virtues & vocations

HIGHER EDUCATION FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING Fall 2025

Meaningful Work

Cover artwork: "Contemplating My Garden from Afar" by Agucho Velásquez

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Fall 2025 **Meaningful Work**

CONTEMPLATING MY GARDEN FROM AFAR
AGUCHO VELÁSQUEZ

"Art is not just part of my life, but my life itself. And painting is not just a pleasure for me, but an emotion with powerful wings that allow me to fly fearlessly through the world and the people who inhabit it."

—Agucho Velásquez

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

There is no such thing as work-life balance. Everything worth fighting for unbalances your life. —ALAIN DE BOTTON

This issue of *Virtues & Vocations: Higher Education for Human Flourishing* is about work: meaningful or purposeful work, balancing work and leisure, and the ethics of work. We have lovely, thoughtful, and compelling essays from engineers, physicians, and educators and deeply personal, often poignant reflections from a range of individuals working in different industries and settings. We have, as in every issue, thoughtfully paired each essay with a piece of art that evokes a sense of work without being overly didactic.

Despite the wisdom and beauty each offers, I find our collective fascination with work perplexing, and the academic interest in work even more so. Maybe I am channeling my parents, who until their deaths suggested being an academic was not actual work. Maybe it is the fact that I have told students

ARTWORK BY AGUCHO VELÁSQUEZ

for so many years that I have the best job in the world,—I drank my own Kool-Aid. Or maybe it is the fact that I so love what I do that it doesn't feel like the kind of labor I imagine "real jobs" to be. Is a rarified life of reading, writing and teaching actually *work*? Can privileged work still be called work? Isn't this really what Aristotle meant by leisure?

Certainly, we are all shaped by the cultures of work within which we operate. Three conversations across many, many years of work with colleagues seem relevant here. First, as a graduate student one advisor told me to never turn my office light out so people always think you are working. Another laughed at the suggestion, noting that success was based on output not on input.

Fair enough, I thought. The goal of an academic is production. A good publication is a good publication whether it took 3 weeks or 3 years. But don't we all glean some satisfaction from the extraordinary effort in all parts of our life? The more we put in, the more invested we feel. Winning a hard-fought tennis match, baking that crazy hard-to-make pie, learning that musical piece, the unnecessarily difficult hot yoga class, winning over that super cranky neighbor—all seem somehow bigger victories. I studied Chinese in college not because I cared all that much about China, but because I was in college so why not study the language that seemed more challenging. Intensity matters.

Second, as a junior faculty member I recall a colleague telling me of a conversation that he had with his partner. The partner suggested that his life as a professional sociologist was not that of an all-consuming, mad scientific or artistic genius. The partner further suggested that he ought, perhaps, approach it like a job: go to work, come home, act like a responsible adult.

This one has really followed me around. Sure, a bit more discipline never hurt anyone—though I do love being totally immersed in my work. I love when it feels all consuming. But no, that does not exempt me from my responsibility to others. I think we all have that brilliant but insufferable colleague who assumes brilliance is an excuse for bad behavior—or worse, slacker behavior. Not every day can or even maybe should be about the obsessive high that work can provide, even small bits of everyday can be pretty great.

Third, recently, a faculty colleague quite sheepishly told me that if she won the lottery, she'd quit her job and move to France the next day. It was as if that somehow signaled a lack of commitment. I love this one. I think if she said this five years ago, I might have struggled to see her perspective. If I love what I do and it

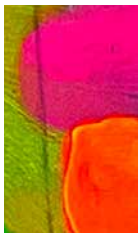
really isn't work, why retire? I find retiring hard to imagine, but the prospect of a not-yet-imagined, new life of work as a florist, dog breeder or novelist is increasingly a delightful daydream—not unlike winning the lottery.

Ultimately, I guess I'm closer to de Botton on this one. I thrive on the all-encompassing, often unsettling, enthrall of my work. It is not who I am, but it is something that gives me great joy. My work is an extraordinary privilege for which I am grateful every day.

As you peruse this particular issue, I want to draw your attention to one new dimension of our work: our new Editorial Board. Three years ago, we piloted this biannual Virtues & Vocations magazine in the hopes that it would resonate with an interdisciplinary community of scholars and practitioners variously interested in the cultivation of character, meaning and purpose across the professions. We aspired to something clever—insightful but beautiful. We wanted something that felt good: to read and to touch. We wanted to offer varied writers a space to share with a diverse public audience not just what they think, but how they think. We have been so thrilled by the reception and the interest that only continues to grow. But a biannual publication is a bit beyond the scope of even the world's best tiny, part-time team of two (my extraordinary colleagues Erin Miller and Sam Deane) with the assistance of a fabulous designer (Karen Sheets). And so we have enlisted the counsel of 6 world-class, creative scholars from across the country who share our aspiration for a fresh voice in the national character conversation to serve as our inaugural Editorial Board: Rosalyn Berne (University of Virginia), Paul Blaschko (Notre Dame), Karen Bohlin (Harvard), Jennifer Frey (University of Tulsa), Abraham Nussbaum (University of Colorado School of Medicine), and Francis Su (Harvey Mudd). This issue features three wonderful pieces from board members. We are excited to have them on board as advisors and regular contributors.

We hope you have as much fun reading this magazine as we had producing it. For us, it was good work. V&V

Suzanne Shanahan is the
Leo and Arlene Hawk Executive Director,
Institute for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame.



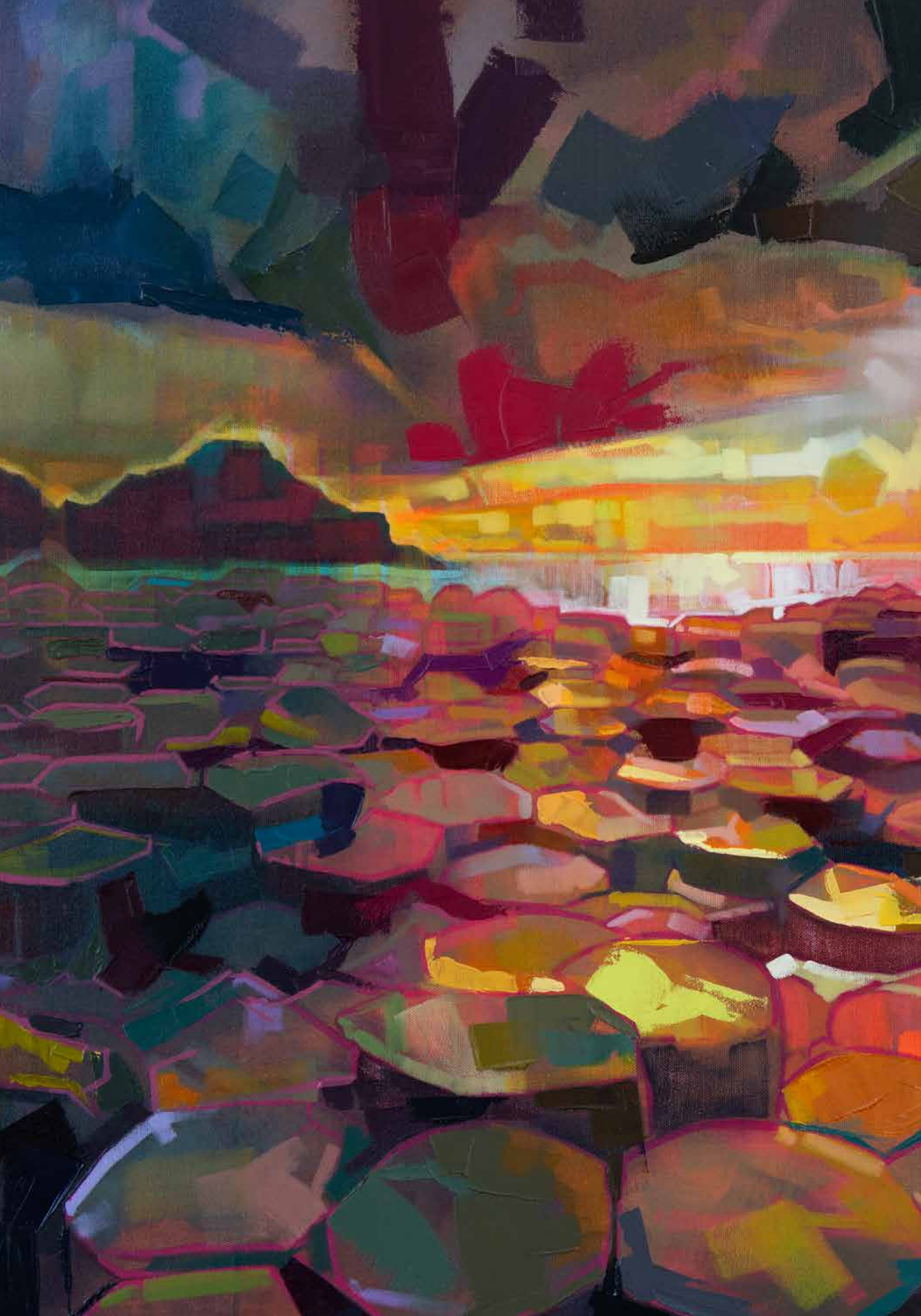
ARTWORK BY AGUCHO VELÁSQUEZ

PART I

Employing Virtue

"Vocation is not the matching of two already fixed and finished things—a formed character and a known form of work—but a medium grounding a process of mutual disclosure."

CHRIS HIGGINS



CHRIS HIGGINS

The Romance and Reality of Vocational Fit

Deweyan Reflections on Meaningful Work

Nothing is more tragic than failure to discover one's true business in life, or to find that one has drifted or been forced by circumstance into an uncongenial calling.

JOHN DEWEY, DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION[1]

The language of work is polarized. "Labor" refers to work that is compulsory and toilsome, and indeed to any exertion that is painful. One of its obscure usages is telling, as "labor" is apparently the name for a group of moles.[2] Or consider the term, "job," which suggests the fragmentation of work into discrete tasks.

ARTWORK BY KEVIN LOWERY

Though its etymology is uncertain, the leading theory is that our term for paid employment came from an earlier use of "job," meaning "the amount that a horse and cart can bring at one time."[3] While this is partly fitting, since we are in fact embodied creatures who must work to survive, we are also thinking, valuing beings. Work involves both the head and, if you will, the hooves. We envision purposes; we are moved to undertake projects. We do not simply gnaw away in the dark. If one set of work words positions us all of the way underground, another has us soaring above our physical needs and self-interest, heeding a divine calling or professing a sacred vow. Sometimes these high and low roads diverge within a single term. "Work" can refer to a larger project or just a paycheck.[4] "Vocation" means alternately a spiritual calling and a manual trade.

This polarized vocabulary reflects deep dichotomies in our self-understanding. We contrast our duties and our inclinations (feeling compelled to add a negative prefix to distinguish our enjoyable *avocations* from our dutiful vocations). We build one campus to nurture the life of the mind and another to train the hands (then rank people according to the color of their collars). We divorce the spiritual from the material (contrasting such "ethereal things" as the good and the beautiful with the "real world" of supply and demand curves).[5] Struggling to unite realism and idealism—so that we might see clearly both our condition and our prospects—we careen between fantasy (conjuring a simplified and sweetened reality) and cynicism (confusing the world with our dispirited, reductive readings of it).

Unless we deny that practices differ in their demands and affordances, or unless we deny that people differ in their talents and interests and aspirations, the idea that there are better and worse vocational choices, and indeed that there can be vocational mistakes, seems not only reasonable but unavoidable.

Would that we could, on some calm philosophical shore, plot a direct route to the meeting place of genuine realism and idealism. But we are already at sea, guided only by the maps of our current moral imagination. For us seafarers, Aristotle

says, "getting hold of the intermediate is difficult."[6] He suggests following Circe's advice: "That spray and surging breaker there—keep your ship well clear of that."[7] Navigating between the Scylla of fantasy and the Charybdis of cynicism, the best we can do is "take to the oars and sail that way . . . grasping the least bad of what is available."[8] To break the spell of fantasy in our vocational imagination, we need targeted desublimations; to avoid running aground on the shoals of reductive cynicism, we need thick, recuperative narratives. A book such as David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs* could help us paddle away from the tenacious delusion that white-collar work is somehow more important and intellectually demanding.[9] Or, to avoid crashing into the conclusion that work is nothing but alienated wage labor, we might turn to the testimony lovingly gathered by Studs Terkel, showing that even the most modest of occupations contain veins of meaning and sources of pride.[10] Whatever the maneuver, vocational discernment requires tacking between romance and reduction.

Consider the epigraph. Is this an example of sentimental distortion? Until recently, I hadn't thought so. And I am still inclined to forgive Dewey's hyperbole, his failure to note that many, in staving off even greater tragedies, must forgo the luxury of vocational choice. Indeed, part of what I find moving about this passage is how this topic rouses the ordinarily stolid Dewey to ardor. It is not Dewey's effusiveness that gives me pause, but this very idea of discovering "one's true business in life." This might be just the place to heed Circe's advice and pull hard on the rudder. For it may be that our stories about "the work we were meant to do" are just fairy tales whose true moral is that we are drawn to disavow the contingency of our choices and flee our finitude. It might be more honest to think of vocation, as one colleague recently put it to me, as an arranged marriage in which love at best comes later.[11] Is the very idea of "finding one's calling" just kitsch?

Ultimately, I find the strong form of this deflationary view untenable. Unless we deny that practices differ in their demands and affordances, or unless we deny that people differ in their talents and interests and aspirations, the idea that there are better and worse vocational choices, and indeed that there can be vocational mistakes, seems not only reasonable but unavoidable. That said, the deflationary view does expose two necessary qualifications to the romantic idea of finding one's calling. The first is that no one has only one calling. The second is that callings are made as much as they are found.

Ironically, it is Dewey himself (on the very same page no less) who gives us the most interesting argument for rejecting the idea

that each of us has but *one* "true business in life":

> **As a man's vocation as artist is but the emphatically specialized phase of his diverse and variegated vocational activities, so his efficiency in it, in the humane sense of efficiency, is determined by its association with other callings. A person must have experience, he must live, if his artistry is to be more than a technical accomplishment. He cannot find the subject matter of his artistic activity within his art; this must be an expression of what he suffers and enjoys in other relationships—a thing which depends in turn upon the alertness and sympathy of his interests. What is true of an artist is true of any other special calling, . . . so that the scientific inquirer shall not be merely the scientist, the teacher merely the pedagogue, the clergyman merely one who wears the cloth, and so on. (308)**

Notice how this differs from the usual appraisal of the specialist as deep but narrow. Specialism actually breeds shallow technicism. "In the degree in which it is isolated from other interests," Dewey notes just before this passage, "an occupation loses its meaning and becomes . . . routine" (307). One can manipulate micropipettes or lecture students without ever really engaging the vocation of scientist or teacher. To access the "humane," or extra-technical, dimensions of one's vocation requires an experience-expanding "alertness" and relationship-deepening "sympathy." However, to develop such qualities requires a life of "diverse and variegated" callings. Thus, not only does Dewey admit the possibility of having more than one vocation, he insists that it is impossible to have only one. "Insofar as one approximates that ideal," Dewey pronounces, "he is a kind of monstrosity" (307).

This is not to say that everyone has multiple paid occupations. Dewey has a capacious conception of vocation as any practice whose purposive frame helps us open up the interest of the world, balance "the distinctive capacity of an individual with his social service" (308), and knit our experience into meaningful continuity. Without everyday practices—parenting, gardening, cooking, civic engagement, learning Arabic, playing the flute—that demand that the "idea of an end be steadily maintained," experience would fragment into disconnected bits or grind into monotonous repetition (309).

If Dewey believes that each of us typically engages in "variegated vocational activities," why does he speak of "one's true business"? I chalk it up to a moment of rhetorical excess. In the very next sentence, he offers this qualification: "A right occupation means simply that the aptitudes of a person are in adequate play" (308). Here Dewey is careful to say "a" not "the" right occupation. However, the fact that none of us has a singular vocational match does not mean that there is no such thing as vocational mismatch, and here lies the pathos of the passage. Dewey is observing the everyday tragedy that, while each of us could have multiple vocations, many never find any congenial calling.

By "congenial," Dewey does not mean "suiting one's interests and temperament," as if occupational choice follows an already completed process of personal formation. Vocations are themselves key catalysts of our growth. They direct and quicken our attention, activating from the welter of experience a world of significant actions and consequences. Thus, Dewey rejects the "conventional and arbitrary view" that we can discover "once for all at some particular date" what work suits us (311). An initial interest "only blocks out in outline the field in which further growth is to be directed" (311). Treating this as a "definite, irretrievable, and complete choice" turns a dynamic process into a "rigid" role, closing off the "continuous reorganization of aims and methods" characteristic of full vocational enactment (311).

Vocation is not an already-booked appointment that one might miss, but an ongoing process of mutual explication of self and world.

For Dewey, a vocation is an educative medium, a set of enabling constraints. If

this sounds oxymoronic, it is because we tend to default to a negative conception of freedom, freedom from constraint. By way of correction, Immanuel Kant offers a vivid synecdoche: "The light dove, in free flight cutting through the air the resistance of which it feels, could get the idea that it could do even better in airless space."[12] This ambitious dove is about to learn the painful lesson that freedom abhors a vacuum. The idea of enabling constraints is perhaps most intuitive in the arts. One can say different things with paint on canvas, with chords on a guitar, with the human body choreographed in time and space. It is precisely because the medium pushes back that we can achieve forms of eloquence unachievable by other means.

This suggests a deeper notion of congeniality. Vocation is not the matching of two already fixed and finished things—a formed character and a known form of work—but a medium grounding a process of mutual disclosure. Though there is no pre-ordained vocational destiny, there can be a deep feeling of fit, a feeling that you have found your medium, one of them at least. Over time, we may come to experience a profound, twofold recognition: in

me, the world is working out what it needs to be; in this worldly practice, I am working out what I need to be.

This brings us to the second qualification needed to rescue the idea of vocational fit from misty-eyed sentimentality. Finding one's calling is not really about picking a line of work. It means finding a path within one's work that brings self and world into fruitful relation. Vocations are made as much as they are found. They are discovered, but only over time and only by those open to the kind of "dialectical" bootstrapping described by Talbot Brewer where, even as we must invest to gain entry, it is only through deeper entry that we come to understand what that investment entails.[13] Ultimately, vocational enactment is more important than vocational selection.

Am I then conceding that work is like an arranged marriage, meaningful only if and when one puts in the effort? Despite debunking the "one true calling" theory, I still resist the implication of this metaphor. I see three significant ways in which vocational choice remains far from arbitrary. First, the fact that vocational enactment reveals new aspects of self and world does not negate the importance of one's prior history. We enter worlds of work along different vectors: interested in different aspects of the world, diverging in our ideas about what matters, varying in our formative momentum and inertia. What

exactly will grow in the soil of a vocational medium is not predictable in advance. But that does not mean that it is arbitrary where we plant our hopes and our efforts. For each of us, some sites will prove fertile, others sterile.

Second, even insofar as we downplay the importance of *what* occupation we choose, *how* we choose remains of crucial significance. The romantic chooses decisively, saying, "this is what I was meant to do." The danger is that, thinking that you have already found your vocation, you may never set out to discover it within your selected line of work. Work is work, the cynic replies, denying the very idea that vocational practices could be sources of meaning and transformation. And then the prophecy is fulfilled as the cynic proves unwilling to make the sort of investments Brewer describes.

Third, it is difficult to find any vocational medium in our rather late modernity, this

world of isolated (and increasingly virtual) tasks in isolated cubicles. A decade before the publication of *Democracy and Education*, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke famously offered vocational advice to the "young poet," Franz Kappus. Rilke warned Kappus to steer clear of "professions petrified and no longer linked with living," to avoid any calling so "burdened with . . . conventions" that it leaves no "room for a personal conception of its problems."[14] A century later, what looms larger is the opposite problem: how few forms of work allow us to make contact with, as Matthew Crawford puts it, "the world beyond our head."[15] Much of contemporary work isolates us both from recalcitrant reality—offering us instead various virtual knobs for manipulating pre-selected variables—and from the joint structures of attention which disclose a common world.

With this, we have tacked back toward an idea of vocational fit that is at once realistic and idealistic. Without colliding into the cynical conclusion that vocational choice is arbitrary, we steered clear of the romantic ideas that vocational fit is singular and that it is legible in advance of the work. Without draining the pathos out of the drama of vocational enactment, we dispelled some of the fantasies around the idea of finding one's calling. Vocation is not an already-booked appointment that one might miss, but an ongoing process of mutual explication of self and world. It is a medium in which one may discover a fuller freedom and fluency, a fuller connection to the natural and social world. Where and when one will find such a medium is uncertain. What is certain is that this search is all too often aborted or derailed—this remains a great tragedy indeed. V&V

NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: MacMillan, 1916), 308. Further quotations from this work will be cited parenthetically by page number. In what follows, I will follow Dewey in using the words "calling," "occupation," and "vocation" interchangeably.

2. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Labor, n7" (1471–).

3. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Job, n1" (1560–) and "Job, n3" (1560–1771).

4. As an example of this ubiquitous dichotomization, consider the tagline for the recent Netflix docuseries, *Working: What We Do All Day*: "For some it's a paycheck, for others a calling." See netflix.com/search?q=working&jbv=81130576.

5. Dewey adapts the phrase "ethereal things" (spelling updated) from John Keats. See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee/Putnam, 1934), Chapter 2.

6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics: Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*, eds. Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121 [1109a25-6].

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 121 [1109a33]. Aristotle incorrectly attributes this passage from the *Odyssey* to Calypso (see the editor's note on page 311).

8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 122 [1109a335-1109b1].

9. David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* (*New York:* Simon and Schuster, 2018).

10. Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: Pantheon: 1974).

11. This was a remark made by a co-panelist, Guru Madhavan, partly in response to my stressing that vocational discernment must include reflection on the question, What is a worthy form of work to which I am suited? ["Cross Professional Book Talks & Panel," Virtues & Vocations 2025: Higher Education and Human Flourishing, University of Notre Dame, Wednesday, May 21, 2025]. After the panel, Chanon Ross pressed me further on this point. I am grateful to Guru and Chanon—and this congenial event—for this productive counterpoint.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A5/B8. Since Guyer and Wood include both the 1781 and 1787 versions of the introduction, this passage appears on both p. 129 and p. 140.

13. Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially 37–49.

14. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton, rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1954), 46, 40.

15. Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Our Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015).

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ANNA BONTA MORELAND

Leisure? How Do You Spell That?

A CAUTIONARY OPENING

I feel like a hypocrite sitting down to write a reflection on leisure as I claw my way to the end of an overcommitted semester. I teach a seminar at Villanova University called "Shaping an Adult Life" in which I dedicate one-third of the course to the idea of leisure. I taught that course during both semesters this year, and I find myself having preached one thing and practiced something quite different.

This is a serious case of St. Paul's "the good that I will to do, I do not do" (Rom. 7:19). Or perhaps worse: "the good that I teach my students, I do not do." It is somehow a consolation to note that Thomas Aquinas thought teaching a gratuitous grace. In other words, it is a grace given for the sake of others, but one that does not necessarily transform the instructor's interior life (*ST* I-II.111.4). Below, I offer reflections upon what I teach. Make no assumptions about how I live my life.

ARTWORK BY GRETA LAUNDY

CLASSROOM MOMENTS

When I bring up leisure in a class, I am universally met with blank stares. Students don't know how to spell "leisure," let alone practice it. They come to campus having suffered the grind of the college admissions process. Trapped as they are in a productivity machine that measures achievements, they arrive having been promised that these will result in wealth, prestige and status. In this way, the college experience becomes yet another grind where the resume replaces the college application as the frame within which they walk through their experience.

This "resume frame" has turned even extracurriculars into work. It is not enough to join clubs. They need to run for the countless positions on club executive boards to show "leadership skills." Classes generally end in the late afternoon, only to be replaced by student club meetings from 6-9pm. When students have free time, they're bone tired. Going out to bars even feels like work, what with all the snapping of photos, the curating of photos, the posting of photos, and the liking of other people's photos—this sounds more like a part-time job and less like a party. It's no wonder they often stay home instead, doom scrolling on their phones, gaming, online sports gambling, or binge-watching Netflix. Or doing all four at the same time. And adults are making a lot of money on the backs of these students. One recently said to me, "Everywhere I turn, adults are trying to get me addicted."

As they begin to reflect upon what true leisure could mean for them, many realize that recovering childhood activities is the way to begin to reclaim leisure. Some used to paint or write music. Others used to play pickup basketball or bake. I remember one student mentioning that she loved doing puzzles during the pandemic so she looked forward to going home where she could do a puzzle again. "Why not bring a puzzle to campus?" I asked. She looked at me like I had suggested she fly to the moon.

A LEISURE GARDEN

Students need a new frame to replace the "resume frame." I offer the metaphor of a leisure garden. Through entering into this image and reflecting upon it, through committing to practices to build this

garden in accountability groups, students find themselves making small changes that have an outsized impact on their collegiate experience.

To turn a weedy patch of grass into a lovely leisure garden, pulling out unhealthy practices is a good start. And building a fence around the phone-super-predator is absolutely necessary. Students try different apps to help them curb phone use. They talk to each other about what to eliminate. A few apps work. Most don't. I challenge them to go to a concert without taking photos. There is a lot of defensive talk and resistance during this stage. It takes one determined student to testify to the joys of deleting Instagram or TikTok for a week to give others the courage to do this. Some never go back. Others try and curb a device that is designed for addiction. These students become models for each other in how to prune and plant their interior garden.

Friendship, community, is at the heart of a healthy approach to leisure.

Augustine knew about the power of a concrete model.

In Book Eight of the *Confessions* Augustine had come to recognize what his issues were.[1] He knew he had a problem with sex (this isn't his only issue, of course—he's also insanely arrogant and overly ambitious, but in Book Eight he zeros in on sex). It's in this book that he famously says, "Give me chastity, but not yet!" By this point in his life, he knows he needs to reform his ways but he's holding back.

Let's look at the scene in chapter 11 of Book Eight in two parts. In part I, Augustine has already recognized that he's torn up about what kind of life he should lead. He notes that even when we're choosing between two *good choices*, each of the choices tug at us: "All are good, but they compete among themselves until one is chosen," he writes.[2] How to choose? He finds himself "dislodged" and "hanging" at this point in his life.[3] Augustine's imagination is a powerful force in his movement

from disordered to ordered love. He has some mistresses, tantalizing voices, tugging on his fleshly garments [paraphrasing here], "Are you *sure* you can do without us?" they ask. "Are you ready to give us up *completely*?" they say. "If you give us up *forever*, you'll never, your *whole life long* be able to come back to us." As he turns away from them, their voices recede and they begin to mutter behind his back, but they still pluck at him, trying to get him to look back. Augustine writes that "they did slow me down, for I could not bring myself to tear free and shake them off and leap across to that place whither I was summoned, while aggressive habit still taunted me: 'Do you imagine you will be able to live without these things?'"[4]

These imaginative voices in our heads pluck at us, tugging on our fleshly garments. They tell us we can't survive without social media, that silencing our phones will mean we'll miss our mother's emergency phone call. They tell us watching porn is harmless, that scrolling through Instagram will only take a minute.

In part II of this scene, Augustine encounters a vision of a lady who is chaste. This chaste woman he calls "Lady Continence." In his imagination he encounters a woman who, while not sexually active or seductive, is attractive. She's fruitful. She's happy. She has a calm demeanor and coaxes him with welcoming hands to come towards her. Surrounding her are many boys and girls, people of every age, widows and women "grown old in their virginity."[5] This vision comes as somewhat of a shock to him because he'd *never imagined* that refraining from sex could be an attractive way of life. Up to this point he'd only seen refraining from illicit sexual experiences as a negative, as a bodily addiction to deny. But here he sees the alternative as actually *appealing*. Lady Continence smiles at Augustine and asks, "Can't you do what these women and men have done?"[6] He stands there, bitterly ashamed, because he could still hear the murmurs of those voices in his head. He stands there in suspense, hanging back. She gently appeals to him a second time, urging him to close

his ears to those voices. He is finally able to say to himself that he wants to be like *her*.

What's really crucial about this second part of the scene is that it is not until Augustine has an imaginative encounter with Lady Continence, an encounter that is appealing to him, that he's able to decide to move away from disordered love. It's not until he recognizes that Lady Continence isn't barren, but rather that she's fruitful and a fully satisfied lover of the Lord, that he is able to embrace a different life. He bursts into tears at this point and goes outside so as not to cry in front of his friend. This is where he has the famous *tolle lege* moment: he hears a voice to pick up scripture and read it. He lights upon chapter 13 of the Book of Romans that tells him (literally) to stop "messing" around and turn toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

He writes, "No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away."[7]

This experience gives him the courage to leave the city and move to the countryside to live among friends who are friends with God. This last detail is crucial to our reflection on leisure. He chooses friends with whom he can spend true *otium*, true leisure, and retires to the country. It's important not only to become "leisure ambassadors" to each other, acting as

The sabbath is a time to enjoy leisure for its own sake, not as simply a way to recharge our work batteries.

concrete models of what true leisure looks like. It's also crucial to build leisure habits together. Friendship, community, is at the heart of a healthy approach to leisure. Notice that in his imagination with Lady Continence, Augustine encounters a whole community of people living chastely and fruitfully. Together, my students learn how to plant a leisure garden. Weeding is a crucial first step. But planting is just as important.

LITURGICAL LEISURE

Building a leisure garden isn't just about doing stuff, even doing stuff together. Leisure activities can easily become just one more thing to add to our "to do" lists. To guard against this, we turn inward. True leisure demands a pretty radical interior reorientation. We are used to leisure being what is left over after work is done. But as Rabbi Abraham Heschel reminds us, the workweek should be oriented toward the sabbath, not the sabbath toward the work week.[8] The sabbath is a time to enjoy leisure for its own sake, not as simply a way to recharge our work batteries. It's a "realm in time where the goal is not to have, but to be, not to own, but to give, not to control, but to share, not to subdue, but to be in accord."[9] Cultivating an interior centeredness helps to put guardrails around work and to let leisure breath in our lives.

Cultivating an interior centeredness helps to put guardrails around work and to let leisure breath in our lives.

Since many students may wake up on Sundays with the "Sunday scaries," weighed down by all the work they face during the upcoming week, I suggest practicing the sabbath on Saturdays, or—ideally—also carving out mini-sabbath practices on a daily basis. These result in stronger mental, physical, and spiritual health. But these leisure practices aren't just instrumental to such health, they become essential habits of living. Once they become knitted into the patterns of our lives, they encourage a different rhythm altogether.

Worship is the deepest root of leisure, Josef Pieper reminds us, because in worship we see the world as it is and approve of it as such.[10] Just as it's impossible to love someone "in order to" or "for the purpose of," we don't worship in order to gain to

something else.[11] To worship is to express gratitude for the gift of creation. To worship is to rest in this gift. Leisure practices throughout the week ideally cultivate this inner rest, an inner silence that prepares us to become receptive to creation. Sabbath liturgies accentuate that receptivity and reorient our whole week toward that receptivity.

It's time for me to turn away to the voices tugging at my own fleshly garments and start practicing at home what I preach in the classroom. V&V

NOTES

1. Augustine, *The Confessions* Maria Boulding, trans. (New City Press, 1997).
2. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 154.
3. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 154.
4. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 155.
5. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 155.
6. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 155.
7. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 157.
8. Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2005) p.10.
9. Heschel, *The Sabbath,* p.3.
10. Josef Pieper, *Josef Pieper: An Anthology* (Ignatius Press, 1989) "Leisure and its Threefold Opposition," 142.
11. Pieper, *Anthology*, p.141.

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KAREN E. BOHLIN

A Door to the Interior Life

Poetry as a Practice of Leisure

This essay is written for fellow educators—especially those of us charged with forming future doctors, teachers, engineers, and professionals whose work will shape the well-being and flourishing of others.

We teach, advise, publish, serve on committees, manage clinical partnerships, and try to remain human in the process. Much of this work takes place in institutions shaped by metrics and motion, where our value is often measured by speed or output. But we are not machines. And if we are to sustain the presence, discernment, and mentoring our students need—not to mention find meaning in our own lives—we must recover something many of us have lost, access to our interior lives.

ARTWORK BY JUSTIN WHEATLEY

Poetry is one way in. It opens a door to the interior life—one we may not have known we needed until we step through it.

By this, I don't mean anything esoteric. The interior life is the space where we reflect, imagine, create, and discern. It is the seat of our freedom and the root of our authenticity, where our unfettered and truest self resides. Whether or not we consider ourselves spiritual, it is here that joy and creativity take shape. And it is here, too, that the possibility of leisure, rightly understood, begins.

Poetry is one way in. It opens a door to the interior life—one we may not have known we needed until we step through it.

This essay makes the case that poetry is not a luxury, nor the exclusive domain of literature students with time to spare. It is a vital contemplative practice—one that can nourish our interior lives, form the moral imagination, and help us return to our work with greater clarity and care.

Josef Pieper, in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, reminds us that leisure is not just time off. It is, in his words, "a mental and spiritual attitude . . . a condition of the soul."[1] It is a kind of interior openness to truth and beauty that resists the totalizing forces of work. This kind of leisure, he argues, is the foundation of learning, culture, and wisdom.

Poetry cultivates this leisure. It draws us into stillness. It sharpens attention. It deepens our capacity to feel. These are not incidental effects. They are, I suggest, quiet necessities for a flourishing interior life.

Long before poetry became a subject of study, it was a way of being human. It predates literacy. Its rhythm, meter, and form made it possible to remember and retell long before anything was written down. Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, our earliest and most enduring storytellers wrote in verse. Their words were spoken aloud, repeated, passed from one voice to the next. The epic tradition, the Psalms, the tragedies and odes of ancient Greece: these remind us that poetry has long helped people pass on what matters.

The word poetry, or *poiesis*, from the Greek *ποίησις*, means "to make"—to create something meaningful from breath and words. Aristotle understood this well. In his *Poetics*, he defines poetry as a form of *mimesis*, or imitation, whose medium includes rhythm, words, and melody. For him, these formal elements aren't decorative; they shape how a listener experiences the poem,

evoking emotion and insight in ways that exposition cannot.

Poetry continues to thrive in the public square: we spot Yeats posted in the London Underground and integrate poetry in the training of physicians, through initiatives like Harvard Medical School's Arts & Humanities Initiative, to help future doctors attend more closely to the individual stories and emotions of those in their care. The *Favorite Poem Project*, with participants from all fifty U.S. states, is a national archive in which Americans—from firefighters to teachers and veterans—read aloud the poems that have become part of their personal memory. These are not merely recitations, but reflections on how a poem anchors, consoles, or animates them in ways that are deeply human. It is in these filmed moments—intimate yet public accounts from the most unexpected voices—that we glimpse how poetry opens a doorway to the interior life.

Poetry still speaks. And for those of us who spend our days forming the intellectual and professional lives of others, it may help us refine our capacity to listen. This essay draws on my own experience in teaching and professional education, including with those initially reluctant to read poetry at all. Across settings, I have seen what poetry can do. In what follows, I explore three ways poetry helps us reclaim our interior life and recover the kind of leisure that helps us become more fully human.

STILLNESS: COUNTERING RESTLESSNESS

One poem. That's all it took to change the atmosphere of the classroom.

Twenty-three high school seniors had arrived, preoccupied and taut shoulders hunched under the weight of college essays, practice schedules, part-time jobs, and friendship tensions. Their bodies were restless. Their minds scattered. I watched

the strain on their faces as they took their seats—not quite present, not quite still.

And then I read a poem. Once. Then again.

The poem was Sarah de Nordwall's "I Put an Orchid in My Room." It begins:

> **I put an orchid in my room**
> **When the room was a total mess.**
> **The orchid was so beautiful**
> **She had the power to bless.**

The first time, they were quiet. The second time, I noticed a change. Their shoulders softened. Their breathing slowed. A few picked up pencils and began to sketch. Others simply stared ahead. One or two closed their eyes.

We paused on the final image:

> **Disorder left and chaos fled.**
> **Her loveliness was power.**[2]

I asked, "How does this poem make you feel?" "Peace," one student said. Another added, "Calm." A third: "Simple joy."

The conversation that followed was light and easy. There was laughter, and then stillness again, the kind that doesn't need to be filled. We carried on reading and discussing other poems. At the end of class, a few students lingered, in no hurry to leave. I watched them walk out differently—unhurried, at ease, as though something within had quietly realigned.

What had happened was subtle, but real. The pace slowed. Their presence softened. The poem had made space. And in that kind of space, stillness becomes possible. Pieper urged true leisure is "an attitude of non-activity, of inward calm, of silence; it means not being 'busy,' but letting things happen." The kind of stillness poetry cultivates is not passivity. It is readiness. A way of being receptive to what might emerge. And that, I have come to see, is a condition for the interior life to take root.

ATTENTION: LEARNING TO NOTICE

I didn't come to poetry through a childhood love of verse. I came to it by accident. As someone who liked things that could be measured and seen, I began college thinking I would major in biology. Then I signed up for a course on Romantic poetry at Boston College. The professor was John Mahoney: tall, commanding, wild eyebrows, a sonorous voice, and the

habit of pacing the front of the room while reciting lines aloud.

One day, he was reading from Wordsworth's "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways." Lucy—this quiet country girl we barely know, who lives and dies in a handful of lines—is described in an image I've never forgotten:

> **A violet by a mossy stone,**
> **Half hidden from the eye;**

He repeated the lines, then stopped mid-pace and smiled. There was something curiously resonant in the way he let them settle in the room—unhurried, unexplained.

That phrase, "a violet by a mossy stone," unlocked something. It was simple, unassuming. Beauty hidden. Half-shadowed. Easily missed. And somehow, that made it more moving. More real.

It wasn't just that I found the image beautiful. It was that I had noticed it. And in noticing, something in me had shifted. I began to see how much I overlooked. The poem opened up another way of knowing, intuitive, sensory, quiet. A kind of seeing that doesn't just gather information but is attuned.

That image has stayed with me. I think of it on walks, especially in the woods, when

The poem opened up another way of knowing, intuitive, sensory, quiet.

I catch sight of something small yet quietly radiant. That one line captures what poetry did, even then: it began to train my attention. It changed what I saw—and what I looked for—not only in nature, but in people, and in the ordinary rhythms of my life. It taught me to look for the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Before that course, I thought of attention as neutral—a matter of focus or acuity. Poetry showed me attention could be formative. It could teach me to perceive differently. To notice not what stands out, but what nearly escapes. Good poets do this with remarkable economy. They distill human experience into something so concentrated it can stir memory, awaken curiosity, even offer a momentary balm in the middle of a demanding day. Their

imagery doesn't embellish; it reveals. And in that moment of recognition—of seeing differently—something shifts.

"She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways" ends with another quiet jolt:

> **She lived unknown, and few could**
> **know When Lucy ceased to be;**
> **But she is in her grave, and, oh,**
> **The difference to me!**

The loss is nearly invisible to the world. But not to the speaker. That final line "the difference to me" is as stark as it is restrained. It names what only attention can hold: the felt significance of what we might otherwise miss.

For those of us who live by the relentless demands of meetings, deadlines, and syllabi, this kind of attention is not incidental. It is a quiet form of restoration. When we allow poetry to interrupt our pace, we begin to notice again—carefully, humanly. And in that noticing, we begin to reclaim the interior life that so much of our work-driven culture pushes to the margins.

FEELING: DEEPENING OUR WAY OF KNOWING

Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son" begins simply: "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."

The line is plainspoken, but it lands with weight. The mother, the speaker in the poem, is worn, fierce, and full of love. She doesn't soften life's edges, but she doesn't give up either. She urges her son to keep climbing—even when the stairs are splintered, even when there's no light.

Some years ago, in a workshop I led for high school faculty, I asked teachers across departments to read the poem aloud in pairs. Then I read it again, slowly, for the whole group.

When we reached the refrain, "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair," I asked them: "What do you hear in her voice?" The responses came slowly at first, then gathered momentum. One teacher spoke about the mother's grit. Another heard fatigue. Someone mentioned love—the kind that is protective, unyielding. A math teacher sat quietly for a while, then said, "This is the conversation I never had with my son. And now I want to."

It wasn't analysis. It was recognition—raw, reflective, and unfinished.

Around the same time, I came across an account from a youth detention center in Tacoma, Washington, where educator Margaret Ross ran a book club. In a *New York Times* Learning Network article published on November 7, 2017, Ross described how, near Christmas in 2013, she read "Mother to Son" aloud to a group of ten young men. One of them, recently incarcerated because, as he put it, "my mother didn't want me," broke down mid-poem—head on the table, shoulders trembling.

Poetry showed me attention could be formative.

A week later, on December 18, the *New York Times* published a column by Charles Blow titled "Defining Moments and Crystal Stairs." Blow quoted the same poem, writing, "That poem helped change my life when I was younger. It steadied me when the world was rocky." Ross brought copies of the article to the next meeting and asked who would like one. Every hand went up.

At their next session, the young man who had wept asked if he could read the poem

aloud. This time, his voice was steady. No one looked away.

What stayed with me in both moments—the faculty workshop and Ross's detention center book club—was how poetry made space for three dimensions of feeling:

Sensory: the texture of "splinters" and "tacks," the boards "torn up."

Emotional: the ache of abandonment, the force of a mother's love, the resilience born of hardship.

Empathic: the recognition of another's story as worthy of attention, an opening into what someone else carries, whether a stranger or someone seated beside you.

Poetry doesn't argue or persuade. It gives us language when language fails. It helps us feel what we didn't know how to name and imagine how others might feel, too. As one of my mentors once put it "Poetry helps us to say what we cannot say for ourselves."

A QUIET NECESSITY

We began with a question many of us carry quietly: How do we stay human and reclaim our interior lives when the pace of professional work can leave us treading water, with little space for reflection?

Poetry, I've suggested, is one way in. It nurtures the stillness, attention, and sensitivity to feeling that make interior life possible. These are not optional states. They are quiet necessities for anyone seeking to live well and lead wisely. Without them, we run dry. With them, we begin to recover our capacity for discernment, empathy, and practical wisdom.

That matters, especially in moments of strain, when we're over-focused on solving, fixing, producing. When our instinct is to power through, we need practices that help us pause. Poetry invites that pause. It slows the pace, opens a space, and often changes the tenor of the room—sometimes literally.

I've opened executive retreats and professional seminars with poems like these—not to soften the room, but to ground it. They summon us, helping us rediscover the heart of our work and of one another. I've gifted John O'Donohue's "For One Who is Exhausted" to colleagues and family members teetering on the edge of burnout, when recovery felt just out of reach. These

poems don't fix problems. But they do something else: they bring us back into contact with our interior lives and the deep reserves that restore our strength.

So here is what I offer—not a prescription, but an invitation. Any one of the following poems may move, steady, or delight you. But please—don't add them to your task list. Don't treat them as a productivity tool or a neuro hack. This is not about self-optimization. This is about a return to what it means to be human. Take them one at a time. Read them slowly. Aloud. More than once.

If you're caring for an aging parent or facing a diagnosis that will change a loved one's life, pick up "Matinee" by Patrick Phillips. Let it walk you into the ache and quiet wisdom of enduring love.

If you're in a liminal space—navigating change, uncertainty, or loss—take up Wendell Berry's "The Peace of Wild Things." Let each image and stanza steady your breath and help you find your footing again.

If you miss the wonder of first love, revisit Gary Soto's "Oranges." Let its winsomeness rekindle your sense of romance.

If you're holding hope for someone who is incarcerated or struggling, turn to Jimmy Santiago Baca's "Cloudy Day."

These poems won't fix what's broken. But they might steady you. They might open a door to your interior life. Poetry, as a contemplative practice, is a form of leisure rightly understood—a quiet, sometimes forgotten door to the space of interior freedom and joy we so often neglect. V&V

NOTES

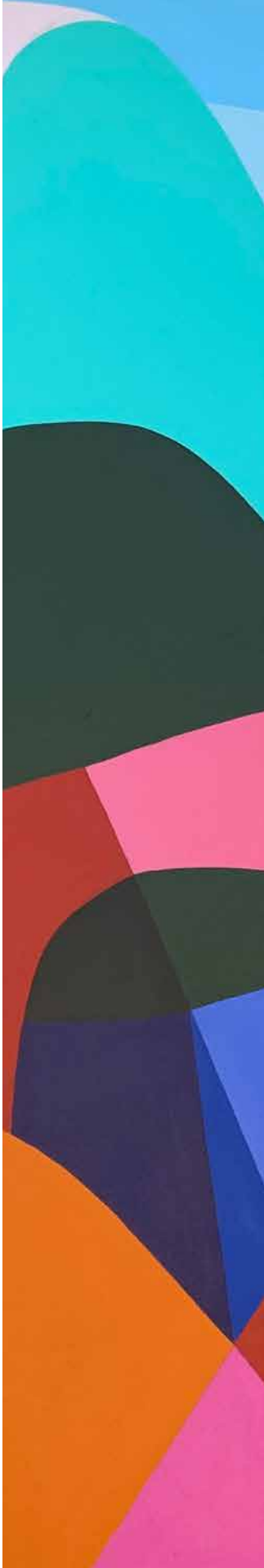
1. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (Ignatius Press, 2009), p. 46
2. Poem excerpted from Sarah de Nordwall, "I Put an Orchid in My Room," in *50 Poems for My 50th* (2015). Used with appreciation.

Karen E. Bohlin is author of *Teaching Character Education Through Literature* and "The Power of Art to Shape our Ability to See: A Phenomenological Reflection on Rembrandt" in *Toward an Ethics of the Imagination* (Routledge, 2025 at press) and "Educating the Heart: Why Poetry Matters" in *Educating Character Through the Arts* (Routledge, 2023).

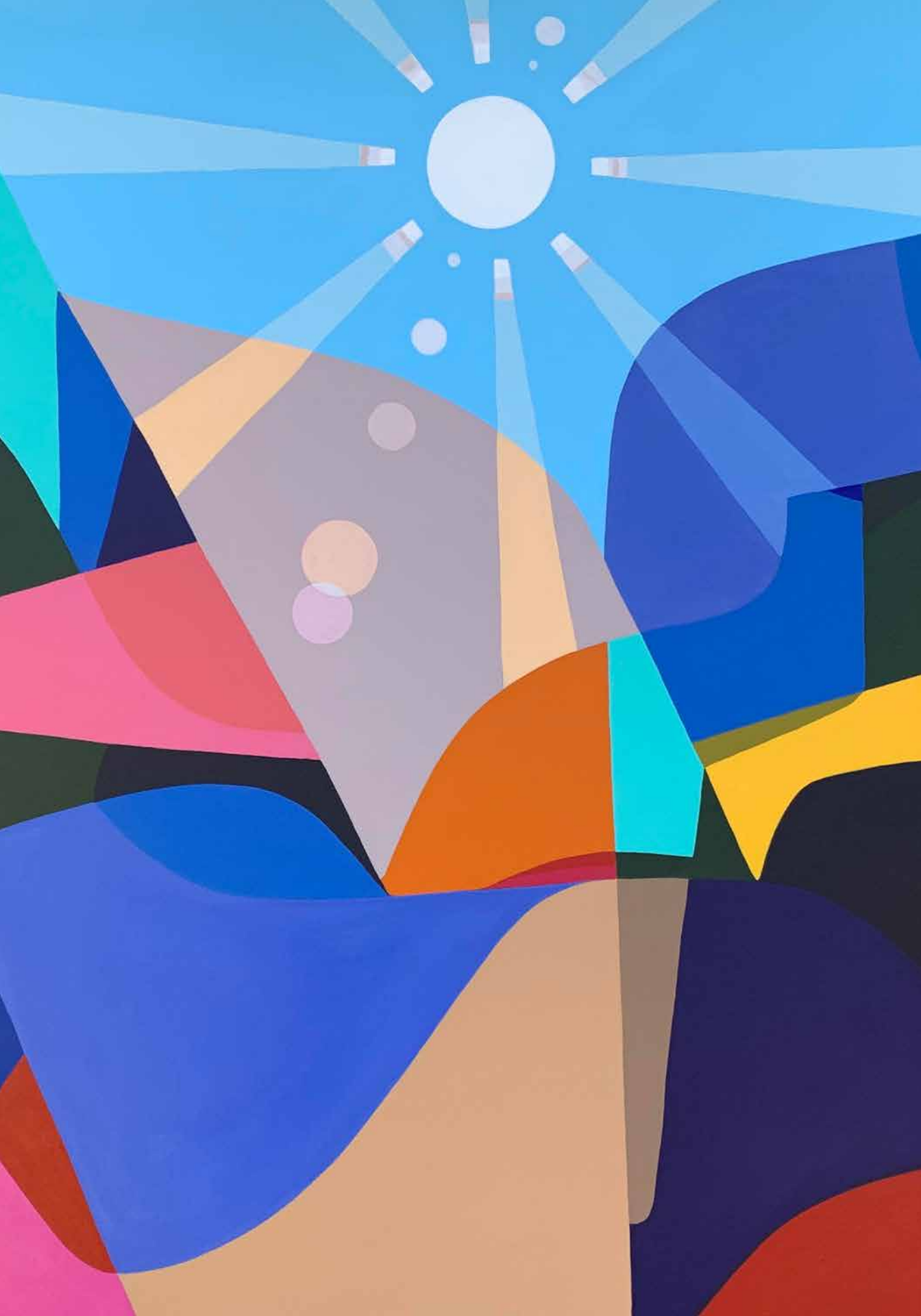
ZENA HITZ

Work and the Meaning of Life

Some years ago, while delayed at an airport, I sat near a man in a jumpsuit washing the huge plate glass windows that opened onto the tarmac. I watched as he soaped a section of window and wiped the soap away, moving his squeegee in an elaborate pattern that extinguished every trace of soapy water. He worked across the window with the grace of a ballet dancer, leaving the glass clear, spotless, and shining behind him.



ARTWORK BY GRETA LAUNDY



Something seems to be wrong with the traditional argument of work and leisure.

When I lived in a religious community (Madonna House in Combermere, Ontario), one of the tasks I loved most was cleaning the large metal counter called "the scraping table." Dirty pots and pans were left on the table to be scrubbed. Those washing the dishes would stand at the counter and "scrape" the dishes, scrubbing off the bits of food to prepare them to be washed and rinsed without wrecking the dishwater.

To clean the soapy water and food from the scraping table after dishes were done required a technique. The technique had a few simple instructions; following them could take years to perfect. One spread soapy water over the table and carefully squeegeed it off, working from one end to the other. Done right, the table would shine as if it had been newly forged and polished. Done imperfectly, it would be dull or—worse—be striped with streaks of soap.

I would be hard-pressed to explain the intensity of my desire to clean the scraping table until it gleamed like a jewel. Yet I am sure that the airport window-washer understood it well. If an old friend or relative worked as a window washer at the airport, we might view them with a touch of pity—it is lowly work by our lights. Yet it would be hard to maintain an attitude of pity while watching the man dance across the terminal, leaving perfection in his wake. The meaning of his work was evident, to him and to me.

The Catholic tradition, following the suggestions of Plato and Aristotle, distinguishes work from leisure. Work is "servile"—it is a mere means to an end. The end of ends is leisure, where human beings act for the sake of acting and live for the sake of living. Leisure matters in and of itself. Human flourishing is structured by leisured activity. Work without leisure is scarcely a human life at all.

What exactly is menial or servile work? One might think it is any action that is a means to an end. For instance, my job at a gas station is a means to an end—I wouldn't work there if it weren't for the money. Alternately, I might think of an action that one might want only conditionally. In this case, my (say) feeding the homeless is only conditionally valuable—if homelessness were abolished, the work would be pointless. On this account, exercise is servile, as is housecleaning, including the lovely tasks of washing windows or wiping tables. So too would be the various forms of service: helping, healing, comforting, teaching. The only truly free activities would be totally self-contained: thought thinking itself, or at least the human intellect gazing upon God in his essence.

Something seems to be wrong with the traditional argument of work and leisure. I say this as someone whose career, such as it is, rests on that argument, or a version of it. It seems not able to explain the joy of small practical tasks, or the rich meaning of a life spent in service.

■■■

The earliest version of the distinction between work and leisure appears in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Socrates praises the life of the philosopher, who always has enough time to consider things as they are. Socrates says:

> **It does not matter to such men if they talk for a day or a year, if only they may hit on that which is.**

He contrasts this man with a "man of the law courts", who lives in slavery by contrast with the philosopher's freedom:

> **But the other, the man of the law courts, is always in a hurry when he is talking; he has to speak with one eye on the clock. Besides, he can't make his speeches on any subject he likes; he has his adversary standing over him, armed with compulsory powers and the sworn statement, which is read out point by point as he proceeds, and must be kept to by the speaker.**

One might wonder whether a condition of responsiveness to the judgement of another is always servile.

The "lawyer"—let's call him—shows his lack of freedom in two ways. First, he is in a hurry—he is a sort of slave to the clock. Second, he cannot say whatever he wants. He is bound both by the procedure—described here as a point-by-point response to the accusation—and, as Socrates goes onto say, by the judge or jury to whom his words must be pleasing. The judge or jury is his "master."

> **The talk is always about a fellow-slave, and is addressed to a master, who sits there holding some suit or other in his hand. And the struggle is never a matter of indifference; it always directly concerns the speaker, and sometimes life itself is at stake. Such conditions make him keen and highly strung, skilled in flattering the master and working his way into his favor; but cause his soul to become small and warped.** [1]

On the account in the *Theaetetus*, the slavery of menial work has to do with meeting the standards set by other human beings rather than by one's own desire for the truth. Servility in this case is not metaphorical: there is a literal master who the lawyer serves, the judge or jury whom he must please.

One might wonder whether a condition of responsiveness to the judgement of another is always servile. Consider teaching and learning. Is the student servile, bound by necessity to please his teacher? We see mere teacher-pleasing as well as mere student-pleasing as ways in which the educational endeavor might fail. Education is neither flattery nor entertainment.

It matters, in the end, who benefits from the practice, as well as the nature and quality of the benefit. Teaching done well is for the sake of the student, with an eye to the student eventually developing for himself his own version of the teacher's habits of mind. In this respect, teaching resembles parenting—it is a replacement process. Socrates' lawyer, by contrast, must please for the sake of his success, victory in court, his fee, and such success costs him his freedom, his human flourishing. Such a lawyer does not operate under the guise of justice, but something far less than that.

Teaching is not always done well. Ten years ago I gave up one form of academic life for another, leaving a career as a research academic in a public university for the life of a teacher in a liberal arts college. Both

lives were in some sense the life of the mind. But in the former case, the students needed my class to graduate; they were not motivated to absorb the skills I might be able to pass on to them. Regardless, the classes were much too large for any such passing-on to take place, apart from the few students who sought it out. Both teacher and student had incentives to please one another; neither had the incentive to seek any real good from teaching or learning.

By contrast, liberal arts is characterized by a heavy load of other-directed teaching work, helping students to think through challenging material, in small groups or one-on-one. I have incentives to seek the student's good, and moreover, I have the resources to do it. In some sense, both types of teaching are instrumental, yet it took a major conversion for me to choose the latter over the former. That is because, in our depraved and corrupted society, the latter type of work is far less prestigious and the pay substantially lower.

Let's hypothesize that the difference between servile work like Plato's lawyer and the beautiful usefulness of the airport window washer has to do with providing a recognizable human good. Clean and beautiful spaces to live and work in, health and well-being, physical fitness, intellectual growth, and justice all count as such goods. Garbage collectors do such work, as well as those entrepreneurs that develop or sell something of real value: lights that flash yellow when a car is in your blind spot, cancer treatments, electric dishwashers, eyeglass repair kits.

My hypothetical definition of work as an activity that serves the human good of course runs afoul of the apparent variations in the human good. In ancient times, temples where infants might be sacrificed to the gods may have seemed to serve the human good; now perhaps they would not, or at any rate, we do not call them "temples." We make mistakes, individually

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and collectively, as to our good. Yet basic necessities like food, drink, clothing, and housing seem universal and timeless, as do art, music, study, and worship. We must not let the stochastic and imperfect way we judge the human good be used to justify practices that either serve no recognizable good or that produce recognizable harm.

One of the features of work environments in the contemporary US—and I suspect, in Europe as well if not everywhere—is that recognizable goods are served through highly flawed institutions, to the point where the original function of the institution may seem to be lost. The most dramatic example is the Large Language Model university, where an institution meant to form the young for work and for civic life becomes a living joke, where the teachers use machines to generate content so that students may pretend to absorb it.[2] In the end, an empty credential or degree is exchanged for cash. An institution designed and built to make our communities function better by passing on essential skills and habits now sucks cash out of the economy in a sort of pyramid scheme.

Speak with workers or professionals regularly and there are other, perhaps less dramatic, malformations of institutions against their mission. In health care, in law and politics, in agriculture or in ministry, institutions can consume their founding good rather than nurturing it. I regularly have conversations with people inclined to a form of service who find that employment in the designated institutions is an exercise in frustration and disillusionment. They cannot find the good they seek through the tasks they are expected to perform.

One way in which my hypothetical definition is useful, then, is to inspire the reform of institutions so that they are aligned with their original missions, the human good or goods such an institution exists to serve.

However, the hypothetical definition also exposes a more timeless and stubborn difficulty. It can hardly escape notice that the most useful types of work, where the human good served is most transparent, have the lowest prestige and the worst working conditions. Consider garbage collecting, cleaning bathrooms, the work of a home health aid, or work in grocery stores or restaurants. Is there any work less prestigious? Yet an investor who does nothing but buy low and sell high, guided by luck and acumen, pulling wealth out of the community to a dimension far out of proportion to what he puts in, is honored, paid well, and given vast amounts of power.

If we were better trained, or trained ourselves, to think from the bottom up about the human good, could we have a hope of reversing this perverse set of incentives, the machinery of so many forms of gross injustice?

If we were better trained, or trained ourselves, to think from the bottom up about the human good, could we have a hope of reversing this perverse set of incentives, the machinery of so many forms of gross injustice?

Let's return to the condition of a contemporary service worker, for instance, a line-cook in a diner. The cook must cook food that pleases the customer and his employer. The two masters may give orders in tension with one another: the employer may want the food made cheaply in a way that is less delicious to the customer. In this respect, the line-cook looks as slavish as Plato's lawyer.

Yet neither of the line-cook's masters is necessarily concerned with the objective purpose of cooking, to supply the needs of a hungry human being with an eye to nutrition and pleasure. (In the good order I imagine, both criteria must be satisfied, not one at the expense of the other.) In most cases, in fact, the customer's good is subordinate to the bottom line, rather than the bottom line being determined by the customer's good. It can be easier to supply a pleasing appearance, low light,

gimmicks, a sense of being in a fashionable place, food that is either prestigious (with high-end obscure ingredients) or pleasing without being nutritious (lobster mac-and-cheese).

I warrant that the line-cook's own well-being, the sense in which his or her work serves his or her happiness, depends on the concern of whoever governs the restaurant. In those cases where the owner or manager takes a central concern for the good of the eater, the cook will be able to perfect her craft under the guise of another's good. The customer's recognition that his own good is satisfied feeds the owner's bottom line; the cook's struggle for excellence is under the guise of the same good; all the right things coincide.

■■■

It should be obvious that service work—or any work—aimed at the genuine good for human beings is rare. Corrupt or depraved institutions, aimed at producing appearances of satisfaction for the sake of the maintenance of a given revenue structure, are far more common. It is of course possible within such an institution to work with one's own solitary eye on the human good. So the fast-food worker who treats his customers with care; the exploited adjunct who takes time with her students; the hidden hotel custodian who leaves a carpet spotless.

The general depravity and corruption of our institutions obscures the original notion of servile work. High-prestige work, unlike service work, is often extremely empty: it is busywork, box-checking, or fulfilling imaginary roles in imaginary projects. The management consultant may find a way to help a client in truth, but the incentives all lie in the direction of pretending to help by moving arbitrarily chosen metrics. Such work, like the work of Plato's lawyer, is purely instrumental, or even worse, devoted to fantasy pleasures,

The general depravity and corruption of our institutions obscures the original notion of servile work.

enchantment by words like "compliance", "effectiveness" or "efficiency" and by the charms of high pay and high status.

I began with the distinction between work and leisure, and ended up distinguishing two kinds of work, hollow work and real work, aimed at a human good. I suspect that if we lived in a world of real work, leisure would seem less important. The human goods have a luminosity that inspires us to perfect our work, knowing that its perfection is part of its benefit. Such a vision of work makes the end of leisure more visible—after all, the beauty of such work, and the splendor of a developing and developed human being, are worthy of contemplation in their own right. V&V

NOTES

1. Plato, *Theaetetus,* M. Levett, trans. (Hackett Classic, 1990) 172d–173a.

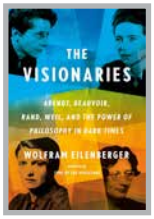
2. It is not necessary to refer to breathless reporting such as in the recent New York Magazine article to see this as a present phenomenon. Consider OpenAI's partnership with the California State University system, or Ohio State's recent announcement that all students will be "trained" in the use of large language models.

Zena Hitz is a Tutor at St. John's College and founder and president of the Catherine Project. She is the author of two books, *A Philosopher Looks at the Religious Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) and *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

Good Reads

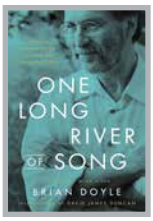
We asked our authors to recommend a book they had read over the past couple of years. Here is what they said:

The Visionaries: Arendt, Beauvoir, Rand, Weil, and the Power of Philosophy in Dark Times



BY WOLFRAM EILENBERGER

An illuminating quadruple biographical/intellectual history of Arendt, Beauvoir, Rand, and Weil. Pairs well with Arendt's *The Human Condition*. And Merlot. —PAUL BLASCHKO

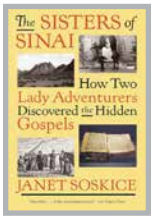


One Long River of Song: Notes on Wonder

BY BRIAN DOYLE

One Long River of Song: Notes on Wonder is a collection of lyrical, brief, and prose-poetic essays curated by Brian Doyle's friends and colleagues after his death from brain cancer in 2017; the introduction alone is a moving portrait of Doyle. As David James Duncan writes, "This is not just a book. It is a sacred offering, a family album, a psalm, a prayer. It is a love song to the world and a hand extended to every one of us." —KAREN E. BOHLIN

The Sisters of Sinai: How Two Lady Adventurers Discovered the Hidden Gospels



BY JANET SOSKICE

This wonderfully written book tells the true story of two exceptional Scottish twins who became adventurers, manuscript hunters, and Bible scholars. —ZENA HITZ

Anna Karenina

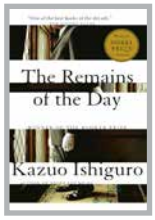
BY LEO TOSTOY

This 19th century Russian novel opens with the following line: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Over the next 900 pages, Tolstoy paints a portrait of the particular joys and sorrows deep within a set of families. Beautifully written and psychologically astute. —ANNA BONTA MORELAND

Living Speech: Resisting the Empire of Force

BY JAMES BOYD WHITE

I only wish I had found White's little masterpiece sooner! Finally, a book that treats the formative power of language with the seriousness it deserves. The writing is so economical and lucid. Practicing what he preaches, White speaks from his own silent center to ours. No noise. Each word thoughtfully chosen. Through close readings of legal and literary texts, White develops his thesis that dehumanization and regimes of force are fed by our empty speech and automatic thinking. "Language is always dying in our minds," he writes, "and it is our responsibility to give it life." —CHRIS HIGGINS



The Remains of the Day

BY KAZUO ISHIGURO

This choice was tough. The obvious option for this issue of the magazine would be Ling Ma's 2018 dystopian novel about work, made crazy popular by the Apple series. But I'm going with the hauntingly beautiful 1989 Ishiguro classic, *Remains of the Day*. Dystopian in its own way, I love how the central character's pursuit of excellence at work corrodes his moral imagination—an implicit theme in *Severance* as well. (If Anthony Hopkins was the lead actor in the TV adaptation of *Severance*, I might have chosen differently). —SUZANNE SHANAHAN

PAUL BLASCHKO

Creating a Culture of Virtuous Leisure in a World of Total Work

The Ant and the Grasshopper, A Modern Retelling

A clean-cut college junior walks briskly across the quad, head down, clutching an overstuffed padfolio with drafts of his resumé and forty marked-up cover letters, one for each prestigious internship he'll be applying for. As he looks down to grab one of the sheets of paper that are slipping out, he suddenly collides with a wandering freshman who, with empty hands in empty pockets, is reciting a passage of some poem about dragonflies. The loose leaves are thrown into the air, flipping and spinning, catching flashes of sunshine as they float to the ground. The freshman suddenly comes to attention in a moment of epiphany. "Oh," he cries, "That's what those are for!"

ARTWORK BY SUSAN ABBOTT

I think we all know deep down that the ever-increasing pressures to produce, accomplish, and achieve are somehow incompatible with the environment we're trying to create as educators . . .

Neither student is the hero of this parable, at least not in my telling of it. Each represents values our students bring to our college campuses—values that we, as educators, reinforce or resist. These values produce tension in our shared life on campus that often shows up as contradictions in the lecture hall, during office hours, or in the varied communications with which we recruit and retain our students, and then communicate with them as alumni and eventual donors.

The contradictions also show up in our own intellectual lives as professors. We shake our heads about status-obsessed students, even as we obsess about publishing in top-tier journals ourselves. We can't understand why students are more concerned with getting an 'A' than diving deep into the substance of the *Republic*. But when we go back to our offices we work tirelessly on all manner of professional trivia while our own copies of the *Republic* gather dust on the shelf.

I think we all know deep down that the ever-increasing pressures to produce, accomplish, and achieve are somehow incompatible with the environment we're trying to create as educators; that the values driving us in our professional lives lead to a cognitive dissonance that's easier to diagnose and dismiss when we see it show up in the personal and professional aspirations of our students. "Don't worry about that internship, just focus on learning," is about as comforting and useful to a college sophomore as the advice I once received from a much older colleague, "Don't publish in graduate school or in your first couple years as a faculty member, you really don't have anything substantive to contribute until you've been working for 3–5 years."

The contemporary university campus has become as much a part of what Josef Pieper calls the "world of total work" as the factory was in the middle of the nineteenth century, and as bursting with frenetic activity as a Silicon Valley tech start-up is today.[1] Whether it's fundraising, program-building, publishing, or cranking out lectures, I'd venture to guess that very few of us in academe feel like we're "living the life of the mind" or ever approaching what the ancients would have recognized as contemplation.

What we need, then, is an anchor—something to which we can hold fast as we populate our Google Calendars and book travel for the coming semester. Something that will tether us to our real work, that will help us align our efforts with our purpose. Something we can credibly propose to our students as a touchstone or locus for a well-integrated life. But what could possibly provide us with such stability?

THE PROBLEM: WE'VE FORGOTTEN WHAT WE'RE DOING

Say that our shared goal in higher-ed is to help students integrate work into well-lived lives while contributing to healthy communities. And say we also aim to instill a love of learning for its own sake. That is to say: suppose we are actually aiming to deliver a liberal education. The first claim I want to convince you of is that the way we spend our time and effort is, in general, radically misaligned with these goals.

Anyone who stops to think about it will see that students learn as much or more from the cultures of their universities as they do from explicit instruction or teaching. Consider the differences you observe at freshmen orientation versus commencement or, at my university, during Senior's Week. Somehow our students transform in remarkably uniform ways. By the end of their four years on campus there are any number of archetypes that have been embodied, and any observant faculty member could probably differentiate between a roving band of finance majors and an

Anyone who stops to think about it will see that students learn as much or more from the cultures of their universities as they do from explicit instruction or teaching.

anxious cluster of classics majors. More broadly, the vast majority of students walking across the stage to get their diplomas share so much more in common with any one of their peers at that moment than virtually any other demographic group to which they belong. They exude a similar energy. They possess similar aspirations. They speak a common dialect.

While recent pedagogical reforms have emphasized course-level learning goals and backward design, we've largely overlooked what is arguably the primary source of designable student learning: university culture. If we take our role as educators seriously, then, we need to focus as much on community and culture building as we do on determining what to include in our syllabi.

Neglecting this hidden curriculum comes at a high cost. It's not just student disengagement that I'm worried about here, or the growing pressure to articulate the value of a liberal arts education in utilitarian terms. Those issues are downstream and, I think, require far more nuanced diagnoses and treatments than any I've yet encountered. I'm worried about the very integrity of academe, about well-placed public mistrust, and that our laser focus on the thin criteria used in rankings will prevent us from asking the important questions until it's too late. The stakes, in my mind, could not be any higher.

So here's my pitch: I think professors who genuinely care about the educational mission of their university should commit themselves to building "virtuous cultures of leisure," and that administrators should do everything in their power to enable this work. In characterizing such cultures, I note striking overlap with practices that contribute to such cultures and practices associated with "leisure" in the classical sense. By more clearly articulating this connection, I aim to demonstrate how investment in the community of the university, in building up a culture of leisure and contemplative learning, promotes the learning goals we should all care about most deeply.

In short, my suggestion is that those of us in higher-ed whose primary commitment remains educating students for their own (and for the common) good should recapture "scholē" as the root or foundation of our schools, that is: to be a place where leisure and learning go hand in hand both inside and outside of the classroom. To do this, we need to seed and nurture cultures of virtue and contemplative leisure while taking seriously the "life of action" for which we are purportedly preparing most of our students.

ACHIEVEMENTISM, OUR CONTEMPORARY WORK ETHIC

The term "work ethic" was coined by sociologists in the 1950s to describe the cultural attitudes we've adopted toward work. These theorists built on a project started in the 1930s by Max Weber, who was trying to understand how capitalism came to be embedded in Western culture in the 20th century, and why it took the form of large,

The contemporary university campus has become as much a part of what Josef Pieper calls the world of total work as the factory was in the middle of the nineteenth century and as bursting with frenetic activity as a Silicon Valley tech start-up is today.

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bureaucratic institutions hyper-focused on rational organization, efficiency and, productivity in continuous pursuit of the maximization of profit.

A work ethic can be understood as an implicit cultural understanding of the moral value work plays in a well-lived life. It exists at the level of the social unconscious, but it both governs behavior at the individual level and helps explain social phenomena. The American endorsement of the beliefs that hard work is inherently virtuous, for instance, or that those who don't work are lazy helps explain both why we idolize and why we try to emulate figures like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk. It also helps explain why it's historically been difficult to gain widespread support for social programs like Universal Basic Income.

Weber's insight was that the work ethic of post-reformation Christianity laid the groundwork for capitalism to flourish. A belief that social classes reflected a divine order, for instance, or that the acquisition of wealth (so long as it wasn't spent) reflected blessedness as a sign of salvation. In today's world, we've largely abandoned the moral and religious worldview in which

this work ethic was forged. But its effects continue to haunt us.

We are driven by an insatiable desire for personal and professional achievement. It is grounded in the belief that personal value is bound up with success in the sphere of work, that self-improvement has, as its aim, efficiency and productivity at work, and that achievement in work is the grounds of our self-worth. The philosopher Byung Chul Han aptly notes this ethos at work at a cultural level: "Today's society" he claims, is ". . . a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories. Twenty-first-century society is . . . an achievement society." Inhabitants of an achievement society are "achievement-subjects . . . [they are] . . . entrepreneurs of themselves."[2]

I will call this work ethic "achievementism," and define it as the philosophical position that our purpose and value lie in continuous achievement: that self-worth depends on and reflects one's status and success is both the means to, and the end of, a well-lived life. In an apt analogy, Arthur Brooks likens our obsession with achievement to an addiction:

> **People sacrifice their links with others for their true love, success. They travel for business on anniversaries; they miss Little League games and recitals while working long hours. Some forgo marriage for their careers—earning the appellation of being "married to their work"—even though a good relationship is more satisfying than any job.[3]**

Achievementism isn't so much a well-articulated philosophy that we consciously endorse. It's more like a theory posited to explain our actual behavior. There are our "beliefs" and then there are our beliefs. If actions speak louder than words,

achievementism is the creed we're living by when we miss our kids' t-ball game to finish a report.

Weber described the effects of the protestant work ethic as creating an "iron cage," a social framework that promises freedom, but delivers a Sisyphusian cycle of production and consumption fueled by ever-expanding desires. Achievementism does the same thing but in an even more pernicious way. As "entrepreneurs of ourselves" we've internalized a drive that prior generations enforced through control, discipline, and religious prohibition. As Han observes, "Prohibitions, commandments, and the law [have been] replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation." Today's workaholic engages in "auto-aggression" and "auto-exploitation," forms of motivation that are far more efficient than any sort of managerial domination. Our "iron cage" has been gilded, and we've come to embrace its glittering bars.

As achievement-subjects, Han claims, we have come to see inactivity as a "deficiency that must be overcome as quickly as possible."[4] Han's thesis, though it's been updated for the age of Tik-Tok in the style of continental philosophy and critical theory, is essentially a restatement of a thesis Josef Pieper articulated in 1948. "[T]he original meaning of the concept of leisure," Pieper writes, "has practically been forgotten in today's leisure-less culture of 'total work.'"[5] In Pieper's "culture of 'total work,'" everything, including leisure and education, is reshaped to serve productivity. As inhabitants of it, he's suggesting that we are so

obsessed with work and achievement that we can only think of leisure in contrast to it, as a negative space between projects or a temporary break to recharge our biological batteries.

"WHAT DOES LEISURE LOOK LIKE TODAY?"

This is a question that, quite frankly, stumped me in a class I teach called "The Working Life: Work, Meaning, and Happiness." I'd spent so much of the time designing the class to scaffold the ideas we'd need to even articulate the debates surrounding the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* that I hadn't stopped to apply the concepts in simple terms to everyday life. As a seasoned teacher, I quickly turned the question around on the student who'd asked it as I collected some thoughts on the differences between *technē* (skill), *praxis* (action), and *theōria* (contemplation), and each of their relevant virtues.

Even if the student was satisfied with the eventual response (which they probably weren't), I found the question gnawing at me over the next few weeks. All of the historical touchstones that provided me with examples of leisure—ancient symposia, 18th-century salons, or even monastic rules of life—simply didn't translate to the context I found myself inhabiting with my students. This question stayed with me—and I realized I didn't have a clear answer. So, with some students and colleagues at Notre Dame, I built one.

Through a series of decidedly fortunate events, I found myself creating a community around this ideal within the College of Arts & Letters at Notre Dame. The vision statement for the Sheedy Family Program in Economy, Enterprise, and Society states: "We are an intellectually rigorous community at Notre Dame that goes beyond fundamentals to find deeper meaning in the practice of business through the liberal arts." For those in whom I sense a similar pedagogical and philosophical disposition, I articulate the vision more briefly: We're trying to integrate the life action with the life of contemplation through dialogue.

In the SFP, we group students into cohorts of thirty. During their first year in the program they take "Business in Context," a gateway class that asks big questions like "Where did the term 'Economy' come from? What does it refer to now?" They also go on retreat to learn how to closely read poems like "The Road Not Taken," and interrogate why it's so often misinterpreted. We form bonds through competitions, academic workshops, and lightly structured late-night dialogues around a campfire on the shores of Lake Michigan. The whole community comes back transformed and ready to take on the rest of the curriculum.

This curriculum consists of more than just courses. While students do take more courses together (my "Work, Meaning, and Happiness" class, for example, and a senior seminar called "Investing and the Good Life"), most of our "curriculum" is experiential. We gather for three-hour dialogues over dinner each month in a room that looks like we're on the set for Harry Potter or Downton Abbey. We trek to Chicago, New York, or Silicon Valley to pose questions to professionals that are sometimes deeply practical and sometimes deeply personal. All of these have philosophical dialogue at their core: we train our students to actively listen and carefully distinguish, to pose strong questions to their peers, and to respond to these questions with confidence and candor. We prohibit technology at all of these events, but, honestly, by the third or fourth week in the community, we rarely find ourselves having to enforce the prohibition. We've intentionally designed our programming to fit into our students' busy lives, and we've negotiated a deal with them: We won't ask you to attend anything we don't believe is essential to your educational journey through the program, but when we do we want complete buy-in and undivided attention.

I explain all this because it is my answer to the prescient question my student posed. I believe this is what leisure looks like at the University of Notre Dame, I believe this is how we integrate the ideals of action and contemplation into a single life.

This program challenges our students to get out of the "achievementist" mindset. One of the most common questions I'm asked about is what sort of incentive we offer. Do students get a minor for the classes they take? Do they get an "honors" designation on their transcript? The answer is: nothing. Or, at least, nothing you'd recognize in the framework of achievement. The same is true for the faculty leadership team. Yes, we're paid to do this work, but it's not an engine that will propel us into an elite

academic position. We could honestly be more "productive" by cutting the time we spend planning programs in half. For both us and for our students, though, the reward is largely intrinsic to the work. The end is contained within the means. It's leisure, scholē: "Productive activity pursued for its own sake."

POSTSCRIPT: THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Stories with clear messages have largely gone out of fashion today. The fable or morality tale seems too didactic for our modern tastes, maybe even a bit manipulative. But I'm not opposed to a story with a clear moral. Even if we don't agree with it, it can give us an interpretive starting point.

The two students that appear in the introductory story (stand-ins for Aesop's "ant" and "grasshopper" respectively) represent motivations and values that all of our students can and should possess to some degree. They also represent motivations that we, ourselves, struggle with as achievement-minded professors. Integrating these through programming in credible ways—creating "curricula" consisting of both classes and real-world experiences, and architecting time and space for a community to bond through dialogue over meals or on retreat—is a way of moving toward that ever-elusive goal for institutions committed to a liberal arts education: helping our students integrate action with contemplation in the context of lives well-lived. V&V

NOTES

1. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (St. Augustine's Press, 1998), p. 26.
2. Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 8–11.
3. Arthur C. Brooks, "'Success Addicts' Choose Being Special Over Being Happy," *The Atlantic* (July 30, 2020).
4. Byung-Chul Han, *Vita Contemplativa: In Praise of Inactivity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024), p. 1.
5. Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, p. 26.

Paul Blaschko teaches philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, and is the founding Director of the Sheedy Family Program in Economy, Enterprise, and Society. His current courses and writing focus on how the humanities can help us find meaningful work. He is the co-author of *The Good Life Method* (Penguin Press, 2022), and his second book *Worklife: A Philosophical Guide* is under contract with Princeton University Press.

INTERLUDE

What Makes Your Work Meaningful?

"Wonder is not incidental to a life worth working—it is foundational. It demands courage, humility, and a sustained willingness to enter into spaces of discomfort where easy answers are unavailable. Wonder reframes discomfort not as something to be avoided, but as something to be mined for meaning, connection, and growth."

—MICHELLE WEISE

We asked people from a variety of professions and backgrounds what makes their work meaningful, and while the nature of their jobs and the content of their responses varied, we were struck by a common thread of love and commitment to the good of others. Perhaps there is a common vocation, or a foundational motivation, that transforms work into more than a job.

Rana Awdish

Physician, Henry Ford Hospital

I was trained in a biomedical model that taught me to view the body as a machine with broken parts I was meant to fix. In that model, the patient became an object,

stripped of agency. I've come to understand that healing is not something one person confers upon another. It emerges in relationship, co-created with the body's own wisdom.

Because of this shift, my work feels most meaningful when I help others, from patients to fellow physicians, reconnect to their own strength and motivation, even in moments of deep vulnerability. Healing happens when we meet each other as humans. Humans who are flawed, aware of their own fragility, and attuned to shared suffering. It is not just physical; it is embodied, relational, and alive.

To practice this way, I must bring my whole self. My medical knowledge matters, but so does my lived experience, my vulnerability, and my willingness to be present. Illness often strips people of agency, identity, and control. We can help rebuild those foundations through our presence and support.

I want us to see the full personhood of our patients, and to understand that medicine lives not only in interventions but in presence, perception, and in the spaces between us. That is where true healing begins. M&M

Rana Awdish, MD, is a pulmonary and critical care physician serving as the Director of the Pulmonary Hypertension Program at Henry Ford Hospital. She also serves as the Medical Director of Care Experience for Henry Ford's Health System, where she has integrated compassionate communication strategies and Narrative Medicine practice into the curriculum. She is the author of *In Shock*, a critically acclaimed, bestselling memoir based on her own critical illness.

Angela Hubbard

Custodian, University of Notre Dame

To me, it's waking up every morning, thanking God for another day's journey to be able to come to work knowing I have a purpose and a job to do, all the while making sure the employees and students are coming into a well-cleaned and organized building. What's more meaningful is the smiles a person or student can put on my face just by appreciating the small things, things that are not required in my job description, that I go out of my way to do for them. I have worked at the University of Notre Dame for 35 years, over 20 of them in a girls' dorm. Not too long ago, a lady came into Geddes Hall (where I now work). She was heading to the 3rd floor. When she came back down, she recognized me from working in the dorm she used to live in, noting how helpful I was to her and her roommates, cleaning their private bathroom. For this young lady to tell me this after she graduated 15 years ago, now that is meaningful work to me. I love what I do. I love to help others in any way that I can, big or small. It's always a team effort with me. V&V

Angela Hubbard began her Notre Dame career in 1990 working as a line server at North Dining Hall. Four years later she was transferred to the Building Services Support team as a Custodian. She worked in a number of residence halls until she was recommended to Breen-Phillips Hall, where she remained for over 20 years. She then decided it was time for a change and moved to Geddes Hall, where she has been ever since.

Guru Madhavan

Norman R. Augustine Senior Scholar and Senior Director of Programs, National Academy of Engineering

What happens when a system you trust fails? An instrument falters. A model collapses. A decision meant to help backfires. Meaningful work cracks you open, like a geode revealing its crystalline core, to uncover the potential of what you can build and who you can become.

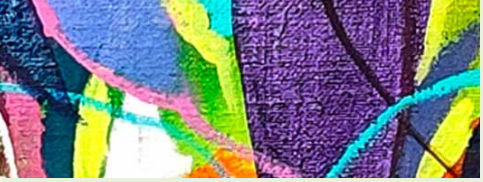
In engineering, true productivity springs from insight. We build, we break, we begin anew. Claude Claremont wrote, "The engineer learns most on the scrapheap," where lessons rise from the rusted, the discarded, the unfinished. Each misstep reveals context and consequence, refining the work and the worker.

My most transformative moments stemmed from quiet failures. I nearly failed control theory, yet it became the lens through which I think in systems. My GRE verbal score was dismal, but later nudged me toward writing. Reclaimed from the scrapheap, these stumbles reshaped my potential, opening paths I hadn't envisioned.

Across my work in medical products, systems analysis, and technology and workforce policy, one question persists: Who will this touch, and how carefully can we account for them? Here, productivity and purpose converge.

Every system we craft reaches beyond our hands. Others inherit our creations, navigating their promise and perils. Meaning in engineering lies in the audacity of returning to the flawed, the unresolved, seeing clearly what it demands, and engaging it again, and again. This relentless, revealing, regenerative rhythm, like steel forged in the scrapheap's fire, sustains the practice and sharpens its purpose. M&M

Guru Madhavan is the Norman R. Augustine Senior Scholar and senior director of programs at the National Academy of Engineering. He is the author of *Applied Minds: How Engineers Think* and *Wicked Problems: How to Engineer a Better World.*



Maria F. Vazquez

Superintendent, Orange County Public Schools (Florida)

I was terrified on the day I started kindergarten. I didn't speak a word of English, and I feared that no one would understand me. My parents fled Cuba for Florida before I was born, and they saw education as the key to success in America. As scared as I was at first, I found a sanctuary in school. My kindergarten teacher, Ms. Alvarez, ensured I was around students who could translate, and she consistently checked in to make sure I wasn't left behind. Over the years, teachers saw my potential and pushed me. Because of my experience in school, I see myself in every student, regardless of their challenges. Reaching a struggling reader or getting to a breakthrough on a tough concept is immensely rewarding. And now I get to help make sure these moments happen for more than 200,000 students each year.

Our district is urban, suburban and rural and serves students from 199 countries who speak 176 languages and dialects. We need to make sure our schools provide each child with an individualized pathway. We offer a range of advanced studies options, more than 40 magnet programs, provide alternative education programs that combine work and learning, and maintain a network of career and technical colleges.

But we're always looking for ways to do more. Public education serves as the great equalizer. It provides every child, regardless of their background or circumstances, with the opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed. So we can't slow down. V&V

Maria Vazquez has served at every level of the education system and has extensive expertise in curriculum and instruction. In 2022, she became Superintendent of Orange County Public Schools. During her tenure, she has expanded access to advanced coursework for historically underserved students, recruited great teachers to the most vulnerable schools, and reprioritized the district's budget to support teaching and learning. Under her leadership, OCPS earned an "A" grade from the Florida Department of Education.

Jason Wesaw

Educator and Multi-disciplinary Artist, Potawatomi (Turtle Clan)

My work is meaningful because it's created from a place of Love. I believe we're each given a unique set of skills, tools of a sort, with which to shape and refine the reasons for our existence. The language of visual art is an incredibly powerful instrument that I have in my toolbox . I want to be a conduit for a higher power, one who reminds me that we are deeply spiritual beings, living a very interconnected and often flawed human experience. While creating with paper and clay, I am constantly inspired by the enduring relationships we have with the lands, waters, and skies around us. The natural world teaches us so much about nurturing and reciprocity, which can guide us in how we thoughtfully interact with other people. The earth provides inspiration to draw or sculpt in a way that decentralizes the self and opens us up to truly understanding our place amongst all of creation. When we acknowledge our role in this circle, it makes accepting others unlike us quite easy. I happen to feel this is one of the most important issues that we need to overcome in modern times: How do we better Love and accept those who may look different, have diverse beliefs, or live in a separate part of the world than us? I desire for my art to remind the viewers of the importance of healthy and respectful communication, as it shows the capacity we have to care for and Love one another. M&M

Jason Wesaw is an educator and multi-disciplinary artist, exhibiting works in an array of media including ceramics, textiles, works on paper, and traditional cultural pieces. His projects relate stories about the Potawatomi people's ancient and evolving connection to the Land, the Sky, the Water, and Beyond. He is dedicated to working in his Tribal community as a Peacemaker and believes strongly in the healing, empowering qualities of relationship-building through the timeless, traditional teachings of his ancestors. Jason is Potawatomi (Turtle Clan) and lives near the historic Pokagon Potawatomi settlement of Rush Lake in southwestern Michigan.

MICHELLE WEISE

The Soul of Work

Navigating Purpose in an Age of Spaghetti Pathways

When I first met Dana Allen Walsh, a senior pastor at a progressive church in my hometown, it quickly became clear that we shared an abiding interest in the *soul of work*—the search for purpose and meaning through our vocations.

At the time, I was just about to deliver a commencement address titled "Nothing Is Wasted," a message to young college graduates about the hidden value of detours, failures, and apparent dead-ends. I urged them not to view these moments as a waste of time or resources, but rather as signs of growth. The worst moments can often serve as fertile ground for profound growth and unexpected transformation.

ARTWORK BY DENYS GOLDEN

Calling, it turns out, is rarely static or singular. It is a dynamic, relational process, shaped by ongoing discernment, reflection, and the courage to listen both to oneself and to others.

What I did not anticipate was how deeply this message would resonate with Dana. She told me it mirrored the final sermon she had preached at her former church, where she reflected on the messy beginnings of a community garden—one that starts, as she put it, with "a huge pile of stinky compost." To her, this compost was a powerful metaphor: the scraps and failures we often seek to discard are precisely what enriches and sustains new life. Perhaps one of the most surprising things I learned from Dana was that the most pressing concern brought to her by parishioners was their struggle with a career transition of some sort.

Without knowing it, we each had been wrestling with the same questions of how to help people chart a path forward amid the muck of uncertainty and setbacks. Despite the different paths we had taken—Dana into ministry and I into studying the future of work—we were both helping others with their career navigation.

Dana was eager to learn more about how I was seeing the world of work getting more complicated by the day with advanced technologies. And I, in turn, found myself yearning to address the "soul" of work. I had spent so many years thinking about skill building for a wide swath of the American population and unlocking barriers to pursuing an education while working that I was beginning to worry that somehow we were missing the question of purpose and meaning in that pursuit of *more*—more education, more skills, and more economic mobility between better jobs. I wasn't seeing any trending conversations about tying together the survival of work and workers to the flourishing of our souls.

Something was missing. *You and me*—human beings with souls.

The word, soul, can catch people off guard. But I use it as a placeholder for however we

think about our inner lives, our spirituality, or what moves and motivates us internally to behave in certain ways. I use this word soul because I think we need more ways of talking about aligning our inner lives, the inner values and passions we carry, to any sort of external-facing contribution we make in the world.

How do we find fulfillment in our work? And perhaps more importantly, how do we find a sense of purpose even when our work doesn't feel purposeful?

Dana and I were asking the same questions. And out of that recognition, the earliest seeds of our podcast, "A Life Worth Working," were planted. Since that first walk together, we have begun exploring a renewed understanding of calling: one that embraces the messiness, imperfection, and circuitous routes through which people forge meaningful lives.

We call them Spaghetti Pathways—these broken paths that include moments of downshifting, real stuckness, and something that feels like a detour in life. They can also feel like sharp pivots that include deep and wide upskilling to stay ahead of the curve.

Our work lives, we recognize, will not be about building on strengths and moving from one success and certainty to another. Instead, most of us will go through cycles

of transformation that require a time of disorientation—of unknowing, of uncertainty. It's not a straight, linear path.

Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr speaks of it as the "wisdom pattern: order, disorder, and reorder," the title of his 2020 book.[1] Similarly, in *Praying the Psalms*, theologian Walter Brueggemann believes we experience a constant cycle of movement—of "(a) being securely oriented; (b) being painfully disoriented; and (c) being surprisingly reoriented."[2]

In our podcast, we focus on the disorder and the painful disorientation. We dwell in

the messy middle. The mud and the muck is where resilience is born. And it doesn't look Instagram-worthy. But in that stuckness, the most significant learning tends to happen.

And we have been blown away by our guests' willingness to open up and share their most vulnerable moments of stuckness. They've been so generous with us in their ability to linger in that muddy mess of their work lives. Ultimately, they also see how nothing is wasted: Every experience counts and creates the conditions for new life and growth.

"GOOD WORK" IS WONDER WORK

Again and again in our conversations with guests, a few themes keep emerging. One is simply that the traditional metrics for evaluating "good work"—status, income, prestige—are increasingly inadequate. Instead, meaning and a meaningful life, for many of our guests, have surfaced through *wonder*. Wonder is essential for curiosity, imagination, and resilience.

Wonder is not merely a fleeting feeling of awe, but a critical posture for living. Damon Davis, an award-winning post-disciplinary artist, chases wonder as a way of life, where art becomes merely the byproduct of a much larger quest for more imagination. Wonder is something to actively cultivate and fiercely protect. He's less afraid of death than the death of wonder. Without wonder, Damon asserts, "We wither and die."[3]

Similarly, death doula Meredith Parfet shares her own return to the "ecstatic" and "spiritual wonder" of her younger self—a conscious choice to reengage with the mystery and openness that many of us lose along the way. She describes how she had "tamped down" her spiritual curiosity through the roadmap she had been dutifully following, which led her to a prestigious business school and the world of hedge funds and venture capital. It was only through her confrontation with serious tragedy, loss, and multiple deaths that she found herself really listening to her call to chaplaincy. She began, as she puts it, using a "different part of my brain or a different set of muscles that I'd never used before." Meredith's work in end-of-life care is imbued with a reverence for the unknown, a humility that wonder demands.

Korean pop star Soeun Lee embraces wonder as an invitation to a more "life-giving" process. Soeun shares her willingness to inhabit confusion—to step repeatedly into new, unfamiliar spaces. Despite the fact that she could have easily continued a life of celebrity, surrounded by managers, agencies, stylists, and a

Wonder, in this sense, is a discipline: a way of moving through the world with courage rather than control; with openness rather than being closed in ourselves.

whole team of people doing things for her, Soeun made a deliberate choice to lean into discomfort and become a novice again. She "had no idea how to be independent," and felt she owed it to herself to step out of her comfort zone. She moved to another country and started law school as a nobody. Her choice was an intentional embrace of vulnerability: a choice to see uncertainty not as a threat, but as an invitation for more learning.

Across these diverse narratives, a pattern emerges: Those who cultivate wonder tend to stretch, grow, and find purpose even in the midst of profound ambiguity.

Collectively, Dana and I have come to see that wonder is not incidental to a life worth working—it is foundational. It demands courage, humility, and a sustained willingness to enter into spaces of discomfort where easy answers are unavailable. Wonder reframes discomfort not as something to be avoided, but as something to be mined for meaning, connection, and growth.

In an age characterized by cynicism and burnout, the question—how do we keep a sense of wonder, curiosity, and vulnerability alive?—feels urgent and necessary. Wonder, in this sense, is a discipline: a way of moving through the world with courage rather than control; with openness rather than being closed in ourselves.

THE POWER OF RELEASE

Many of our interviewees discuss the role of *release*—the moment they break free from external expectations, internal constraints, or unexamined paths. Release is not always a dramatic rupture; often, it is a quiet but decisive shift in posture—a willingness to relinquish what no longer serves in order to embrace possibility, agency, and authenticity.

Education consultant Kwaku Aning recounts a pivotal conversation with his father, whom he finds in tears after a funeral. Kwaku assumes that his father is mourning the loss of his own father. Instead, his father turns to Kwaku and says, "Your sister was your mom's project. Look at how well your sister's doing . . . you were my project, and I failed."

Rather than experiencing this moment as the beginning of a shame spiral, Kwaku describes this moment as "liberating." In

his father's perceived disappointment, Kwaku saw an unexpected freedom: he was no longer "locked into" trying to fulfill someone else's expectations. As he put it, "When no one expects anything from you, that is the most magical moment." It was a release into self-determination—a clean slate that allowed Kwaku to pursue his true passion for music, untethered from inherited scripts about success.

Executive Director of the Wallis Annenberg GenSpace Christopher Leech reveals another dimension of release: discerning what is *not* one's calling. Working closely with individuals at the end of their lives, Christopher found himself "broken" by the emotional weight of the work. Recognizing that this path was not his to follow, he accepted a necessary release from that vocational direction. As he put it, he realized he couldn't persist in a calling that belonged to someone else. That clarity allowed him to reorient toward work with older adults in ways that felt nourishing and sustainable, rather than depleting.

Release, then, is not simply a letting go—it is an active movement toward something deeper and truer. It often involves pain, discomfort, or disorientation. Yet time and again, our guests reveal that it is only by releasing the weight of misplaced expectations that a more expansive, life-giving vision of vocation begins to emerge.

Ultimately, release is essential to a life worth working. It invites us to move not toward passivity, but toward greater agency; not toward resignation, but toward profound renewal by becoming who we are called to be.

BEYOND THE MYTH OF THE BURNING BUSH

The historical understanding of calling has evolved considerably over time. Once confined to religious vocations, it was expanded by figures like Martin Luther to encompass all forms of honest work as potential acts of service. Yet even today, cultural narratives often depict calling as a singular, dramatic event—a "burning bush moment"—where one's purpose becomes instantly clear.

Our guests' stories challenge that myth. Calling, it turns out, is rarely static or singular. It is a dynamic, relational process, shaped by ongoing discernment, reflection, and the courage to listen both to oneself and to others. Author Simone Stolzoff calls it "more of a wobble." Others describe it as more of a nagging, or inconvenient signals that something feels misaligned.

Time and again, our guests have reflected on the importance of listening to these internal cues, even when they contradict societal expectations. Having invested heavily in

college and graduate school, Kristin Olson initially expected to pursue a more traditional, prestigious career. Choosing to become a yoga teacher carried a tinge of diminishment. She even described herself as "just a yoga teacher." But when she finally embraced her unorthodox path as something that was up to her to create, she felt "like a weight was lifted." She saw how her classes kept getting bigger and bigger and recognized she was onto something. Kristin calls it listening to "the whisper," that quiet, persistent intuition that allowed her to step fully into her purpose.

These moments of discernment are often catalyzed by relational feedback—trusted friends, mentors, and even children who bear witness to the truth we struggle to see for ourselves.

Dana's own journey into ministry, for example, did not hinge on a sudden revelation but on "lots of little conversations," small leadership opportunities, and the careful listening to trusted mentors who reflected back to her what they saw taking root.

In this spirit, Scarlett Lewis's story reveals, powerfully, the dynamic, responsive process of a calling—something we create, moment by moment, especially in the face of life's greatest adversities.

Scarlett's son Jesse was murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School. And rather than being broken by pain, she chose love over fear, bitterness, and retreat. She recalls being perfectly content in her inward-facing life as a mother. But Jesse's death made her purpose in life a whole lot more concrete.

Amidst the chaos of that time, Scarlett learned from witnesses and crime scene investigators that her amazing, little six-year-old tried to save nine other friends in the classroom. Her little one displayed such courage and sacrifice in the most trying of circumstances. Scarlett couldn't help but reflect on her own life and realize that so many of the decisions she had been making in her life about relationships and work "were all made in fear." She dedicates her life to transforming pain into a force for good.

The mission of the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement is to make sure that everyone has access to the essential life skills needed for human flourishing. This social-emotional learning movement has caught fire. Choose Love has spread to 16,500 schools in every state in America and across 135 countries. The Buddhist concept that "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional" has been lived out by Scarlett, who is using her pain to help others understand post-traumatic growth—that pain can be fortifying.

Calling, then, is not a singular revelation. For Scarlett, calling is a continual act of choosing love, compassion, and courage over despair.

THE LIMITS OF VOCATION

Vocation shapes identity, but should it shape us entirely? According to National Constitution Center President Jeffrey Rosen, leisure is important, too. Rosen draws from Supreme Court Justice Louis

Brandeis as well as our Founding Fathers to suggest that leisure is not idleness but essential for "self-cultivation, self-mastery, at learning and growing about topics outside of your immediate employment." Rosen wonders if "perhaps we ask too much of work when we expect it to be our main source of meaning."

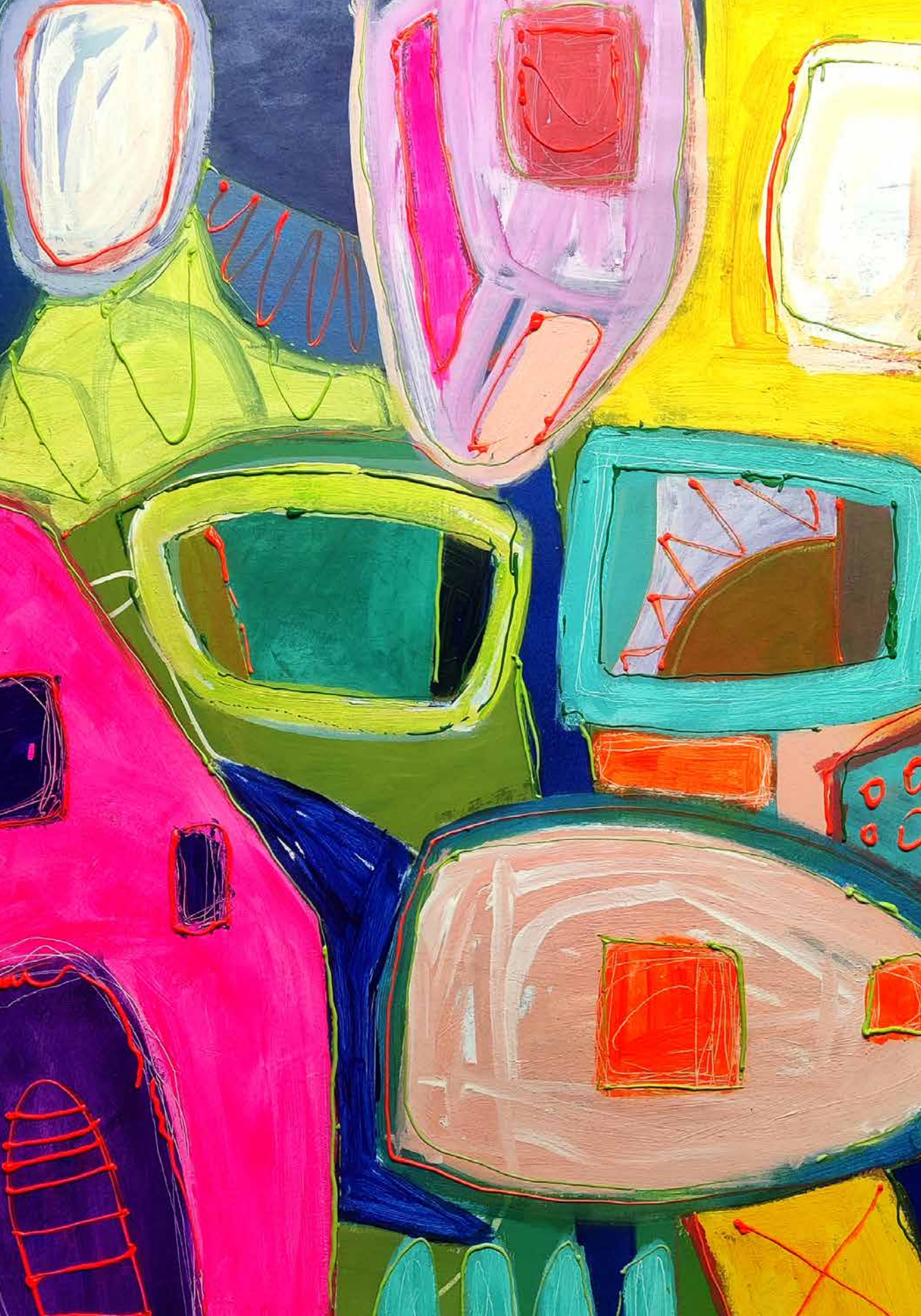
In an achievement-obsessed culture, the boundaries between work and life have blurred dangerously. Author Simone Stolzoff believes that many of us risk making work the central axis of our identity, often to the detriment of our other roles as family members, neighbors, friends, and citizens. Stolzoff invites us to imagine work not as our "vocational soulmate" but as one important, bounded aspect of a rich life. A "good enough job" is one that supports the life we want to build without demanding all of who we are. If we fail to cultivate these aspects of ourselves, we risk losing our sense of identity when work inevitably changes or disappears. Creating healthy boundaries around work is not a luxury; it is a necessity for flourishing. Without them, as Stolzoff warns, work behaves like a gas: It expands to fill all available space.

As we navigate the winding, messy pathways of life, perhaps the truest calling is simply this: to stay open to wonder, courageous in release, faithful in response—and to trust that, step by step, we are shaping a life worth working. V&V

NOTES

1. Richard Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern* (Franciscan Media, 2010), p. 2.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Cascade, 2007).
3. All the following quotations in this essay are from stories shared on Michelle Weise's podcast "A Life Worth Working." Full episodes can be found at alifeworthworking.com or anywhere you listen to podcasts.

Michelle Weise is the Chief Impact Officer of The Kern Family Foundation. She is also the co-host of "A Life Worth Working," a podcast about finding meaning in the work that we do. Her award-winning book, *Long Life Learning: Preparing for Jobs that Don't Even Exist Yet*, was published in 2021, the same year that Thinkers50 named her one of 30 management and leadership thinkers in the world to watch. She has served as the Chief Innovation Officer for various university systems and funders, and with Dr. Clayton Christensen, she co-authored the book, *Hire Education: Mastery, Modularization, and the Workforce Revolution* (2014) while leading the higher education practice at Christensen's Institute for Disruptive Innovation.



ARTWORK BY AGUCHO VELÁSQUEZ

PART II

Employing Vocation

"I wonder what other tools, teaching methods, or extracurricular opportunities we can cultivate so that every student gets their best chance to find a meaningful vocational path that aligns with their core values and will help them to flourish in their professional lives."

ROSALYN W. BERNE

RICARDO NUILA

The People Practice

Dad, Insurance, and Medicine

When I started working at Ben Taub, Houston's largest public hospital, I didn't know what it meant that most of our patients had no health insurance. Growing up, I experienced healthcare the way most people in this country do, which is through private insurance. My pediatricians encountered no snags as they kept me on the vaccine schedule and ensured I didn't fall too far off the growth curve. The doctor-patient relationship looked idyllic from my vantage point.

My dad delivered babies for a living, and every Saturday morning, he brought me to the hospital for his rounds. I was my most docile self during our short car rides, which ended in the parking garage. From there, it was a couple of quick turns into back entrances and service elevators before we were on the labor and delivery floor.

ARTWORK BY ESTÉ MACLEOD

"This is my son," he'd tell the L&D nurses.

"Yes, we've met," they'd respond graciously.

After the intros, my dad would punch a couple of numbers into an electronic keypad to open a door down the hall, and for the rest of the morning, I parked myself in front of the television in the doctors' lounge, where I watched TV while he visited his patients inside the hospital.

It was glorious. Being at the hospital made me feel fortunate, like my dad's assistant. Aesthetically, the lounge could have used a little love. Every table or countertop had granules of sugar speckled over it, and of course, the heavy aroma of burnt coffee hung in the air. I spent hours in there. Sometimes his doctor friends would come in, sit down, and make me chat to them about my family and school. Other times, they'd see me presiding over the TV and leave as quickly as they came in.

These Saturdays with my father started in America's heartland, Wichita, Kansas, where my dad worked for a private clinic owned by a group of doctors. The clinic used the hospital we visited for all its deliveries, which was how my dad had his special standing. Having joined the group fresh out of residency, and less than five years after immigrating from El Salvador, he worked overtime the way a young lawyer working their way up in a firm might. The established partners gave him a base salary plus incentives for productivity. His schedule included plenty of overnight calls and undesirable shifts, though my dad never complained much. It must have helped that he was young, but my dad also saw his work as doctor as more than just a job. Medicine was his calling. Those scrubs in the OR and that suit in his clinic were his identity. To my dad, the privilege of talking with people about their problems and thinking about and sometimes operating on them was priceless. The partners set all the rules for the patients he saw and the payments he received; my dad didn't have to do anything but work. "Estoy de turno," *I'm on call*, became a common refrain around the house.

In 1986, sensing he might never make partner, he opened a private obstetrics and gynecology practice in Houston. His

brother, my godfather, was also an ob-gyn, and so the two worked in tandem, sharing office costs while keeping their patients separate. They used a hospital on the northwest side, in what was a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, for the vast majority of their surgeries and deliveries. As a demonstration of confidence in their future business relationship—and as a sign of the times of the 1980s—the hospital gave my father a $100,000 line of credit at 0 percent interest to start his practice, the only requirement being that he bring in patients.

The hospital also gave him a discounted rate on an office on the sixth floor of the adjoining professional building, provided he walk next door for surgeries and deliveries.

"It's beautiful," he said. The view was of nothing more than six lanes of freeway going in either direction, but to him, it could have been Mount Kilimanjaro.

This was how buoyant the world looked to a young doctor from El Salvador. In the Texas of 1986, anything was possible. My dad had moved from a group practice to a private specialty practice. He was no longer an employee of the doctor group in Wichita. Now he could decide what shifts to work and which patients to see. He opened his practice with an entrepreneurial sentiment: every cent generated from every surgery would funnel back into his practice and improve the level of care he could provide his patients. The money would also help his family grow.

With age, I began to notice the daily balance my dad struck between serving his patients' needs and running a business. He had grown up hallowing medicine as if it were a calling, and like me, he took his early lessons from his own father. It's very possible that Buenaventura Nuila, my grandfather, was the first Salvadoran doctor to earn a public health degree at Harvard. He didn't stay in 1940s America long after receiving his diploma, though; he returned home to El Salvador to start a private pediatrics practice. Rather than serving the elite with his Ivy League degree, he focused on middle-class children, which in El

My grandfather opened his home to his patients out of a simple belief: the profession of medicine demanded that a doctor take responsibility for the well-being of others. Money came second.

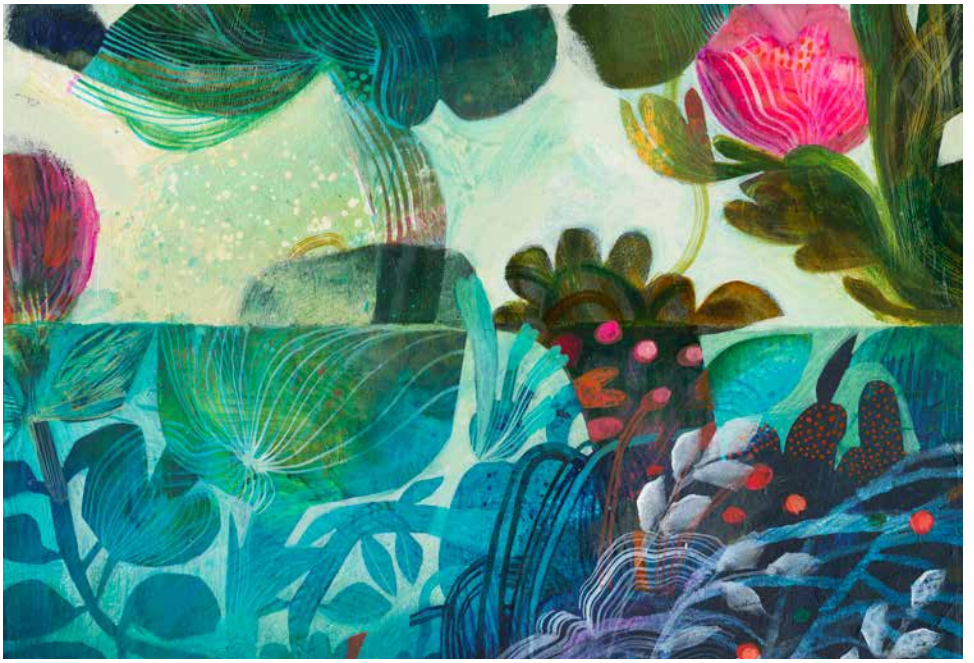
Salvador meant the working class. Whenever my dad got out of school, he walked to my grandfather's office and waited for him to see his last patients before the two headed home. If a child's cough persisted beyond the salves, the humidified air, and the tinctures of tonic water, my grandfather made house calls. Sometimes, my dad would awaken in the dead of the night to find petrified patients staring blankly at the walls of his living room. My grandfather opened his home to his patients out of a simple belief: the profession of medicine demanded that a doctor take responsibility for the well-being of others. Money came second.

My dad exhibited a similar work ethic within his own practice. He wore a suit to the office every day and insisted on meeting all new patients face-to-face from behind his escritoire. This was in contrast to those profit-minded colleagues he reviled, who introduced themselves while inserting the speculum to procure a pap smear, because they "had no time." Courtesy and attention were as fundamental to my dad's practice of medicine as knowing anatomy.

These were my earliest lessons in service. I thought of it as "People." It was why I wanted to become a doctor in the first place. I'm not talking about just "helping others," though that was definitely part of it. "People" meant listening to patient's histories. It meant communicating prognoses and treatment plans clearly.

But People went beyond practice. People included style. People was medicine's art. Once my dad delivered a baby wearing a tux. I was in line for hors d'oeuvres at a Hispanic Business gala to which my dad had purchased tickets when he tapped me on the shoulder. "Be right back," he said. We didn't see him again for almost an hour: my mother and my girlfriend—now my wife—had speculated he was just telling his jokes as usual, but no, it turned out that the labor of one of his insured patients had extended longer than expected. I tried to imagine him doing his job wearing a loose gown over that tuxedo, and I asked him what his patient thought. "She liked it," he said before diving right back into the party.

Later, I thought about how that tux may have influenced the delivery. Could it have relaxed the mother and allowed a



smoother birth that didn't require Pitocin or other medications? My father was the type of guy who could pull it off, too. It's very likely the experience ended up going beyond the standard delivery, which was why medicine wasn't just science.

There are incalculable moments that could tip patient care one way or another. The way a doctor pronounces a word, the way he dresses, his accent, even the volume with which he spoke, all influence whether a patient decided to take a medication or not.

I knew that the doctors I admired had perfected the "People" part. A good doctor gave her patient confidence. A good doctor knew the diagnosis just from talking with someone. A good doctor gave his patient what was needed at key moments, whether it was a hand on the shoulder, a statistic, or, as I learned from my dad, even a well-timed joke.

This old-school commitment to patients as people bore fruit business-wise. Soon after he opened his office, corkboards filled with photos of him hoisting up babies he delivered lined the walls between exam rooms. The collages grew so plentiful that my dad routinely had me change them out for new ones.

This old-school commitment to patients as people bore fruit business-wise. Soon after he opened his office, corkboards filled with photos of him hoisting up babies he delivered lined the walls between exam rooms. The collages grew so plentiful that my dad routinely had me change them out for new ones.

"It's kinda sad," I said, tossing an old corkboard into the trunk of his Mercedes.

"Ricky," he said, "there are too many."

His practice grew. My dad began taking care of the next generations of women; some of the babies he delivered entered his office nearly two decades later. Mothers and daughters visited him together. He earned sufficient income to send all three of his children to a private grade school, then private high schools, then private colleges.

But the splendor didn't last. By the time I started medical school in 2002, more than half of my dad's patients carried insurance through Medicaid. A decreasing number carried private health insurance through their work, as employers avoided offering health insurance as a benefit and hired fewer full-time employees and more contractors. Medicine was becoming corporatized. Large health insurance companies purchased more and more hospitals, retirement homes, anything to integrate care and drive up their profits, even doctors' practices. My dad's mom-and-pop practice now had

to compete with the medical McDonald's. With the cost of supplies increasing, he couldn't afford to treat uninsured patients, and so he turned more and more away.

The pressures manifested inside his office. The old escritoire now held stack upon stack of manila envelopes, mostly filled with unpaid insurance claims. The floors themselves were overgrown with stacks, such that vacuum trails, left by the maintenance staff in an attempt to swerve away from the colossal columns, had embedded themselves in the carpet. He hadn't spoken with a patient in there for years.

As I progressed through medical school, my dad asked me whether I might follow in his footsteps and take over his ob-gyn practice. He envisioned the two of us passing each other in the hallway between exam rooms or discussing difficult cases in his office with a view of the freeways.

"Have you thought about it?" he asked me. "It'd be nice."

For more than two decades, my dad had done the heavy lifting of building a tried-and-true moneymaker. But my memories of my dad's experience as a doctor didn't entirely line up with his own. The overgrown stacks of folders stood out to me as much as the corkboards lining his hallway. I was on the verge of leaving medicine altogether for a career in public health or, possibly, as a writer. Medicine in America appeared far too transactional, too dictated by insurance, not enough about People.

■■■

Early in my career, during my internship, I was slated to take care of patients on Ben Taub's general wards, meaning those hospitalized for some degree of organ dysfunction—kidney disease, liver cirrhosis, pneumonia, infections of the skin. Every morning, I pulled into work listening to a Wilco song. I wasn't superstitious, but one particular line seemed to encapsulate all the illnesses I was witnessing and my general feeling of ineptitude, and it comforted me to recite it: "Maybe I won't be so afraid." I have no idea when this ritual stopped.

I arrived on the wards and printed out a list of my new patients. Then I visited

each hospital unit and started reading through the charts. Everything was paper back then, meaning you could flip and flip and flip—through orders, test results, the notes of other doctors—and still not get to the bottom of what exactly was happening. One patient had a particularly large chart, actually two charts duct-taped together: Alvaro. It was so heavy and had been flipped through so many times that, like on an old book, cracks had started to show in its gray spine.

I read about Alvaro's many surgeries: hip surgery, belly surgery, large portions of his intestines removed. For months, he couldn't eat, his only nutrition delivered through an IV and then a tube in his stomach. It started as colon cancer. It had spread throughout Alvaro's body to multiple organs and joints. Over the prior nine months, he'd spent only a couple of weeks out of the hospital. Otherwise he was in the ICU, then the wards, then the ICU again with septic shock from an infection of the blood, then a rehab center, then again the ICU. And now Alvaro was here on the wards, in Ben Taub, my new patient. After flipping through the chart, I draped a stethoscope around my neck and went to meet him.

"English or Spanish?" This was the first important question I asked.

"Español," he said.

As a medical student, professors used to praise me for the translations I provided. They had no clue. I'm the son of Salvadoran immigrants, and as such, grew up with Spanish everywhere—at the dinner table, at my parents' parties, every summer visiting my grandparents in the hills outside the capital. But apparently reading and studying English influenced me more, and I speak Spanish like a gringo. It is something I'm constantly aware of, a part of who I am and how I'm seen. Except at Ben Taub. The patients here rarely mention it. Even my Spanish is music to their ears.

"Any bleeding?" I asked.

Mr. Alvaro shifted his head a little. "I don't think so."

"Can you lean forward?" I said, giving him a little push.

He took two short breaths like a weightlifter in the clench and stayed right in place. "Not really," he grunted.

When I was on my way into his room, the nurse had stopped me. There was a decision I had to make, the quicker the better. "MAP is sixty," she said. "Want to give fluids?"

It took me more than a second to realize what she was saying. The mean arterial pressure tells us if our vital organs are receiving an adequate amount of blood and nourishment. If this number is too low, then organs aren't receiving the blood supply needed to survive. My new patient's MAP was right at the cutoff. Patients with low MAPs usually have to go to the ICU. Mr. Alvaro had just come from the ICU, and the nurse wanted to know if we could give IV fluids to bring up the MAP or if we needed to send him back.

I told the nurse to give me a minute. In thinking about what to do about the MAP, I had almost blinded myself to what was in front of me: a scared man, struggling to live as much as to die. I went back into the room, sat down beside Alvaro, and listened to his story.

Alvaro told me about the past nine months of his life—not about the pain or the vomiting or the bloody stools constantly filling the bag attached to what remained of his intestines, but how he had become a burden to his family. His daughter stayed with him in the hospital most nights and worked during the day cleaning offices. She had to. If you're poor and people depend on you, you can't not make money. She had kids at home, too, school-aged kids. Alvaro told me she should have been taking care of them, not him.

Somehow, in this moment, my Spanish didn't stumble. "You know it's okay if you die," I said. As ever, I could hear a note of gringo, but the accent sounded muted, unimportant.

He was the same age as my grandfather: maybe that's why I said what I did. Or maybe seeing the fear in his eyes when we discussed what might happen next, that this could go on, gave me the courage to be frank.

When I came out of the room, I saw the nurse talking with a woman I quickly recognized as Alvaro's daughter. I buttoned my white coat and wove my way into the conversation.

"How is he?" the daughter asked.

I told her what Alvaro had told me, that he didn't want doctors to resuscitate him if his heart stopped, that he didn't want a breathing tube inserted under any circumstances. What this meant was that he

The public hospital has shown me a different side of healthcare, one that I've latched onto and hang my hopes on. I can still focus on people.

wouldn't be returning to the ICU again, ever.

"He's been through so much," I said in Spanish. "I think he's tired."

She nodded. It was still summer, the ridiculous Houston heat continued to broil outside, and yet everyone in Ben Taub wore layers and long sleeves. The AC did that to us. The daughter shivered, held her elbows tight. "I know he is," she said.

As I started to walk away, the nurse reminded me about the MAP. "Are we giving fluids?"

"He's DNR/DNI now," I said. "I'll put in the order."

I flipped to the "Orders" section of his chart, wrote "Do Not Resuscitate" with my signature timed and dated, and slid the wobbly chart into its slot. I called my attending and told him about the change. Immediately I turned my attention to the next name on my list, a patient staying on the other side of the hospital. I didn't walk there with my usual quick pace, but I didn't saunter either. Ten minutes later, I was absorbed in a different patient's chart. That's when my pager went off. I cursed having to be so connected and called the number back.

"This is the intern," I said.

"Just wanted to let you know that Mr. A just passed," said the nurse.

"He's dead?"

"The daughter's at the bedside."

I rushed back to the unit and met the daughter in the hallway. She was on the phone, pacing, crying, holding a tissue beneath her nose, getting words out. I

didn't want to interrupt her, and so I waited until I had her attention, and then I mouthed to her in Spanish, "Lo siento."

She smiled at me courteously and held her hand over the receiver. "It's okay, it's really okay," she said.

It didn't hit me until after I performed what had to be done next—the death exam, the death note, signing off for Transportation to wheel the body away—that Mr. Alvaro might have still been alive if we hadn't talked. Was that even possible? That words could mean the difference between life and death?

It's been over a decade since Mr. Alvaro died. I've cared for hundreds of patients at Ben Taub in that time, patients from Nigeria, Bhutan, Eritrea, Vietnam, the Fifth Ward here in Houston, even from my grandparents' village in El Salvador, the majority of whom lacked health insurance. Our overcrowded ER and how we're constantly being asked to demonstrate our productivity—in increasingly granular ways—is a testament to the continuous pressures imposed by private healthcare. But for the time being, I don't feel bogged down by insurance companies. The public hospital has shown me a different side of healthcare, one that I've latched onto and hang my hopes on. I can still focus on people. V&V

Adapted from Ricardo Nuila's book *The People's Hospital: Hope and Peril in American Medicine* (Scribner, 2022).

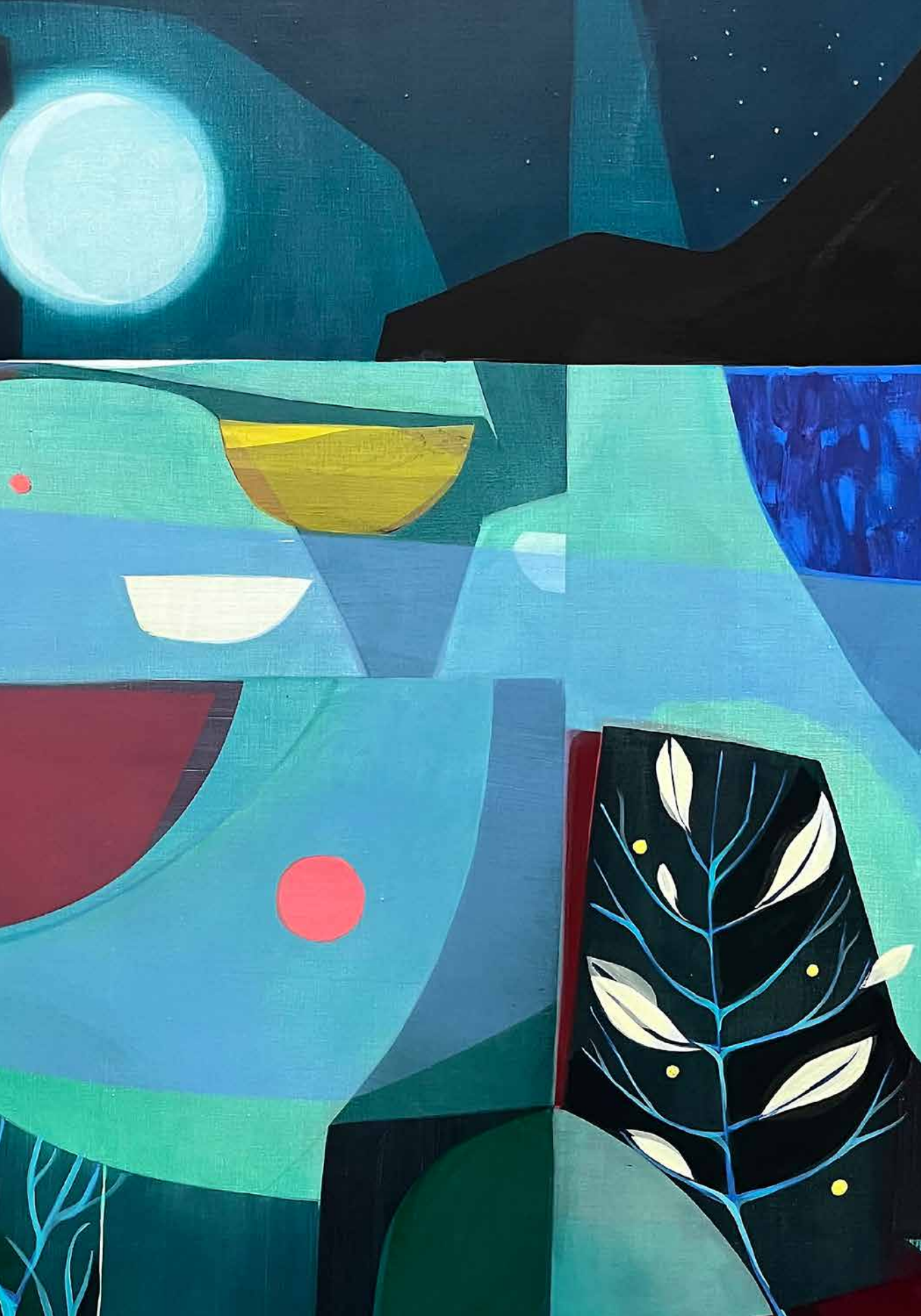
Ricardo Nuila is a practicing internal medicine doctor and hospitalist serving at Ben Taub Hospital in Houston, Texas. He serves as an associate professor of medicine, medical ethics and health policy at Baylor College of Medicine, where he directs the Humanities Expression and Arts Lab (HEAL). His first book, *The People's Hospital: Hope and Peril in American Medicine* (Scribner, 2023) was shortlisted for the Goddard Riverside Stephan Russo Book Prize for Social Justice.

DAN GRAFF

The Last Good Job in America

After my dad retired as a unionized pipefitter at the age of 56 in 2001, he would often joke that he had given up "the last good job in America." Born of quite modest means on a small southern Illinois farm in 1945, he graduated high school, was drafted into the army, and then moved to the metropolitan St. Louis area to find work. After hiring in as an unskilled laborer at the power company, he seized the opportunity offered by a craft apprenticeship to become a journeyman pipe fitter, a position he held for over thirty years. He worked hard and saved as much as possible so that he and my mom could retire while both were relatively young, and they raised two sons who never wanted for anything.

ARTWORK BY LOUISE BODY



An intellectually inquisitive yet highly practical and unpretentious man, he directed his aspirations for higher learning and upward mobility onto his children, who unreflexively identified as middle class and took that route for granted.

For my father, the term "good job" carried multiple meanings, some genuine and some ironic. By many objective measures, he had a "good job" as defined by those of his gender, class, and generation. Skilled work came with decent pay, especially for someone without a college degree. He also enjoyed the work itself, taking pleasure from the daily deployment of his skills and problem-solving abilities, deriving satisfaction from knowing that his labor was indispensable to maintaining the industrial plumbing required to power our community and taking great pride in being a member of a craft with a long history of promoting quality work.

For my father, the term *good job* carried multiple meanings, some genuine and some ironic.

But he also knew that the quality of his job depended on his union. Pipefitter pay was decent, to be sure, but collective bargaining brought him and his family additional benefits such as employer-provided health care, a defined-benefit pension, and paid time off that increased with each year served; equally important were job security provisions that prevented the boss from terminating him without cause or arbitrarily disciplining him in case of a dispute. More than money, these latter provisions promoted dignity on the job, empowering him to speak up without fear of a pink slip or demotion, and off the job, enabling him to plan ahead, purchase a home, and invest in his children's education. Though neither ideologue nor firebrand, my usually quiet dad was always quick to remind organized labor's critics—a growing group during his working years, including some in our extended family and neighborhood—that the only thing separating a "good job" from a "bad job" was the union contract.

The joke that my dad retired from "the *last* good job" in the country, especially for ordinary working folks, was both personal—his bittersweet recognition of the physical challenges of advancing age—and

political—his lament at the nationwide decline of unions and erosion of the employment contract, as beginning in the 1970s American corporations and policymakers globalized the labor market, lessened worker protections, and increasingly produced jobs that were less remunerative, more precarious, and stripped of dignity. From his retirement perch, he appreciated his own security while constantly worrying whether the "good jobs" pathway would exist for working-class folks in coming generations, as well as what that would mean for the country as a whole.

Lest my dad come off as unapologetically nostalgic for a receding golden age of the American worker, I hasten to add that his understanding of the term "good job" was laced with an irony never far from the surface. As much as he enjoyed the work itself as well as the camaraderie of his union colleagues, he refused to romanticize this "good job," which exposed him to all sorts of daily hazards, from unsafe conditions to industrial accidents, from intense periods of overwork and extreme exhaustion to decades of bodily wear and tear, including hearing loss. Further, he sometimes endured the inconvenience of forced overtime, especially when he was young and had little seniority, prompting him to miss the occasional family gathering, middle school band concert, or little league baseball game. More problematic to him, he also suffered the indignities associated with having to follow the orders of foremen who "didn't know their elbows from a pipe wrench," as he put it.

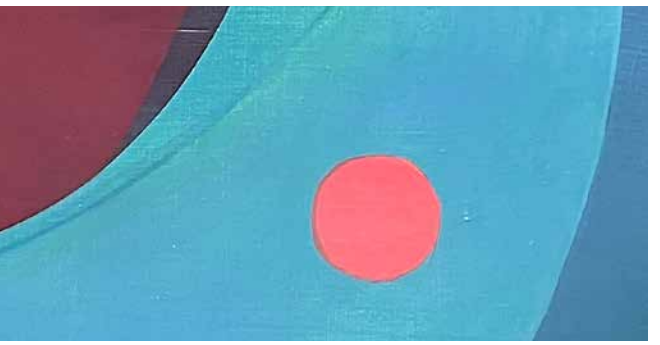
In short, my dad was a worker, and like all those who work for someone else, he didn't have complete autonomy in his work life. To be sure, his union contract lifted standards, promoted fairness, and protected workers' basic dignity, but ultimately it could only mitigate the power imbalance inherent in the workplace, not erase it. None of this challenged my dad's firm belief that he had a "good job," but he thought it important to recognize the trade-offs he accepted, and the sacrifices working-class folks often must make in order to get access to the pay and benefits that promise a middle-class life for themselves and their families.

■■■

My dad passed away two months ago, just shy of his 80th birthday, after an

eighteen-month battle with cancer. The most important man in my life, he taught me to prioritize family, to live by the principle that no one is more or less worthy or important than anyone else, and to never cross a picket line. He was the inspiration for me to study labor issues past and present by pursuing a Ph.D. in history, even though he had no idea that "labor historian" could be someone's job, and the ways of the academic world continually amused and baffled him.

I've been reflecting a lot on my dad's work and his complex thoughts on "good jobs," especially because the lung cancer that claimed his life was likely the delayed effect of the asbestos and other carcinogens he breathed on the job for decades. Still, in the time between diagnosis and death, I never heard him revise his understanding that he had a "good job," even though he had plenty of choice words for his former employer (and pursued a lawsuit with former coworkers seeking restitution). But his passing has prompted me to ponder just how good his job was, and, beyond that, to wrestle with our collective understanding of what we mean when we talk about "good jobs."



In American popular usage today, the term "good job" is much deployed but ill-defined. A scan of a few dozen recent *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* pieces suggests that "good jobs" are simply those with decent pay and benefits, though some add stability, security, and opportunities for advancement as well. Especially among policymakers, the articulated desire to create more good jobs often equates to adding positions in manufacturing, nodding toward a prior era. In a typical formulation, the *New York Times* summarized the recent remarks of Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent, who declared "the essence of the American dream" as "having good jobs that are not lost to foreign competition and wages that are high enough to afford homes."[1] Usually missing from this mix are two important ingredients central to my dad's definition: a sense of work's meaning and a voice in the process.

In American popular usage today, the term *good job* is much deployed but ill-defined.

Not that long ago pairing the word *good* with *jobs* would be considered nonsensical, at least by those holding power and privilege, who saw nothing good about the status of performing work for someone else for wages.

Today everyone seems to agree that "good jobs" matter, as politicians and pundits of every stripe declare their importance and want to increase them. A brief foray into the American past, however, reminds us that it hasn't always been that way. Not that long ago pairing the word "good" with "jobs" would be considered nonsensical, at least by those holding power and privilege, who saw nothing "good" about the status of performing work for someone else for wages. In the words of historian John Ashworth, "For most of human history the status of the wage laborer has been an extremely humble one," and "Americans were heirs to a long and venerable tradition of hostility to wage labor."[2]

Ashworth traces that legacy from the ancient world of Aristotle, who opined that "no man can practise virtue who is living the life of a mechanic or labourer," through early modern England, where performing wage labor was widely seen as a badge of servitude, to revolutionary-era America, where Jeffersonian thought lionized the farmer, not the worker, as the ideal citizen of the new republic.[3] Of course, in early America, most of those who worked for others were bound persons whose labor was owned by one of Jefferson's farmer-citizens, whether for life (a slave), a term (a child, servant, or apprentice), or most of adulthood (a wife). This hierarchical ordering of society into households of "independent" masters commanding the labor of their "dependents" was naturalized on the basis of race, age, and gender; further, it extended to all those who worked for others under the operation of common law, which undergirded these households by vesting nearly unlimited power and authority to masters. In short, to work for someone else in early America, even as a wage laborer, meant no rights on the job and little resource to the law.[4]

In the wake of the American Revolution, however, which rejected monarchy, rebuffed a titled aristocracy, and encouraged challenges to authority everywhere, working Americans—in households, at workshops, and on plantations—increasingly demanded personal freedom, equality, and independence, fueling the tensions that led to the sectional crisis that ruptured the union. The American Civil War was a massive labor dispute, in the sense that it centered on a nationwide conflict over the labor system most conducive to sustaining and expanding a republican order. Whose should prevail, the "free labor" North or the "slave labor" South? The North's most forceful articulator was Abraham Lincoln, whose eloquent ideas about workers, wages, and worthiness reveal the evolution in American thought that bridges the revolutionary generation to our own.[5]

Informed by decades of working people's arguments for full inclusion in the economic and political life of the republic, and buoyed by his own rise from extreme poverty to successful attorney, politician, and eventually president, Lincoln rejected centuries of elitism by attacking what he called the "mud-sill theory," whose proponents saw firm and permanent class lines separating the commanders of labor from the performers of it. According to Lincoln, defenders of the mud-sill theory believed "that nobody labors, unless somebody else, owning capital, somehow, by the use of that capital, induces him to do it."[6]

Lincoln countered with a vision of what he called "free labor," where the "prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him." The ideal republic, as Lincoln saw it, was one that promoted upward mobility, "a just and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all—gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all."[7]

Lincoln and other "free labor" champions envisioned wage labor not as drudgery and a badge of dishonor but as a legitimate lifestage for a young man on the pathway to

independence. In essence, they transformed the traditional suspicion of wage labor by celebrating its integration into an American dream of upward mobility. That dream, to be sure, still accommodated persistent, if contested, ideas about the supposed natural hierarchies of race and gender. As Lincoln argued, it was designed for "[m]en, with their families—wives, sons and daughters—[who would] work for themselves, on their farms, in their houses and in their shops," and it justified those who remained wage laborers for life because of "a dependent nature which prefers it."[8]

Free labor advocates trumpeted not the creation of "good jobs," then, but the construction of policies that would facilitate pathways out of wage labor; the permanence of wage labor in an individual's work-life still bore the taint of personal failure. At the same time, though, they reimagined those who performed wage labor as worthy of upward mobility and entitled to that promise. This laid the foundation for the emergence of a "good jobs" economy in the decades following the Civil War, as the rapid, massive industrialization of the economy confronted the republic with a new reality, one where an increasing majority of Americans were destined for life as wage workers toiling for someone else. This compelled a further rethinking of the relationship between work, wage labor, and worthiness, but the spur for that reckoning came less from philosophers or politicians than from workers organizing the labor movement, an arduous, unfinished effort that stretched for a century bracketed by the Gilded Age to the Age of Civil Rights, with its greatest impact in the post–World War II decades.

As the nation transformed into a republic of employees, working people and their advocates first invented the idea of "a living wage," which then evolved into the more expansive "good job." Beginning in the late nineteenth century, "living wage" proponents argued that workers were entitled to pay that permitted the worker's family to escape poverty and enjoy the basic minimal standards for a good life (shelter, food, clothing, transportation, and the like).[9] But it required a strong labor movement, only established in the New Deal and World War II years, to articulate and put the muscle behind a fully fleshed out "good jobs" economy, one where all those who worked for others were entitled not just to decent pay, but also on and off-the-job benefits that promoted stability, security, and flourishing for workers and their families. The labor movement reached its apex of power, prestige, and percentage of the workforce in the prosperous postwar decades that many contemporary Americans long to revive. Indeed, though barely recognized today, that prosperity—more widely shared than at any time before or since—rested on the foundational success of the labor movement

in converting heady corporate profits into higher wages and better benefits, as well as normalizing outward (beyond unionized workers) and upward (into the ranks of management) pro-labor innovations across the employment spectrum, including position descriptions, hiring and promotion policies, and worker protections from abuse and harassment. In the two decades after World War II, the working-class standard of living grew by leaps and bounds, and the very idea of the USA as a middle-class society was born (if never fully realized). With it came claims for a "good jobs" economy, one that fully reimagined wage labor as a worthy endeavor and those who performed it as full citizens whose prosperity was the republic's reason for being.[10]

Even as leaders of the labor movement bargained hard for better jobs, they were negotiating with corporate leaders bent on realizing a mass consumer society that relied on relentless efficiencies and economies of scale to lower prices and sell more goods to offset the relatively high labor costs. In effect, millions of American workers gained "good jobs" consisting of decent pay, growing benefits, and employment protections, but failed to realize critical components that make work meaningful and enjoyable, including autonomy, creativity, and input in the work process. Many postwar policymakers and pundits saw this as an inevitable trade off in a modern economy, while even some labor leaders argued that workers should look to find satisfaction in their leisure time rather than on the clock.[11]

Now, of course, with the decimation of unions over the past few decades, even that narrower definition of "good jobs" premised on stability, security, and high wages has been in rapid decline, hence the urgent, persistent, perennial calls to (re)create more "good jobs." As my dad would no doubt remind us if he were alive today, "the only difference between a good and a bad job is the union contract." But I think he would go further than that. When he talked about retiring from "the last good job in America," he wasn't only lamenting the decline of organized labor or the ravages of age; he was also asserting a vision of wage work that brought the toiler not just comfort and security, but also meaning, satisfaction, solidarity, and sometimes joy, a vision sorely lacking in the twenty-first century American imaginary of work.

I really hope that he didn't hold "the last good job in America," but it will require a revival of organized labor on a massive scale, plus the pioneering of alternative, unforeseen vehicles forged by working people to realize a "good jobs" economy today, one that builds upon the earlier successes of the labor movement while expanding the definition of just what makes a job good. V&V

NOTES

1. "Pitch on Tariffs Is That People Can Take Pain," *New York Times*, Apr 1, 2025.

2. John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, Vol. 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 10.

3. Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics*, p. 10-12 (Aristotle quote on p. 10).

4. For a useful introduction to the tensions over work, wages, and republican thought in the new republic, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

5. Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (Norton & Co., 2010), is a great introduction to Lincoln's thoughts on work in the context of the evolving sectional economies and the Civil War.

6. Abraham Lincoln, "Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society," Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Sep. 30, 1859, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 3 (Rutgers University Press, 1953), p. 477–78.

7. Lincoln, "Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society," p. 478–79.

8. Lincoln, "Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society," p. 478–79.

9. Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

10. For a good introduction to the achievements and limits of postwar prosperity for workers and organized labor, see Robert H. Zieger and Gilbert J. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), chapter 6. For the standardization and "depersonalization" of women-typed jobs beginning in the 1970s, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, "'A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm': Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 56 (October 1999), p. 23–44.

11. For example, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (Basic Books, 1995).

Dan Graff is director of the Higgins Labor Program at the Institute for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame, where he is also a professor of the practice in the Department of History. He leads the Just Wage Research Lab, which deploys Catholic social tradition principles to explore answers to the question, "What makes any given wage just or unjust?" An award-winning classroom teacher and advisor, he was also the recipient of Notre Dame's 2022 Rev. William A. Toohey, C.S.C., Award for Social Justice. He publishes regularly on contemporary labor questions, including most recently "Fair Wages: Not Just a Question of Numbers," *Aggiornamenti Sociali/Social Compass* (Milan, Italy, 2024), "From a Just Hope to a Just Wage Economy," *Working Notes: The Journal of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice* (Ireland, 2024), and "Just Wages For the Workforce: Why Health Care Should Lead the Way," *Health Progress* (Catholic Health Association, 2023). He is an active member of the Vatican-led research and education project, *The Future of Work: Labour After Laudato Si*.

MARY OLIVER

In Blackwater Woods

Source: *American Primitive* (Back Bay Books, 1983)

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
go,
to let it go.

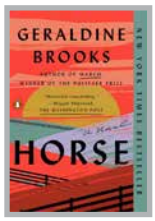
ARTWORK BY JED DORSEY

Good Reads

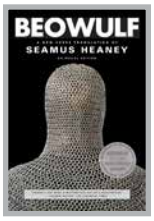
We asked our authors to recommend a book they had read over the past couple of years. Here is what they said:

Horse

BY GERALDINE BROOKS



I loved reading about the character of the man who took care of this horse and the nature of their relationship. —ROSALYN W. BERNE



Beowulf

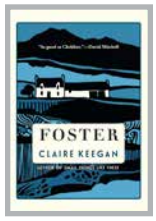
SEAMUS HEANEY TRANSLATION

It is hard to put into words the power and the wonder of this epic poem. Thankfully, the poem itself does this. I have come to this masterpiece over and over throughout my life, from being a teenager to now a grandfather. In each revisit, I relate afresh to the glories and struggles and brokenness of our hero with my own mortality in entirely new ways.

—SATYAN L. DEVADOSS

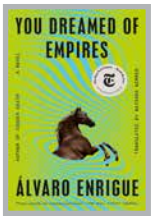
Small Things Like These and Foster

BY CLAIRE KEEGAN



Both of these books by Claire Keegan demonstrate an understated brilliance and precision of language—as if they were poetry in prose form. Every word is essential, and the overall effect is this powerful emotional resonance. —MICHELLE WEISE

You Dreamed of Empires



BY ALVARO ENRIGUE

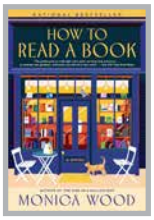
This novel, set in the days preceding Moctezuma's meeting with Hernán Cortés in Tenochtitlan, shows us the human side of two civilizations, founded on entirely different belief systems, feeling each other out. It's funny, philosophical, tragic, trippy, and it also makes a rather powerful statement about how medicines can change worlds. —RICARDO NUILA

Liberating Spiritualities: Reimagining Faith in the Americas

BY CHRISTOPHER TIRRES

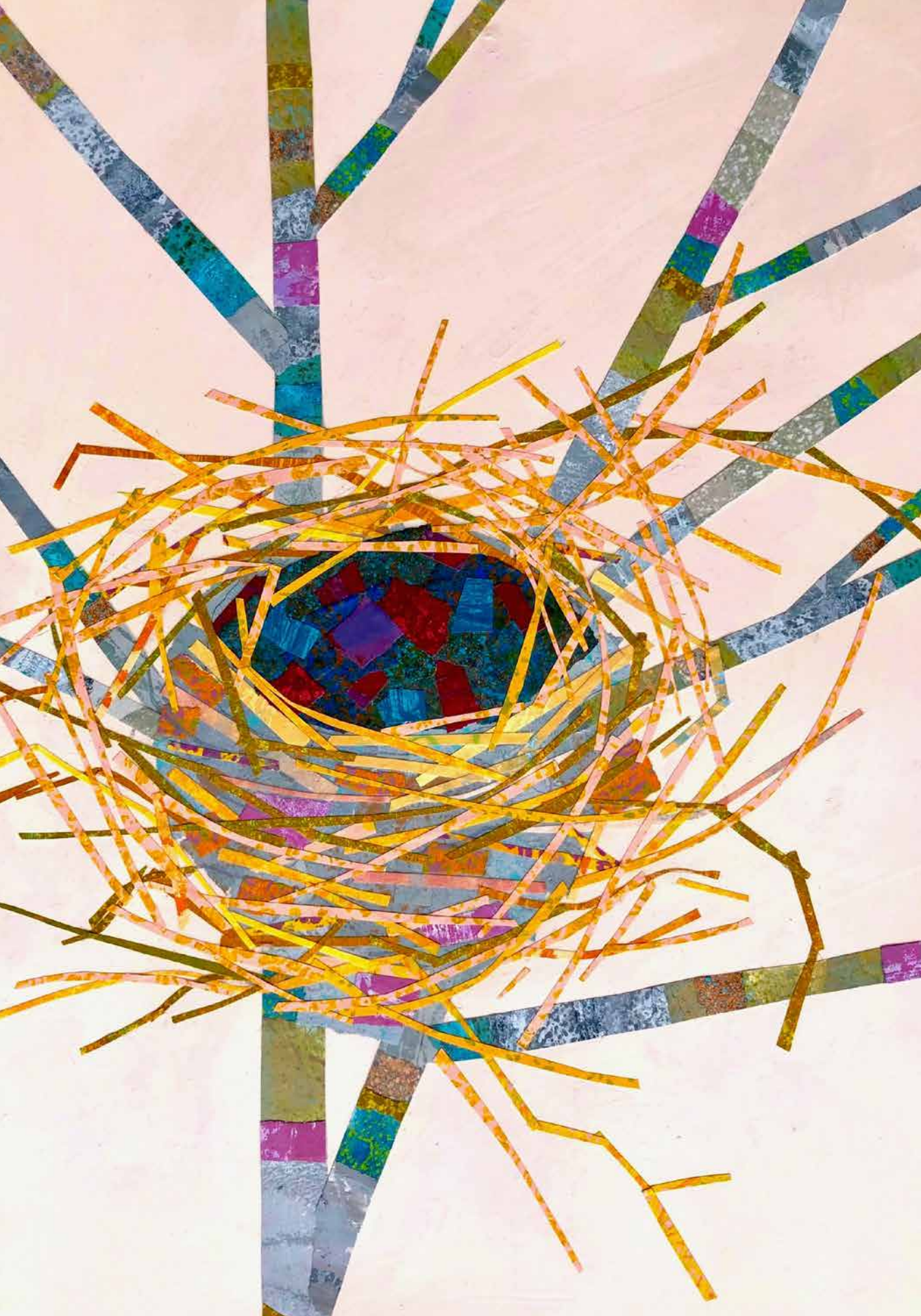
Chris is a pragmatist colleague of mine, very thoughtful and very careful in attending to issues in philosophy and religion, especially Catholicism. I think reading this very interesting treatment of Spirituality in The Americas is provocative in its own right, but might also give all of us some insight into the faith and philosophy of Pope Leo XIV! —BARBARA S. STENGEL

How to Read a Book



BY MONICA WOOD

The great novelists foreground the agency of ordinary people leading their lives even as they situate those lives within larger, often unjust, structures that limit and channel that agency. Monica Wood's excellent *How to Read a Book*, a novel about incarceration, intergenerational connections, and second chances, reminds us to always see the importance of individuals even when we recognize, and often despair of, the powerful forces that inhibit, and seem to prohibit, full expressions human dignity. —DAN GRAFF



ROSALYN W. BERNE

Ethical Career Alternatives for Engineers

There's a memory that sticks with me from the spring semester of 2004. I was teaching an undergraduate course on Engineering Ethics to graduating seniors of every major, including mechanical, electrical, aerospace, chemical, systems, computer, and biomedical engineering. It was a great class in that most of the students were deeply engaged in our varied conversations. The class size of 21 was small enough that we could form the chairs into a circle, a configuration most conducive to the provocative discussions we would have.

ARTWORK BY SUZANNE SIEGEL

I was heartened by the apparent level of student interest and participation . . . except for the one student who seemed to dislike everything about the class, including me. She never smiled, she never spoke, and she never even looked me in the eye. Despite how put off I was by her attitude and behavior, I was determined to stay neutral in my dealings with her and to be objective in grading her assignments. Then came the last day of class. I went around the circle clockwise, asking each student to share their aspirations for their future lives as practicing engineers. This person, let's call her Amy, was seated at about a third of the way around the circle.

"Amy, what about you? What do you see yourself doing with your life as an engineer? What are your hopes and dreams?" I asked her. She looked up, her eyes piercing mine with an intentional gaze I had never seen in her. She spoke without hesitation. "I never wanted to be an engineer. I always wanted to be a teacher. But I have no choice."

I didn't see that coming and yet couldn't imagine proceeding to the next person without follow-up. "Of course, you have a choice, Amy," I blundered. "No, I really don't. My parents are uneducated. They immigrated here from Cambodia. They made sacrifices so I could get a university education. They are counting on me to be an engineer so I can make enough money to help support the family," she replied.

Her words were a stab to my heart. What could I say? I did my best to bring closure before moving on to the next student. "Amy, I think you would make a wonderful teacher, and I hope that someday you can find your way into the classroom." Wholly unsatisfied and feeling like I had somehow failed her, I proceeded. The next student was excited to share about starting a new job in an engineering consulting firm.

Amy was the only student in that class whose aspirations were to teach school, and probably the only one in the graduating class of 525 engineers. But she was far from alone in choosing to study engineering for employment purposes. Indeed, I would venture to guess that most of our

students, then and now, have employment opportunities in mind as a primary factor when deciding to apply to attend the school of engineering. Over the last 10 years, applications to the undergraduate engineering program have continued to increase. Students, along with their parents, seem to be primarily concerned about securing well-paying jobs and employment stability. And who would blame them?

My department in the UVA School of Engineering, Engineering & Society, teaches two required courses in engineering ethics: micro-ethics, which asks students to think about themselves and the choices they make, the actions they take, and the encounters they have as individuals; and macro-ethics, which considers the role and function of engineering more generally, in its impact on communities, society writ large, and the planet. Both courses aim to prepare students to make ethical choices about how they will act, and how they will use the engineering skills they acquire. What we don't do is to tell them what kind of engineering jobs they ought to pursue once they graduate. That kind of guidance is more likely to come from career services and their major advisors, i.e. where chemical engineers or mechanical engineers ought to look for jobs. As far as what makes an ethical engineering career, who's to decide? Who or what would determine what makes an ethical engineering job?

This year has been particularly challenging for our graduating students, with hiring freezes and cutbacks happening across various industries that recruit engineers, and especially with the government contractors who are major recruiters at our school. By February 2025, students became concerned about whether they'd be able to get a job at all, or to hold onto job offers they had received during the fall; some offers were already being rescinded. Students participated in the usual recruiting visits with representatives from engineering firms, construction companies, manufacturing companies, technology companies, and government agencies, with aerospace and defense being among the most prevalent fields in demand. They pursued career counseling to identify their interests, skills, and talents, and learn how to match those with recruiters' needs and wants. They prepared resumes, practiced their communication skills, and showed up at the career fairs hoping to be selected for an interview. They waited for callbacks and anxiously anticipated offers to work someplace exciting, in a secure job that would cover their living expenses, help pay off educational loans, and ideally lead to increasing responsibilities and leadership opportunities. All to be expected—in a normal year.

What I didn't expect was that while many were anxious about the job market, even more so some were disappointed in the nature of the job prospects. As a director of our school's new Engineering Character Strength Initiative (ECSI), I was approached by a member of the ECSI student leadership team. She said that many students she had spoken with wanted opportunities to work in ways that could change the world. She wanted to know if we could bring in ECSI speakers who represent alternatives to conventional engineering careers, to meet and hear from engineers who are working in inspiring, meaningful jobs:

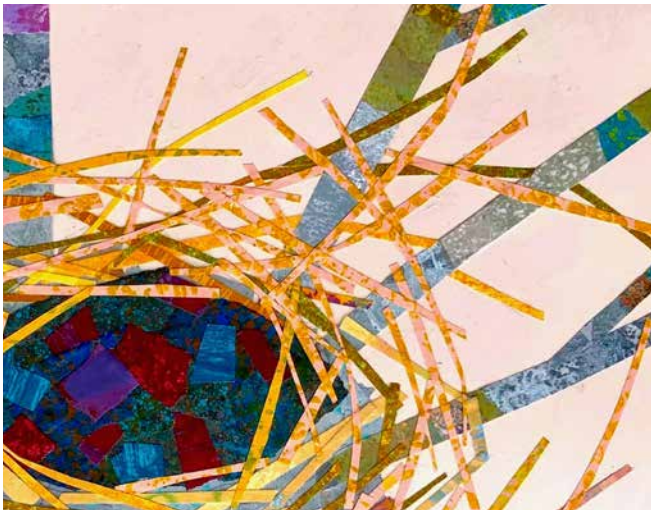
> **"I came here wanting to make a difference, in a good way. Most of the opportunities I see are related to defense, and that's not the kind of work I want to do. Please bring in speakers who work in engineering jobs that are helping people, and their communities, and the planet. I am not just asking for me; a lot of us want this."**

The first ECSI speaker of the academic year 2025–2026 was Ed Pierson, well-known as a Boeing whistleblower. As a former senior manager at Boeing's 737 factory in Renton, Washington, Ed raised concerns about the dangerous production environment and risks to the safety of airplanes. He'd wanted Boeing leadership to shut down production but was ignored. And then came two fatal Boeing airliner crashes.

Ed's visit was enormously popular with our students, partly because of his accessible

persona and his warm, highly engaging communication style. Furthermore, he visited multiple classes, had meals with the students, and conveyed his authentic, impassioned commitment to aviation safety. I'd assumed that Ed would be well-received as a famous Boeing whistleblower. But I quickly realized that his appeal was something more; the students were wowed by that, but seemed more inspired by the fact of his leaving Boeing to become a major spokesperson for airline safety and an advocate for the victims of Boeing's crashes. One student was so moved that she asked Ed for the opportunity to volunteer as an intern in his organization, soon to become a Flight Operations Analyst for Ed's Foundation for Aviation Safety. A second student, who followed up with him after the visit, just graduated with a B.S. in Aerospace Engineering and now works for Ed.

The enormous turnout for Ed's visit, and huge response from so many of our students, made clear the importance of their search for meaning and purpose in work, but also how important it is for them to have direct, personal exposure to people in the engineering world who are passionate and determined to have a positive impact on people's lives. I watched as the students listened to Ed's stories about his testimonies before congressional committees. I heard them note in their questions his various character traits: bravery, for example. I could sense them realizing that he was a person with clear values, hopes, and ambitions, trying to do his best to make a difference where he could, fighting to reduce the chances of another plane crash. I saw them respond to his compassion when he talked about the families of crash victims that he is trying to help.



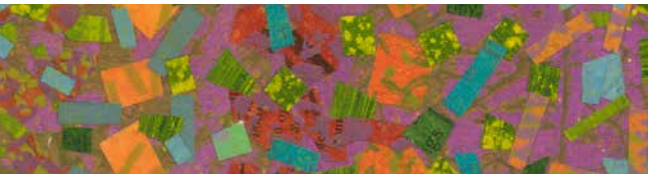
What I didn't expect was that while many were anxious about the job market, even more so some were disappointed in the nature of the job prospects.

Our responsibility and our challenge is to help our students identify, understand, and speak their own values, and to help them identify and realize opportunities to bring their own character strengths into their working lives.

The next ECSI speaker of the academic year was Jim Wetherbee, the only U.S. astronaut to have commanded five missions in space and to have landed the Space Shuttle five times. A former Deputy Director of the Johnson Space Center, after the Space Shuttle Columbia accident in 2003 Jim was the operational search director, responsible for finding the human remains of the flight crew. He then took his experience from the aerospace industry into the oil and gas industry where he served as a Safety and Operations Auditor for BP America. While there, he was a member of the investigation team for the Deepwater Horizon oil well blowout accident and the technical editor for their report. Jim's biography attracted a significant audience to his lecture. And many students remained after his talk with follow-up questions. His message emphasized effective leadership behaviors to inspire people to perform with operating excellence. Students seemed to be intrigued by him.

From witnessing the impact of Ed and Jim's visits, I felt that we were on the right track in exposing students to engineers with strength of character, clarity of values, and dedication to working for the greater good. Both visits underscored for me that it's not up to us to tell students what work is virtuous, or which engineering jobs are more ethical than others. Rather, our responsibility and our challenge is to help our students identify, understand, and speak their own values, and to help them identify and realize opportunities to bring their own character strengths into their working lives.

Who's to say that defense work, or oil and gas work, is categorically not good work "that helps people, and their communities, and the planet?" While I might deem that to be so for myself, I would never suggest that to my students. They must decide for themselves what kind of career path is an ethical one, as determined by whether a particular job or career aligns with their own values and beliefs. Given their relatively early stage of development when they arrive at our school, this is an endeavor that may require a variety of experiences and exposure to a variety of people before they gain a sense of what a virtuous vocational path will look like for them.



And yet, some students arrive with that clarity. One such student announced to me, at the end of an ethics course, his intention and desire to work in the entertainment industry. His eyes were bright and sparkled as he spoke, his mouth turned up in a wide grin. "That's what I want to do."

He graduated with a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering and headed for Orlando, Florida, to begin a job on the design team at Universal Destinations and Experiences. This is the same student who decided to use his undergraduate thesis to, in his words, "craft a framework for engineering students to use to make ethical, value-driven career decisions. With this new framework, I hope to empower students to look past the falsely unilateral path toward defense and create their own career pathways that validate their moral code." His framework drew from the VIA instrument, something we had been introducing to students during ECSI events.

If our job is to help engineering students navigate the terrain of job prospects by using their own moral compasses to determine what is good, ethical work for themselves as engineers, while also preparing them to balance what could become difficult choices between the work they are inspired to do and the work they might need to do if, for example, income needs are a significant factor, then I feel good about bringing in speakers to model the possibilities. But I continue to ask myself what we as engineering educators could do better for students like Amy. I wonder what other tools, teaching methods, or extracurricular opportunities we can cultivate so that every student gets their best chance to find a meaningful vocational path that aligns with their core values and will help them to flourish in their professional lives. V&V

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SATYAN L. DEVADOSS

Touching Mathematics

Making the Work of Mathematics Meaningful

THE FUEL OF MATHEMATICS

Mathematics has become an extraordinarily formidable agent in our modern era due to two great strengths: the *permanence* of its ideas and the *abstraction* of our thoughts. Bertrand Russell, philosopher and mathematician, echoed this as he penned these words over a century ago:

> Remote from human passions, remote even from the pitiful facts of nature, the generations have gradually created an ordered cosmos, where pure thought can dwell as in its natural home, and where one, at least, of our nobler impulses can escape from the dreary exile of the actual world.[1]

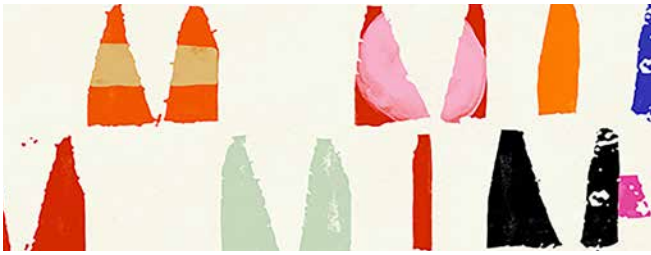
ARTWORK BY JENNY FREAN

Even science is not a domain for permanence, for science is filled with theories, not truths, from explorations of the "*pitiful facts of nature.*" Indeed, even established notions such as Newtonian gravity need to be updated and reevaluated. Einstein's contribution of general relativity does just that, showcasing how gravity is altered based on the mass of the object, behaving quite differently at the quantum scale versus the cosmic scale. And string theory ideas are asking us to reevaluate gravity once again.[2] Mathematics, on the other hand, is radically different: every mathematical statement, once proven to be true, becomes a bedrock of an "ordered cosmos" on which further mathematics can be built. No corrections needed.

The power of mathematical abstraction has led to the creation of computational tools built for the digital revolution. The deep machine-learning algorithms of Silicon Valley, built on the foundation of mathematics, are now impacting us in all we do, from video games and computational photography to airport security and self-driving cars. AI tools have moved from party tricks to all-purpose machines, and unlike 20th-century tech, these statistical computers are wielding a knife to careers requiring high levels of education, with impact far beyond schools and businesses.[3] And the COVID pandemic has only pushed us deeper into a dependency on our smartphones, our curated entertainment platforms, and our isolated online communities. We are in an era that coerces, if not shoves us to "escape from the dreary exile of the actual world" towards isolation and disembodiment, with mathematics the fuel.

Yet, in all of this, we are humans with bodies and hands and senses. This truth pushes against the notions of permanence

If mathematics has progressed powerfully with an emphasis on the mind, how much more can be done if we involve our bodies as well?



(our bodies will fade) and abstraction (we are profoundly embodied). And so, our driving question at the University of San Diego's Math Play Room is: *If mathematics has progressed powerfully with an emphasis on the mind, how much more can be done if we involve our bodies as well?* Said differently, how can the body play a role in mathematics? This is one way we've sought to reconnect the work of mathematics to matter and meaning.

At our playroom, the answers come from the deep connections between thinking and doing that have been explored by psychologists and sociologists, including gesture researchers, educational theorists, and cognitive scientists. They have shown how bodily activity is essential to understanding human cognition.[4] Cognitive scientists and linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson continue:

> **The evidence supports an evolutionary view of human reason in which reason uses and grows out of bodily capacities.[5]**

Numerous disciplines have taken the idea of an intentional physical space seriously, weaving it into both pedagogical and discovery phases of their knowledge. Their art studios and science labs contain tools which both constrain and enable the experimentation process, which involves not only trial and error but also questioning and debugging. Failed experiments require reflection, adjusting, and retesting in order to understand the cause of a failure, which encourages students to take on deeper understandings of the material.

A SPACE FOR MATHEMATICS

Philosopher Michael Polanyi writes:

> **The body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical. [E]xperience [is] always in terms of the world to which we are attending from our body.[6]**

This viewpoint led to a grant from the Fletcher Jones Foundation to renovate the mathematics department at the University of San Diego, the centerpiece being the creation of our Math Play Room, a space devoted to the learning and creation of mathematics through analog tools.

- The room is a **shop** to make with our hands. A wall is lined with simple tools such as duct tape, pipe cleaners, paper clips, popsicle sticks, toothpicks, yarn, glue, and fabric, with varying sizes of wood and paper stock. This pedagogical approach is influenced by rapid-prototyping techniques where the output is one of low-resolution objects that promote playfulness rather than perfection.

- The room is a **studio** to store since ideas do not fit neatly into one-hour blocks of lecture time. Thus, there are numerous hooks for hanging, and shelves of all sizes, for books, projects, and models. Additionally, one wall of the room is made of glass and the opposite wall is devoted to the display of creations with studio lighting, needed to excite and entice the public.

- The room is a **sanctuary** to highlight the human senses without the need for technological interface. A sewing machine is the most advanced electronic tool there. An entire wall is covered with a heavy slate chalkboard and colorful Hagoromo Fulltouch chalk.

A space for the work of mathematics is vital: physical action, readily available, is faster and more nuanced than symbolic manipulation. Being able to move pieces around enables learning in ways that reading and listening do not.[7] Tangible objects also provide an anchor for communication where the mind's eye is made visible, allowing everyone to observe and participate, forming a community through the performance of creation.

THE BODY FIGHTS BACK

The Math Play Room is part of a larger movement in our national conversation. Over the past decade, the desire for sensual experiences and the value of flesh and blood are pushing against abstraction and digitization. The realigning of the food industry, from artisanal breads and high-end coffees to ultra-premium ice creams and local breweries, calls out to a reclaiming of taste and smell. A push against the automation of food has led to the valuing of organic farming and the fight against GMOs, leading to personal gardening and

homesteading. And the music commerce has turned to vinyl records, which are coveted and outshining the (technologically flawless) digital downloads. Our senses are eager to touch music and to run our fingers along the grooves of the record itself. We do not seem to trust music that has no weight.

When the pendulum swings too far into disembodiment, there is a push toward a corporeal focus on the body. With our increasing dependence on technology, there is a thirst to be with others in a physical setting, reclaiming community as humans, using our bodies to escape the trappings of our minds on the screens.

Some of the most beautiful resistance against this technological age has come from artists, many of whom eschew the digital lens through which their works are approached. Consider Chris Ware, one of the greatest graphic novelists of any era. His opus, *Building Stories*, is a collection of tales about a brownstone apartment building in Chicago and the tenants that lived in it over the span of decades. Ware showcases this assortment as a large box containing 14 different comic elements, from pamphlets and leaflets to hard-bound volumes and newspaper foldouts. It is designed to display the folly of linearity imposed by a digital tablet and to embrace full-on the tactile nature of exploration and storytelling.

All of this confrontation against the digital is not surprising, for decades of research has revealed the vital importance of the sense of touch in the flourishing of humanity, from pregnancies and preterm infants to patients suffering PTSD and depression.[8] Scholars such as Sherry Turkle[9] and Cal Newport[10] warn of confusion and distraction in the digital age, where philosophers such as Charles Taylor[11] caution against loneliness and loss of purpose. Critics also point to the

Tangible objects also provide an anchor for communication where the mind's eye is made visible, allowing everyone to observe and participate, forming a community through the performance of creation.

We are not asking to discard the way mathematics has traditionally been done, but offering a way to supplement it, having our bodies join our minds in the meaningful work of creating, exploring, and teaching mathematics.

destruction of our planet's resources[12] and the threats against equity and democracy[13] that big data and machine-learning invite. As we forsake the body for the disembodied realm, something far deeper at the core of who we are fights back, pushing against the new spirituality that is forming where human flourishing is no longer a religious issue but a technological one.

THE BODY AND PERMANENCE

From my vantage point, the theological grid behind all of these threads is the resurrection of Jesus. In the Gospel according to Luke, Chapter 24, we find the disciples locked in an upper-room when Jesus suddenly walks through the wall and appears to them for the first time after his resurrection. While the disciples were stunned to see his presence, Jesus (and Luke), in the midst of the greatest wonder of the ages, asks for the most mundane and basic of requests: some food to eat. At this point in the story, the Christ no longer needs to carry the mantle of a body to use as a sacrificial atonement for humanity. That work has already been done. No, here is something far more radical. By this act of eating, Jesus shows that he is fully human, flesh-and-blood, for all eternity. And so, the World to Come, the permanent and everlasting kingdom, is physical in nature.[14] Throughout and beyond space-time, Food matters, Touch matters, Matter matters.

Today, the Math Play Room plays a role as a pointer for the future Kingdom, where mathematics as work and ideal will thrive in abstract thought and bodily expression, satisfying our longing for permanence. For we are not asking to discard the way mathematics has traditionally been done, but offering a way to supplement it, having our

bodies join our minds in the meaningful work of creating, exploring, and teaching mathematics. We hope this space, and this overall framing, will bring an attractive invitation to the next generation to take up and create mathematics with wholistic involvement, offering a haven for the embodied self. V&V

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BARBARA S. STENGEL

The "Great Work" of Teaching

Educators know what good work is.

At least they should. Educators participate *directly* in what Matthew Fox (following Ranier Maria Rilke and Meister Eckhardt) calls "the Great Work," that is, the continuing creation of the cosmos.[1] To teach is to see, encourage, and challenge those (young and older) who are our students. To work in schools at any level from pre-school through university is to participate in the creation of communities whose very purpose is the reconstruction of our social life.

ARTWORK BY MERYL BLINDER

I use the term "reconstruction" quite intentionally. Some would say that schools *reproduce* social life and, to some extent, that is the case. We who serve as educators enter into relation with students with some basic productive and reproductive goals in mind, of course. (We call that curriculum). But we also enter with a secret (perhaps subconscious) hope that our students will outgrow and outshine us, and in the process bring new life to our ways of being individually and together. That new life, that reconstruction, is indispensable to the health and welfare of any community, but it is also, at root, unpredictable. Teachers plan and design for the growth and development of their students, but they don't control it. Students bring themselves to the relation—and that makes teaching frustrating *and* delightful, as well as ever-challenging.

Let me highlight the not-wholly-determinable work of teaching by employing Fox's framework of meaning and meaningfulness informing creation spirituality: *via negativa, via positiva, via creativa,* and *via transformativa*.

There is, of course, drudgery and frustration involved in teaching, as in virtually any form of meaningful work; just ask any teacher who is reviewing student papers and projects on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, shadowed by the spectre of student AI use (*via negativa*). But there is always also joy if we have eyes to see it (*via positiva*). Informed by careful attention to how students are growing and guided by what the world needs now, educators are called to bring the frustration and the joy together creatively as they design environments and activities to engage their students in ways that elicit effort and interest (*via creativa*). And that combination of effort and interest results in the transformation of each student in their own way and—frustratingly at times—at their own pace (*via transformativa*). Transformation is the visible sign of education well-practiced. If we observe no joy and awe, no creativity and passion, no transformation and rebirth (and yes, no pain and uncertainty), there is no education—no matter how much effort is demanded or invested. What does this look like in the quotidian work that teachers do? I offer two examples.

WATCHING MY GRANDCHILDREN GROW UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE OF THEIR TEACHERS

My grandchildren attend an urban Catholic school located just a few blocks from my home in a small city in Pennsylvania, a school I serve by acting as informal advisor for the relatively new principal *and* by coaching the 3rd and 4th grade boys' basketball team. It is a K–8 school of just 180 students. Each week, the school circulates a newsletter to parents, volunteers, and donors, and the final segment of the newsletter each week is "Seen around School." Week after week, there are photos of children between the ages of 5 and 14 growing in love and grace right before the eye of the camera. They are sitting on the hallway floor leaning on—and working with—their friends; they are standing proudly—individually and in groups—before the camera to celebrate this or that moment of growth. They are only vaguely aware of the work and worry of their teachers, teachers who plan each day with each and every child in mind, teachers who communicate faithfully with parents—sharing good news and enlisting parents as allies in addressing problems, teachers who are paid less than they would be in the public school across the street. These teachers are well-aware of the difficulties facing a parochial school where funding

Teachers plan and design for the growth and development of their students, but they don't control it.

is always an issue, and aware also of the personal and societal challenges facing their students.

But the *positiva*, the *creativa,* and the *transformativa* are evident in both everyday and occasional activities of children. Just weeks ago, I experienced the joy (and humor!) of watching Mother's Day videos one grandson and one granddaughter, both kindergartners, created for their mothers with the help of their quite wonderful teacher. Mrs. L interviewed each kindergartner and edited those interviews into

a video that began with a common introduction, featured the kindergartner talking about his or her mother (or primary parent), and then brought the entire class in to sing a song together in honor of the love of a mother. The positive energy and the creativity of the project enabled each mother (and me, by extension) to bear witness to the transformation of the child from a shy five-year-old into an outspoken six-year-old able to express their powers of observation and appreciation of love as a force in their lives. This took work, but the work was supported and worth it.

Sometimes the everyday insecurities of middle schoolers interrupt the loving community of the school. Sometimes adolescents don't control their impulses as well as we educators might like. How the principal and the teachers respond to frustration—the students' and their own—is what determines whether this is a moment of growth for students. In one such interruption involving a posse of sixth graders and unnecessary disrespect for their teachers and each other, the principal and middle school teachers focused together on the quality of the class community. Rather than "discipline" just the apparent offenders, they gathered the class, employed an outside facilitator, and created the conditions for the students and teachers to diagnose the problem and solve it together. It is early days for the solution they fashioned, but the results are promising for both individual students and teachers *and* the class as a whole. Struggle, faith, creativity, and new possibility exist together in the work of those teachers.

SHARING RESPONSIBILITY IN A PUBLIC URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

For four years, from 2012 to 2016, I worked closely with the faculty and administration of a public middle school in Nashville, TN that could only be described as "troubled." The new principal, a friend of mine, arrived with a clear focus on taking care of teachers so that they could take care of youngsters in a way that addressed trauma and insecurities of all kinds as they raised the bar on academic growth.

Together we found ways to expand and enhance relational capacity in the school by minimizing formal administrative roles and redistributing those resources toward empowering teachers and teacher leaders. Grade-level teams of teachers—content teachers, a special educator, a counselor, paraprofessionals, and residents from my teacher education program—led by one of their own took on virtually every function that ensured the well-being of students. This meant that student grouping, targeted social and academic interventions, instructional planning, daily schedules, and

assessment were all in the hands of the teacher-led teams. That this required intellectually and emotionally demanding effort goes without saying. But the presence of supportive teams (flexibly operating to give each other a break when the demands threatened to break them) enabled the teachers to see, encourage, and challenge each and every student.

Because of the positive support and the encouraged team-based creativity, the school was gradually but steadily transformed from troubled to energized. The teachers were transformed from competent if overloaded to inspired and inspiring. Stunningly, the students came quickly to understand themselves as, in the words of the morning motto, "individuals of character, scholars for life, leaders now and tomorrow," a descriptor confirmed by their continuing loyalty to their middle school experience, and the life milestones (college graduation and job advancement) that they regularly post to social media.

There are innumerable stories to be told about my four years in that school that would confirm the heartache, the joy, the innovation, and the resulting growth of all involved. But I'll mention just two: the move to algebra for the entire 8th grade class and the experience of one particular seventh-grader who, with the help of an advocate teacher, shed his special education label.

Transformation is the visible sign of education well-practiced.

Too many of the school's students (upwards of 85%) were failing to achieve proficiency on required state math tests, a source of great frustration for their teachers. So the math team pivoted away from failure and toward possibility, making a unilateral decision to teach algebra to all eighth graders, even those who were "below basic" in the previous year. That move required some curriculum adjustment and a supportive team effort to keep students' heads in the game. At the end of the year, the experiment and the faith it demanded paid off. Seventy-five percent of the students passed the algebra test and qualified for high school geometry! The evident joy and pride the day the test

scores came back was infectious. Even the students who didn't master algebra took pride in their capacity to do hard things. And the expectations all students had for themselves in this previously low-achievement school went up a notch or two.

While the eighth graders were growing as a group, one seventh grader was resisting labels imposed on him early in his school career. He believed that he could learn and grow *with* the support of his teachers but *without* the limits of a special education tag. This was partly because his team of teachers had so integrated students of varying needs with differentiated instruction that he *experienced* keeping up and, in some areas, forging ahead. When he asked the special education teacher whether he needed the label, she heard him and began a not-so-simple process of advocacy—and frustrating paperwork—that freed him. He flourished. Her work paid off. A life was changed.

Teachers' work integrates the *via negativa* (uncertainty, darkness, discouragement, even suffering), the *via positiva* (awe, delight, gratitude and joy), the *via creativa* (creativity and passion), and the *via transformativa* (justice, healing, celebration). These characteristics of work well done come together in the reproduction of what is worth preserving and in the reconstruction of individual lives and communal interaction. This is success.

But to achieve success understood in this way, that is, to allow teachers to experience their work in the ways I have characterized above, we need, says Fox, "wisdom schools" rather than the current "knowledge factories."[2] Wisdom schools do not reduce education to mere training ground for jobs (rather than work worthy of the title). And when we think of education as merely preparation for job, we lose our energy for education, rightly understood.

American philosopher John Dewey cautions that "the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education [is that we stop] conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make it the full

meaning of the present life."[3] When teachers are unable to integrate the negative, the positive, the creative, and the transformational into their work, the cost to our individual and social lives is beyond measure. I fear we are experiencing that today in a long season of education policy inspired by narrowly construed economic goals.

The two schools I profiled above are wisdom schools; they do not fall into that trap. The teachers are well-aware of the fiscal constraints and socio-political realities that challenge them and their students. Nonetheless, they are willing to work hard, to persist through disappointment, to do what they can to change students' lives and possibilities. And what they can do is impressive! That they and their students celebrate together the power of human growth completes the circle of teachers' work.

Matthew Fox reminds us that, for the Celts, only poets could be teachers, because poets knew, in their minds and in their hearts, "that knowledge that has not passed through the heart could be dangerous."[4] Put another way, there is no education without spirit. I could cite famous educators like Maria Montessori or Rudolph Steiner—or Dewey—to back up this point, but I suspect I don't need to. If you think about the moments in your educational experience—in and out of schools—that changed you, they are marked by Spirit, that is, the integration of discomfort, joy, creativity, and transformation that teachers know—and desire—as the best part of their work. There is complexity, mystery, and yes, a fair dose of chaos involved in an effort that is never fully determined.

It is left to all of us to support wisdom schools and the teachers who do this "Great Work." V&V

NOTES

1. Matthew Fox, *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for our Time* (Harper Collins, 1994).
2. Fox, *Reinvention*, p. 170.
3. John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey,* Jo Ann Boydston, ed. (Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–1991). ("Self-realization as the Moral Ideal," EW 4: 50).
4. Fox, *Reinvention*, p. 171.

Barbara S. Stengel is professor emerita of philosophy of education and teacher education at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of several books, most recently, *Responsibility: Philosophy of Education in Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2023). Stengel is a former President of the Philosophy of Education Society and current President of the John Dewey Society.

Meaningful Work

SOUNDBITES FROM PAST VIRTUES & VOCATIONS CONVENINGS

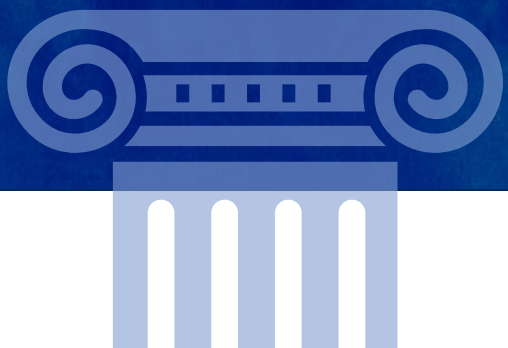
"For me the great insight is that we are formed more powerfully by our work than we form it. The tools we use, the habits of thought, the systems we routinely employ, the way we think about the persons around us and the persons we don't see who are vital to our work, those habits and processes—the cultures—are shaping us as we use them. Sort of like the handle of a hammer shapes the hand of a carpenter over a lifetime. . . . Work has many consequences, and one of them is that you are turning into someone while you do it. So, look for a way to make it formative."

Sanford "Sandy" Shugart
former president, Valencia College

"What draws so many people into the healthcare professions—physicians, nurses, therapists—is a desire to look at human suffering and do something about it, whether it is doing something by a surgery or a technical procedural skill or simply standing with someone as they navigate a devastating diagnosis. I think both of those need to be valued in the same way."

Sneha Mantri
physician and director of medical humanities, Duke University School of Medicine

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



"Students are obsessed with work. Most of them think about college as a transactional relationship; it is just about getting a job. They are given a social script, and parents who don't know what to say when their kids come to them and say that they want to get a good job say, 'Well, keep your options open. You can do anything.' So, on the one hand, they're told, 'keep your options open. You can do anything.' And on the other, they are told that there are only a couple of really successful careers. 'Be a doctor. Be a lawyer. Be an engineer—or you are a failure.' So they are really confused about how to make a good choice about work. . . . A lot of the practical exercises [from *The Young Adult Playbook*] come from the insight that work is a gift; you have to develop your talents, and you have to serve the human community—that's what meaningful work is."

Thomas Smith
provost, Providence College

"Every interview subject who attended an HBCU talked about the significance of their professors, and they talked about the professors as being almost familial. . . . They had stories of faculty members who would go to their dorms when they were sick and bring soup or knock to find out why they weren't on the bus. . . . That wasn't my approach to teaching, but I've been inspired by a lot of what I learned doing this research to engage my students more holistically."

Deondra Rose
professor of public policy, Duke University

Art credits

COVER ARTIST: AGUCHO VELÁSQUEZ etsy.com/shop/ParakasArtColors

FRONT/BACK COVER: **Contemplating My Garden from Afar** ©2025, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 4: **Victory for All** ©2025, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 8: **Winds and Feelings** ©2024, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 62: **The Winds of Spring** ©2024, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 80: **Found Memories** ©2024, acrylic on canvas

Born in Lima, Peru, Velásquez moved to Italy in 1990, where he strengthened his skills by visiting various artists and organizing exhibitions. He currently lives and works in Belgium. He has been involved in art—painting, sculpture and design—for more than 40 years. He says, "My works have been sold in over 40 countries around the world, which allows me to wake up every morning with the satisfaction of knowing that my art is appreciated by many people from different cultures." Follow him on Instagram @agucho.velasquez_art.

SUSAN ABBOTT susanabbott.com | Instagram @susanabbott_art

PAGE 51: **Road Into Summer** ©2024, oil on linen

PAGE 52: **Small Town Intersection** ©2021, oil on linen

PAGE 53: **Paper Moon** ©2024, oil on linen

PAGE 57: **Candyland** ©2024, oil on linen panel

PAGE 58: **Vacationland** ©2024, oil on linen

PAGE 60: **Red Barn, Afternoon** ©2023, oil on linen

Susan Abbott was born in Takoma Park, Maryland. Her paintings are represented in numerous international corporate and individual collections and have been featured in many publications and media including the Oprah Winfrey Show. An art critic for the *Washington Post* commented, "There simply aren't many who can match her level of expertise. What makes her painting so interesting, however, is the tension between the dazzling display of skill and the underlying idea." She currently lives in northern Vermont.

MERYL BLINDER merylblinder.com | galleryjupiter.com/collections/meryl-blinder

PAGE 124: **In the Waves** ©2024, pencil and oil paint on gessoed linen

Meryl Blinder was born in Brooklyn, New York. Drawing and color define her career and she teaches those skills at Wentworth Institute's School of Architecture in Boston, where she now lives. Before becoming a painter, she was a courtroom sketch artist for TV news and a color designer for the late architect Michael Graves. In 2002, her pencil drawing of the World Trade Center bombing was selected for the Library of Congress archive. Her work is inspired by a combination of abstraction and representation. Artwork can be purchased directly by emailing merylcolors@gmail.com.

LOUISE BODY louisebody.com | Instagram @louisebodypaintings

PAGE 94: **Adjusting to the Dark** ©2024, acrylic on canvas

Louise Body lives and works in Hastings on the south coast of the UK. She says, "My experience of living by the sea has had a profound effect on my work. The ever present, uninterrupted horizon line where the sea meets the sky serves as a constant reminder of the vastness of the world and the smallness of ourselves within it." Her paintings have been featured in Elle Decoration and Coast Magazine. She sells prints through King & McGaw and John Lewis. She painted the cover artwork for Ian McEwan's 2025 novel *What We Can Know*.

JED DORSEY jeddorseyart.com | acrylicuniversity.com | Instagram @jeddorseyart

PAGE 105: **Sanctuary** ©2023, acrylic on panel

Jed Dorsey, a fourth-generation artist who has sold paintings since he was 11 years old, says, "I like how light changes objects, from garbage cans, to buildings, to plants and trees, creating shadows and diverse colors." Beyond the canvas, Jed teaches through his platform Acrylic University and is passionate about helping others discover their own creative voice. He also paints commissions from photographs, and information about this process can be found on his website. He makes his home on Camano Island, Washington, where he grew up.

JENNY FREAN jennyfrean.com | Instagram @jennyfrean

PAGE 116: **Ludere 4** ©2023, mixed media

PAGE 121: **Zigzag** ©2021, mixed media

Jenny Frean is an award-winning textile designer, now focussing on art and stationery. She studied at the Royal College of Art in London before setting up her design group First Eleven Studio. The studio flourished, was exhibited extensively in Europe and America, and its designers worked with some of the world's best and most exciting textile companies. Jenny's visual narrative draws on observation and a love of color, form and pattern. This and the joy of creating are the framework of her artistic practice.

DENYS GOLDEN goldengallery.ca | Instagram @goldengallery.ca

PAGE 70: **Bloom Time** ©2024, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 77: **Peaceful Dusk** ©2025, acrylic on canvas

Denys Golden (Golemenkov) is a Ukrainian-born, Toronto-based visual artist who specializes in bright, abstract paintings, as well as vibrant digital works. He is inspired by the geometrics of everyday things, by Toronto's modern and historical architecture, and by the lights and colors in nature. His abstract pieces are meant to express movements and aspects of modern life. Influenced by his own background in architecture, he developed a painting style that is structured, yet bold and expressive.

GRETA LAUNDY gretalaundyart.com | Instagram @gretalaundyart

PAGE 20: **Endless Summer** ©2019, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 39: **The Strength of Mountains** ©2020, acrylic on polycotton

Raised in rural South Australia, Greta Laundy is now based in the beautiful foothills of Adelaide, South Australia. She draws inspiration from the open spaces of the South Australian natural environment to create vibrant, magical abstract landscapes loved for their bold use of color and strong compositions. Her work is in private collections worldwide. She can also be followed on Facebook @GretaLaundyArtist.

KEVIN LOWERY kevinlowery.ie | Instagram @kevinloweryart

PAGE 10: **Causeway II** ©2025, oil & acrylic on canvas

PAGE 15: **Haze** ©2025, oil on canvas

PAGE 16: **Rocks at Pampa III** ©2020, oil & acrylic on canvas

Kevin Lowery is an Irish artist born in Clare, whose work is shaped by the landscape of Northwest Ireland. His paintings reflect the dramatic scenery and shifting light of the region. Kevin has exhibited widely, including with the Royal Ulster Academy and the Royal Society of Marine Artists. His work is held in Irish and international collections. In May 2024, he opened his own studio and gallery in Bundoran, Donegal, where he is currently based.

ESTÉ MACLEOD estemacleod.com | Instagram @estemacleod

PAGE 82: **Blackwaterfoot** ©2014, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 84: **Black Beach** ©2015, acrylic on canvas

PAGE 87: **Corcovado** ©2024, acrylic and mixed media on canvas

Esté MacLeod was born in South Africa and based in England. She combines fine art with design, characterized by ethereal, colorful works featuring floral themes, botanicals and birds. With qualifications in textile design, fine art printmaking, ceramics and glass, and jewelery design, Esté creates still lives, landscapes, and floral-themed paintings in acrylics and mixed media. She teaches online and licenses designs for textiles and wallpaper globally. Sign up for free weekly color prompts at coloricombo.substack.com.

SUZANNE SIEGEL suzannesiegel.net | Instagram @suzanne_siegel_studio

PAGE 108: **Nest III** ©2024, hand painted paper collage

PAGE 111: **Summer Garden I** ©2022, hand painted paper collage

Suzanne is an award-winning painter who works in watercolor, pastels, and painted-paper collage. Her ideas arise from what she sees in places where she feels most at home, whether on long walks on the beach or driving through the countryside. She works in her studio nearly every day because "this is where I come alive," she says. She begins each day by drawing her compositional ideas, or painting papers with layers of texture or solid colors. With a color idea in mind, she chooses a few papers that excite her eye, and that harmonize well together, and the search for magic begins. She lives and works in Georgia.

JUSTIN WHEATLEY justinwheatley.com | Instagram @justinwheatleyart

PAGE 29: **The Ants Go Marching** ©2018, acrylic on canvas

Justin Wheatley was born and raised in Clinton, Utah. His work is influenced by his love for nature and architecture. He is represented by galleries across the country and has work in the collections of organizations including Brigham Young University, Marriott International, Royal Caribbean, Salt Lake County, University of Utah, and Utah Arts and Museums. He currently resides in Salt Lake City with his wife and four daughters.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