Thanks to a generous grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, we are pleased to welcome you to the second cohort of students in a new non-credit program.

This booklet will provide (1) program background and logistics, and (2) readings to be completed before the first retreat September 8-10, 2023.

Plan to be in room W0750 at 11:00am on Friday, September 8, 2023 with your luggage, sleeping bag/bedding and other items (see packing list inside this document). Please bring this booklet with you, as well as writing implements, a note pad (you will be provided with a journal to keep track of your thoughts and reflections), and anything else (non-electric) that you would aid you in discerning your calling. You will return to Ross around 5:30pm on Sunday, September 10, 2023.

Program Overview

*Management as a Calling* is an immersive retreat experience for personal growth to help you look deep inside yourself to consider *management as a calling*. It is designed to help you discern your calling, moving away from the simple pursuit of a career for private personal gain and towards a *vocation* that is based on a higher and more internally derived set of values about leading commerce and serving society.\(^1\) And it appears that students increasingly want this emphasis - A 2019 Gallup poll found that 97% of young business professionals want a career with “purpose.”\(^2\) Understanding discernment and connecting career with purpose is about living a life, and not just earning a living. You will one day possess power as a business executive, and as corporate attorney James Gamble writes, “power needs to be constrained by conscience.”\(^3\) This program will help you examine your idea of what kind of a leader you want to be, what kind of career you want to have, and what kind of legacy you want to leave.

This program is available to business students in their final year of study during the 2023-24 academic year: senior undergraduates, second-year graduates, and third-year dual degree students. You have been selected for one of only 40 total slots available. You will be required to give up your cell phone and computer to both (a) be fully present for the entirety of the retreat, and (b) open possibilities for creativity and introspection. Numerous research articles show that creative increases in times of boredom where distractions are limited.

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Program Structure

The structure of this program includes multiple touchpoints to build, test, reinforce and then build again your personal calling. The keystone is two remote retreats for guided self-examination and discernment. Overall, the program has four primary components.

1. **First Engagement:** Between Friday September 8 and Sunday September 10, 2023, you will spend the weekend at the University of Michigan Biological Station in Pellston, MI. This site offers the ability to be fully immersed in nature while limiting technology. For the entire visit, you will be asked to give up your cell phones and computers so as to remain fully present and focused on the task at hand. The weekend will be interspersed with (1) readings, (2) guided lectures and exercises, (3) peer mentoring and feedback, and (4) periods of self-reflection. The weekend will yield a Personal Mission Statement and letter to your future self to be received in March 2024.

2. **Second Engagement:** In late March/early April, you will spend the weekend at Camp Nissokone in Oscoda, MI. There, you will be reconvened for further (1) readings, (2) guided lectures and exercises, (3) peer mentoring and feedback, (4) periods of self-reflection and (5) development of actionable strategies for maintaining your calling after you enter the workforce. This will be an opportunity to discuss your letter to yourself, your Personal Mission/Purpose Statement, and your progress in responding to the challenges they each present. This will be a chance to repeat and review your first immersion, adding new insights and adjustments as circumstances have changed. The weekend will yield a revised Personal Mission Statement and second letter to your future self to be received in March 2025.

3. **Interim Lectures:** Between the first and second engagement, there will be 4 special lectures and seminars on the ideas, concepts and models of discerning a calling, the challenges in today’s society to which one might devote their calling and presentations from leaders who have examined and exemplified the values and actions that we are seeking to instill in this program.

4. **Post Graduation:** One year after graduation, in the summer of 2025, you will be invited to participate in virtual meetings that reinforce your sense of your calling and respond to your second letter to yourself. These sessions will serve at least four purposes: (1) check-ins to see how everything is going in your pursuit of a calling in management. This will help to reinforce strategies and tactics for discerning your calling and guide discussion to respond to your letter to your future self; (2) an opportunity to refresh the lessons with some additional exercises; (3) a chance for the cohort to reconnect (both as a large group and in small breakouts) and provide support and encouragement to continue on the path you have set for yourself; and (4) an opportunity for the program organizers to obtain feedback and survey data on the effectiveness of the program for future cohorts.
Why This Program and Why Now?
Corporations play an outsized role in our modern world. Their actions, as much as the individuals that inhabit them, decide how we will live and adapt in a world that climate change, species extinction, income inequality and other social and environmental issues are altering. Corporations can, at their best, “be vehicles of social progress and the solution to basic problems such as the provision of food, healthcare, education and other human needs and wants” and, at their worst, “provide the tools to multiply the effects of the darkest of human impulses.” To be the former, we need to cultivate leaders who are willing to challenge taken-for-granted norms and conceive of a new vision for the corporation and their career. As business steps into such arenas, we need fully mature, self-aware and wise leaders. This program is designed to help “rejuvenate the intellectual and moral training of future business leaders” in order to redefine the role of business in society towards one that serves society’s needs and solves the systemic problems that the market, in many ways, has caused.

Program Expectations
Because this program depends heavily on both inward reflection and outward interactive dialogue, participation is essential, both for your and your classmate's learning. We can guide you on this journey, but the hard work is up to you. You have been selected based on a demonstrated maturity and seriousness of intent to pursue a career and embark on this journey. You have demonstrated that you have done some initial thinking on your purpose, want some help in continuing that journey and are open to the idea of being mentored and mentoring others on this path. If you have reservations about speaking, expressing your ideas in groups, and receiving feedback from others, you may wish to carefully consider your participation in this program. This is especially important as we will be discussing your personal goals and aspirations in work and life. In this program you will be expected to read materials both before and during the sessions; and you are strongly encouraged to find additional materials on the topic of this program and bring that material to the class discussion. In this way, we will all learn together.

Learning Objectives
(1) Develop an understanding and appreciation for the concept of a calling or vocation and be able to apply it to your own life. (2) Participate in deep discernment of your own calling. (3) Engage in positive peer-to-peer coaching on vocational discernment; Develop the skills and aptitude to mentor others in their pursuit of a calling. (4) Develop an Ethical Autobiography, Personal Values Inventory, Aspirational Vision and Personal Mission/Purpose Statement. (5) Test the ideas of your calling over an extended period of time by returning to the group after 1 year to gauge progress and success in holding to one’s sense of a calling. (6) Consider the role that businesses and business managers can and should play in serving society through the market.

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First Retreat Location and Details
University of Michigan Biological Station
9133 Biological Road
Pellston, MI 49769
Facility phone numbers: 231-373-4564; 231-818-9292.

What to bring (See suggested packing list below for more detail):
- Blankets or sleeping bags, sheets, pillows, towels, Toiletries, etc.
- If you have allergies, bring your prescription and/or epi pen and inform Professor Hoffman and your cohort leader.

What not to bring:
- Alcohol or drugs.
- Cell phones, computers or other tools for connecting to Wi-Fi, cellular or the internet.
- Cigarettes, UMBS is smoke free.

Full UM Bio-Station packing list:

 Required
- Clothes that can be worn in layers and get dirty/stained/torn:
- Long pants (2-3 pairs), ideally something that can dry quickly
- Sweatshirts/long sleeves (2)
- Jacket/coat/raincoat
- Shoes that can get wet/dirty
- Tall socks
- Raincoat/pants or poncho
- Hot-weather clothes (t-shirts, shorts)
- Towel/washcloth
- Soap (hand and bath) & toiletries
- Pillows
- Sheets/blankets (for regular twin bed), or Sleeping bag
- Sunscreen
- Daily medication/epi pen (if applicable)
- Backpack/string bag

 Recommended
- Heated blanket/throw with automatic timer to shut off (cabins are not insulated and nights can get cool)
- Flashlight, day pack
- Insect repellent (30% DEET; herbal not effective) or head net
- Water bottle/Travel mug (help us reduce disposable coffee cup waste!)
- Sunglasses
- Alarm clock
- Water shoes, hiking shoes
- Shorts
- Baseball cap / sun hat
- Bathing suit/Beach towel
- Games/playing cards
- Recreation gear (frisbee, running shoes, etc.)

In an emergency, family or friends can call or email Professor Hoffman (617-285-0920; ajhoff@umich.edu), the facility phone numbers (above) and courtesy phones, which are located at the Biostation: at the second floor of Stockard Lakeside Lab near the steps by the Director’s Office (231-539-8861), and in the dorm hallway-base of steps (231-539-7359 year-round). Local calls are no charge; long distance calls require a phone card.
Schedule

Pre-Retreat:
• Please read the Assigned List of Readings attached to this document and consider some of the Optional Readings.
• You will also be sent a survey separately. Please fill it out prior to the weekend.

Retreat:
Friday, September 8, 2023
THEME: PREPARE/INSPIRE
W0750
11:00-12:00 Welcome and Orientation
12:00-1:00 Lunch in Ann Arbor
1:00-5:00 Drive to UM Biostation, Transport by Private Motorcoach.
Arrive at UM Biostation, Pellston, MI
5:00-6:00 Settle In
6:00-7:00 Dinner
7:00-8:00 Evening Discussion
8:00 Formal program ends for the evening, Casual time around the campfire.

Saturday, September 9, 2023
THEME: REFLECT/CONNECT
UM Biostation, Pellston, MI
8:00-9:00 Breakfast
9:00-12:00 Exercises and Reflections
12:00-1:00 Lunch
1:00-5:30 Exercises and Reflections
5:30-6:30 Dinner
6:30-8:00 Lecture and Discussion
8:00 Formal program ends for the evening, Casual time around the campfire.

Sunday, September 10, 2023
THEME: INTEGRATE/ASPIRE
UM Biostation, Pellston, MI
8:00-9:00 Breakfast
9:00-11:30 Exercises and Reflections
11:30-12:00 Preview Second Retreat
12:00-1:00 Lunch
1:00-1:30 Pack for Departure
Depart from UM Biostation, Pellston, MI
1:30-5:30 Drive to Ann Arbor, Transport by Private Motorcoach.
Post-Retreat:

2. Submit your 1-page Personal Mission Statement (or longer if you wish) on Canvas by October 18, 2023. This will not be graded but will form the basis of discussion for the next retreat and private meetings with Professor and/or TA’s if you request them.
3. You will be given a survey to ascertain your experience with the retreat so as to make necessary adjustments and increase the impact and success of this program.
4. You will be given a schedule for 4 monthly lectures, which are a requirement of this program. Readings will be assigned one month in advance of each of the lectures.

Academic Integrity and Community Values

Personal integrity and professionalism are fundamental values of the Ross School community. Though we will not be in Ann Arbor, abiding by the Ross Community Values are still expected and you should be familiar with and understand the Ross School’s Statement of Community Values, the Ross School Academic Honor Code, and the Ross School Code of Student Conduct including all campus public health policies. In light of COVID, our community has enhanced the Code of Student Conduct to include our commitment to each other and adherence to campus and School public health policies. Each of these, including a Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities, may be found in the Ross School Impact on Ross Community Values. In addition, every student at the University of Michigan accepts the rights and responsibilities of membership in the University's academic and social community. These rights and responsibilities are clearly laid out in The Statement. By enrolling in this program you confirm that you have read and understood these statements and policies, and further that you agree to abide by them. Any violation of the Ross School Academic Honor Code will be referred to the Community Values Committee. Possible penalties include dismissal from the program and a permanent notation of an honor policy violation on your transcript and even expulsion.

Office Hours

Professor Hoffman will be available for office hours at a time that is mutually agreeable to your calendar. There are 5 students assistants who are also available for one-on-one sessions. All of us are to be used as sounding boards to test ideas, work through blockages or solicit guidance. You are strongly encouraged to take advantage of these resources.
Advance Readings

You are being provided with the following materials to be read BEFORE the weekend retreat on September 8-10, 2023. Please read these at a relaxed pace, gathering the information presented but also the spirit with which it is presented. The assigned book (Man’s Search for Meaning) is a classic text. First published in 1946 by psychologist Viktor Frankl, it chronicles his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Listed by the Library of Congress, as one of the “ten most influential books in the United States,” it answers the question "How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner?" and answers it with his ideas of meaning and his theory called logotherapy.

The assigned articles are in the back of this booklet. The two readings by Parker Palmer and the one by Herbert Shepard set the tone for the retreat, offering inspiration and structure for pursuing your calling and life of meaning. The reading from Marshall Ganz emphasizes the importance of narrative and storytelling in pursuing your calling, a technique we will make use of in the retreat. The reading by David Foster Wallace (you can also listen to the talk on the linked website) points out that we pursue our calling within a context that may resist our efforts. And the two articles from the New York Times warn of pitfalls for not pursuing what really matters to you.

Assigned Book:

Assigned Articles:
- Wallace, D.F. (2005) This is Water, Commencement address at Kenyon College.
Optional Readings, For a Deeper Dive:

Books:

Finding Purpose

Purpose and Work

**Spirituality and Religion**
• Huber, C. (1990) *That Which You are Seeking is Causing You to Seek* (Sequim, WA: Keep It Simple Books).

**Experiences and Examples of Calling**

**Philosophy**

**Psychology**

**Inspiration**
Articles:


Poetry:

Video:
• Center for Student Formation (n.d.) The Three Key Questions https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-4lKCENdnw 
Program Personnel

Program Faculty Lead:

- **Andrew (Andy) Hoffman** (ajhoff@umich.edu; Office Phone: 734-763-9455; Cell Phone for emergencies: 617-285-0920; Room R4390, Ross School) is the Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise, a position that holds joint appointments at the Ross School of Business and the School for Environment and Sustainability. His work and his calling focus on finding solutions to our sustainability challenges, notably climate change and other environmental challenges, through the market and business. Prior to academics, and while he was searching for his calling, he quit his job as a chemical engineer for the US Environmental Protection Agency and spent five formative years building custom homes. The notions of calling and vocation animate all of Andy’s teaching and research, forming a central aspect of his idea of what it means to be a professor. Andy holds a B.S. in Chemical Engineering from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a MS and PhD in Civil Engineering and Management from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Teaching Assistants:

- **Akbar Arsiwala** (arsiwaak@umich.edu) Akbar is a second-year MBA student who’s passionate about the intersection of sports, coaching, and youth mental health. He serves as the VP of Youth Mentorship for the Detroit Initiative of Ross and leads Action-based Learning for FitX, Michigan Ross’ premier health & fitness industry club. Before Ross, Akbar served as the Midwest Region Program Manager for the Travis Manion Foundation, a nonprofit providing veterans with community service opportunities upon transition from service. His proudest accomplishment was building and scaling a food insecurity relief operation in Chicago, providing over 100 tons of groceries to over 4,600 families. Akbar also served as an Officer in the U.S. Navy, where he learned the tenets of servant leadership, how to persevere through challenges and the value of pursuing one’s calling. Akbar holds a B.S. in Political Science from the United States Naval Academy and a minor in Arabic. He’s deeply committed to helping others navigate adversity and become the best version of themselves.

- **Jill Dannis** (jdannis@umich.edu) is a third-year MBA/MS in Environment and Sustainability Behavior, Education and Communication candidate through the Erb Institute. Prior to graduate school, she worked for eight years in the nonprofit sector across a variety of mission areas, including suicide prevention and crisis services for LGBTQ+ youth at The Trevor Project, higher education scholarships and leadership development for LGBTQ+ students at Point Foundation, and early talent development, diversity, equity and inclusion at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. She has designed and facilitated leadership development and mentorship programs as well as built and led identity-centric affinity groups. Jill has also been invited to speak at retreats at her alma mater for undergraduates to engage in discernment about their post-graduation plans. She believes in following one’s passions and values to chart a career path, however winding it might be. Jill holds a B.A. in Sociology with a minor in Environmental Studies from Loyola Marymount University.
• **Ashley (Ash) Martinez** (ashemart@umich.edu) is a third-year dual degree student pursuing her MBA with a concentration in Global Operations and a MS in Environment and Sustainability with a focus on Sustainable Systems. Ashley is passionate about using sustainability solutions to increase equity and accessibility in the food sector and built environment. Prior to graduate school, Ashley spent 5 years working in strategy and operations consulting at Deloitte Consulting LLP in Seattle, WA. She’s helped Fortune 500 and mid-size enterprise clients across numerous industries (food and beverage, retail, consumer product goods, defence, technology, healthcare, and nonprofit) to improve supply chain and operational performance as well as team dynamics, organizational design, and talent development. She launched and managed the Seattle office inclusion council and designed Deloitte’s national DEI recruiting model. For the summer of 2023, she is interning with Mars Petcare in Franklin, TN as a Strategy and Customer Development Intern. The previous summer, she interned with MillerKnoll Inc. through the Tauber Institute for Global Operations where she developed an inventory management model for the newly merged organization. She currently serves on the University of Michigan's President's Advisory Committee on Labor Standards and Human Rights as well as the Michigan Farm to Institution Network Advisory Committee. In addition, Ashley is a Graduate Student intern with the Sustainability team in UM Dining and a part time Sustainability Consultant with the Impact Collective Group which provides ESG solutions to mid-size companies across industries. She is currently finishing up her DEI certificate through the Rackham Graduate School and Six Sigma Black Belt certification.

• **Michael O’Gorman** (mogorman@umich.edu) is a Michigan Ross class of 2023 alumnus and currently works as a senior strategy consultant at Deloitte based in New York City. Prior to business school, Michael was a senior strategist at the NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE, 2018-2021) where he was responsible for increasing student access to high quality seats. In this role he also founded the DEI Working Group in the Division of School Planning and Development which served as the pilot for professional DEI education across the NYCDOE. Before his tenure with the NYCDOE, Michael was a teacher and teacher leader with KIPP public schools in New York City and Washington, D.C. Michael remains deeply passionate about public education and using it to lift low-income students and families from poverty. He is also fascinated by the intersection of business, ethics, impact, and meaning which he explored while at Ross and recently as a FASPE Fellow in Germany and Poland. Michael believes a life worth living is one in service to others, rich with relationships, and with dedicated time and exercises for deep reflection. Michael holds a B.A. in Political Science from Moravian University, a M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction from George Mason University, a M.B.A. from the University of Michigan and is an alumnus of AmeriCorps and Teach for America.
Madison (Maddie) Parrish (maddie.parrish@umich.edu) is a second-year MBA/MS dual degree student at the Ross School of Business and the School for Environment and Sustainability. Born in Battle Creek, Michigan, she grew up in Virginia and studied Economics and Communication Studies at Davidson College in North Carolina. Throughout her 10-year professional career in the global packaging industry before Ross, Maddie has experienced first-hand the challenges global brands face to reach their sustainability goals. She is passionate about the needed intersection of brand management, international business, and sustainability and seeks to learn strategies for influencing sustainable consumer behavior change. Through her graduate education, Maddie aims to learn how consumers view sustainability, what affects their decisions, and how to motivate their behaviors to benefit both the environment and business. She seeks to understand the strategies that can be used to influence consumers to pursue positive behaviors, such as recycling or purchasing sustainable products. She also seeks to learn how international brands can use their market and product influence to inspire this needed consumer behavior. After graduating, Maddie hopes to help global brands overcome sustainability challenges and positively influence consumer behavior. Maddie aims to identify a career path that aligns with her personal moral values and her desire to better this world and its environment while serving society. Her time at graduate school has encouraged her to thoroughly understand and appreciate her personal values and ambitions. Specifically, she has learned what truly motivates her and how she can create a personally fulfilling and enjoyable career while meeting her subsistence needs. She strongly believes that the personality and drive of an effective manager should be based on more than just the sole quest for financial rewards. Those in leadership positions can positively influence the individuals they lead and the world, society, and the environment around us.
Other Related Courses at the University of Michigan

If the topic of finding purpose and meaning in your work is something that you want to pursue further, there are courses that you may which to explore at Ross and elsewhere around the university. Some are class based, some use cases and some more experiential learning.

1. **MO 330 (BBA): InterMission**, Professor Kevin Thompson. The goals of this course and *Management as a Calling* are similar and synergistic. Both courses are designed to help students better lead themself and others. To achieve this goal, *InterMission* explores the people, context and surroundings where we live, work and lead alongside individualized instruction of leadership development. It utilizes traditional business education and case study methods alongside experiential and action-learning approaches.

2. **MO 320 (BBA) and MO 620 (MBA): Leading a Good Life**, Professor Dave Mayer. These courses help students lead in a positive and purposeful manner. Their explicit goal is to help students live a good life, one that is meaningful by understanding the science of habit formation, self-regulation, positive emotional states and behavioral ethics.

3. **MO 440 (BBA) and MO 640 (MBA): Building Healthy Businesses**, Professor Stewart Thornhill. These courses are designed to help students develop tools and methods to implement practices in their workplaces that contribute to wellness and resiliency among all employees and apply those tools and practices in their own lives.

4. **MO 468: The Art and Science of Thriving in the New World of Work**, Professor Gretchen Spreitzer. Through this course you will reflect upon and synthesize your academic studies and action learning experiences to proactively craft a meaningful career and life. Specifically, you will learn to reveal and leverage your knowledge to adapt to your evolving professional and personal priorities, and the changing business world. faculty-guided group work and provide support for class deliverables.

5. **MO 455 (BBA) and MO 555 (MBA): Thriving at Work and Beyond: The Science of Positive Organizational Scholarship**, Professor Jane Dutton and Monica Worline. This course is designed to give students a working and practical knowledge of the domain of positive organizational scholarship (POS), an interdisciplinary approach to leading and being in work organizations in ways that call forth the best in people, resulting in individual and collective flourishing. Flourishing is a term that captures the optimal state of functioning of individuals, groups or organizations, with indicators such as thriving, engagement, health, growth, well-being and creativity as well as other markers of being in a state of positive deviance.

6. **PUBLIC HEALTH 250: On Purpose: Designing and Living a Big Life**, Professor Victor Strecher. This undergraduate course is designed to help students define goals directed toward the things that matter most in one’s life, to live a good or “big” life. It is premised on the idea that “having a direction in one’s life has long been viewed as an essential element of human well-being. There is now a strong and growing science supporting the philosophy.” In this course, Dr. Strecher moves from ancient philosophy to recent scientific research examining the importance of purpose and purposeful living.
Quotes
for Reflection
“A useless life is an early death.” – Goethe

“Are you bored with life? Then throw yourself into some work you believe in with all your heart; live for it, die for it and you will find happiness that you had thought could never be yours.” – Audrey Hepburn

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” – Barack Obama

“Character is that which reveals moral purpose.” – Aristotle

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” – Maya Angelou

“Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve.” – Martin Luther King Jr.

“Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.” – Theodore Roosevelt

“Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events; and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.” – Robert F. Kennedy

“Follow your bliss and don’t be afraid, and doors will open where you didn’t know they were going to be.” – Joseph Campbell

“For of those to whom much is given much is required.” – John F. Kennedy

“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.” – Luke 12:24

“For what it’s worth: it’s never too late or, in my case, too early to be whoever you want to be. There’s no time limit, stop whenever you want. You can change or stay the same, there are no rules to this thing. We can make the best or the worst of it. I hope you make the best of it. And I hope you see things that startle you. I hope you feel things you never felt before. I hope you meet people with a different point of view. I hope you live a life you’re proud of. If you find that you’re not, I hope you have the courage to start all over again.” – F. Scott Fitzgerald

“Great minds discuss ideas; Average minds discuss events; Small minds discuss people.” – Elenor Roosevelt

“Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway.” – Mother Teresa

“I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.” – Mark Twain

“I have one life and one chance to make it count for something . . . I’m free to choose what that something is, and the something I have chosen is my faith. Now, my faith goes beyond theology and religion and requires considerable work and effort. My faith demands – it is not optional – my faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I can, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference.” – Jimmy Carter
“I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.” - Henry David Thoreau

“I really don’t think life is about the I-could-have-beens. Life is only about the I-tried-to-do. I don’t mind the failure but I can’t imagine that I’d forgive myself if I didn’t try.” – Nikki Giovanni

“If you don’t know what your passion is, realize that one reason for your existence on earth is to find it.” – Oprah Winfrey

“If you don’t like something, change it. If you can’t change it, change your attitude. Don’t complain.” – Maya Angelou

“If you understand something you believe in, you have an obligation to share it.” – Twyla Tharp

“In addition to our human needs to sustain and reproduce our bodies, we humans flourish when also meeting two higher level needs: our need to belong, and our need for significance, for meaning, for noble purpose.” - David G. Myers

“It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.” – Harry Truman

“It’s not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about?” - Henry David Thoreau

“It’s your road, and yours alone. Others may walk it with you, not no one can walk if for you.” – Rumi

“Life is a promise; fulfill it.” – Mother Teresa

“Man’s search for meaning is a primary force in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning. There are some authors who contend that meanings and values are ‘nothing but defense mechanisms, reaction formations and sublimations.’ But as for myself, I would not be willing to live merely for the sake of my ‘defense mechanisms,’ not would I be ready to die merely for the sake of my ‘reaction formations.’ Man, however, is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values!” – Victor E. Frankl

“Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.” – Helen Keller

“Never be limited by other people’s limited imaginations. If you adopt their attitudes, then the possibility won’t exist because you’ll have already shut it out...You can hear other people’s wisdom, but you’ve got to re-evaluate the world for yourself.” – Mae Jemison

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” - Margaret Mead

“Nothing makes you happier than when you really reach out in mercy to someone who is badly hurt.” - Mother Teresa
“One [person] can make a difference and every [one] should try.” – John F. Kennedy

“One needs something to believe in, something for which one can have whole-hearted enthusiasm. One needs to feel that one’s life has meaning, that one is needed in this world.” – Hannah Senesh

“One thing I know: The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.” - Albert Schweitzer

“[One] who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.” - Friedrich Nietzsche

“[One] who becomes conscious of the responsibility [they] bear toward a human being who affectionately waits for [them], or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away [their] life. [They] know the ‘why’ for [their] existence, and will be able to bear almost any ‘how’.” - Viktor Frankl

“People do not seem to realize that their opinion of the world is also a confession of character.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we are seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our inner-most being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That’s what it’s finally all about.” - Joseph Campbell

“Providence has nothing good or high in store for one who does not resolutely aim at something high or good. A purpose is the eternal condition of success.” – T.T. Munger

“Some men see things as they are and ask, ‘Why?’ I dream things that never were and ask, ‘Why not?’” – Robert F. Kennedy

“The danger of education, I have found, is that it so easily confuses means with ends. Worse than that, it quite easily forgets both and devotes itself merely to the mass production of uneducated graduates–people literally unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate and completely artificial charade which they and their contemporaries have conspired to call ‘life’.” - Thomas Merton

“The great French Marshall Lyautey once asked his gardener to plant a tree. The gardener said ‘why plant it? It won’t flower for 100 years.’ ‘In that case,’ the Marshall replied, ‘plant it this afternoon.’” - John F. Kennedy

“[The human] search for meaning is the primary motivation of [one’s] life and not a ‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by [him or her] alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy [their] own will to meaning.” - Viktor Frankl

“The man without a purpose is like a ship without a rudder – waif, a nothing, a no man. Have a purpose in life, and, having it, throw such strength of mind and muscle into your work as God has given you.” – Thomas Carlyle

“The purpose of education is to show a person how to define himself [or herself] authentically and spontaneously in relation to his [or her] world–not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary definition of the individual himself [or herself].” - Thomas Merton
“The purpose of life is a life of purpose.” – Robert Byrne

“The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for the rest of your life. And the most important thing is, it must be something you cannot possibly do.” - Henry Moore

“The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind.” - Khalil Gibran

“The test of a vocation is the love of the drudgery it involves.” – Logan Pearsall Smith

“The tragedy of life doesn’t lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn’t a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream . . . It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim is sin.” – Benjamin Elijah Mays

“The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” – Mark Twain

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” – Socrates

“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” – Albert Einstein

“There is no point at which you can say ‘Well, I’m successful now, I might as well take a nap.’” – Carrie Fisher

“This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; being a Force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.” – George Bernard Shaw

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

“To handle yourself, use your head; to handle others, use your heart.” - Eleanor Roosevelt

“We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.” – E.M. Forster

“We need to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk or meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.” - Viktor Frankl

“What is happiness: to be dissolved into something complete and great.” – Willa Cather

“What makes life dreary is the want of a motive.” – George Eliot

“When goals go, meaning goes. When meaning goes, purpose goes. When purpose goes, life goes dead in our hands.” – Carl Jung
“When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.” - Paulo Coelho

“You are what your deep driving desire is; As your deep driving desire is, so is your will; As your will is so is your deed; As your deed is so is your destiny.” – The Upanishads

“You become what you give your attention to.” – Epictetus

“When your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of other’s opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.” – Steven Jobs

“Your work is to discover your work and then with all your heart to give yourself to it.” – The Buddha
Assigned Readings
CHAPTER I

Listening to Life

Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I have made. Ask me whether what I have done is my life. Others have come in their slow way into my thought, and some have tried to help or to hurt: ask me what difference their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look at the silent river and wait. We know the current is there, hidden; and there are comings and goings from miles away that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.
—William Stafford, “Ask Me”

“Ask me whether what I have done is my life.” For some, those words will be nonsense, nothing more than a poet’s loose way
with language and logic. Of course what I have done is my life! To what am I supposed to compare it?

But for others, and I am one, the poet’s words will be precise, piercing, and disquieting. They remind me of moments when it is clear—if I have eyes to see—that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me. In those moments I sometimes catch a glimpse of my true life, a life hidden like the river beneath the ice. And in the spirit of the poet, I wonder: What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?

I was in my early thirties when I began, literally, to wake up to questions about my vocation. By all appearances, things were going well, but the soul does not put much stock in appearances. Seeking a path more purposeful than accumulating wealth, holding power, winning at competition, or securing a career, I had started to understand that it is indeed possible to live a life other than one’s own. Fearful that I was doing just that—but uncertain about the deeper, truer life I sensed hidden inside me, uncertain whether it was real or trustworthy or within reach—I would snap awake in the middle of the night and stare for long hours at the ceiling.

Then I ran across the old Quaker saying, “Let your life speak.” I found those words encouraging, and I thought I understood what they meant: “Let the highest truths and values guide you. Live up to those demanding standards in everything you do.” Because I had heroes at the time who seemed to be doing exactly that, this exhortation had incarnate mean-
ing for me—it meant living a life like that of Martin Luther
King Jr. or Rosa Parks or Mahatma Gandhi or Dorothy Day, a
life of high purpose.
So I lined up the loftiest ideals I could find and set out to
achieve them. The results were rarely admirable, often laugh-
able, and sometimes grotesque. But always they were unreal,
a distortion of my true self—as must be the case when one
lives from the outside in, not the inside out. I had simply
found a “noble” way to live a life that was not my own, a life
spent imitating heroes instead of listening to my heart.
Today, some thirty years later, “Let your life speak” means
something else to me, a meaning faithful both to the ambigu-
ity of those words and to the complexity of my own experi-
ence: “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it,
listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell
your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to,
let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you
represent.”
My youthful understanding of “Let your life speak” led
me to conjure up the highest values I could imagine and then
try to conform my life to them whether they were mine or not.
If that sounds like what we are supposed to do with values, it is
because that is what we are too often taught. There is a simp-
listic brand of moralism among us that wants to reduce the
ethical life to making a list, checking it twice—against the
index in some best-selling book of virtues, perhaps—and then
trying very hard to be not naughty but nice.

Listening to Life 3
There may be moments in life when we are so unformed that we need to use values like an exoskeleton to keep us from collapsing. But something is very wrong if such moments recur often in adulthood. Trying to live someone else’s life, or to live by an abstract norm, will invariably fail—and may even do great damage.

Vocation, the way I was seeking it, becomes an act of will, a grim determination that one’s life will go this way or that whether it wants to or not. If the self is sin-ridden and will bow to truth and goodness only under duress, that approach to vocation makes sense. But if the self seeks not pathology but wholeness, as I believe it does, then the willful pursuit of vocation is an act of violence toward ourselves—violence in the name of a vision that, however lofty, is forced on the self from without rather than grown from within. True self, when violated, will always resist us, sometimes at great cost, holding our lives in check until we honor its truth.

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.

That insight is hidden in the word vocation itself, which is rooted in the Latin for “voice.” Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at
the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.

Behind this understanding of vocation is a truth that the ego does not want to hear because it threatens the ego’s turf: everyone has a life that is different from the “I” of daily consciousness, a life that is trying to live through the “I” who is its vessel. This is what the poet knows and what every wisdom tradition teaches: there is a great gulf between the way my ego wants to identify me, with its protective masks and self-serving fictions, and my true self.

It takes time and hard experience to sense the difference between the two—to sense that running beneath the surface of the experience I call my life, there is a deeper and truer life waiting to be acknowledged. That fact alone makes “listen to your life” difficult counsel to follow. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that from our first days in school, we are taught to listen to everything and everyone but ourselves, to take all our clues about living from the people and powers around us.

I sometimes lead retreats, and from time to time participants show me the notes they are taking as the retreat unfolds. The pattern is nearly universal: people take copious notes on what the retreat leader says, and they sometimes take notes on the words of certain wise people in the group, but rarely, if ever, do they take notes on what they themselves say. We listen for guidance everywhere except from within.
I urge retreatants to turn their note-taking around, because the words we speak often contain counsel we are trying to give ourselves. We have a strange conceit in our culture that simply because we have said something, we understand what it means! But often we do not—especially when we speak from a deeper place than intellect or ego, speak the kind of words that arise when the inner teacher feels safe enough to tell its truth. At those moments, we need to listen to what our lives are saying and take notes on it, lest we forget our own truth or deny that we ever heard it.

Verbalizing is not the only way our lives speak, of course. They speak through our actions and reactions, our intuitions and instincts, our feelings and bodily states of being, perhaps more profoundly than through our words. We are like plants, full of tropisms that draw us toward certain experiences and repel us from others. If we can learn to read our own responses to our own experience—a text we are writing unconsciously every day we spend on earth—we will receive the guidance we need to live more authentic lives.

But if I am to let my life speak things I want to hear, things I would gladly tell others, I must also let it speak things I do not want to hear and would never tell anyone else! My life is not only about my strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for “wholeness” is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident
and proud of. That is why the poet says, “ask me mistakes I have made.”

In the chapters to come, I speak often of my own mistakes—of wrong turns I have taken, of misreadings of my own reality—for hidden in these moments are important clues to my own vocation. I do not feel despondent about my mistakes, any more than the poet does, though I grieve the pain they have sometimes caused others. Our lives are “experiments with truth” (to borrow the subtitle of Gandhi’s autobiography), and in an experiment negative results are at least as important as successes. I have no idea how I would have learned the truth about myself and my calling without the mistakes I have made, though by that measure I should have written a much longer book!

How we are to listen to our lives is a question worth exploring. In our culture, we tend to gather information in ways that do not work very well when the source is the human soul: the soul is not responsive to subpoenas or cross-examinations. At best it will stand in the dock only long enough to plead the Fifth Amendment. At worst it will jump bail and never be heard from again. The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions.

The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient, and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is to go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an
hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek.

That is why the poem at the head of this chapter ends in silence—and why I find it a bit embarrassing that as this chapter ends, I am drawing the reader not toward silence but toward speech, page after page of speech! I hope that my speech is faithful to what I have heard, in the silence, from my soul. And I hope that the reader who sits with this book can hear the silence that always surrounds us in the writing and reading of words. It is a silence that forever invites us to fathom the meaning of our lives—and forever reminds us of depths of meaning that words will never touch.
LEADING FROM WITHIN
by Parker J. Palmer

Note: This piece comes from Chapter V of Parker Palmer’s book, Let Your Life Speak. As such you’ll notice some references to earlier chapters in the book.

Back to the World

From the depths of depression, I turn now to our shared vocation of leadership in the world of action. This may seem more like a leap than a turn, but none of the great wisdom traditions would look upon this segue with surprise. Go far enough on the inner journey, they all tell us—go past ego toward true self—and you end up not lost in narcissism but returning to the world, bearing more gracefully the responsibilities that come with being human.

Those words are more than a device to weave these chapters together—they are a faithful reflection of what happened to me once I passed through the valley of depression. At the end of that descent into darkness and isolation, I found myself re-engaged with community, better able to offer leadership to the causes I care about.

“Leadership” is a concept we often resist. It seems immodest, even self-aggrandizing, to think of ourselves as leaders. But if it is true that we are made for community, then leadership is everyone’s vocation, and it can be an evasion to insist that it is not. When we live in the close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone follows and everyone leads.

Even I—a person who is unfit to be president of anything, who once galloped away from institutions on a high horse—have come to understand that, for better or for worse, I lead by word and deed simply because I am here doing what I do. If you are also here, doing what you do, then you also exercise leadership of some sort.

But modesty is only one reason we resist the idea of leadership; cynicism about our most visible leaders is another. In America, at least, our declining public life has bred too many self-serving leaders who seem lacking in ethics, compassion, and vision. But if we look again at the headlines, we will find leaders worthy of respect in places we often ignore: in South Africa, Latin America, and eastern Europe, for example, places where people who have known great darkness have emerged to lead others toward the light.

The words of one of those people—Vaclav Havel, playwright, dissident, prisoner, now president of the Czech Republic—take us to the heart of what leadership means in settings both large and small. In 1990, a few months after Czechoslovakia freed itself from communist rule, Havel addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress:

The communist type of totalitarian system has left both our nations, Czechs and Slovaks…a legacy of countless dead, an infinite spectrum of human suffering, profound economic decline, and, above all, enormous human humiliation. It has brought us horrors that fortunately you have not known. [I think we Americans should confess that some in our country have known such horrors.—P.J.P.]

It has also given us something positive, a special capacity to look from time to time somewhat further than someone who has not undergone this bitter experience. A person who cannot move and lead a somewhat normal life...
because he is pinned under a boulder has more time to think about his hopes than someone who is not trapped that way.

What I’m trying to say is this: we must all learn many things from you, from how to educate our offspring, how to elect our representatives, all the way to how to organize our economic life so that it will lead to prosperity and not to poverty. But it doesn’t have to be merely assistance from the well-educated, powerful and wealthy to someone who has nothing and therefore has nothing to offer in return.

We…can offer something to you: our experience and the knowledge that has come from it. The specific experience I’m talking about has given me one certainty: consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better…and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed—be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable. ¹

The power for authentic leadership, Havel tells us, is found not in external arrangements but in the human heart. Authentic leaders in every setting—from families to nation-states—aim at liberating the heart, their own and others, so that its powers can liberate the world.

I cannot imagine a stronger affirmation from a more credible source of the significance of the inner life in the external affairs of our time: “consciousness precedes being” and “the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart.” Material reality, Havel claims, is not the fundamental factor in the movement of human history. Consciousness is. Awareness is. Thought is. Spirit is. These are not the ephemera of dreams. They are the inner Archimedean points from which oppressed people have gained the leverage to lift immense boulders and release transformative change.

But there is another truth that Havel, a guest in our country, was too polite to tell. It is not only the Marxists who have believed that matter is more powerful than consciousness, that economics is more fundamental than spirit, that the flow of cash creates more reality than does the flow of visions and ideas. Capitalists have believed these things too—and though Havel was too polite to say this to us, honesty obliges us to say it to ourselves.

We capitalists have a long and crippling legacy of believing in the power of external realities much more deeply than we believe in the power of the inner life. How many times have you heard, or said, “Those are inspiring notions, but the hard reality is…”? How many times have you worked in systems based on the belief that the only changes that matter are the ones you can measure or count? How many times have you watched people kill off creativity by treating traditional policies and practices as absolute constraints on what we can do?

This is not just a Marxist problem; it is a human problem. But the great insight of our spiritual traditions is that we—especially those of us who enjoy political freedom and relative affluence—are not victims of that society: we are its co-creators. We live in and through a complex interaction of spirit and matter, of the powers inside of us and the stuff “out there” in the world. External reality does not impinge upon us as an ultimate
constraint: if we who are privileged find ourselves confined, it is only because we have conspired in our own imprisonment.

The spiritual traditions do not deny the reality of the outer world. They simply claim that we help make that world by projecting our spirit on it, for better or for worse. If our institutions are rigid, it is because our hearts fear change; if they set us in mindless competition with each other, it is because we value victory over all else; if they are heedless of human well-being, it is because something in us is heartless as well.

We can make choices about what we are going to project, and with those choices we help grow the world that is. Consciousness precedes being: consciousness, yours and mine, can form, deform, or reform our world. Our complicity in world-making is a source of awesome and sometimes painful responsibility—and a source of profound hope for change. It is the ground of our common call to leadership, the truth that makes leaders of us all.

**Shadows and Spirituality**

A leader is someone with the power to project either shadow or light upon some part of the world, and upon the lives of the people who dwell there. A leader shapes the ethos in which others must live, an ethos as light-filled as heaven or as shadowy as hell. A good leader has high awareness of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good.

I think, for example, of teachers who create the conditions under which young people must spend so many hours: some shine a light that allows new growth to flourish, while others cast a shadow under which seedlings die. I think of parents who generate similar effects in the lives of their families, or of clergy who do the same to entire congregations. I think of corporate CEOs whose daily decisions are driven by inner dynamics, but who rarely reflect on those motives or even believe they are real.

We have a long tradition of approaching leadership via “the power of positive thinking.” I want to counterbalance that approach by paying special attention to the tendency we have as leaders to project more shadow than light. Leadership is hard work for which one is regularly criticized and rarely rewarded, so it is understandable that we need to bolster ourselves with positive thoughts. But by failing to look at our shadows, we feed a dangerous delusion that leaders too often indulge: that our efforts are always well-intended, our power always benign, and the problem is always in those difficult people whom we are trying to lead!

Those of us who readily embrace leadership, especially public leadership, tend toward extroversion, which often means ignoring what is happening inside ourselves. If we have any sort of inner life, we “compartmentalize” it, walling it off from our public work. This, of course, allows the shadow to grow unchecked, until it emerges larger-than-life into the public realm, a problem we are well-acquainted with in our own domestic politics. Leaders need not only the technical skills to manage the external world—they need the spiritual skills to journey inward toward the source of both shadow and light.

Spirituality, like leadership, is a hard word to define. But Annie Dillard has given us a vivid image of what authentic spirituality is about:

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences can not locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field:
our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned. 2

Here, Dillard names two critical features of any spiritual journey. One is that it will take us inward and downward, toward the hardest realities of our lives, rather than outward and upward toward abstraction, idealization, and exhortation. The spiritual journey runs counter to the power of positive thinking.

Why must we go in and down? Because as we do so, we will meet the darkness that we carry within ourselves—the ultimate source of the shadows that we project onto other people. If we do not understand that the enemy is within, we will find a thousand ways of making someone “out there” into the enemy, becoming leaders who oppress rather than liberate others.

But, says Annie Dillard, if we ride those monsters all the way down, we break through to something precious—to “the unified field, our complex and inexplicable caring for each other,” to the community we share beneath the broken surface of our lives. Good leadership comes from people who have penetrated their own inner darkness and arrived at the place where we are at one with one another, people who can lead the rest of us to a place of “hidden wholeness” because they have been there and know the way.

Vaclav Havel would be familiar with the journey Annie Dillard describes, because downward is where you go when you spend years “pinned under a boulder.” That image suggests not only the political oppression under which all Czechs were forced to live, but also the psychological depression Havel fell into as he struggled to survive under the communist regime.

In 1975, that depression compelled Havel to write an open letter of protest to Gustav Husak, head of the Czech communist party. His letter—which got Havel thrown in jail and became the text of an underground movement that fomented the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989—was, in Havel’s own words, an act of “autotherapy,” an alternative to suicide, his expression of the decision to live divided no more. As Vincent and Jane Kavaloski have written, “[Havel] felt that he could remain silent only at the risk of ‘living a lie,’ and destroying himself from within.” 3

That is the choice before us when we are “pinned under a boulder” of any sort, the same choice Nelson Mandela made by using twenty-eight years in prison prepare inwardly for leadership instead of drowning in despair. Under the most oppressive circumstances, people like Mandela, Havel, and uncounted anonymous others go all the way down, travel through their inner darkness—and emerge with the capacity to lead the rest of us toward community, toward “our complex and inexplicable caring for each other.”

Annie Dillard offers a powerful image of the inner journey, and tells us what might happen if we were to take it. But why would anybody want to take a journey of that sort, with its multiple difficulties and dangers? Everything in us cries out against it—which is why we externalize everything. It is so much easier to deal with the external world, to spend our lives manipulating material and institutions and other people instead of dealing with our own souls. We like to talk about the outer world as if it were infinitely complex and demanding, but it is a cakewalk compared to the labyrinth of our inner lives!

Here is a small story from my life about why one might want to take the inner journey. In my early forties I decided to go on the program called Outward Bound. I was on the edge of my first depression, a fact I knew only dimly at the time, and I thought Outward Bound might be a place to shake up my life and learn some things I needed to know.

I chose the week-long course at Hurricane Island, off the coast of Maine. I should have known from that name what was in store for me; next time I will sign up for the
course at Happy Gardens or Pleasant Valley! Though it was a week of great teaching, deep community, and genuine growth, it was also a week of fear and loathing!

In the middle of that week I faced the challenge I feared most. One of our instructors backed me up to the edge of a cliff 110 feet above solid ground. He tied a very thin rope to my waist—a rope that looked ill-kempt to me, and seemed to be starting to unravel—and told me to start “rappelling” down that cliff.

“Do what?” I said.

“Just go!” the instructor explained, in typical Outward Bound fashion.

So I went—and immediately slammed into a ledge, some four feet down from the edge of the cliff, with bone-jarring, brain-jarring force.

The instructor looked down at me: “I don’t think you’ve quite got it.”

“Right,” said I, being in no position to disagree. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“The only way to do this,” he said, “is to lean back as far as you can. You have to get your body at right angles to the cliff so that your weight will be on your feet. It’s counter-intuitive, but it’s the only way that works.”

I knew that he was wrong, of course. I knew that the trick was to hug the mountain, to stay as close to the rock face as I could. So I tried it again, my way—and slammed into the next ledge, another four feet down.

“You still don’t have it,” the instructor said helpfully.

“OK,” I said, “tell me again what I am supposed to do.”

“Lean way back,” said he, “and take the next step.”

The next step was a very big one, but I took it—and, wonder of wonders, it worked. I leaned back into empty space, eyes fixed on the heavens in prayer, made tiny, tiny moves with my feet, and started descending down the rock face, gaining confidence with every step.

I was about halfway down when the second instructor called up from below: “Parker, I think you better stop and see what’s just below your feet.” I lowered my eyes very slowly—so as not to shift my weight—and saw that I was approaching a deep hole in the face of the rock.

In order to get down, I would have to get around that hole, which meant I could not maintain the straight line of descent I had started to get comfortable with. I would need to change course and swing myself around that hole, to the left or to the right. I knew for a certainty that attempting to do so would lead directly to my death—so I froze, paralyzed with fear.

The second instructor let me hang there, trembling, in silence for what seemed like a very long time. Finally, she shouted up these helpful words: “Parker, is anything wrong?”

To this day, I do not know where my words came from, though I have twelve witnesses to the fact that I spoke them. In a high, squeaky voice I said, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then,” said the second instructor, “it’s time that you learned the Outward Bound motto.”

“Oh, keen,” I thought. “I’m about to die, and she’s going to give me a motto!”

But then she shouted ten words I hope never to forget, words whose impact and meaning I can still feel: “If you can’t get out of it, get into it!”

I had long believed in the concept of “the word become flesh” but until that moment I had not experienced it. My teacher spoke words so compelling that they bypassed my mind, went into my flesh, and animated my legs and feet. No helicopter would come to rescue me; the instructor on the cliff would not pull me up with the rope; there was no parachute in my backpack to float me to the ground. There was no way out
of my dilemma except to get into it—so my feet started to move and in a few minutes I made it safely down.

Why would anyone want to embark on the daunting inner journey about which Annie Dillard writes? Because there is no way out of one’s inner life, so one had better get into it. On the inward and downward spiritual journey, the only way out is in and through.

**Out of the Shadow, Into the Light**

If we, as leaders, are to cast less shadow and more light, we need to ride certain monsters all the way down, understand the shadows they create, and experience the transformation that can come as we “get into” our own spiritual lives. Here is a bestiary of five such monsters. The five are not theoretical for me; I became personally acquainted with each of them during my descent into depression. They are also the monsters I work with when I lead retreats where leaders of many sorts—CEOs, clergy, parents, teachers, citizens, and seekers—take an inward journey toward common ground.

The first shadow-casting monster is insecurity about identity and worth. Many leaders have an extroverted personality that makes this shadow hard to see. But extroversion sometimes develops as a way to cope with self-doubt: we plunge into external activity to prove that we are worthy—or simply to evade the question. There is a well-known form of this syndrome, especially among men, in which our identity becomes so dependent on performing some external role that we become depressed, and even die, when that role is taken away.

When we are insecure about our own identities, we create settings that deprive other people of their identities as a way of buttressing our own. This happens all the time in families, where parents who do not like themselves give their children low self-esteem. It happens at work as well: how often I phone a business or professional office and hear, “Dr. Jones’s office—this is Nancy speaking.” The boss has a title and a last name but the person (usually a woman) who answers the phone has neither, because the boss has decreed that it will be that way.

There are dynamics in all kinds of institutions that deprive the many of their identity so the few can enhance their own, as if identity were a zero-sum game, a win-lose situation. Look into a classroom, for example, where an insecure teacher is forcing students to be passive stenographers of the teacher’s store of knowledge, leaving the teacher with more sense of selfhood and the vulnerable students with less. Or look in on a hospital where the doctors turn patients into objects—“the kidney in Room 410”—as a way of claiming superiority at the very time when vulnerable patients desperately need a sense of self.

Things are not always this way, of course. There are settings and institutions led by people whose identities do not depend on depriving others of theirs. If you are in that kind of family or office or school or hospital, your sense of self is enhanced by leaders who know who they are.

These leaders possess a gift available to all who take an inner journey: the knowledge that identity does not depend on the role we play or the power it gives us over others. It depends only on the simple fact that we are children of God, valued in and for ourselves. When a leader is grounded in that knowledge, what happens in the family, the office, the classroom, the hospital can be life-giving for all concerned.

A second shadow inside many of us is the belief that the universe is a battleground, hostile to human interests. Notice how often we use images of warfare as we go about our work, especially in organizations. We talk about tactics and strategies, allies and enemies,
wins and losses, “do or die.” If we fail to be fiercely competitive, the imagery suggests, we will surely lose, because the world we live in is essentially a vast combat zone.

Unfortunately, life is full of self-fulfilling prophecies. The tragedy of this inner shadow, our fear of losing a fight, is that it helps create conditions where people feel compelled to live as if they were at war. Yes, the world is competitive, but largely because we make it so. Some of our best institutions, from corporations to change agencies to schools, are learning that there is another way of doing business, a way that is consensual, cooperative, communal: they are fulfilling a different prophecy and creating a different reality.

The gift we receive on the inner journey is the insight that the universe is working together for good. The structure of reality is not the structure of a battle. Reality is not out to get anybody. Yes, there is death, but it is part of the cycle of life, and when we learn to move gracefully with that cycle a great harmony comes into our lives. The spiritual truth that harmony is more fundamental than warfare in the nature of reality itself could transform this leadership shadow—and transform our institutions as well.

A third shadow common among leaders is “functional atheism,” the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen—a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.

This shadow causes pathology on every level of our lives. It leads us to impose our will on others, stressing our relationships, sometimes to the point of breaking. It often eventuates in burnout, depression, and despair, as we learn that the world will not bend to our will and we become embittered about that fact. Functional atheism is the shadow that drives collective frenzy as well. It explains why the average group can tolerate no more than fifteen seconds of silence: if we are not making noise, we believe, nothing good is happening and something must be dying.

The gift we receive on the inner journey is the knowledge that ours is not the only act in town. Not only are there other acts out there, but some of them are even better than ours, at least occasionally! We learn that we need not carry the whole load but can share it with others, liberating us and empowering them. We learn that sometimes we are free to lay the load down altogether. The great community asks us to do only what we are able, and trust the rest to other hands.

A fourth shadow within and among us is fear, especially our fear of the natural chaos of life. Many of us—parents and teachers and CEOs—are deeply devoted to eliminating all remnants of chaos from the world. We want to organize and orchestrate things so thoroughly that messiness will never bubble up around us and threaten to overwhelm us (for “messiness” read dissent, innovation, challenge, and change). In families and churches and corporations, this shadow is projected as rigidity of rules and procedures, creating an ethos that is imprisoning rather than empowering. (Then, of course, the mess we must deal with is the prisoners trying to break out!)

The insight we receive on the inner journey is that chaos is the precondition to creativity: as every creation myth has it, life itself emerged from the void. Even that which has been created needs to be returned to chaos from time to time so it can be regenerated in more vital form. When a leader fears chaos so deeply that he or she tries to eliminate it, the shadow of death will fall across everything that leader approaches—for the ultimate answer to all of life’s messiness is death.

My final example of the shadows that leaders project is, paradoxically, the denial of death itself. Though we sometimes kill things off well before their time, we also live in denial of the fact that all things must die in due course. Leaders who participate in this
denial often demand that the people around them keep resuscitating things that are no longer alive. Projects and programs that should have been unplugged long ago are kept on life-support to accommodate the insecurities of a leader who does not want anything to die on his or her watch.

Within our denial of death lurks fear of another sort: the fear of failure. In most organizations, failure means a pink slip in your box, even if that failure, that “little death,” was suffered in the service of high purpose. It is interesting that science, so honored in our culture, seems to have transcended this particular fear. A good scientist does not fear the death of a hypothesis because that “failure” clarifies the steps that need to be taken toward truth, sometimes more than a hypothesis that succeeds. The best leaders in every setting reward people for taking worthwhile risks even if they are likely to fail. These leaders know that the death of an initiative—if it was tested for good reasons—is always a source of new learning.

The gift we receive on the inner journey is the knowledge that death finally comes to everything—and yet death does not have the final word. By allowing something to die when its time is due, we create the conditions under which new life can emerge.

**Inner Work in Community**

Can we help each other deal with the inner issues inherent in leadership? We can, and I believe we must. Our frequent failure as leaders to deal with our inner lives leaves too many individuals and institutions in the dark. From the family to the corporation to the body politic, we are in trouble partly because of the shadows I have named. Since we can’t get out of it, we must get into it—by helping each other explore our inner lives. What might that help look like?

First, we could lift up the value of “inner work.” That phrase should become commonplace in families, schools, and religious institutions, at least, helping us to understand that inner work is as real as outer work and involves skills one can develop, skills like journaling, reflective reading, spiritual friendship, meditation, and prayer. We can teach our children something that their parents did not always know: if people skimp on their inner work, their outer work will suffer as well.

Second, we could spread the word that inner work, though it is a deeply personal matter, is not necessarily a private matter: inner work can be helped along in community. Indeed, doing inner work together is a vital counterpoint to doing it alone. Left to our own devices, we may delude ourselves in ways that others can help us correct.

But how a community offers such help is a critical question. We are surrounded by communities based on the practice of “setting each other straight”—an ultimately totalitarian practice bound to drive the shy soul into hiding. Fortunately, there are other models of corporate discernment and support.

For example, there is the Quaker “clearness committee” mentioned earlier in this book. In this process, you take a personal issue to a small group of people who are prohibited from giving you “fixes” or advice, but who, for three hours, pose honest, open questions to help you discover your inner truth. Communal processes of this sort are supportive but not invasive. They help us probe questions and possibilities but forbid us from rendering judgment, allowing us to serve as midwives to a birth of consciousness that can only come from within. 4

The key to this form of community involves holding a paradox—the paradox of having relationships in which we protect each other’s aloneness. We must come together in ways that respect the solitude of the soul, that avoid the unconscious violence we do when
we try to save each other, that evoke our capacity to hold another life in ways that honor its mystery, never trying to coerce the other into meeting our own needs.

It is possible for people to be together that way, though it may be hard to see evidence of that fact in everyday life. My evidence comes in part from my journey through clinical depression, from the healing I experienced as a few people found ways to be present me without violating my soul’s integrity. Because they were not driven by their own fears, the fears that lead us either to “fix” or abandon each other, they provided me with a lifeline to the human race. That lifeline constituted the most profound form of leadership I can imagine—leading a suffering person back to life from a living death.

Third, we can remind each other of the dominant role that fear plays in our lives, of all the ways that fear forecloses the potentials I have explored in this chapter. It is no accident that all of the world’s wisdom traditions address themselves to the fact of fear, for all of them originated in the human struggle to overcome this ancient enemy. And all of these traditions, despite their great diversity, unite in one exhortation to those who walk in their ways: “Be not afraid.”

As one who is no stranger to fear, I have had to read those words with care so as not to twist them into a discouraging counsel of perfection. “Be not afraid” does not mean we cannot have fear. Everyone has fear, and people who embrace the call to leadership often find fear abounding. Instead, the words say we do not need to be the fear we have. We do not have to lead from a place of fear, thus engendering a world in which fear is multiplied.

We have places of fear inside of us, but we have other places as well—places with names like trust, and hope, and faith. We can choose to lead from one of those places, to stand on ground that is not riddled with the fault lines of fear, to move toward others from a place of promise instead of anxiety. As we stand in one of those places, fear may remain close at hand and our spirits may still tremble. But now we stand on ground that will support us, ground from which we can lead others toward a more trustworthy, more hopeful, more faithful way of being in the world.


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Your central issue is a life fully worth living. The test is how you feel each day as you anticipate that day's experience. The same test is the best predictor of health and longevity. It is simple.

If it's simple, why doesn't everyone know it? The answer to that question is simple, too. We have been brought up to live by rules that mostly have nothing to do with making our lives worth living; some of them in fact are guaranteed not to. Many of our institutions and traditions introduce cultural distortions into our vision, provide us with beliefs and definitions that don't work, distract us from the task of building lives that are fully worth living, and persuade us that other things are more important.

The human infant is a life-loving bundle of energy with a marvelous array of potentialities, and many vulnerabilities. It is readily molded. If it is given a supportive environment, it will flourish and continue to love its own life and the lives of others. If it is starved in various ways it will survive, with some long-term deficiencies that it will spend the rest of its life trying to compensate for. This struggle makes it dependent on and controllable by any source that promises to remove the deficiencies. The deficiencies are often described as needs: needs for approval, recognition, power, control, status; needs to prove oneself masculine, or smart, or successful in others' eyes - and in one's own eyes, which have been programmed to see the world in terms of one's deficiencies.

How potentialities may be turned into deficiencies is suggested by a fable, "The School for Animals":

"Once upon a time the animals got together and decided to found a school. There would be a core curriculum of six subjects: swimming, crawling, running, jumping, climbing and flying. At first the duck was the best swimmer, but it wore out the webs of its feet in running class, and then couldn't swim as well as before. And at first the dog was the best runner, but it crash landed twice in flying class and injured a leg. The rabbit started out as the best jumper, but it fell in climbing class and hurt its back. At the end of the school year, the class valedictorian was an eel, who could do a little bit of everything, but nothing very well."1

And how one's deficiencies, such as the need to prove oneself, can distract you from living fully, is suggested by the following account of a cormorant's career. Dr. Ralph Siu, when asked what wisdom the ancient oriental philosophers could contribute to modern man in modern organizations on how to preserve his mental health, developed a list of "advices" for modern man. One of them was as follows:

"The second piece of advice is: Observe the cormorant in the fishing fleet. You know how cormorants are used for fishing. The technique involves a man in a rowboat with about half a dozen or so cormorants, each with a ring around the neck. As the bird spots a fish, it would dive into the water and unerringly come up with it. Because of the ring, the larger fish are not swallowed but held in the throat. The fisherman picks up the bird and squeezes out the fish through the mouth. The bird then dives for another, and the cycle repeats itself."
"To come back to the second piece of advice from the Neo-Taoist to the American workers: Observe the cormorant, he would say. Why is it that of all the different animals, the cormorant has been chosen to slave away day and night for the fisherman? Were the bird not greedy for fish, or not efficient in catching it, or not readily trained, would society have created an industry to exploit the bird? Would the ingenious device of a ring around its neck, and the simple procedure of squeezing the bird's neck to force it to regurgitate the fish have been devised? Of course not.

"Greed, talent, and capacity for learning, then, are the basis of exploitation. The more you are able to moderate and/or hide them from society, the greater will be your chances of escaping the fate of the cormorant.....It is necessary to remember that the institutions of society are geared to make society prosper, not necessarily to minimizing suffering on your part. It is for this reason, among others, that the schools tend to drum into your mind the high desirability of those characteristics that tend to make society prosper - namely, ambition, progress and success. These in turn are to be valued in terms of society's objectives. All of them gradually but surely increase your greed and make a cormorant out of you."

Dr. Siu then goes on to list the ways in which modern man suffers the fate of the cormorant. But what parents are not delighted to be able to say that their children are ambitious, talented, and have a great capacity for learning? It is something to boast about, rather than something to hide. Thus all institutions, including the institution of parenthood, are suspect when they attempt to give career guidance. Suspect, because many of them have an outlook analogous to that of the fisherman, who is not interested in whether the cormorant has a life fully worth living, but only in those of its characteristics that serve the fisherman's purposes. Suspect, if they address only the development of a career, so that the rest of life becomes an unanticipated consequence of the career choice. Suspect, if they stress only the how-to's of a career and not its meaning in your life. Suspect, if they describe a career as a way to make a living, and fail to point out that the wrong career choice may be fatal.

Don Juan was explicit and clear on these points in teaching Carlos Castaneda about careers. To have a path of knowledge, a path with a heart, made for a joyful journey, and was the only conceivable way to live. And he advised us to think carefully about our paths before we set out on them. For by the time a man discovers that his path "has no heart", the path is ready to kill him. At that point, he cautions, very few men can stop to deliberate, and leave that path. In a life/career planning workshop for the staff of a midwest military research laboratory, a 29-year-old engineer confessed that he was bored to death with the laboratory work, but his eyes lit up at the prospect of teaching physical education and coaching athletic teams at the high school level. He emerged with a career plan to do just that, and to do it in his favorite part of the country, northern New England. He resolved to do it immediately upon retirement from his civil service job as an engineer - at age 65, a mere 36 years away.

Organizations have implicit ways of teaching about careers, regardless of whether they have explicit career planning and development programs. Reward systems are geared to common deficiencies - needs for status, approval, power - and a career consists of doing the right things to move up the ladder. A vice president of one company counseled his subordinates: "The work day is for doing your job; your overtime is for your promotion."

In many companies the message about careers is very clear: not only is your career more important than the rest of your life, it is more important than your life. In one large corporation great emphasis was placed on moving young professionals and managers through many company functions as their preparation for general management responsibility. The career plan was well understood: "When
you're rotated, don't ask if it's up, down or sideways; the time to worry is when you stop rotating." In such companies, successful careers are based on working hard at any job you are given whether you like it or not, and conforming to the organization's unwritten rules and the expectations of your superiors in such matters as office manners, dress, presentation style, language and prejudices.

Do these paths have "heart"? For some people they do. Others "burn out". In one company that recruits only the top graduates, that devotes a great deal of managerial time to tracking their performance, that moves each one along at what is judged to be an appropriate pace into jobs that are judged to be suited to his/her talents and potentials, the amount of burn-out observed in mid-career management ranks became a matter of concern. As a result, the company offered career planning workshops to midcareer managers, the main objective of which was, according to one executive: "to revitalize them by reminding them that in an ultimate sense each of them is in business for himself."

For deficiency-motivated people, moving up the hierarchy of management is likely to be such a compelling need that they may desert careers that did have some heart for them. In an informal survey conducted by the author some years ago of industrial research scientists, it was possible to identify the ones for whom their career path had a heart, by their responses to the question: "What is your main goal over the next two or three years?" Some responded in such terms as" "Some equipment I've tried to get for three years has finally made it into this year's budget. With it, I can pursue some very promising leads." Others responded in such terms as: "I hope to become a department head."

Just as adult organizations teach about careers in the ways described above, schools teach about careers whether they have courses about careers or not. The ideal is the "Straight A" student - and these are the ones that many employers seek to recruit. What "Straight A" means is that the student has learned to do a number of things at a marketable level of performance, regardless of whether the student has any interest in or innate talent for the activity, and regardless of whether it brings pain, joy or boredom. The reward is in the grade, not the activity. And in collusion with the school, parents will bestow love and recognition for A's, while discouraging the student from working in areas of interest and talent, so that energies can be devoted to studies in which the student is "deficient". In adult life/career planning workshops, the author has found that of the things participants actually enjoy doing, less than 5% are things they learned in school as part of formal classroom work.

One outcome of these experiences is that many adults cannot remember, if they ever knew, what their unique talents and interests were, what areas of learning and doing were fulfilling for them, what paths had heart. These have to be discovered or rediscovered. Another outcome is that adults distinguish between work and play. Work is something you have to be "compensated" for, because it robs you of living. Play is something you usually have to pay for, because your play is often someone else's work. Children have to be taught these distinctions carefully, for they make no sense to anyone whose life is fully worth living. As one philosopher put it:

"A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his education and his recreation. He scarcely knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself he always seems to be doing both.""
What does "vision of excellence" mean? How do you acquire your own? We can be reasonably sure that it has little to do with getting A's, excelling others in competition, or living up to someone else's standards. It is one's own unique vision.

The idea of uniqueness is troublesome. It won't do in school, where each person must be comparable to every other person, so that grades and rank can be assigned. Such differences as exist between people should be differences in degree, not in kind. Consider the word "genius". The dictionary meaning of the term is "the unique and identifying spirit of a person or place". But to most of us it means a person with a high IQ. Differences in IQ are differences of degree, whereas the notion of "unique" makes it impossible to rank and compare.

Each person is unique, yet each person has much in common with every other person. For a life that is fully worth living, it is important to identify your uniquenesses and decide how to use them, and to identify the qualities you possess that others also possess, and decide how to use them.

In the search for your uniqueness, use still a third definition of "genius". By this definition, your genius consists of those of your talents that you love to develop and use. These are the things that you can now or potentially could do with excellence, which are fulfilling in the doing of them. So fulfilling that if you also got paid to do them, it would not feel like compensation, but like a gift.

Discovering your genius may be easy or difficult. At some level of your being you already know it; you are fortunate if it is in your conscious awareness. If not, there are several routes to discovery, and many sources of pertinent information.

The first source is play. Make a list of the things you enjoy doing and find the common themes. Observe what you do when you are not obliged to do anything. What activities are you likely to engage in? What catches your eye when you thumb through a magazine? When you are in an unfamiliar environment, what interests you, what catches your attention? What are the contents of your fantasies and daydreams? What do you wish you were doing? Your sleep-dreams are also important. Record them, for some of them contain important wishes that you may want to turn into plans.

The second source is your own life history. Record in some detail the times in your past life when you were doing something very well and enjoying it very much. What themes or patterns of strength, skill and activity pervade most of those times? What were the sources of satisfaction in them?

The third source is feedback from others. What do those who know you have to say about your strengths and talents? As they see it, what seems to excite, give you pleasure, engage you? And if you can find people who knew you when you were a child, can they recall what used to capture your attention and curiosity, what activities you enjoyed, what special promise and talents you displayed?

The fourth source is psychological instruments, which provide a variety of ways of helping you to organize and interpret your experience. There are many such instruments that can provide you with clues to your interests, strengths and sources of satisfaction. Perhaps the most valuable is the Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator. It is based on the insights of the great psychologist, Carl Jung, who believed that each person has certain qualities that are innate, rather than learned after birth. (This will seem self-evident to parents of more than one child.) He identified four basic temperaments, four quite different ways of approaching life. One of these is oriented to tradition and stability in the world, and devoted to making systems work and to the maintenance of order. The second type loves action, freedom, excitement and the mastery of skills. The third type is oriented to the future and to
mastery of the unknown. The fourth loves to work in the service of humanity to bring about a better world. One can learn to perform competently in activities that do not fit one's temperament, but it always feels like "work"; if the activities are in accord with one's temperament, it feels more like play. It follows that your temperament is one of the important components of your genius.

As you take these four routes, you may find the same messages about yourself over and over again - and you may also find a few surprises and contradictions. In general, the truth strategy you employ is the one enunciated in Alice in Wonderland: "What I tell you three times is true." You may emerge from the search with some hunches to explore further; you may emerge with certainty about a new direction to take; or you may simply affirm what you already knew - confirming or disconfirming the life and career choices you have already made.

The discovery or affirmation of your genius is a first step. It needs to be nourished and developed, and you need to learn how to create the conditions which will support you in practicing it, as the following case illustrates.

Jerome Kirk, a well-known sculptor, discovered his genius through play, though not until his late twenties. Alone on an island off the Maine coast for a week, he amused himself by fashioning sculptures out of driftwood. It was a dazzling experience. But his education had prepared him for work in the field of personnel administration. For the following twenty years he developed his skill as a sculptor, while "earning a living" as a personnel administrator - and he was quite successful in this profession. After twenty years, his sculptures matched his own vision of excellence, he was a recognized artist, and the income from his art was sufficient to enable him to devote all his time to it. It was the realization of a dream. His comment: "I was good in the personnel field, but I never really enjoyed it. It wasn't me. And now I'm utterly convinced that if a person really loves something, and focuses his energy there, there's just no way he can fail to fulfill his 'vision of excellence'."

Passion, energy and focus: these are the qualities released when a person has discovered his or her genius. They are the mark of persons whose genius lies in the leadership of organizations, as much as they are of a sculptor like Jerome Kirk.

After the discovery of your genius, then, the second step is to acquire the resources you need in order to build a world for yourself that supports you in the pursuit and practice of your genius. The process of acquiring these resources can be called the development of autonomy - learning the skills needed to build that world. If Kirk had been independently wealthy, he would have had that autonomy early. He put this to a test in his early thirties. He resigned from his job, rented a loft, and spent full time on his sculptures. But he could not sell enough of them, and had to return to employment as a personnel administrator.

Turning now to those qualities which you share in common with other people, three seem especially important to a life fully worth living. They can be called tone, resonance, and perspective.

The first of these, tone, refers to your aliveness as an organism. When you think of good muscle tone, you think of a relaxed alertness, a readiness to respond. As used here, the term tone refers to your entire being, your mental and emotional life as well as your muscle and organ life. Hence anxiety is as much the enemy of tone as drugs or being overweight. Lowen expressed this idea as follows:
"A person experiences the reality of the world only through his body....If the body is relatively unalive, a person's impressions and responses are diminished. The more alive the body is, the more vividly does he perceive reality and the more actively does he respond to it. We have all experienced the fact that when we feel particularly good and alive, we perceive the world more sharply....The aliveness of the body denotes its capacity for feeling. In the absence of feeling, the body goes 'dead' insofar as it's ability to be impressed by or respond to situations is concerned....It is the body that melts with love, freezes with fear, trembles in anger, and reaches for warmth and contact. Apart from the body these words are poetic images. Experienced in the body, they have a reality that gives meaning to existence."

You began as a bundle of life-loving energy with a marvelous array of potentialities. As you grew up you learned to do many things and not to do other things. Some of these things were good for you, some bad for you, some good for others, some bad for others. Out of these things you learned, you fashioned an identity, a self-image. Your self-image is thus a cultural product, a distortion which probably prevents you from recognizing yourself anymore as a bundle of life-loving energy with a marvelous array of potentialities. If the latter were your self-image, you would have no difficulty maintaining your tone.

Acquiring that renewed identity, or identification with what is truly wonderful about yourself and therefore worth nourishing and loving, is not an easy task. It requires a lot of unlearning and letting go, as well as learning and risk-taking.

The first step is to become aware of the particular cultural distortions that interfere most with your tone. There are a number of common ones from which few of us escape on our journey through society's institutions.

One of the most common distortions is to comprise your self-image out of some role or roles you play in society. Great actors and actresses use their capacity for total identification with another human being as a basis for a great performance, but their self-image is not that of the person portrayed. That costume is removed at the end of each performance. Cornelia Otis Skinner declared that the first law of the theater is to love your audience. She meant of course that the actor or actress rather than the character portrayed must love the audience. You cannot love the audience unless you love yourself, and yourself is not a role. Thus it is vitally important to recognize your roles as costumes you wear for particular purposes, and not to let them get stuck to you. Your prospects at retirement from your profession or organization will otherwise be a very short life.

A second common distortion is to make your head (your brain) your self-image, and the rest of you part of your environment. Cutting your body into two segments places enormous stress on it, and your tone will suffer severely. "You don't exist within your body. Your body is a person."

A third common distortion is to make your gender your self-image. The sexual-reproductive aspects of people are among their most wonderful potentialities, but to identify with your gender leads you to spend the first years of your life learning some bad habits that you spend the rest of your life trying to liberate yourself from.

Other common distortions include being the public relations representative of your family (often forced on boys and girls), being an underdog, a clown, or a representative of superior values.
All such distortions will exact their price by robbing you of tone: by causing you to eat too much or drink too much or worry too much or keep your body in continuous stress, and miss the joy of being alive.

The second quality which you share with other people is the capacity for resonance. This is the experience of enhanced, stimulated and yet relaxed vitality that you can experience in interaction with particular others and particular environments. Discovering those others and those environments can be one of the most fulfilling aspects of the journey through a life fully worth living. Once again, many of our traditions and institutions provide us with cultural distortions that cause us to avoid or destroy resonance, or prevent us from fully experiencing it. And once again, the first step is to become aware of the cultural distortions that rob you of the potential resonance in your life.

Four pervasive cultural themes can be identified as cripplers of the capacity for resonance: adversarialism, materialism, sexism, and violence.

Ours is an intensely adversarial society. Almost everything is perceived in competitive, win-lose, success-failure terms. "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing!"

By materialism is meant the tendency to measure one's self-worth by the number of kinds of possessions one has, and the tendency to turn experiences into things so that they can be possessions. Collectibles are a way of "life".

By sexism is meant the tendency to turn sexual relationships and partners into materials, and to use sexual labels to sum oneself and others up - gay, macho, or liberated. Morality and fidelity have lost all but their sexual meanings.

"Violence is as American as apple pie." We have more guns than people. Our folk heroes were violent men. The word resonance was chosen rather than the word love, with which it has much in common, because the very meaning of love is distorted in an adversarial, materialistic, sexist, violent society. It becomes a commodity in short supply; it is a marketable item; it is a weapon used to control others; it is difficult to distinguish from exploitation or imprisonment.

The term resonance was chosen for other reasons as well. It conveys the notion of being "in tune" with other people and environments; it suggests the synergy and expansion of tone when your energy is joined with the energy of others. It also implies harmony. Harmony is a beautiful arrangement of different sounds, whereas noise is an ugly arrangement of different sounds. Resonance, as used here, implies people's capacity to use their differences in ways that are beautiful rather than ugly.

The world you build that supports you in the pursuit of your genius is not worth living in if it lacks resonance. Your capacity to build and maintain resonant relationships, and to transform dead or noisy relationships into resonant ones may have been damaged by the distorting cultural themes described above. The first step to regaining that capacity is to become aware of the particular cultural distortions that have damaged it. There are a number of common ones.

One of the commonest distortions is a win-lose outlook - the belief that the world is one's enemy. One must be either on the defensive or offensive, or both at once. One must conquer, control, exploit or be conquered, controlled, exploited. One must fight or run away. One may be experienced by others as shy and withdrawn, as hostile, aggressive or aloof, or as seductive and untrustworthy. Under these circumstances, resonance is hard to come by and short-lived.
For many people, win-lose competitiveness does not dominate all aspects of their lives, but is induced by particular kinds of situations - and destroys the potential resonance and synergy of those situations. For example, you can experience resonance and synergy when a group works creatively together, building on one another's thoughts, stimulated by each other's ideas, mixing work and laughter - when there is no thought of winning or losing, succeeding or failing, proving oneself or making points. The presence of the latter distortions accounts for the unpleasantness and low productivity of most seminars and staff meetings.

Various combinations of adversarial, materialistic and sexist themes are commonly destructive of resonance in intimate relationships, such as marriage. Jealousy, possessiveness and feelings of being exploited dominate the relationship and the partners become each other's prisoners and jailers. But if they are able to free themselves of these distortions, the relationship can be transformed and resonance restored. If you think of any intimate relationships as consisting of three creatures: yourself, the other person, and the couple, you can see that the phrase "a life fully worth living" applies to each. It follows that you would reserve for the couple only those things that are growthful and fulfilling for it. In pursuing the other aspects of your life your partner can be a resource to you, and you a resource to your partner. Rather than being each other's jailers, you become the supporters of each other's freedom - and this will enhance your resonance. An application of this principle is not difficult for most parents to grasp: delight in seeing your child leading a fulfilling life as a result of the support you provided. Cultural distortions make it more difficult to understand that the principle applies equally to intimate relationships among adults.

The third important quality that you share in common with other people is the capacity to develop perspectives that can guide your choices and inform your experience. If you have only one way of looking at the situation you are in, you have no freedom of choice about what to do. And if you have only one framework for understanding your experience, all of your experiences will reinforce the framework. For example, if your outlook is adversarial, you will interpret whatever happens as evidence that the world is hostile, and your choices will be limited to fighting or running away. If you fight, it will confirm your belief that the world is hostile. If you run away, you will know that you were wise to do so.

If you have multiple perspectives - for example, if you can see the potentiality of a new relationship to be collaborative or to be adversarial - you enlarge your range of choices. Thus, if you can see "the multiple potential of the moment", you will usually be able to make a choice that will make the next moment better for you and for the others in the situation.

The cultural distortions that lock you into a limited number of perspectives, or into perspectives that lead you to make self-destructive choices, are the same ones that interfere with your tone and self-image, or your capacity for resonance. That such distortions are blocking your access to useful perspectives is evidenced whenever you find yourself humorless. The essence of humor is a sudden shift of perspective. To be without humor is to be dying, and laughter is one of the most valuable sources of health and well-being on the journey called a life fully worth living.13

The foregoing pages have offered a set of perspectives, some of which may be familiar, some of which may be new. Like all frameworks, they should be used only when they fit your purposes. For example, the framework provided - the categories of genius, autonomy, tone, resonance and perspective - is arbitrary. These aspects of your life are not separate: poor tone will affect the resonance of your relationships, reduce your autonomy, and limit your perspective.
A perspective has also been offered on teaching about careers, namely, that it may be afflicted by cultural distortions which prevent you from finding a path with a heart. Does this mean, that for the well-being of all of us, the schools should refrain from teaching about careers? Does it mean that there can be no institution with a vested interest in you having a life that is fully worth living?

I believe the answer to both questions is no. Schools are to a large extent simply a reflection of the culture they serve; if the culture changes, the schools will change, though slowly. Two concurrent forces are operating to change the culture quite rapidly. One of these is the dawning realization in many American organizations that the theories of management and organization on which our society has operated in the past have failed us, and will not serve us in the future. And it is because they have regarded human beings as parts of a social machine, and treated as irrelevant individual genius, spirit, well-being and capacity for resonance. This realization is bringing about a transformation in industrial organizations; non-industrial organizations will eventually catch up. This failure of our traditions is made all the more severe by the second force: technology and especially electronic communication and computers. The more that routine operations are performed by machines, the more demand there is that the non-routine operations be performed with excellence. This kind of excellence in human performance can only be attained by persons who are fully alive and operating in the area of their genius. Only if the path has a heart will it sustain excellence.

When the aerospace industry was in its infancy, the technical challenge, and hence the need for creativity and teamwork, was immense. One of the most successful companies recognized this fully in its organizational structure and culture. It invented new organizational forms that were suited to its mission and the capacities of its members to work together creatively. In the process, it created most of the principles and processes of what is called organization development that are in use today. Among other things, it offered its members Life and Career Planning workshops, to help them identify their talents and interests. The approach was somewhat different from the one outlined in this paper, but its intent was the same. The spirit of these workshops was summed up in the way the company introduced them: "What you do with your life and career is your responsibility. But because you are a member of this company, the company shares some of that responsibility with you. Perhaps it's 80% yours, 20% the company's. This workshop is the company's effort to contribute towards its 20%." In a similar spirit, another company offers workshops based on their version of Paul Thompson's career-stages model, to help employees identify their position on the path, understand their potential more clearly, and find ways of fulfilling it.14

These companies have a vested interest in having their members discover a path with a heart. Teaching about careers in schools can help the student find such a path much earlier.
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Source Link:
In this worksheet you will focus primarily on your story of self. But public narrative is not primarily a form of self-expression. It is an exercise of leadership by motivating others to join you in action on behalf of a shared purpose. Although this worksheet focuses on your “story of self”, the goal is to identify sources of your own calling to the purpose in which you will call upon others (story of us) to join you in action (story of now). Remember, public narrative requires learning a process, not writing a script. It can be learned only by telling, listening, reflecting, and telling again – over, over and over. This is to get you started.

1. **A story of now**: What urgent challenge do you hope to inspire others to take action on? What is your vision of successful action? What choice will you call on members of your community – in this case, your classmates - to make if they are to meet this challenge successfully? How can they act together to achieve this outcome? And how can they begin now, at this moment? Describe this “now” in two or three sentences.

2. **A story of us**: To what values, experiences, or aspirations of your community – in this case your classmates at the very least - will you appeal when you call on them to join you in action? What stories do you share that can express these values? Describe this “us” in two or three sentences.

3. **A story of self**: Why were you called to motivate others to join you in this action? What stories can you share that will enable others to “get you.” How can you enable others to experience sources the values that move you not only to act, but to lead? Focus on this section, trying to identify key choice points that set you on your path.

**WHY STORIES?**
Stories are how we learn to make choices. Stories are how we learn to access the moral and emotional resources we need to face the uncertain, the unknown, and the unexpected
mindfully. Because stories speak the language of emotion, the language of the heart, they teach us not only how we “ought to” act, but can in inspire us with the “courage to” act. And because the sources of emotion on which they draw are in our values, our stories can help us translate our values into action.

A plot begins when a protagonist moving toward a desired goal runs into an unexpected event, creating a crisis that engages our curiosity, choices he or she makes in response, and an outcome. Our ability to empathetically identify with a protagonist allows us to enter into the story, feel what s/he feels, see things through his or her eyes. The moral, revealed through the resolution, brings understanding of the head and of the heart. Stories teach us how to access moral resources to face difficult choices, unfamiliar situations, and uncertain outcomes. Each of us is the protagonist in our own life story; we face everyday challenges, we author our own choices, and we learn from the outcomes – the narrative of which constitutes who we are, our identity.

By telling personal stories of challenges we have faced, choices we have made, and what we learned from the outcomes, we become more mindful of our own moral resources and, at the same time, share our wisdom so as to inspire others. Because stories enable us to communicate our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others.

Stories are specific – and visual - they evoke a very particular time, place, setting, mood, color, sound, texture, taste. The more you can communicate this visual specificity, the more power your story will have to engage others. This may seem like a paradox, but like a poem or a painting or a piece of music, it is the specificity of the experience that can give us access to the universal sentiment or insight they contain.

You may think that your story doesn’t matter, that people aren’t interested, that you shouldn’t be talking about yourself. But when you do public work, you have a responsibility to offer a public account of who you are, why you do what you do, and where you hope to lead. If you don’t author your public story, others will, and they may not tell it in the way that you like.

A good story public story is drawn from the series of choice points that have structured the “plot” of your life – the challenges you faced, choices you made, and outcomes you experienced.

**Challenge:** Why did you feel it was a challenge? What was so challenging about it? Why was it your challenge?

**Choice:** Why did you make the choice you did? Where did you get the courage – or not? Where did you get the hope – or not? How did it feel?

**Outcome:** How did the outcome feel? Why did it feel that way? What did it teach you? What do you want to teach us? How do you want us to feel?

The story you tell of why you have chosen the path you have allows others emotional and intellectual insight into your values, why you have chosen to act on them in this way, what they can expect from you, and what they can learn from you.
WHAT URGENT “CHALLENGE” MIGHT YOU CALL ON US TO FACE?

WHAT VISION COULD WE ACHIEVE IF WE ACT?

WHAT “ACTION” MIGHT YOU CALL UPON US TO JOIN YOU IN TAKING?

PLEASE RESPOND WITH NO MORE THAN 2-3 SENTENCES.

A “story of now” is urgent, an urgency based on threat, or, equally, on opportunity; it is meant to inspire others to drop other things and pay attention; it is rooted in the values you celebrate in your story of self and us, but poses a challenge to those values. It contrasts a vision of the world as it will be if we fail to act, the world as it could be if we do act, and calls on us to act.

• Do you value honoring those who sacrifice for their country? Does the care returning veterans receive meet this standard? If not, what are you going to do about it?

• Do you value passing on a livable world to the next generation? Do the measures being taken to deal with climate change meet this standard? If not, what are you going to do about it?

• Do you value a society in which individuals are only responsible for themselves and their families? Is being undermined by public policies, interest groups and others? What are you going to do about it?

• Do you value the principal that powerful institutions, especially if they benefit from public support, have moral responsibilities to the public in how they use their power? Which one’s? How? What are you going to do about it?

• Do you value marriage as legitimate only between a man and a woman, a value placed at risk as a result of recent court decisions? What are you going to do about it?

• Do you value equal treatment under the law for all racial, religious, and cultural groups? Is that the case? If not, what are you going to do about it?

Leaders who only describe a problem, but fail to inspire us to act together to try to solve the problem, aren’t good leaders. Running through a list of “100 things you can do to make the world better” is a “cop-out.” It trivializes each action. Suggesting that everyone work at it in their own way, ignores the significance of strategic focus in overcoming resistance to change. If
you are called to face a real challenge, a challenge so urgent that we are motivated to face it as well, you have a responsibility to invite us to join you in plausible action. A ‘story of now’ is not simply a call to be for or against something — that’s “exhortation” — it is a call to take “hopeful” action. This means clarity as to what will happen if we don’t act, what could happen if we do, and action each of us could commit to take that could start us in a clear direction right here, now, in this place.

If you ask me to “change a light bulb,” for example, to deal with climate change, do you really think it will happen? Especially if it’s among 100 other things I might — or might not — do? But if you ask me to join you in persuading the Kennedy School to change all of its light bulbs by signing a student petition, joining you in a delegation to the dean, and, adding my name to a public list of KSG students who have committed to changing the light bulbs where they live, what do you think the odds are of success?

A “story of now” works if people join you in action.

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**story of us**

**WHO IS THE “US” YOU WILL CALL UPON TO JOIN YOU?**

**WHAT MOTIVATING VALUES DO THEY SHARE?**

**WHAT EXPERIENCES HAVE YOU SHARED?**

PLEASE Respond WITH NO MORE THAN 2-3 SENTENCES.

We are all part of multiple “us’s” — families, faiths, cultures, communities, organizations, and nations in which we participate with others. What community, organization, movement, culture, nation, or other constituency do you consider yourself to be part of, connected with? With whom do you share a common past? With whom do you share a common future? Do you participate in this community as a result of “fate”, “choice” or both? How like or unlike the experience of others do you believe your own experience to be? One way we establish an “us” — a shared identity — is through telling of shared stories, stories through which we can articulate the values we share, as well as the particularities that make us an “us.”

**Your challenge in this course is to inspire an “us” from among your classmates** whom you will call upon to join you in action motivated by shared values, which you bring alive through story telling. There are many “us’s” among your classmates, as there are in any community. They may think of themselves as an “us” based on enrolling in this class, dealing with the challenge of choosing classes, enrolling the same year, in the same program, dealing with family challenges, experiencing an acceptance letter, finding the money, time, space to be able to come here; experiencing the shock of arrival; sharing aspirations, backgrounds (work experience, religion, generation, ethnicity, culture, nationality, family status, etc.), experiences coming to school here, values commitments, career aspirations, career dilemmas, etc. Your challenge is to think through the “us” whom you can move to join you in action on behalf of a shared purpose.
Some of the “us's” you could invite your classmates to join are larger “us’s” in which you may already participate. You may be active in the environmental movement, for example, and may find others among your classmates who are as well. You may be active in a faith community, a human rights organization, a political campaign, a support organization, an immigrant association, a labor union, and alumni group, etc. Some “us’s” have been around for literally thousands of years such as faith traditions – some only for a few days. Most “us's” that have been around tell stories about their founding, the challenges founders faced, how they overcame them, who joined with them, and what this teaches us about the values of the organization.

A story of us works if people identify with each other on behalf of values that inspire them to act.

### story of self

**WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF YOUR OWN CALLING?**

**WHAT CRITICAL CHOICES POINTS CAN YOU RECALL?**

**WHAT STORIES CAN YOU TELL ABOUT THESE CHOICE POINTS?**

PLEASE USE MOST OF YOUR PAPER TO ADDRESS THIS QUESTION

Now reflect on the sources of your motivation, your call to leadership, the values that move you to act. Grab a notebook, a recorder, or a friend who will listen, and describe the milestones and experiences that have brought you to this moment. Go back as far as you can remember.

You might start with your parents. What made them the people they became? How did their choices influence your own? Do you remember “family stories,” perhaps told so often you may have gotten tired of hearing them. Why did they tell these stories and not others? What was the moral of these stories? What did they teach? How did they make you feel?

In your own life, consider the purpose for which you are telling your story, focus on challenges you had to face, the choices you made about how to deal with them, and the satisfactions – or frustrations – you experienced. What did you learn from the outcomes and how you feel about them today? What did they teach you about yourself, about your family, about your peers, about your community, about your nation, about the world around you, about people - about what really matters to you? What about these stories was so intriguing? Which elements offered real perspective into your own life?

If you’re having trouble, here are some questions to help you begin. This is NOT a questionnaire. They are NOT to be answered individually. They are to help you get your memory gears rolling so that you can reflect on your public story and tell it with brevity and intentionality. Don't expect to include the answers to all these questions each time you tell your story. They are the
building blocks of many potential stories, and the object right now is to lay them out in a row and see what inspires you.

What memories do you have as a child that link to the people, places, events that you value? What are your favorite memories? What images, sounds or smells in particular come up for you when you recall these memories?

List every job or project that you have ever been involved with that are connected with these values (or not). Be expansive; include things like camping in the wild, serving in a youth group, going to a political rally, organizing a cultural club, experiencing a moment of transcendence. List classes you have taken, projects you have led, and work that you have done that connects with your values. Name the last five books or articles that you have read (by choice) or movies or plays that you have seen. What do you see as a connection or theme that you can see in all of the selections? What did you enjoy about these articles? What does your reading say about you?

Some of the moments you recall may be painful as well as hopeful. Most people who want to make the world a better place have stories of pain, which taught them that the world needs changing, and stories of hope, which persuaded them of the possibility. You may have felt excluded, put down or powerless, as well as courageous, recognized, and inspired. Be sure to attend to the moments of “challenge” as well as to the moments of “hope” – and to learn to be able to articulate these moments in ways that can enable others to understand who you are. It is the combination of “criticality” and “hopefulness” that creates the energy for change.

What was the last time you spent a day doing what you love doing? What in particular made you want to use that day in that way? What was memorable about the day? Is there a specific sight, sound or smell that you think of when you recall this day?

What factors were behind your decision to pursue a career in public work? Was there pressure to make different choices? How did you deal with conflicting influences?

Who in your life was the person who introduced you to your “calling” or who encouraged you to become active? Why do you think that they did this? What did your parents model? What was the role, if any, of a community of faith? Whom did you admire?

Whom do you credit the most with your involvement now in work for your cause? What about their involvement in your life made a difference? Why do you think it was important to them to do so?
In the end you will be asked to link your story of self, story of us, and story of now into a single public narrative.

As you will see, however, this is an iterative — and non-linear — process. Each time you tell your story, you will adapt it — to make yourself clearer, to adjust to a different audience, to locate yourself in a different context. As you develop a story of us, you may find you want to alter your story of self, especially as you begin to see the relationship between the two more clearly. Similarly, as you develop a story of now, you may find it affects what went before. And, as you go back to reconsider what went before, you may find it alters your story of now.

You will not leave this class with a final “script” of your public narrative but you will learn a process by which you can generate that narrative over and over and over again when, where, and how you need to.


Source: https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/30760283/Public-Narrative-Worksheet-Fall-2013-.pdf
This is Water by David Foster Wallace (Full Transcript and Audio)

David Foster Wallace’s 2005 commencement speech to the graduating class at Kenyon College, is a timeless trove of wisdom — right up there with Hunter Thompson on finding your purpose and living a meaningful life. The speech was made into a thin book titled This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life.

Wallace hits on our need to manage rather than remove our core hard-wired human instincts.

This is Water

“Greetings parents and congratulations to Kenyon’s graduating class of 2005. There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”

This is a standard requirement of US commencement speeches, the deployment of didactic little parable-ish stories. The story thing turns out to be one of the better, less bullshitty conventions of the genre, but if you’re worried that I plan to present myself here as the wise, older fish explaining what water is to you younger fish, please don’t be. I am not the wise old fish. The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. Stated as an
English sentence, of course, this is just a banal platitude, but the fact is that in the day to day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance, or so I wish to suggest to you on this dry and lovely morning.

Of course the main requirement of speeches like this is that I’m supposed to talk about your liberal arts education’s meaning, to try to explain why the degree you are about to receive has actual human value instead of just a material payoff. So let’s talk about the single most pervasive cliché in the commencement speech genre, which is that a liberal arts education is not so much about filling you up with knowledge as it is about “teaching you how to think.” If you’re like me as a student, you’ve never liked hearing this, and you tend to feel a bit insulted by the claim that you needed anybody to teach you how to think, since the fact that you even got admitted to a college this good seems like proof that you already know how to think. But I’m going to posit to you that the liberal arts cliché turns out not to be insulting at all, because the really significant education in thinking that we’re supposed to get in a place like this isn’t really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about. If your total freedom of choice regarding what to think about seems too obvious to waste time discussing, I’d ask you to think about fish and water, and to bracket for just a few minutes your scepticism about the value of the totally obvious.

Here’s another didactic little story. There are these two guys sitting together in a bar in the remote Alaskan wilderness. One of the guys is religious, the other is an atheist, and the two are arguing about the existence of God with that special intensity that comes after about the fourth beer. And the atheist says: “Look, it’s not like I don’t have actual reasons for not believing in God. It’s not like I haven’t ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and I couldn’t see a thing, and it was 50 below, and so I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out ‘Oh, God, if there is a God, I’m lost in this blizzard, and I’m gonna die if you don’t help me.’” And now, in the bar, the religious guy looks at the atheist all puzzled. “Well then you must believe now,” he says, “After all, here you are, alive.” The atheist just rolls his eyes. “No, man, all that was was a couple Eskimos happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp.”

It’s easy to run this story through kind of a standard liberal arts analysis: the exact same experience can mean two totally different things to two different people, given those people’s two different belief templates and two different ways of constructing meaning from experience. Because we prize tolerance and diversity of belief, nowhere in our liberal arts analysis do we want to claim that one guy’s interpretation is true and the other guy’s is false or bad. Which is fine, except we also never end up talking about just where these individual templates and beliefs come from. Meaning, where they come from INSIDE the two guys. As if a person’s most basic orientation toward the world, and the meaning of his experience were somehow just hard-wired, like height or shoe-size; or automatically absorbed from the culture, like language. As if how we construct meaning were not actually a matter of personal, intentional choice. Plus, there’s the whole matter of arrogance. The nonreligious guy is so totally certain in his dismissal of the possibility that the passing Eskimos had anything to do with his prayer for help. True, there are plenty of religious people who seem arrogant and certain of their own interpretations, too. They’re probably even more repulsive than atheists, at least to most of us. But religious dogmatists’ problem is exactly the same as the story’s unbeliever:
blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up.

The point here is that I think this is one part of what teaching me how to think is really supposed to mean. To be just a little less arrogant. To have just a little critical awareness about myself and my certainties. Because a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. I have learned this the hard way, as I predict you graduates will, too.

Here is just one example of the total wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of: everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute centre of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centredness because it’s so socially repulsive. But it’s pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute centre of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people’s thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.

Please don’t worry that I’m getting ready to lecture you about compassion or other-directedness or all the so-called virtues. This is not a matter of virtue. It’s a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self. People who can adjust their natural default setting this way are often described as being “well-adjusted”, which I suggest to you is not an accidental term.

Given the triumphant academic setting here, an obvious question is how much of this work of adjusting our default setting involves actual knowledge or intellect. This question gets very tricky. Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education–least in my own case–is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualise stuff, to get lost in abstract argument inside my head, instead of simply paying attention to what is going on right in front of me, paying attention to what is going on inside me.

As I’m sure you guys know by now, it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive, instead of getting hypnotised by the constant monologue inside your own head (may be happening right now). Twenty years after my own graduation, I have come gradually to understand that the liberal arts cliché about teaching you how to think is actually shorthand for a much deeper, more serious idea: learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed. Think of the old cliché about “the mind being an excellent servant but a terrible master.”

This, like many clichés, so lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses a great and terrible truth. It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in: the head. They shoot the terrible master.
And the truth is that most of these suicides are actually dead long before they pull the trigger.

And I submit that this is what the real, no bullshit value of your liberal arts education is supposed to be about: how to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out. That may sound like hyperbole, or abstract nonsense. Let’s get concrete. The plain fact is that you graduating seniors do not yet have any clue what “day in day out” really means. There happen to be whole, large parts of adult American life that nobody talks about in commencement speeches. One such part involves boredom, routine and petty frustration. The parents and older folks here will know all too well what I’m talking about.

By way of example, let’s say it’s an average adult day, and you get up in the morning, go to your challenging, white-collar, college-graduate job, and you work hard for eight or ten hours, and at the end of the day you’re tired and somewhat stressed and all you want is to go home and have a good supper and maybe unwind for an hour, and then hit the sack early because, of course, you have to get up the next day and do it all again. But then you remember there’s no food at home. You haven’t had time to shop this week because of your challenging job, and so now after work you have to get in your car and drive to the supermarket. It’s the end of the work day and the traffic is apt to be: very bad. So getting to the store takes way longer than it should, and when you finally get there, the supermarket is very crowded, because of course it’s the time of day when all the other people with jobs also try to squeeze in some grocery shopping. And the store is hideously lit and infused with soul-killing muzak or corporate pop and it’s pretty much the last place you want to be but you can’t just get in and quickly out; you have to wander all over the huge, over-lit store’s confusing aisles to find the stuff you want and you have to manoeuvre your junky cart through all these other tired, hurried people with carts (et cetera, et cetera, cutting stuff out because this is a long ceremony) and eventually you get all your supper supplies, except now it turns out there aren’t enough check-out lanes open even though it’s the end-of-the-day rush. So the checkout line is incredibly long, which is stupid and infuriating. But you can’t take your frustration out on the frantic lady working the register, who is overworked at a job whose daily tedium and meaninglessness surpasses the imagination of any of us here at a prestigious college.

But anyway, you finally get to the checkout line’s front, and you pay for your food, and you get told to “Have a nice day” in a voice that is the absolute voice of death. Then you have to take your creepy, flimsy, plastic bags of groceries in your cart with the one crazy wheel that pulls maddeningly to the left, all the way out through the crowded, bumpy, littery parking lot, and then you have to drive all the way home through slow, heavy, SUV-intensive, rush-hour traffic, et cetera et cetera.

Everyone here has done this, of course. But it hasn’t yet been part of you graduates’ actual life routine, day after week after month after year.

But it will be. And many more dreary, annoying, seemingly meaningless routines besides. But that is not the point. The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing is gonna come in. Because the traffic jams and
crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm gonna be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop. Because my natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me. About MY hungri ness and MY fatigue and MY desire to just get home, and it's going to seem for all the world like everybody else is just in my way. And who are all these people in my way? And look at how repulsive most of them are, and how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem in the checkout line, or at how annoying and rude it is that people are talking loudly on cell phones in the middle of the line. And look at how deeply and personally unfair this is.

Or, of course, if I'm in a more socially conscious liberal arts form of my default setting, I can spend time in the end-of-the-day traffic being disgusted about all the huge, stupid, lane-blocking SUV's and Hummers and V-12 pickup trucks, burning their wasteful, selfish, 40-gallon tanks of gas, and I can dwell on the fact that the patriotic or religious bumper-stickers always seem to be on the biggest, most disgustedly selfish vehicles, driven by the ugliest — this is an example of how NOT to think, though — most disgustedly selfish vehicles, driven by the ugliest, most inconsiderate and aggressive drivers. And I can think about how our children's children will despise us for wasting all the future's fuel, and probably screwing up the climate, and how spoiled and stupid and selfish and disgusting we all are, and how modern consumer society just sucks, and so forth and so on.

You get the idea.

If I choose to think this way in a store and on the freeway, fine. Lots of us do. Except thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic that it doesn't have to be a choice. It is my natural default setting. It's the automatic way that I experience the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of adult life when I'm operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the centre of the world, and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world's priorities.

The thing is that, of course, there are totally different ways to think about these kinds of situations. In this traffic, all these vehicles stopped and idling in my way, it's not impossible that some of these people in SUV's have been in horrible auto accidents in the past, and now find driving so terrifying that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive. Or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he's trying to get this kid to the hospital, and he's in a bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am: it is actually I who am in HIS way.

Or I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people probably have harder, more tedious and painful lives than I do.

Again, please don't think that I'm giving you moral advice, or that I'm saying you are supposed to think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it. Because it's hard. It takes will and effort, and if you are like me, some days you won't be able to do it, or you just flat out won't want to.
But most days, if you're aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look
differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the
checkout line. Maybe she's not usually like this. Maybe she's been up three straight
nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer. Or maybe this very
lady is the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department, who just yesterday helped
your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, red-tape problem through some small act of
bureaucratic kindness. Of course, none of this is likely, but it's also not impossible. It
just depends what you want to consider. If you're automatically sure that you know what
reality is, and you are operating on your default setting, then you, like me, probably
won't consider possibilities that aren't annoying and miserable. But if you really learn
how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be
within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as
not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love,
fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.

Not that that mystical stuff is necessarily true. The only thing that's capital-T True is
that you get to decide how you're gonna try to see it.

This, I submit, is the freedom of a real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted.
You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide
what to worship.

Because here's something else that's weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult
life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not
worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the
compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to
worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four
Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything
else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where
you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have
enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will
always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths
before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been
codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great
story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more
power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as
smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.
But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's
that they're unconscious. They are default settings.

They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and
more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully
aware that that's what you're doing.

And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default
settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily
along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self. Our
own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary
wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the centre of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talk about much in the great outside world of wanting and achieving.... The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day.

That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.

I know that this stuff probably doesn’t sound fun and breezy or grandly inspirational the way a commencement speech is supposed to sound. What it is, as far as I can see, is the capital-T Truth, with a whole lot of rhetorical niceties stripped away. You are, of course, free to think of it whatever you wish. But please don’t just dismiss it as just some finger-wagging Dr Laura sermon. None of this stuff is really about morality or religion or dogma or big fancy questions of life after death.

The capital-T Truth is about life BEFORE death.

It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over:

“This is water.”
“This is water.”

It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out. Which means yet another grand cliché turns out to be true: your education really IS the job of a lifetime. And it commences: now.

I wish you way more than luck.

**Still Curious?** David Foster Wallace is the author of *Infinite Jest*, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, *Oblivion*, *Consider the Lobster*, and the unfinished book he was working on at the time he committed suicide: *The Pale King*.

Source: [https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/](https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/)
MY FIRST, CHARMED week as a student at Harvard Business School, late in the summer of 2001, felt like a halcyon time for capitalism. AOL Time Warner, Yahoo and Napster were benevolently connecting the world. Enron and WorldCom were bringing
innovation to hidebound industries. President George W. Bush — an H.B.S. graduate himself — had promised to deliver progress and prosperity with businesslike efficiency.

The next few years would prove how little we (and Washington and much of corporate America) really understood about the economy and the world. But at the time, for the 895 first-years preparing ourselves for business moguldom, what really excited us was our good luck. A Harvard M.B.A. seemed like a winning lottery ticket, a gilded highway to world-changing influence, fantastic wealth and — if those self-satisfied portraits that lined the hallways were any indication — a lifetime of deeply meaningful work.

So it came as a bit of a shock, when I attended my 15th reunion last summer, to learn how many of my former classmates weren’t overjoyed by their professional lives — in fact, they were miserable. I heard about one fellow alum who had run a large hedge fund until being sued by investors (who also happened to be the fund manager’s relatives). Another person had risen to a senior role inside one of the nation’s most prestigious companies before being savagely pushed out by corporate politics. Another had learned in the maternity ward that her firm was being stolen by a conniving partner.

Those were extreme examples, of course. Most of us were living relatively normal, basically content lives. But even among my more sanguine classmates, there was a lingering sense of professional disappointment. They talked about missed promotions, disaffected children and billable hours in divorce court. They complained about jobs that were unfulfilling, tedious or just plain bad. One classmate described having to invest $5 million a day — which didn’t sound terrible, until he explained that if he put only $4 million to work on Monday, he had to scramble to place $6 million on Tuesday, and his co-workers were constantly undermining one another in search of the next promotion. It was insanely stressful work, done among people he didn’t particularly like. He earned about $1.2 million a year and hated going to the office.
“I feel like I’m wasting my life,” he told me. “When I die, is anyone going to care that I earned an extra percentage point of return? My work feels totally meaningless.” He recognized the incredible privilege of his pay and status, but his anguish seemed genuine. “If you spend 12 hours a day doing work you hate, at some point it doesn’t matter what your paycheck says,” he told me. There’s no magic salary at which a bad job becomes good. He had received an offer at a start-up, and he would have loved to take it, but it paid half as much, and he felt locked into a lifestyle that made this pay cut impossible. “My wife laughed when I told her about it,” he said.

‘When I die, is anyone going to care that I earned an extra percentage point of return? My work feels totally meaningless.’

After our reunion, I wondered if my Harvard class — or even just my own friends there — were an anomaly. So I began looking for data about the nation’s professional psyche. What I found was that my classmates were hardly unique in their dissatisfaction; even in a boom economy, a surprising portion of Americans are professionally miserable right now. In the mid-1980s, roughly 61 percent of workers told pollsters they were satisfied with their jobs. Since then, that number has declined substantially, hovering around half; the low point was in 2010, when only 43 percent of workers were satisfied, according to data collected by the Conference Board, a nonprofit research organization. The rest said they were unhappy, or at best neutral, about how they spent the bulk of their days. Even among professionals given to lofty self-images, like those in medicine and law, other studies have noted a rise in discontent. Why? Based on my own conversations with classmates and the research I began reviewing, the answer comes down to oppressive hours, political infighting, increased competition sparked by globalization, an “always-on culture” bred by the internet — but also something that’s hard for these professionals to put their finger on, an underlying sense that their work isn’t worth the grueling effort they’re putting into it.
This wave of dissatisfaction is especially perverse because corporations now have access to decades of scientific research about how to make jobs better. “We have so much evidence about what people need,” says Adam Grant, a professor of management and psychology at the University of Pennsylvania (and a contributing opinion writer at The Times). Basic financial security, of course, is critical — as is a sense that your job won’t disappear unexpectedly. What’s interesting, however, is that once you can provide financially for yourself and your family, according to studies, additional salary and benefits don’t reliably contribute to worker satisfaction. Much more important are things like whether a job provides a sense of autonomy — the ability to control your time and the authority to act on your unique expertise. People want to work alongside others whom they respect (and, optimally, enjoy spending time with) and who seem to respect them in return.

And finally, workers want to feel that their labors are meaningful. “You don’t have to be curing cancer,” says Barry Schwartz, a visiting professor of management at the University of California, Berkeley. We want to feel that we’re making the world better, even if it’s as small a matter as helping a shopper find the right product at the grocery store. “You can be a salesperson, or a toll collector, but if you see your goal as solving people’s problems, then each day presents 100 opportunities to improve someone’s life, and your satisfaction increases dramatically,” Schwartz says.

One of the more significant examples of how meaningfulness influences job satisfaction comes from a study published in 2001. Two researchers — Amy Wrzesniewski of Yale and Jane Dutton, now a distinguished emeritus professor at the University of Michigan — wanted to figure out why particular janitors at a large hospital were so much more enthusiastic than others. So they began conducting interviews and found that, by design and habit, some members of the janitorial staff saw their jobs not as just tidying up but as a form of healing. One woman, for instance, mopped rooms inside a brain-injury unit where many residents were comatose. The woman’s duties were basic: change bedpans,
pick up trash. But she also sometimes took the initiative to swap around the pictures on the walls, because she believed a subtle stimulation change in the unconscious patients’ environment might speed their recovery. She talked to other convalescents about their lives. “I enjoy entertaining the patients,” she told the researchers. “That is not really part of my job description, but I like putting on a show for them.” She would dance around, tell jokes to families sitting vigil at bedsides, try to cheer up or distract everyone from the pain and uncertainty that otherwise surrounded them. In a 2003 study led by the researchers, another custodian described cleaning the same room two times in order to ease the mind of a stressed-out father.

To some, the moral might seem obvious: If you see your job as healing the sick, rather than just swabbing up messes, you’re likely to have a deeper sense of purpose whenever you grab the mop. But what’s remarkable is how few workplaces seem to have internalized this simple lesson. “There are so many jobs where people feel like what they do is relatively meaningless,” Wrzesniewski says. “Even for well-paid positions, or jobs where you assume workers feel a sense of meaning, people feel like what they’re doing doesn’t matter.” That’s certainly true for my miserable classmate earning $1.2 million a year. Even though, in theory, the investments he makes each day help fund pensions — and thus the lives of retirees — it’s pretty hard to see that altruism from his window office in a Manhattan skyscraper. “It’s just numbers on a screen to me,” he told me. “I’ve never met a retiree who enjoyed a vacation because of what I do. It’s so theoretical it hardly seems real.”

THERE IS A raging debate — on newspaper pages, inside Silicon Valley, among presidential hopefuls — as to what constitutes a “good job.” I’m an investigative business reporter, and so I have a strange perspective on this question. When I speak to employees at a company, it’s usually because something has gone wrong. My stock-in-trade are sources who feel their employers are acting unethically or ignoring sound
advice. The workers who speak to me are willing to describe both the good and the bad in the places where they work, in the hope that we will all benefit from their insights.

The smoothest life paths sometimes fail to teach us about what really brings us satisfaction day to day.

What’s interesting to me, though, is that these workers usually don’t come across as unhappy. When they agree to talk to a journalist — to share confidential documents or help readers understand how things went awry — it’s not because they hate their employers or are overwhelmingly disgruntled. They often seem to love their jobs and admire the companies they work for. They admire them enough, in fact, to want to help them improve. They are engaged and content. They believe what they are doing matters — both in coming to work every day and in blowing the whistle on problems they see.

Do these people have “good jobs”? Are they luckier or less fortunate than my $1.2 million friend, who couldn’t care less about his firm? Are Google employees who work 60 hours a week but who can eat many of their meals (or freeze their eggs) on the company’s dime more satisfied than a start-up founder in Des Moines who cleans the office herself but sees her dream become reality?

As the airwaves heat up in anticipation of the 2020 election, Americans are likely to hear a lot of competing views about what a “good job” entails. Some will celebrate billionaires as examples of this nation’s greatness, while others will pillory them as evidence of an economy gone astray. Through all of that, it’s worth keeping in mind that the concept of a “good job” is inherently complicated, because ultimately it’s a conversation about what we value, whether individually or collectively. Even for Americans who live frighteningly close to the bone, like the janitors studied by Wrzesniewski and Dutton, a job is usually more than just a means to a paycheck. It’s a source of purpose and meaning, a place in the world.
There’s a possibility, when it comes to understanding good jobs, that we have it all wrong. When I was speaking to my H.B.S. classmates, one of them reminded me about some people at our reunion who seemed wholly unmiserable — who seemed, somewhat to their own surprise, to have wound up with jobs that were both financially and emotionally rewarding. I knew of one person who had become a prominent venture capitalist; another friend had started a retail empire that expanded to five states; yet another was selling goods all over the world. There were some who had become investors running their own funds.

And many of them had something in common: They tended to be the also-rans of the class, the ones who failed to get the jobs they wanted when they graduated. They had been passed over by McKinsey & Company and Google, Goldman Sachs and Apple, the big venture-capital firms and prestigious investment houses. Instead, they were forced to scramble for work — and thus to grapple, earlier in their careers, with the trade-offs that life inevitably demands. These late bloomers seemed to have learned the lessons about workplace meaning preached by people like Barry Schwartz. It wasn’t that their workplaces were enlightened or (as far as I could tell) that H.B.S. had taught them anything special. Rather, they had learned from their own setbacks. And often they wound up richer, more powerful and more content than everyone else.

That’s not to wish genuine hardship on any American worker, given that a setback for a poor or working-class person can lead to bankruptcy, hunger or worse. But for those who do find themselves miserable at work, it’s an important reminder that the smoothest life paths sometimes fail to teach us about what really brings us satisfaction day to day. A core goal of capitalism is evaluating and putting a price on risk. In our professional lives, we hedge against misfortune by taking out insurance policies in the form of fancy degrees, saving against rainy days by pursuing careers that promise stability. Nowadays, however, stability is increasingly scarce, and risk is harder to measure. Many of our insurance policies have turned out to be worth as much as Enron.
“I’m jealous of everyone who had the balls to do something that made them happy,” my $1.2 million friend told me. “It seemed like too big a risk for me to take when we were at school.” But as one of the also-rans myself — I applied to McKinsey, to private-equity firms and to a real estate conglomerate and was rejected by them all — I didn’t need any courage in making the decision to go into the modest-paying (by H.B.S. standards) field of journalism. Some of my classmates thought I was making a huge mistake by ignoring all the doors H.B.S. had opened for me in high finance and Silicon Valley. What they didn’t know was that those doors, in fact, had stayed shut — and that as a result, I was saved from the temptation of easy riches. I’ve been thankful ever since, grateful that my bad luck made it easier to choose a profession that I’ve loved. Finding meaning, whether as a banker or a janitor, is difficult work. Usually life, rather than a business-school classroom, is the place to learn how to do it.

Charles Duhigg is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and the author of “The Power of Habit.” He last wrote about Google and competition.

Meet the Nun Who Wants You to Remember You Will Die

Suffering and death are facts of life: “Everyone dies, their bodies rot, and every face becomes a skull.”

By Ruth Graham
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BOSTON — Before she entered the Daughters of St. Paul convent in 2010, Sister Theresa Aletheia Noble read a biography of the order’s founder, an Italian priest who was born in the 1880s. He kept a ceramic skull on his desk, as a reminder of the inevitability of death. Sister Aletheia, a punk fan as a teenager, thought the morbid curio was “super punk rock,” she recalled recently. She thought vaguely about acquiring a skull for herself someday.

These days, Sister Aletheia has no shortage of skulls. People send her skull mugs and skull rosaries in the mail, and share photos of their skull tattoos. A ceramic skull from a Halloween store sits on her desk. Her Twitter name includes a skull and crossbones emoji.

That is because since 2017, she has made it her mission to revive the practice of memento mori, a Latin phrase meaning “Remember your death.” The concept is to intentionally think about your own death every day, as a means of appreciating the present and focusing on the future. It can seem radical in an era in which death — until very recently — has become easy to ignore.

“My life is going to end, and I have a limited amount of time,” Sister Aletheia said. “We naturally tend to think of our lives as kind of continuing and continuing.”

Sister Aletheia’s project has reached Catholics all over the country, via social media, a memento mori prayer journal — even merchandise emblazoned with a signature skull. Her followers have found unexpected comfort in grappling with death during the coronavirus pandemic. “Memento mori is: Where am I headed, where do I want to end up?” said Becky Clements, who coordinates religious education at her Catholic parish in Lake Charles, La., and has incorporated the idea into a curriculum used by other parishes in her diocese. “Memento mori works perfectly with what my students are facing, between the pandemic and the massive hurricanes.” Ms. Clements keeps a large resin skull on her own desk, inspired by Sister Aletheia.

Sister Aletheia rejects any suggestion that the practice is morbid. Suffering and death are facts of life; focusing only on the “bright and shiny” is superficial and inauthentic. “We try to suppress the thought of death, or escape it, or run away from it because we think that’s where we’ll find happiness,” she said. “But it’s actually in facing the darkest realities of life that we find light in them.”

The practice of regular meditation on death is a venerable one. Saint Benedict instructed his monks in the sixth century to “keep death daily before your eyes,” for example. For Christians like Sister Aletheia, it is inextricable from the promise of a better life after death. But the practice is not uniquely Christian. Mindfulness of death is a tradition within Buddhism, and Socrates and Seneca were among the early thinkers who recommended “practicing” death as a way to cultivate meaning and focus. Skeletons, clocks and decaying food are recurring motifs in art history.

For almost all of humanity, people died at younger ages than we do now, more frequently died at home, and had less medical control over their final days. Death was far less predictable, and far more visible. “To us, death is exotic,” said Joanna Ebenstein, founder of Morbid Anatomy, a Brooklyn-based enterprise that offers events and books focused on death, art and culture. “But that’s a luxury particular to our time and place.”
People send her skull mugs and skull rosaries in the mail and share photos of their skull tattoos. Credit: Tony Luong for The New York Times

Sister Aletheia has no shortage of skulls, including one she keeps on her desk. Credit: Tony Luong for The New York Times

Credit: Tony Luong for The New York Times

Credit: Tony Luong for The New York Times
The pandemic, of course, has made death impossible to forget. Since last spring, Ms. Ebenstein has conducted a series of memento mori classes online, in which students explore the global history of representations of death, and then create their own. Final projects have included a miniature coffin, a series of letters to be delivered post-mortem, and a deck of tarot cards composed of photographs taken by a husband who recently died. “For the first time in my lifetime, this is a topic not just interesting to a bunch of hipsters,” Ms. Ebenstein said. “Death is actually relevant.”

The Daughters of St. Paul, Sister Aletheia’s order, was founded in the early 20th century to use “the most modern and efficacious means of media” to preach the Christian message. A century ago, that meant publishing books, which the group still does. But now, “modern and efficacious” means something more, and many of the women are active on social media, where they use variations on the hashtag #MediaNuns. In December, Sister Aletheia appeared in a TikTok video created by the order, which posed cheeky Catholic matchups like evening prayer vs. morning prayer, and St. Peter vs. St. Paul. The video, set to Run-DMC’s “It’s Tricky,” was viewed more than 4.4 million times.

As a teenager in Tulsa, Okla., Sister Aletheia, who is now 40, listened to the Dead Kennedys and attended local punk shows with her friends. Her parents were committed Catholics; her father has a Ph.D. in theology and worked for a local Catholic diocese for a while. But she was a skeptical child and declared herself an atheist as a teenager, rather than go through the formal process of joining the church.

At Bryn Mawr College, she was the leader of an animal rights club. But she blanched at the animal rights movement’s arguments against “speciesism.” It seemed to her that there was a real, if difficult to define, difference between humans and other animals. But “as a materialist atheist, I really couldn’t find a reason for that,” she recalled. “I had this intuitive sense that the soul existed.”

While working on an organic farm in Costa Rica after a stint with Teach for America, she had a sudden and dramatic conversion experience: God was real and she had to figure out his plan for her life. When her longtime boyfriend picked her up from the airport after the trip, she broke up with him and canceled her plans to go to law school. Within four years, she was wearing a habit at the convent, an unassuming blond-brick building that includes a publishing house, gardens and a small free-standing burial chapel where the nuns are entombed after they die.

Sister Aletheia began her memento mori project on Twitter, where she shared daily meditations for more than 500 days in a row. In October 2018, on her 455th day with the skull on her desk, she wrote, “Everyone dies, their bodies rot, and every face becomes a skull (unless you are incorrupt).”

At first, she had no particular goal beyond keeping herself committed to her own daily practice. But the tweets were a hit, and the project expanded. Now the order sells vinyl decals ($4.95, “great Christmas gifts!”) and hooded sweatshirts emblazoned with a skull icon designed by Sister Danielle Victoria Lussier, another Daughter of St. Paul. Sister Aletheia continues to promote the practice on social media, and she has published a memento mori prayer journal and a devotional that opens with the sentence, “You are going to die.”
The books have become some of the order’s best-sellers in recent years, a boost to the nuns, whose income as a nonprofit publisher has declined sharply in recent decades. Sister Aletheia is currently working on a new prayer book for the Advent season, leading up to Christmas.

“She has such a gift for talking about really difficult things with joy,” said Christy Wilkens, a Catholic writer and mother of six outside Austin, Texas. “She’s so young and vibrant and joyful and is also reminding us all we’re going to die.” Ms. Wilkens credits memento mori with giving her the “spiritual tools” to grapple with her 9-year-old son’s serious health issues. “It has allowed me, not exactly to cope, but to surrender everything to God,” she said.

For Sister Aletheia, having spent the previous few years meditating on mortality helped prepare her for the fear and isolation of the past year. The pandemic has been traumatic, she said. But there have also been small moments of grace, like people from the community knocking on the door to donate food to the nuns in isolation. As she wrote in her devotional, “Remembering death keeps us awake, focused, and ready for whatever might happen — both the excruciatingly difficult and the breathtakingly beautiful.”

“It’s actually in facing the darkest realities of life that we find light in them,” Sister Aletheia explained. Credit: Tony Luong for The New York Times

Ruth Graham is a Dallas-based national correspondent covering religion, faith and values. She previously reported on religion for Slate. @publicroad

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