageous. A *beit midrash*, a Jewish study hall, where paired students sit and debate, can be deafening. As a space, it could not be further from the cathedral silence of a library. It takes getting used to. In such a space, you have to make a real effort to listen. If you don’t listen, you will not be able to sharpen your own understanding. Active listening is important in the moment, but the real work of education is accomplished through accountable listening. Has a professor really heard what a student is asking—the words and what lies beneath them—and responded? Has a student truly listened to the professor? Listened to a fellow student?

There are other forms of listening that involve more than conversations or

lessons. Marketing consultant Lindsay Bell identifies four types of listening which I’ve found instructive in helping our young leaders be more intentional about what they are both hearing and saying. They can be found in her 2013 article “Four Listening Styles Communicators Should Know.”

1. Appreciative listening aims for enjoyment and pleasure, like listening to a concert or audiobook where the aural experience is heightened and gratifying.

2. Critical listening involves hearing someone else and being able to identify key points and arguments and how your own view may differ. Critical listening is important when it comes to debating or responding to a professor, a politician, or a protestor.

3. Relationship listening, which is also called therapeutic or empathic listening, strengthens human bonds and is rooted in the ability to be both supportive and honest. We use this form of listening when problem-solving or managing conflicts among people for whom we care.

4. Discriminative listening pays attention to what is between or underneath the words: the tone, the body language, the speed. It gives the words added color or depth, and sometimes the body betrays the words.



EMBRACING SILENCE

Hannah was right. It is very difficult to listen well, which is why we need to make room in our curricula to refine the skill. Identity politics, which should have helped our campuses become places that strengthen difference, have often robbed our precious students of academic honesty, critical thoughtfulness, and human compassion. There is so much anger. There is so little love.

Soon, if not already, our students will enter offices, agencies, laboratories, or other

workplaces. Some will stay within the system and go on to graduate studies. They cannot bring a bullhorn into these spaces. They cannot encamp on the grounds without risk of losing their jobs. They will not be employed or promoted without the ability to work, collaborate, or supervise those with whom they do not share the same political views, race, ethnicity, or religion. They will need to create safe spaces so that others feel seen *and* heard.

Have we prepared them well? Have we modeled respectful engagement ourselves?

I'm encouraged by the attempts many administrators and professors have made to quell the hatred and the violence. The next stage of civic virtue is an intensive effort to encourage understanding. Students can learn that you do not have to agree to understand. But you do have to listen. **M&W**



Dr. Erica Brown is the Vice Provost for Values and Leadership at Yeshiva University and the founding director of its Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership. Her forthcoming book is *Morning Has Broken: Faith After October 7th*. She is also the author of *The Torah of Leadership* and *Kohelet and the Search for Meaning*. Erica was a Jerusalem Fellow, an Avi Chai Fellow, the recipient of the 2009 Covenant

Award, and is a faculty member of the Wexner Foundation. She has written 15 books on the Hebrew Bible, spirituality, and leadership, two of which were finalists for the National Jewish Book Award. Her book *Happier Endings* received the Wilbur and Nautilus Awards for spiritual writing. She also co-authored 2 books on leadership, and co-edited *Ode to Joy: Happiness in the Thinking of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and Beyond*. She has been published in the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Tablet*, *First Things*, and *The Jewish Review of Books*.

Civility, Courage & Conviction

SOUNDBITES FROM PAST VIRTUES & VOCATIONS CONVENINGS

“We can acquiesce to despair and that benefits no one. There is no agency. No action. Wendell Berry would say despair is silence—there is not collaboration; there is not community. Or we say, look, we all have different faith traditions. We all have different belief systems, but we need to animate toward a better good. We need to animate to change. We need to come together. There needs to be some solidarity here.”

Lydia S. Dugdale, MD

Professor of Medicine and Director of the Center for Clinical Medical Ethics, Columbia University

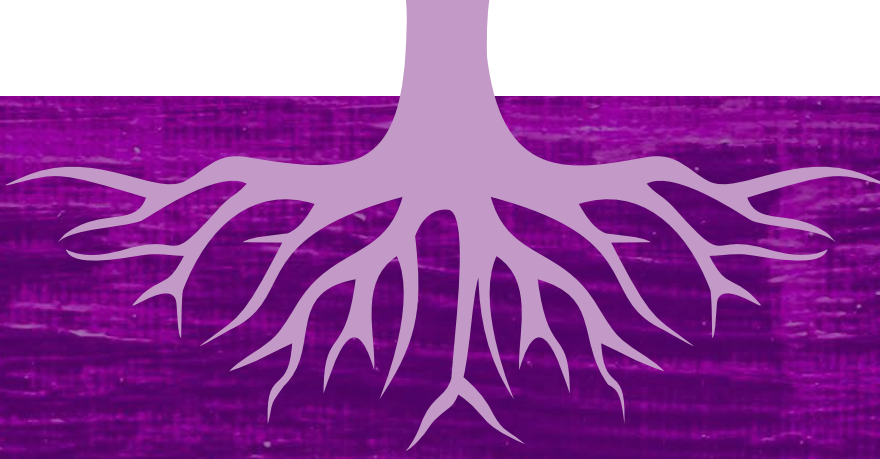
“I think at the heart of what we are struggling with as a society is a deeper battle between the forces of love and fear. Love, when it shows up, can manifest as generosity, as kindness, as compassion. When fear shows up, though, as it often does, it looks like anger, insecurity, jealousy, and rage. I actually think that most of our actions are motivated by one of these two forces, by love and by fear. One of your great powers as a leader is to shape culture in an organization. The choice you have is, ‘Do I build a culture that is grounded in love or do I build a culture that is grounded in fear?’ That is an active choice. A choice that you have to make each and every day when you show up as a leader.”

Vivek Murthy

19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States

Recordings of past convenings and information about future conversations—both virtual and in person—can be found at **virtuesvocations.org**.





“The truth that we believe about the way the world is or it ought to be, is what animates our capacity to go on. . . . My own practice of trying to pursue hope in the world has, I think, clarified for me what truths in my own tradition are important in terms of informing the way I live every day.”

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

Assistant Director at Yale University’s Center for Public Theology and Public Policy

“We’ve become such a divided society. We are much more comfortable with our own echo chambers than we are with reaching across and understanding other people’s perspectives. So, we try to invite our students to step back from their own perspectives and engage in real dialogue. We want to make sure that young people understand how to listen. We are so ready to give an answer before we’ve actually listened to the other person. If you actually care about an issue it is more important to listen, to understand somebody else’s perspective, and to figure out where you can find common ground. Then you can start a dialogue.”

Helene Gayle

former president, Spelman College

“The idea of friendship is an important metaphor for how we think about citizenship. When I think back to the foundational concept of social solidarity within sociology, there are many metaphors that are given. You’ve got organic versus mechanical. You’ve got an organ-type picture that is like a body. You’ve got the economic picture of social capital. We create these metaphors for what binds us together. And friendship used to be the dominant metaphor. I am arguing that we need it back. What friendship, civic friendship specifically, does is put relationships and embodied people in our minds.”

Angel Adams Parham

author & associate professor of sociology, University of Virginia



Art credits

COVER ARTIST: CHARLOTTE WENSLEY

charlottewensley.com.au | [instagram @charlottewensleyart](https://www.instagram.com/charlottewensleyart)

FRONT/BACK COVER: **Candyland** ©2024, mixed media on canvas

PAGE 9: **Unhindered** ©2024, mixed media on board

PAGE 56: **Threads** ©2022, mixed media on paper

PAGE 68: **Bubble & Stripe** ©2023, mixed media on paper

Charlotte Wensley is based in Queensland, Australia. Her abstract paintings unfold through curiosity, inquiry and a liminal approach to mixed media work. Collage, printmaking, painting and drawing are integral parts of her working process, and each painting is a unique fusion of different materials and techniques. She balances the accidental and the unexpected with decision-making and response, drawing on her knowledge and understanding of shape, color and technique to resolve each piece. Prints and originals are available for purchase via her website.

PETER BATCHELDER peterbatchelder.com | peterbatchelderprints.com

PAGE 40: **Woods End** ©2016, oil on canvas

PAGE 45: **Birch Grove** ©2024, oil on canvas

A native New Englander, Peter Batchelder has lived and worked in Martha's Vineyard, Cape Cod, Western Massachusetts, Vermont and now New Hampshire. About his work, he says: "Childhood interests in architecture and archaeology have led me to consider the context of time-worn structures within New England landscapes. I am fascinated on many levels when coming across a barn or seaside cottage." Originals, prints and cards featuring Peter's art are available at peterbatchelderprints.com.

DAN BENNETT dan-bennett.co.uk

PAGE 71: **Delphinium 3** ©2009, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 72: **Helianthus 4** ©2017, acrylic on canvas

About his work, Dan Bennett writes: "I spend weeks at a time living in the landscapes I paint. Hiking the trails, climbing the rocks, swimming in the rivers, gazing at the stars and sleeping amongst the trees. I navigate woodland by moonlight, glimpse wild animals, befriend fellow travelers and explore the shapes, colors and textures of the natural world. Back in my studio I paint these experiences, capturing my memories of the places and the emotions they provoke." Born in Kent, England, he currently resides in Portugal.



STEPHEN CONROY [instagram @conroyphotos](https://www.instagram.com/conroyphotos)

PAGE 4: Winding Road through Valley of Summer Fields ©2017, acrylic on canvas

Stephen Conroy became a full-time artist nearly 20 years ago after years of studying and teaching art. Due to health issues, he began a life of isolation, with his small studio a place of sanctuary. There he creates paintings and paper art purely from his imagination, creating an escapist world of joyful colors, patterns and shapes—three elements that have been at the core of his fascination with art from the start of his ongoing creative journey. He lives and works in North Yorkshire, England.

RICHARD FRIEND [etsy.com/shop/richardfriend](https://www.etsy.com/shop/richardfriend)

PAGE 109: A Favourite Place ©2019, watercolor and ink on paper

Richard Friend, based in Sandwich, England, creates densely layered and delicate story-like paintings on paper using acrylic, ink, pastel and gouache. Influenced by the smugglers and scarecrows of his childhood, his paintings are a reflection on his preoccupation with the dark mystery of both the countryside and the seaside. Prints of his paintings are available from his Etsy shop.

ANIKO HENCZ [artual.com](https://www.artual.com) | [artpal.com/artualdesign](https://www.artpal.com/artualdesign)

PAGE 80: Dawn ©2017, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 83: The Bright Side of the City ©2019, oil on canvas

PAGE 86: Afternoon Silence ©2021, oil on canvas

Aniko is a Hungarian artist living and working in Budapest. She says, “I have a passionate love for landscapes and trees, but I cannot hold myself back from painting houses, too. A group of houses—their interesting shapes, angles and colors are great inspiration for me.” She sells paintings and handmade jewelry at [artpal.com/artualdesign](https://www.artpal.com/artualdesign).

L-TUZIASM [l-tuziasm.com](https://www.l-tuziasm.com) | [instagram @ltuziasm](https://www.instagram.com/ltuziasm)

PAGE 67: Off the Wall ©2020, acrylic on linen

L-Tuziasm is a contemporary artist from Utrecht, The Netherlands. His work is inspired by city life, the urban environment, and the struggle for space. He is fascinated by the way that cities change and evolve over time, and how the world around us is constantly in flux. L-Tuziasm’s paintings are regularly exhibited, and his work can be found in private collections in continental Europe, the U.S., and of course his hometown of Utrecht. Paintings and limited reproductions are available for purchase from his website.

NADIA LYSAKOWSKA [nadialysakowska.com](https://www.nadialysakowska.com) | [etsy.com/it/shop/NadiaLysakowska](https://www.etsy.com/it/shop/NadiaLysakowska)

PAGE 100: Almost Blue ©2024, acrylic on canvas

Nadia was born in Ukraine, but due to the war, she emigrated to Florence, Italy. She says of her work: “Art is born from air, ideas, dust particles glowing in the rays of the sun, the smell of fresh coffee, from an unexpected song or dropped phrase, from everything and nothing . . .” She has received a number of international awards, most recently a special commendation from the Italian president at Florence’s 2023 *Biennale Internazionale d’Arte Contemporanea e Design*. Paintings are available for purchase from her website.



MARINA MARK artmajeur.com/marina-mark

PAGE 11: Infinite Bloom ©2024, acrylic on canvas

Born in Kazan, a place where Eastern and Western civilizations intersect, Marina absorbed a cultural duality that significantly influenced her perception of beauty and her development as an artist. In her art, she strives to blend the vivid colors and decorativeness of Eastern culture with the fundamental classical forms of Western art. She now lives and works in Paris and sells prints through her gallery on artmajeur.com.

ALEJANDRO RUBIO sintitologallery.com/artist/alejandro-rubio

PAGE 91: Fractured Land #4 ©2018, acrylic on canvas

Inspired by Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García, Alejandro Rubio's meticulous attention to the formal elements of painting and geometric abstraction shines through in his artwork. After moving to Northern California, the luminosity and the fractured beauty of the Bay Area landscape, together with the rich local history of art and particularly the work of Bay Area painters like Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn, became another source of inspiration. His abstract landscape series refers to the California landscape as a basis to his pictorial practice which straddles between representation and abstraction. Alejandro was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, and lives and works in Oakland, California. Follow him on Instagram [@alejandrорubioart](https://www.instagram.com/alejandrорubioart).

JO SCOTT etsy.com/shop/JoScottDigitalStudio

PAGE 18: Klein Karoo Sunset ©2023, digital illustration

PAGE 24: Wonderland ©2021, digital illustration

PAGE 49: Mountain Flowers ©2020, mixed media

PAGE 52: Life Partners ©2019, acrylic on canvas

Based in Cape Town, South Africa, Jo started making art late in life. Nature has always been her source of inspiration, along with a love of color, and with a leaning towards design, she found her niche with whimsical bird imagery and vibrant, naive-style landscapes. "Living in a country with sadly, an unreliable postal service," she says, she opened an Etsy shop to sell reproductions of her work and reach a market that she otherwise could not. Her vibrant, print-quality images can be downloaded to create your own hangable art.

TIMNA TARR timnatarr.com

PAGE 29: Summer Sprinkles ©2011, quilted cotton fabrics

Timna Tarr is a quilter, author, teacher, and fabric designer based in Western Massachusetts. While she comes from a long line of quilters, as a kid she hated to sew. Timna started quilting after studying art history in college. "My work is about color and small compositions. Each block in a quilt is made as its own element, independent of the other blocks. After all of the blocks are constructed, my goal is to arrange the small compositions to play off each other and work together to create a larger whole. What keeps me engaged is watching how the project changes and transforms with the addition of each color and texture. The resulting quilts are contemporary works, set in this time and place, which reference the rich tradition of quilt making." She can be contacted through her website about commissions.



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