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Epigraph: Statement on Liberal Learning
Association of American Colleges & Universities

The Association of American Colleges & Universities is the foremost national organization representing higher education with a focus on the liberal arts. It is headquartered in Washington, D. C., and sponsors conferences and publications representing the best thinking about the liberal arts in higher education. This Statement was adopted by the Board of Directors in October 1998.

A truly liberal education is one that prepares us to live responsible, productive, and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions. Liberal education requires that we understand the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society; that we master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; that we cultivate a respect for truth; that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context; and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities.

We experience the benefits of liberal learning by pursuing intellectual work that is honest, challenging, and significant, and by preparing ourselves to use knowledge and power in responsible ways. Liberal learning is not confined to particular fields of study. What matters in liberal education is substantial content, rigorous methodology and an active engagement with the societal, ethical, and practical implications of our learning. The spirit and value of liberal learning are equally relevant to all forms of higher education and to all students.

Because liberal learning aims to free us from the constraints of ignorance, sectarianism, and myopia, it prizes curiosity and seeks to expand the boundaries of human knowledge. By its nature, therefore, liberal learning is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, for nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives.

The ability to think, to learn, and to express oneself both rigorously and creatively, the capacity to understand ideas and issues in context, the commitment to live in society, and the yearning for truth are fundamental features of our humanity. In centering education upon these qualities, liberal learning is society's best investment in our shared future.
Introduction: Liberal Education, Knowledge, and Belmont’s First-Year Seminar

Noel Boyle

Noel Boyle (1973–) is an Associate Professor in Belmont’s Philosophy Department, where he specializes in philosophy of mind and philosophy of science. In addition to teaching introductory and upper-level philosophy courses, he regularly teaches First Year Seminar. In his scholarly work, he examines consciousness through physical and phenomenological approaches. In 2017, he was named Director of General Education for Belmont University.

Shortly before becoming my undergraduate advisor, Stephen Rowe wrote of a paradox in acquiring a liberal education.\(^1\) As college attendance rates soar, our cultural understanding of the nature of a college education diminishes. More students than ever have access to liberal education, but students can’t take full advantage of that access because they don’t genuinely understand what a liberal education is. Nearly thirty years on, the trend continues. Ever larger numbers of students are going to wonderful institutions that carefully preserve the tradition of liberal education, but that has almost nothing to do with why the students choose to go there. Not understanding the fullness of the opportunity available to them, students graduate less impacted by their education than they ought to have been.

First-Year Seminar exists to help you (incoming Belmont freshmen) unlock these paradoxes and make the most of your Belmont education. My goal in this introduction is to summarize an intellectual terrain in which you can place Belmont’s general education program, the First-Year Seminar course, and this anthology.

PART I: ON LIBERAL AND GENERAL EDUCATION

A. The Socratic Spirit

The underlying spirit of liberal education is perhaps best conveyed through the life and outlook of an ancient Athenian named Socrates (470-399 BCE). Most of what we know about Socrates we infer from the writings of his student, Plato. Socrates was eminently literate, but he refused to write anything of philosophical significance, preferring oral discourse. After Socrates’ eventual execution on spurious charges, the aristocratic young Plato dedicated the rest of his life to preserving the Socratic legacy. It is no coincidence that the first two items in this anthology were written by Plato.

The Apology is Plato’s account of Socrates’ defense while on trial. In it, Socrates relates the story of when his friend, Chaerephon, asked the oracle at Delphi and was told that there is no one in Athens wiser than Socrates.\(^2\) I suspect Chaerephon found nothing surprising in the oracle’s response, but Socrates did. After all, Socrates was painfully aware that he did not possess substantive wisdom. He was in pursuit of wisdom. He was a philosopher, literally a “friend or lover of wisdom.” The oracle’s response left Socrates in a bind. Lacking wisdom, he could not accept the oracle’s declaration. Deeply and sincerely religious, he could not fail to accept it.
He went in search of someone with wisdom, intending to bring this person before the oracle to seek clarification. He consistently found that those who were thought to be wise, or who claimed to be wise, did not actually possess the wisdom alleged. Socrates eventually concluded that he was wiser than them because, though neither he nor his interlocutors had knowledge of, say, the nature of justice, Socrates knew that he did not know. The people that Socrates talked to did not even know that they didn’t know. So, Socrates knew something they didn’t. Socrates eventually concluded that the oracle meant that the highest wisdom possible for human beings is knowledge of the limits of their knowledge. Only the gods actually possess wisdom. He further concluded that the gods intended him to spend his life showing his fellow Athenians that they do not know many of the things they think they know, imploring them to turn their attention to seeking knowledge and wisdom.

In an iconic quote, Socrates said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” We all enter adult life with various beliefs that we have never questioned, that we simply assume to be true. We may think everyone shares the belief, or even find it too obvious to think of it as a belief. Many people live unexamined lives, in which they never identify and test such beliefs to see if they are worth holding. Shielding themselves from such examination, many people will only discuss fundamental questions of religion, morality, and politics with those they know will agree with them. Or, looking to avoid a lack of certainty, people will latch onto some ideological framework for seeing the world and refuse to entertain the possibility that the basic framework is misguided. When such ideologies take hold, new information cannot reshape people’s system of ideas; the system of ideas reshapes their new information. The foundational principles of the ideology are outside the bounds of discussion. And anyone who sees the world differently is a fool, a puppet, a crony, or a villain. As a result of these and similar strategies, most people go through life rarely even wondering if their beliefs are actually true, never growing in their basic understanding of the world, never changing actions and dispositions, never improving as human beings.

They are, we are, like the prisoners in Plato’s famous “The Allegory of the Cave.” In the allegory, Socrates asks us to imagine a group of men who are imprisoned in a cave, able to only look forward. They see only a series of images on the wall of the cave. They become quite absorbed in predicting what image will come next, and other such games. Suddenly, one among them is freed from the chains. He turns around to see that the images on the wall are nothing more than shadows cast by various little statues of things like horses and trees, with light from the fire inside the cave. Ascending out of the cave, he comes to see actual horses and trees and such. Feeling called to help, he returns to the cave to free the others. They think he is a pesky dreamer, a weaver of fantasy, an irritant. After all, he doesn’t even know or care what image might appear next on the wall of the cave. Some in the cave think he has lost his mind. They even threaten him with violence.

Like the prisoners in Plato’s cave, our basic understanding of the world is largely framed by factors entirely outside of our control or choice. Where and when humans are born almost entirely determines how we will frame and attempt to resolve questions about morality, religion, politics, even art. Yet, like the prisoners in the cave, the overwhelming majority of human beings go through life considering their understanding of such questions to be the final word on the truth of the matter. No one entirely escapes conflating their own prejudices with objective reality. Like the prisoners in the cave, our lives largely proceed on an unquestioned assumption that our viewpoint on the world is the world as it actually is. We assume that appearance (how it seems to me) and reality (what it actually is) are aligned. But things are not what they seem.
Plato’s image of ascending out of a cave of ignorance is an ideal metaphor for liberal education. At first it is disorienting and sometimes trudging. But then, like Plato said of philosophy generally, “like a blaze kindled from a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and - at once - becomes self sustaining.”\(^4\) Liberal education is map and fuel for an attempted escape from Plato’s cave.

A Socratic disposition toward one’s own beliefs offers inoculation against the ideological and dogmatic life of cave dwellers. While most people seem to be in love with their opinions, Socrates preferred being proven wrong to being proven right. He had no interest in scoring rhetorical points for some ideology. He treated his ethical, political, and theological inclinations as suspicious sources of probable falsehood, not as absolute principles of uncompromising conscience. If he was mistaken on some topic, he would rather lose an argument and change his belief than win the argument by some luck or trickery. He refused to believe anything merely because it was conventional wisdom, or because he had been told to believe it.

In conversations, he skillfully rooted out the unquestioned beliefs of others and subjected them to almost ruthless logical examination. He actively sought out those whose views differed from his own, seeking a different perspective from which to look upon his own view. Through the process of seeking out productive intellectual conflict, by putting divergent views into critical interchange, Socrates repeatedly showed people that their worldview was far too simplistic to be true. He left them with the suggestion that they could hope to gain wisdom and virtue only through hard intellectual work.

Ultimately, in 399 B.C.E., Socrates was tried and convicted on charges of corrupting the youth and being an atheist. He was executed. Though he was certainly no atheist, I suppose there was something to the charge of corrupting the youth. He taught young people to think for themselves, to question what they had been told by teachers, parents, priests, or any other authority figure. He taught them to put the pursuit of wisdom and virtue in the center of their lives, and to ignore the attractions of money and power. He taught them to have the courage and discipline to live according to their convictions. He taught them to speak truth to the face of tyranny, and do so without fear for their lives, because suffering injustice is not as bad as doing injustice. Some still consider it a form of corruption to teach young people to think like. They are wrong. It is the best advice that a young person could possibly get.

On one of multiple meaningful levels, the hero in Plato’s allegory, the cave dweller who was freed from his chains and ascended to see things as they truly are, was Socrates himself. Having a deeper wisdom than others, a wisdom that left him in pursuit of wisdom, Socrates made himself into an exemplary human being by cultivating arete, virtue or excellence, in his soul. Analogous to the petty cave squabbles over prizes given for correctly predicting the next image on the cave wall, in the Apology Socrates asserts that Athenians show the greatest concern for the least important things and the least concern for the most important things. They dedicate their lives to pursuing power, wealth, and honors while giving no consideration to the goodness of their own souls.

John Stuart Mill said that, “no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus.”\(^5\) Plato suggests the same notion when Socrates points out, almost in passing, that no one who has left the cave could fail to pity those who are still in it. The freed former prisoner knows what the still imprisoned do not; he knows that what is useful inside the cave counts for nothing against the importance of getting out of the cave. At the end of the Apology, having been sentenced to death, speaking directly to the Athenian people, he foretold that others, younger and more numerous, would continue to question both themselves and others
in the way Socrates had been doing. He declared that it is neither possible nor good to escape such examination.

Plato wrote the Apology and the “Allegory of the Cave” a generation after Socrates’ death, when he was likely already running a thriving school of Socratic philosophy called the Academy. Plato putting such a “foretelling” in Socrates’ mouth was probably intended to be partially tongue-in-cheek. But the story hardly ends there. Plato’s school would remain open for nearly a thousand years. Its name would enter our language, in multiple forms general enough to cover nearly anything related to the pursuit of knowledge. In fact, it is now common to refer to the entire system of universities and colleges as “the academy”.

B. The Nature and Purpose of Liberal Education

Today’s academy is the descendant of Plato’s Academy; the spirit of Socratic enquiry is what lies behind and unites the core mission of these schools as institutions dedicated to the pursuit of truth and knowledge. The name for this historical core of the university mission is ‘liberal education’, and the various subject matters studied that are relevant to that core mission are called ‘liberal arts’.

At Belmont, like nearly all universities, there is a general education program that constitutes the core liberal arts education shared by all the students. The First-Year Seminar (FYS) is the first and foundational step in that program. In order to do well in the course, and to get the most out of your Belmont education, it is crucial that you understand something of the nature, value, and purpose of liberal education. You’ve indicated an intention to get a liberal education; you ought to know what one is.

Liberal education can be described in terms of its content: it is a broad-based education in which students have at least a cursory familiarity with the most important discoveries, ideas, and contributions of the academic disciplines. It can also be described in terms of its underlying value system: it cherishes integrity, sincerity, diversity, rigor, and, above all, truth. Liberal education can also be described in terms of the impact it has on the student: a liberally educated person is curious, well-informed, deliberative, open-minded, and rational.

Even where this general picture is broadly understood, there are several misconceptions about the liberal arts to overcome. Primary among them is that the liberal arts cannot be meaningfully distinguished from other arts. Though other distinctions can be made, it is most crucial to distinguish between the liberal, professional, and fine arts. The professional arts, such as medicine or accounting, are pursued for their usefulness to society and for the profit that comes to those who have mastered them. The fine arts, such as musical performance, theater, or painting are pursued for their beauty and capacity to enrich human experience. The liberal arts are pursued for their own sake; their pursuit and possession is the manifestation and fulfillment of human curiosity.

Traditionally conceived, there were seven liberal arts, in two groups. The trivium consisted of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Through the study of these arts, students learned how to construct linguistic expressions properly, with beauty and persuasive appeal, and in accord with reason. The quadrivium consisted of arithmetic, geometry, music (by which they meant music theory), and astronomy. The relation between these four arts is fascinating. Arithmetic is the study of number; geometry is the study of number in space; music is the study of number in time; astronomy, considered the crowning gem, is the study of number in time and space simultaneously. Considering all seven arts together, a liberal education is an education in words and numbers.
Though no liberal arts education is still structured around the *trivium* and the *quadrimium*, no understanding of the contemporary liberal arts is complete without an awareness of these historical roots.⁷

Such historical understanding evades another all too common misconception: that the natural sciences (such as physics, chemistry, biology) are not among the liberal arts. Many mistakenly think the liberal arts include only the humanities (such as philosophy, literature, and religion), or that the liberal arts are the humanities along with the social sciences (such as history, sociology, political science). There is an important distinction, even a misguided rivalry, between the natural sciences and the humanities, but that is a distinction within the liberal arts, one roughly akin to the older distinction between the *trivium* and the *quadrimium*. Further confusing things, some now mistakenly think the liberal arts are a contrasting term to the very newly constructed group called STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). STEM is largely a political and economic construct with little academic tradition. While science and math are among the liberal arts, technology and engineering are among the professional arts. Though discoveries and innovations of the natural sciences are often valuable commercially, science itself is uninterested in profit and is motivated by curiosity. In short, there is a distinction between science and technology, between science and the marketable application of science.

Any variety of misconceptions about the nature of liberal education arise from the meaning of ‘liberal’. The use of ‘liberal’ in ‘liberal education’ has nothing at all to do with the liberal-conservative distinction that is the obsession of our media and the poison of our politics. ‘Liberal’ is from the Latin *liber*, meaning “to free.” If you understand the relationship between a broad-based education and freedom then you have come very far in grasping the purpose of a liberal education.

Though it does not resonate well with contemporary values or economics, a liberal education was long understood as proper for persons free from want and labor. It existed for a wealthy class who could afford to study without thought of profit or professional credential, but were nevertheless expected to have a certain breadth of understanding and a cultured disposition. There were things that people of a certain class were expected to know and understand. While this vision rightly strikes us as elitist, that is because we think wealth ought to be earned and that all people should be free. Nevertheless, I think we should agree that free people, possessed of the dignity of self-determination, ought to know certain things, possess certain skills, and display certain virtues. Free people ought to be educated people, and there are certain things that educated people know.

Educated people have a sound familiarity with the broad outlines of contemporary science. They can intelligently discuss something of genetics, neuroscience, geological timeframes, and astronomical distances. Educated people know the broad outline of civilization’s historical arc and the varieties of human societies. They can intelligently discuss something of ancient Greek family structure, Hindu religious beliefs, or the cause and effect of the emergence of modern Israel. Educated people have read a broad range of literature. They can intelligently participate in a discussion ranging over James Joyce, Jane Austen, Shakespeare, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Toni Morrison. Educated people have at least encountered those landmark figures through whom human beings have confronted and addressed the most fundamental questions about the nature of existence, the limits of knowledge, and the meaning of human life. They can at least say something of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, Fredrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and maybe even Ludwig Wittgenstein. (Personally, I’m inclined to recommend David Hume move nearer to center stage, but that’s just me).
Perhaps the reason it seems that free people ought to be educated was best expressed by Aristotle. In another way of understanding the connection between liberal education and freedom, Aristotle held that a liberal education provides the freedom to express our nature and live properly as human beings. Aristotle famously noted that “man is a rational animal.” Distinguishing us from all other kinds of things, human beings engage in “activity of the soul in accord with reason.” In short, we think, use our minds, explore, puzzle things out, and try to understand. Engaging in such activities is proper to us in the sense that it is the most definitive way in which a human being can be human. Just as the best acorn is the one that most expresses its nature by becoming a majestic oak, the best human being is the one who grows over the span of a lifetime to become the most flourishing exemplar of rational activities of the soul. A human life that is good and happy has a central role for thought, reason, and knowledge, using such understanding to guide action. Life lived otherwise is still biologically human, but it does not fully manifest what is uniquely human. Aristotle would say it is a warped and degraded form of human existence. His position shouldn’t be interpreted as degrading people denied the opportunity to be educated (by poverty, tyranny, or disease). On the contrary, it upholds their dignity by demanding that the existential nature of what they have been denied be acknowledged.

Under ideal conditions, a healthy acorn will become a magnificent oak as a matter of natural course. No other oak will have to teach it how to make new branches. To get it to live against its nature, you would have to intervene to steer it away from what is proper to it. Human beings seem just the opposite. We need to be educated in order to fully express our nature. It is when we are left to our own devices that we tend to become warped, distorted by the pursuit of pleasure, wealth, or power.

As an expression of our rational nature, human beings seek out what Cardinal John Newman described as knowledge worth having “for its own sake.” Some things we want to know for their instrumental value; we want to know because it will be useful in getting some further thing. I might want to know where there is a good auto mechanic because I need to get my car fixed. I’m not just curious; I have a reason for learning about local mechanics. The kind of knowledge that Newman describes is prized for its intrinsic value; we want to know just for the sake of knowing. There is something inherently fascinating about the inner happenings of black holes, the structure of a Bach symphony, the politics of ancient Athens, or the social life of elephant tribes. Satisfying such curiosities is not a matter of idle cocktail party chatter. Deep yet wandering curiosity is a basic feature of human nature. The world is an interesting place and it is in the nature of a human being to be interested in it.

Besides making us free to express our true nature, Aristotle might also point out that a liberal education frees us from ignorance about the causes of things. The idea is a simple one. As children, we don’t know how the world works and we therefore don’t know what we ought to behave. We are lead to superstitions and tempted by ideologies, both for the easy explanations they seem to offer. By learning how the world actually works, there is a greatly undervalued opportunity to overcome superstition and be armed against ideology.

To say that liberal knowledge is pursued as an expression of our nature, and that it is a kind of knowledge pursued for its own sake, is not to imply that there is no effect or consequence of being liberally educated. That it does not have career preparation as its purpose does not mean that it does not prepare you for anything. Another way in which the ‘liberal’ in ‘liberal education’ has been understood is that liberal learning provides the knowledge required to effectively exercise the rights of free citizens. A liberal education helps you approach the scientific, cultural, and historical facts relevant to exercising your right to self-determination in a way that is informed and effective.
It molds an intellectual disposition that lets you make the most of your freedom and construct your own path toward the flourishing of yourself, your community, and your world.

We say democracy is good, but rarely ask why. ‘Democracy’ is Greek and it means, roughly, “rule by the people.” Presumably, it is only good for the people to rule if the people are both capable and willing. Otherwise, the society will not be fertile ground for human flourishing. Plato opposed democracy, thinking it a fatally flawed form of government. In Plato’s Gorgias, Socrates explains that ignorant people are easy prey for those who would manipulate the masses, shaping public opinion and exploiting the people’s ignorance in the pursuit of power, wealth, or fame. In modern democracies, universal public education is not just a social service. It is the bedrock institution that ensures the next generation of citizens will have the knowledge, skills, and temperament necessary to govern themselves prudently and effectively. As I mentioned earlier, free people need to be educated people.

Consider the freedoms enshrined in the American constitution. Does the constitution guarantee that Americans are free? Yes, in one sense. Americans have, for instance, freedom of speech. If you want to say that President Obama is a Socialist Nazi trying to control every aspect of daily life, then go ahead. Say what you want. No one can tell you that your speech is prohibited (though they can refuse to listen). John Dewey calls this external freedom, freedom from external constraint. Properly understood, privately considered, external freedom is a tool and not an end in itself. Consider the case of Larry Flynt, publisher of Hustler magazine. This pornographer wrapped himself in the American flag and proclaimed that his smut is the highest expression of the freedom of speech. He was wrong. Pornography is perhaps the lowest possible expression of the freedoms of speech and press. Surely, surely, there are vastly better things to print and say.

Dewey cherishes internal freedom, which requires not merely the absence of external constraint, but also the presence of an internal capacity to deliberatively form and act upon a purpose of one’s own construction. The constitution has enshrined your right to say more or less whatever you wish. Now it is incumbent on you to form in yourself something worth saying and listening to, something worthy of your unique presence in the world. You have to decide what you will do with your freedoms, whether you will be worthy of them. The most available and reliable path for becoming worthy is a traditional liberal education, with its broad base of factual knowledge about the world combined with certain skills of reasoning, communication, and reflection.

It is sometimes said that this kind of liberal education is “useless.” Brand Blanshard best explained the flaw in this comment. He started with the familiar distinction between means and ends. Some things, appropriately called “useful,” are desired for the sake of other things. A hammer is useful because it is used to drive in a nail. Knowledge of how to fix cars is useful for making money fixing people’s cars.

Some things, however, are not desired because they are useful; they are not the means useful for pursuing some further end; they are those desired ends that the useful things aim toward. Happiness, security, and love are, strictly speaking, useless. You cannot use true love or happiness to get ahead in the world. But we don’t desire love because it useful. We desire love directly; love is about why we live, not how we live. Blanshard refers to “the transcendent usefulness of useless things.” Useless things like love and happiness have a value that transcends usefulness and thus become useful in a different, and higher sense. They are not the tools used to achieve human flourishing, they partly constitute human flourishing.

Knowledge of the world and our place in it is such a transcendently useful thing. It need not prove its effectiveness in helping us attain worthwhile things in order to display its value. The
worth of such an education is not reducible to its tangible value in the market. Knowledge of the
down to us except as a ruin… Does anything of them remain? Yes, the Greek spirit remains,
the thought of Plato remains, the art of Sophocles, the logic and ethics of Aristotle. … No
doubt there were hardheaded practical men in Athens who stopped before the door of
Plato’s Academy and asked what was the use of it all. They and their names have vanished;
the little Academy became a thousand academies among nations then unborn. There is a
moral, I think, in this history. It is the usefulness, the transcendent usefulness, of useless
things.16

C. Belmont and the BELL Core

Today, there are many kinds of higher education; “the Academy” has grown quite diverse.
After all, much education today is in arts other than the liberal arts.

An education in a professional art characteristically consists of courses leading to
recognized professional credentials such as an RN, MSW, OT and so on. Also in the category of
professional education is the pursuit of equally practical but not formally recognized credentials
in marketing, finance, public relations, and so on. I think it fair to say that this is the type of
education that is most in demand. Parents think such education is prudent and politicians think it
drives economic growth. Plenty of evidence suggests they are both right.

Parents and politicians are far more reticent to support fine arts education. Tragically, we
have come to see expression through music, painting, theatre, etc. as mere entertainment,
something secondary in priority to money making activities. We are an enormously wealthy
society, but we are not a particularly accomplished artistic society. We have forgotten that markets
serve to make life possible, but art makes life worthwhile. Our culture clearly needs more, not less,
fine and performing arts education.

Belmont University is a hybrid institution, with strong programs in the professional, fine
(especially performing), and liberal arts. As the Mission Statement says, Belmont is committed to
“bringing together the best of liberal arts and professional education in a Christian community of
learning and service.” Belmont has formalized its commitment to this ideal as a member of The
New American Colleges & Universities, an association self-described as being “dedicated to the
purposeful integration of liberal education, professional studies, and civic engagement.”17

As a professor in Belmont’s Philosophy Department, I’m keen to point out that Belmont is
a wonderful place to major in a broad range of the liberal arts. As is typical of Belmont’s liberal
arts programs, our philosophy majors and minors form a vibrant intellectual community doing
excellent work. Every year, Belmont philosophy graduates head off to philosophy graduate school,
law school, and a wide range of other destinations. Graduates from our department are teachers,
attorneys, ministers, and university professors. One is a former director of Amnesty International in North America. Another was a researcher on the Mars Rover project at NASA. The other liberal arts departments at Belmont all have similar stories.

Though we have some excellent liberal arts programs, the vast majority of Belmont students major in one of the professional or performing arts, especially Belmont’s nationally recognized programs in music, business, health care, and the music industry. As a result, for the vast majority of students, a Belmont education consists of two more or less distinct parts: a major offering training in a performing or professional art and the BELL Core, the general education program, offering a foundation in the liberal arts.

A quick summary of the BELL Core indicates the program is in three broad parts (for a detailed guide, go online or speak with your advisor). Reflecting the centrality of intellectual skills, both as a part of a liberal education and as tools in accessing a liberal education, you get to take courses in math, writing, speech, and wellness. Reflecting the broad based content of a liberal education, you get to take courses in the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and religion. Reflecting the integrated nature of liberal education, you also get to experience a series of Belmont signature courses that organize and bring coherence to the whole journey. “BELL,” by the way, stands for “Belmont Education Learning for Life”. For most Belmont students, the BELL Core adds up a greater number of credit hours than the courses leading to their professional credential. Make no mistake about it: general education is the core of your Belmont education; study in your major is secondary.

Like students everywhere, Belmont students too often do not get a satisfactory answer to a natural and reasonable question: “why do I have to take all these classes that have nothing to do with my major?” Behind the question, of course, lie some of those paradoxes in accessing a liberal education that Rowe noted. In a hundred ways, students have been told that higher education is about their professional future. They hear that message from the culture at large, their parents, their high school teachers and guidance counselor, even – most sadly – from university admissions offices. They arrive at the university with their professional aspirations coming into view. When told that most of their courses do not directly relate to that future, nor exist purely in order to prepare them for that future, they are rightly perplexed. They deserve an answer.

The most authentic answer is, of course, outlined above: you have to take such courses because they will lead you toward wisdom and truth, bequeath you your cultural heritage, free you from ignorance and ideology, and make you both worthy and capable of self-determination.

But the question comes from a place of practical, hard-headed, and career-focused deliberation. The summary expression of an abstract ideal will not satisfy the questioner. There is a more concrete answer, one that is both true and good enough to be getting along while the deeper answer comes into view.

Good classes that have nothing to do with your major will still help you in your career. You will be a better nurse if you have studied theology and understand the ways in which human beings have responded spiritually to suffering and death. You will be a better pharmacist if you have studied political science and understand how public policy decisions lead to differential access to health care. You will be a better music industry executive if you study a foreign language, take courses in cross cultural psychology, and become adept at working and thinking across cultural divides.

Admittedly, the likelihood of such direct application varies across professions, and might be rare for some professions. Health care and teaching seem particularly clear examples of professions in which you would be most hindered by a narrow professional training, and most
benefit from a broad and robust general education. To thrive as nurse or teacher, you need to be able to reach a wide variety of people who are going through a wide variety of often tumultuous experiences and emotions. If a pediatric nurse cannot gain the parents’ trust because of an inability and unwillingness to comprehend their culture, care standards could be impaired.

More important than such direct application, however, is the development of what are sometimes called transfer skills, skills developed in one context but able to be transferred and applied in multiple other contexts. I hope it is obvious that an education in the liberal arts greatly improves your skills of written and oral communication, critical thinking, abstract reasoning, integrating new information, avoiding rush to judgment, working with others, disagreeing productively, staying on track to meet long-term goals, and organization. Those are core skills no matter what profession you pursue. Studying the liberal arts is not the only way to acquire such skills, but it the best, surest, and most efficient way.  

Liberal education is sometimes summarized by saying that students “learn how to learn.” For example, reading Immanuel Kant is not easy. In order to get through one of his treatises, you will have to learn how to navigate a technical vocabulary and see how seemingly disparate ideas fit together into a larger implied whole. The content of Kant’s treatise won’t directly help you in a professional setting, but the intellectual skills you acquired by reading the treatise will transfer to any context in which there is technical language and a complex whole. My college roommate and fellow philosophy major now works for a Washington D.C. tech firm as the manager of a team of network security something or other. Honestly, I don’t know what he does; I don’t know nearly enough about computers to understand. I do know that he has no formal university training in computers or in management. There is no overlap whatsoever between the content of his professional work and the content of his college coursework. Yet, he denies any claim that he is not “using” his philosophy degree, suggesting that anyone who knows how to read Kant can figure out a programming manual.

The concrete and practical defense of liberal education is not limited to being more prepared for a dynamic marketplace. Thanks to those same transfer skills, the BELL Core can teach you useful skills and life habits that will make you a better neighbor, spouse, citizen, parent, consumer, and all around human being. For instance, if you know how to disagree civilly, giving reasons for your claims and changing your mind on the basis of what others say, then your romantic relations will benefit tremendously. In other words, one reason you need to take classes that don’t directly relate to your professional ambitions is that your Belmont education should prepare you for the whole of your life, not just your career. I hope that, after graduation, you go on to have a successful and meaningful professional career. But I hope so much more for you than that. After all, life is so much more than a career. If you graduate from Belmont with nothing but the credentials to get a great first job and the tools to succeed in that job, then you did not make the most of your time here. You should leave Belmont better prepared for your career, yes, but you should also leave better prepared for life in all of its manifestations.

PART II. ON FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR AND THIS ANTHOLOGY

D. Knowledge and First-Year Seminar

The first step in your journey through the BELL Core is First-Year Seminar (FYS), which is required for all incoming freshmen at Belmont. Though faculty members choose their own individual subtitles and themes for the course, the overall topic of every section of FYS is the
same: “ways of knowing.” The shared focus of all FYS sections is an interrogation of the role of knowledge in human life.

People often mistakenly presume that knowledge is one of those abstract concepts that evade definition. On the contrary, there is broad consensus among philosophers that Plato was basically on the right track when defining knowledge as “justified true belief.”19 The definition means that there are three parts to knowledge. For a person to know statement or assertion \( x \), 1) the person must believe \( x \) is true, 2) \( x \) must indeed be true, and 3) the person must be justified in believing \( x \).

The first criterion is so obvious that it seems simplistic. In order to know some certain statement, you have to believe that statement. The second is also logically straightforward. Believing false stuff is never knowledge, no matter how good your reasons for believing it. For thousands of years humans had excellent reason for believing that the sun moves around the Earth. Nevertheless, they were wrong. They thought that they knew the sun moves, but it is clearly incorrect to say that they actually knew the sun moved. A false belief can never be knowledge.

The third criterion, justification, is an intellectual gold mine. A bit of reflection can show that a true belief is not necessarily knowledge. Imagine a hypochondriac who always thinks he has some disease or another. This week, he irrationally believes that he has cancer (there are no symptoms); last week it was congestive heart failure. Imagine that it turns out he actually does have a nearly undetectable tumor. Though his belief that he has cancer is true, it gives him far too much credit to say that he knows that he has cancer. He correctly believes that he has cancer but he is not justified in having the belief.

To have knowledge, you need not only believe what is true (hard enough in itself), but you also have to believe for rational and legitimate reasons.20 You have to have evidence, hopefully strong evidence. It is easy to choose to believe this or that thing about any given subject matter. Inevitably, some of those beliefs are going to turn out to be true. But the difference between the person who is actually knowledgeable and the person who is going off guesses, vague intuitions, or the implications of some ideology is that the person with knowledge has formed beliefs around a genuine understanding of the subject matter. Knowledge isn’t simply firmly holding a belief. It isn’t even merely about being right. Knowledge is having true beliefs that grow from rational reflections, reflections that are themselves grounded in substantive and accurate comprehension of the subject matter at hand.

The relevant branch of study here is called epistemology, the sub-branch of philosophy focused on the study of knowledge. Some of the broadest and deepest questions epistemologists study relate directly to this third criterion. What does it take to be sufficiently justified in holding a certain belief? How strong does that justification have to be before meeting the minimal standard for knowledge? What is the relationship between knowledge and certainty? What is good reason to believe something? In slightly technical language, what warrants epistemic license?

Mercifully, First-Year Seminar is not at all like the course in epistemology I offer. Though broad philosophical questions may arise in First-Year Seminar, other kinds of issues about knowledge are typically more central to the course.

Questions about the varieties of knowledge are commonly explored in FYS. How do biologists construct knowledge claims? How do theologians construct knowledge claims? How do historians construct them? What about philosophers, political scientists, or mathematicians? What about music critics, medical doctors, or cultural commentators? How do these knowledge claims relate to, even compete with, one another?
Questions about the means of establishing knowledge are also common questions in FYS. Is intuition or a gut feeling a way of knowing? Is faith? Can scripture provide us with knowledge? If so, what kind? Does knowledge always ultimately rely on observation? Can we gain knowledge by reading fiction or poetry? What kind of knowledge?

Questions about the scope and limits of knowledge are some of the most interesting that are often explored in FYS. Can beliefs about morality, religion, or politics be considered knowledge? Can I know that something is immoral, or beautiful? What are the limits of scientific knowledge? Are there facts that can be known, but cannot be explored scientifically? What should be done when competing claims to knowledge collide?

Questions about the preservation and transmission of knowledge are critical in many sections of FYS. How do technological societies preserve knowledge? What various methods did traditional societies use to pass knowledge from one generation to the next? How is the internet transforming libraries and research? What role have universities historically played in building and disseminating knowledge? How is that role changing? How widely should knowledge be disseminated? When, if ever, is it appropriate to consider knowledge to be private property?

The goal of First-Year Seminar is for students to launch their general education program by interrogating the role of knowledge in human life. Through reading the core of the anthology (which I’ll properly introduce shortly), readings related to the instructor’s sub-theme, and selections from the supplemental material in the anthology, certain course learning objectives are met. First of all, students learn some of the traditional and contemporary claims about the nature, value, and purpose of liberal education. They are exposed to academic values about what it is to be educated, and what it is value knowledge and truth. Secondly, students encounter representative examples of knowledge claims constructed and evaluated from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Likely, through the instructor’s sub-theme, they explore one academic discipline or issue in particular. Also, students consider the role of knowledge in human life generally, outside of academic contexts. They read literature and watch films that poignantly raise questions about how human beings claim to know the things they know, the pitfalls of living in the absence of knowledge, the tragedies that tend to emerge when people feel certain despite being wrong. Finally, students get an introduction to the cultural and intellectual life of the university community beyond the classroom through invited speakers, stage productions, academic lectures, and musical performances.

E. Ways of Knowing

This anthology, titled Ways of Knowing, is put together by a crack team of experienced First-Year Seminar professors under the leadership of English Professor Marcia McDonald.

The “Core Readings,” are required reading in every section of FYS. These are the pieces that we think are most valuable in helping you understand the core questions and issues related to knowledge. They constitute the intellectual core of the course. The other two sections are supplemental. At the discretion of your professor, they may or may not be required. “Academic Disciplines in Action,” includes interesting exemplars of knowledge claims from academic fields as wide as mathematics to sociology, from philosophy to cultural studies. “Poetry and Fiction,” offers poetic and fictional pieces that display the value of knowledge or its role in human life.

As this introduction is already too long, and the anthology includes over forty items, I will present the landscape only as it is formed by the core, indicating along the way how some of the
entries from the second and third sections slip into that landscape. Fortunately, I’m already well along the way.

The two readings by Plato that I discussed earlier are both in the core. As I tried to describe above, the Apology and the “Allegory of the Cave” are founding documents of our intellectual traditions. Socrates’ disposition toward knowledge was inquisitive skepticism, fueled by the conviction that there is always more to understand, and that nothing in human life is more important than the pursuit of wisdom and truth. Likewise, the “Allegory of the Cave” paints one of the most enduring images of Western civilization, spotlighting the human condition. It shows that we all work from false assumptions, of which we are entirely unaware, that draw us toward ideology and complacency. It spotlights the dangers and difficulties associated with trying to see the world as it actually is. Taken together, these pieces serve the critical FYS function of expressing the spirit behind academic life, as well as providing important historical context.

After the entries by Plato is an essay by Mark Edmundson which is included because, much like the first part of this Introduction, it directly articulates the traditional vision of liberal education and argues for the contemporary relevance of that vision. Edmundson frames his defense of liberal education as a letter to incoming university students. By doing so, he is able to reflect on the challenges in pursuing a liberal education as seen from the point of view of incoming university students. As a sort of foreword to the anthology, there is a one page summary of the ideals of liberal education from the American Association of Universities and Colleges. In the supplemental section of the anthology, Andrew Delabanco’s essay “What is College For?” offers historical observations about liberal education in America, a theme reinforced by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1837 speech, “The American Scholar.” Taken together, these pieces serve a core function in FYS: they articulate a vision of why Belmont has a general education and how students might benefit from it.

“The Learning Curve,” by Atul Gawande is the next entry in the anthology’s core. It is included because there are forms of knowledge other than the discursive knowledge typically associated with higher education. Focusing on how surgeons learn their craft, the essay highlights a form of what philosophers call knowing how that can be contrasted with knowing that. There is a difference between knowing that something is a fact and knowing how something is done. The essay also considers the ethical implications that arise when important tasks can only be learned by doing them. If every surgery were performed by the most experienced surgeon in the room, no one would be learning to become the great surgeons of the future.

The notion of practical knowledge and its role in human life is further explored in Matthew Crawford’s essay, “Shop Class as Soulcraft.” Crawford traces the rise and fall of shop class in American public schools as the backdrop to a full throated defense of manual labor and craftsmanship as a kind of embodied learning that is currently undervalued in both our schools and our culture. It is not that Crawford is defending vocational education instead of general education. He is arguing that an introduction to the manual arts, to the building and making of things, is a proper part of a general education understood as forming the grounds for human excellence. The notion that master craftsmanship might be the most rewarding and fully human pursuit is a worthwhile consideration when contemplating what education is properly suited to the human condition. Alice Walker considers the value of material creations from another angle. In a groundbreaking essay from 1974, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” included in the core readings, she argues that women, particularly African-American women, created an artistic and cultural legacy through material creations as diverse as quilts and gardens. These tangible, material products, along with songs and stories, deserve to be understood as not simply functional, but as
forms of art that are “[o]rdering the universe in the image of . . . Beauty.” Aaron Copeland’s essay “How We Listen” offers a different consideration of knowledge as ability, establishing that one must learn how to listen to music, and that there are different kinds of listening. Taken together, these pieces serve the FYS function of exploring various forms of knowledge.

The next piece in the anthology’s core is “The Law of Gravitation, an Example of a Physical Law,” by Nobel Prize winning physicist Richard Feynman. His stated goal is to shed light on the nature of science in the most general sense. Because science is rigorous investigation of specific phenomena in nature, he decides to illustrate by means of an example. Choosing the law of gravity as his example, he demonstrates the hard work, precision, and experimental nature of science. As Feynman points out, science is the most important and reliable way of knowing in the modern world. In fact, science has proven so effective in establishing knowledge claims, it has become sadly fashionable in intellectual circles to hold both that science is the only real source of knowledge and that science is a tool capable of unlocking all knowledge. Science is central to any contemporary discussion of knowledge, and the Feynman piece displays the nature and spirit of scientific enquiry.

Readings throughout the supplemental material reinforce Feynman’s themes. Anne Alison’s paper, “Japanese Mothers and Obentôs,” exemplifies critical sociology as a scientific discipline, precisely observing an interesting phenomena, testing to see how it is best explained. Science plays an important role in David Foster Wallace’s argument in “Consider the Lobster.” Robin Kimmerer’s “The Advantages of Being Small: Life in the Boundary Layer,” highlights the way in which the scientific and the imaginative can fuse, each taken up in the task of the other. She brings her knowledge as a botanist and plant ecologist to to open readers’ eyes to the life of moss, highlighting both the detail observable in nature and the importance of environmental stewardship. Taken together, these pieces serve the FYS function of helping to frame an understanding of science, the most important way of knowing.

The next piece in the anthology’s core is St. Thomas Aquinas’ famous proofs for the existence of God, in which he purports to offer five short and perfectly rigorous and sound arguments which conclusively demonstrate that God exists. Simply as an example of a seemingly audacious knowledge claim, they are worthy of careful consideration in FYS. I want to avoid oversimplifying Aquinas’ thought, leading you away from the impression that his religious thought is reducible to these proofs. Having largely borrowed the proofs from a pagan named Aristotle (along with much of the rest of his metaphysical thought), Aquinas thought the proofs established only the bare existence of an uncaused causer. Insight into the nature of God requires revelation, such as through scripture and prayer. Moreover, it should be noted that it has been over two centuries since such proofs were taken seriously in philosophical circles as demonstrations of God’s existence. It is too easy to show where they rest on unjustified premises or debatable inferences. Nevertheless, plotting the structure of Aquinas’ arguments, and indicating where one might object to his premises, is an excellent introductory lesson in logic and critical thinking.

Nevertheless, besides being a vehicle for pondering the principle of sufficient reason (be sure to look that one up before class discussion), Aquinas’ proofs raise the most direct questions about religion and knowledge. Can it be known that God does or does not exist? What is the best possible attempt to rationally demonstrate that He does? In the supplemental section, William James offers further exploration of such questions, offering a complex philosophical argument that we should choose to believe some things for which we lack demonstrative evidence.

David Dark, a religion professor at Belmont and author of the next piece in the anthology’s core, suggests a different question and a different way of thinking about religion. Dark says that
religion is “simply a tying together.” For Dark, religion is not a set of propositions to be defended with arguments better than one’s heathen opponents. Dark contends that self-identifying as “religious” is “as futile and redundant a move as calling yourself political or cultural…Religion happens.” He means that religion isn’t something that we take or leave; it is part of human existence in its role as our controlling story, the impetus of moral sensibility toward others. When he writes that “religion is the farthest-reaching readily available concept for looking hard and honestly at our own lives,” he might be channeling Socrates. For both, deep piety is not feeling assured in a set of answers, but having the courage sufficient to live joyfully and lovingly in the absence of such assurance. Taken together, these pieces serve an FYS function by offering a deep context in which to reflect on religion as a way of knowing.

The next two pieces in the core of the anthology, written by William Stafford and Walt Whitman, are poems. Literature give us a special kind of knowledge: insight into the experience of others and toward a growing appreciation of the range of human experience. It leads to reflection on the relevance of knowledge of our own past to our current sense of who we are. Nothing has more befuddled the Editorial Board than choosing the appropriate literature to include in the anthology. Whitman’s poem opens with a person in anguish over eternal existential questions. Like Rene Descartes (in the supplemental section), he finds bedrock in the mere assertion of his own existence. Curiously, Stafford’s poem also opens with a theme found also in Descartes: the fact that I only have direct knowledge of what is happening in my own mind. The mind of the other presents epistemic problems. Taken together, with the pieces in the Poetry and Fiction section, these pieces address core FYS goals by deploying literature as a way of knowing and by displaying something of what thereby becomes known about the role of knowledge in human life.

The core readings conclude with W.E.B. DuBois’ “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” Against the emphasis placed on practical education by his mentor, Booker T. Washington, DuBois advocated for African-American children to be given a liberal education, one that would be concerned more with the purpose of life than with the means of making a living. Seeing, with Socrates, education as a tool of liberation from seeing the world as it is initially presented, DuBois also saw the social and political liberation resulting from an intellectual one. Indeed, there are close parallels between DuBois notion of double consciousness and Plato’s cave allegory. In both cases, a deeper knowledge of one’s true circumstances is both cause and effect of seeing oneself as if from the outside. Furthermore, Socrates would contend that understanding a diversity of viewpoints is critical in the pursuit of knowledge, giving us new vantage point from which to test our own.

Taken all together, the required core and supplemental materials in the anthology address the goals of First-Year Seminar by helping you understand the nature and purpose of liberal education, introducing you to the various academic pursuits of knowledge, and leading you to reflect more broadly on the role of knowledge in human life.

**CONCLUSION: SOME UNSOLICITED ADVICE**

I’ve passed along to you some rather grand claims about liberal education, the BELL Core, and First-Year Seminar. I’ve even, once you put all the dots together, suggested that FYS can make you a better person. Like Socrates, you should be open enough to consider that my claims might be true, while also being skeptical enough to subject them to critical examination. Don’t prejudge the question one way or the other.
Too many students at Belmont and everywhere else treat the general education program as nothing but a series of obstacles to overcome on the way to graduation. The more quickly and effortlessly they can be “gotten out of the way,” the better. As a result, many students arrive at graduation little altered by most of their BELL Core courses, having never sought from them anything other than another checked box.

I advise you to take a different approach. Take the BELL Core seriously and test for yourself whether the grandiose claims about a liberal education are true. Treat general education courses like the core of your education that they are intended to be. Consider a major or minor in one of the liberal arts. Come and see me at graduation and tell me the early results of your experiment.

I’ll be delighted to hear it, but I already know what you’ll say in some version or another; I’ve heard it too many times to be in suspense. If you take general education seriously, the world we inhabit together will be more interesting to you, and you will be both more interesting and useful to it. You will be better equipped to flourish as a free human being. So, answer for yourself the same questions Stephen Rowe surely still asks incoming students: do you seek only to be informed, or are you also open to being transformed? Are you here just to get a degree, or do you also want an education?

Notes

6. The exact date of composition for all of Plato’s writings is unknown and is, in fact, a point of contentious scholarly debate.
7. For a clear exposition of the trivium and quadrivium, as well as a defense of their continued importance, see Mark Van Doren, Liberal Education (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1943). For a recent account of the history of liberal education in America, including a defense of its underlying values, see Michael S. Roth, Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2014).
8. Aristotle, Politics in The Complete Works of Aristotle, ed. Johnathan Barnes (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1984), 1253a. The traditional translation of this passage as “man is a rational animal” is disputable. A precise translation might be, “the human alone of the animals possesses speech.” Nevertheless, the idea that rationality distinguishes human beings from other animals is infused throughout the Aristotelian corpus, especially De Anima, Nicomachean Ethics, Physics, and Metaphysics.
13. Some will point out that we have a constitutional republic, in which the citizens vote to determine which few among us will engage in political action, not a democracy in which the citizens directly move the levers of power. But it amounts to the same thing for this point. We have built a civilization on the principle self-determination, of the fundamental freedom of each individual. In our constitutional republic, it may be the case that only a few “rule” in the sense of engaging directly in political action. Nevertheless, each individual is left to rule him or herself.
18. The practical case for the economic benefit of a liberal education has been made many times. For a particularly strong and recent example, see Fareed Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2015).
20. There are some counter-examples to the claim that justified true belief is knowledge. For example, consider the person who believes it to be a certain time of day, justifying that belief by appeal to a generally reliable public clock that happened to have broken exactly twelve hours earlier. For widely discussed, if rather technical, examples see: Edmund Gettier, “Is Knowledge Justified True Belief?,” *Analysis* 23 (1966): 121-123. Nevertheless, all of these counter-examples deal with degree of justification and do not undermine the general claim that knowledge involves belief, truth, and justification.
I do not know, men of Athens, how my accusers affected you; as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak. And yet, hardly anything of what they said is true. Of the many lies they told, one in particular surprised me, namely that you should be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker like me. That they were not ashamed to be immediately proved wrong by the facts, when I show myself not to be an accomplished speaker at all, that I thought was most shameless on their part—unless indeed they call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth. If they mean that, I would agree that I am an orator, but not after their manner, for indeed, as I say, practically nothing they said was true. From me you will hear the whole truth, though not, by Zeus, gentlemen, expressed in embroidered and stylized phrases like theirs, but things spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind, for I put my trust in the justice of what I say, and let none of you expect anything else. It would not be fitting at my age, as it might be for a young man, to toy with words when I appear before you.

One thing I do ask and beg of you, gentlemen: if you hear me making my defense in the same kind of language as I am accustomed to use in the market place by the bankers' tables, where many of you have heard me, and elsewhere, do not be surprised or create a disturbance on that account. The position is this: this is my first appearance in a lawcourt, at the age of seventy; I am therefore simply a stranger to the manner of speaking here. Just as if I were really a stranger, you would certainly excuse me if I spoke in that dialect and manner in which I had been brought up, so too my present request seems a just one, for you to pay no attention to my manner of speech—be it better or worse—but to concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth.

It is right for me, gentlemen, to defend myself first against the first lying accusations made against me and my first accusers, and then against the later accusations and the later accusers. There have been many who have accused me to you for many years now, and none of their accusations are true. These I fear much more than I fear Anytus and his friends, though they too are formidable. These earlier ones, however, are more so, gentlemen; they got hold of most of you from childhood, persuaded you and accused me quite falsely, saying that there is a man called Socrates, a wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse
argument the stronger. Those who spread that rumor, gentlemen, are my dangerous accusers, for their hearers believe that those who study these things do not even believe in the gods. Moreover, these accusers are numerous, and have been at it a long time; also, they spoke to you at an age when you would most readily believe them, some of you being children and adolescents, and they won their case by default, as there was no defense.

What is most absurd in all this is that one cannot even know or mention their names unless one of them is a writer of comedies. Those who maliciously and slanderously persuaded you—who also, when persuaded themselves then persuaded others—all those are most difficult to deal with: one cannot bring one of them into court or refute him; one must simply fight with shadows, as it were, in making one's defense, and cross-examine when no one answers. I want you to realize too that my accusers are of two kinds: those who have accused me recently, and the old ones I mention; and to think that I must first defend myself against the latter, for you have also heard their accusations first, and to a much greater extent than the more recent.

Very well then, men of Athens. I must surely defend myself and attempt to uproot from your minds in so short a time the slander that has resided there so long. I wish this may happen, if it is in any way better for you and me, and that my defense may be successful, but I think this is very difficult and I am fully aware of how difficult it is. Even so, let the matter proceed as the god may wish, but I must obey the law and make my defense.

Let us then take up the case from its beginning. What is the accusation from which arose the slander in which Meletus trusted when he wrote out the charge against me? What did they say when they slandered me? I must, as if they were my actual prosecutors, read the affidavit they would have sworn. It goes something like this: Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others. You have seen this yourself in the comedy of Aristophanes, a Socrates swinging about there, saying he was walking on air and talking a lot of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing at all. I do not speak in contempt of such knowledge, if someone is wise in these things—lest Meletus bring more cases against me—but, gentlemen, I have no part in it, and on this point I call upon the majority of you as witnesses. I think it right that all those of you who have heard me conversing, and many of you have, should tell each other if anyone of you has ever heard me discussing such subjects to any extent at all. From this you will learn that the other things said about me by the majority are of the same kind.

Not one of them is true. And if you have heard from anyone that I undertake to teach people and charge a fee for it, that is not true either. Yet I think it a fine thing to be able to teach people as Gorgias of Leontini does, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis. Each of these men can go to any city and persuade the young, who can keep company with anyone of their own fellow citizens they want without paying, to leave the company of these, to join with themselves, pay them a fee, and be grateful to them besides. Indeed, I learned that there is another wise man from Paros who is visiting us, for I met a man who has spent more money on Sophists than everybody else put together, Callias, the son of Hipponicus. So I asked him—he has two sons—"Callias," I said, "if your sons were colts or calves, we could find and engage a supervisor for them who would make them excel in their proper qualities, some horse breeder or farmer. Now since they are men, whom do you have in mind to supervise them? Who is an expert in this kind of excellence, the human and social kind? I think you must have given thought to this since you have sons. Is there such a person," I asked, "or is there not?" "Certainly there is," he said. "Who is he?" I asked, "What

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1This is Aristophanes. Socrates refers later to his character in his Clouds, first produced in 423 BC.
2These were all well-known Sophists.
is his name, where is he from? and what is his fee?" "His name, Socrates, is Evenus, he comes from Paros, and his fee is five minas." I thought Evenus a happy man, if he really possesses this art, and teaches for so moderate a fee. Certainly I would pride and preen myself if I had this knowledge, but I do not have it, gentlemen.

One of you might perhaps interrupt me and say: "But Socrates, what is your occupation? From where have these slanders come? For surely if you did not busy yourself with something out of the common, all these rumors and talk would not have arisen unless you did something other than most people. Tell us what it is, that we may not speak inadvisedly about you." Anyone who says that seems to be right, and I will try to show you what has caused this reputation and slander. Listen then. Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure that all that I shall say is true. What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just now are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me. Do not create a disturbance, gentlemen, even if you think I am boasting, for the story I shall tell does not originate with me, but I will refer you to a trustworthy source. I shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness to the existence and nature of my wisdom, if it be such. You know Chaerephon. He was my friend from youth, and the friend of most of you, as he shared your exile and your return. You surely know the kind of man he was, how impulsive in any course of action. He went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle—as I say, gentlemen, do not create a disturbance—he asked if any man was wiser than I, and the Pythian replied that no one was wiser. Chaerephon is dead, but his brother will testify to you about this.

Consider that I tell you this because I would inform you about the origin of the slander. When I heard of this reply I asked myself: "Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so." For a long time I was at a loss as to his meaning; then I very reluctantly turned to some such investigation as this: I went to one of those reputed wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could refute the oracle and say to it: "This man is wiser than I, but you said I was." Then, when I examined this man—there is no need for me to tell you his name, he was one of our public men—my experience was something like this: I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know." After this I approached another man, one of those thought to be wiser than he, and I thought the same thing, and so I came to be disliked both by him and by many others.

After that I proceeded systematically. I realized, to my sorrow and alarm, that I was getting unpopular, but I thought that I must attach the greatest importance to the god's oracle, so I must go to all those who had any reputation for knowledge to examine its meaning. And by the dog, gentlemen of the jury—for I must tell you the truth—I experienced something like this: in my investigation in the service of the god I found that those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable. I must give you an account of my journeyings as if they were labors I had undertaken to prove the oracle irrefutable. After the politicians, I went to the poets, the writers of tragedies and dithyrambs and
the others, intending in their case to catch myself being more ignorant then they. So I took up those poems with which they seemed to have taken most trouble and asked them what they meant, in order that I might at the same time learn something from them. I am ashamed to tell you the truth, gentlemen, but I must. Almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors could. I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say. The poets seemed to me to have had a similar experience. At the same time I saw that, because of their poetry, they thought themselves very wise men in other respects, which they were not. So there again I withdrew, thinking that I had the same advantage over them as I had over the politicians.

Finally I went to the craftsmen, for I was conscious of knowing practically nothing, and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, gentlemen of the jury, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am.

As a result of this investigation, gentlemen of the jury, I acquired much unpopularity, of a kind that is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden; many slanders came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor did not have. What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: "This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless." So even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me—and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise. Because of this occupation, I do not have the leisure to engage in public affairs to any extent, nor indeed to look after my own, but I live in great poverty because of my service to the god.

Furthermore, the young men who follow me around of their own free will, those who have most leisure, the sons of the very rich, take pleasure in hearing people questioned; they themselves often imitate me and try to question others. I think they find an abundance of men who believe they have some knowledge but know little or nothing. The result is that those whom they question are angry, not with themselves but with me. They say: "That man Socrates is a pestilential fellow who corrupts the young." If one asks them what he does and what he teaches to corrupt them, they are silent, as they do not know, but, so as not to appear at a loss, they mention those accusations that are available against all philosophers, about "things in the sky and things below the earth," about "not believing in the gods" and "making the worse the stronger argument;" they would not want to tell the truth, I'm sure, that they have been proved to lay claim to knowledge when they know nothing. These people are ambitious, violent and numerous; they are continually and convincingly talking about me; they have been filling your ears for a long time with vehement slanders against me. From them Meletus attacked me, and Anytus and Lycon, Meletus being vexed on behalf of the poets, Anytus on behalf of the craftsmen and the politicians, Lycon on behalf of the orators, so that, as I started out by saying, I should be surprised if I could rid you of so much slander in so short a time. That, gentlemen of the jury, is the truth for you. I have hidden or
disguised nothing. I know well enough that this very conduct makes me unpopular, and this is proof that what I say is true, that such is the slander against me, and that such are its causes. If you look into this either now or later, this is what you will find.

Let this suffice as a defense against the charges of my earlier accusers. After this I shall try to defend myself against Meletus, that good and patriotic man, as he says he is, and my later accusers. As these are a different lot of accusers, let us again take up their sworn deposition. It goes something like this: Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things. Such is their charge. Let us examine it point by point.

He says that I am guilty of corrupting the young, but I say that Meletus is guilty of dealing frivolously with serious matters, of irresponsibly bringing people into court, and of professing to be seriously concerned with things about none of which he has ever cared, and I shall try to prove that this is so. Come here and tell me, Meletus. Surely you consider it of the greatest importance that our young men be as good as possible? —Indeed I do.

Come then, tell the jury who improves them. You obviously know, in view of your concern. You say you have discovered the one who corrupts them, namely me, and you bring me here and accuse me to the jury. Come, inform the jury and tell them who it is. You see, Meletus, that you are silent and know not what to say. Does this not seem shameful to you and a sufficient proof of what I say, that you have not been concerned with any of this? Tell me, my good sir, who improves our young men? —The laws.

That is not what I am asking, but what person who has knowledge of the laws to begin with?—These jurymen, Socrates.

How do you mean, Meletus? Are these able to educate the young and improve them?—Certainly.

All of them, or some but not others?—All of them.

Very good, by Hera. You mention a great abundance of benefactors. But what about the audience? Do they improve the young or not?—They do, too.

What about the members of Council?—The Councillors, also.

But, Meletus, what about the assembly? Do members of the assembly corrupt the young, or do they all improve them?—They improve them.

All the Athenians, it seems, make the young into fine good men, except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is that what you mean?—That is most definitely what I mean.

You condemn me to a great misfortune. Tell me: does this also apply to horses do you think? That all men improve them and one individual corrupts them? Or is quite the contrary true, one individual is able to improve them, or very few, namely the horse breeders, whereas the majority, if they have horses and use them, corrupt them? Is that not the case, Meletus, both with horses and all other animals? Of course it is, whether you and Anytus say so or not. It would be a very happy state of affairs if only one person corrupted our youth, while the others improved them.

You have made it sufficiently obvious, Meletus, that you have never had any concern for our youth; you show your indifference clearly; that you have given no thought to the subjects about which you bring me to trial.

And by Zeus, Meletus, tell us also whether it is better for a man to live among good or wicked fellow-citizens. Answer, my good man, for I am not asking a difficult question. Do not the wicked do some harm to those who are ever closest to them, whereas good people benefit them?—Certainly.
And does the man exist who would rather be harmed than benefited by his associates? Answer, my good sir, for the law orders you to answer. Is there any man who wants to be harmed? —Of course not.

Come now, do you accuse me here of corrupting the young and making them worse deliberately or unwillingly? —Deliberately.

What follows, Meletus? Are you so much wiser at your age than I am at mine that you understand that wicked people always do some harm to their closest neighbors while good people do them good, but I have reached such a pitch of ignorance that I do not realize this, namely that if I make one of my associates wicked I run the risk of being harmed by him so that I do such a great evil deliberately, as you say? I do not believe you, Meletus, and I do not think anyone else will. Either I do not corrupt the young or, if I do, it is unwillingly, and you are lying in either case. Now if I corrupt them unwillingly, the law does not require you to bring people to court for such unwilling wrongdoings, but to get hold of them privately, to instruct them and exhort them; for clearly, if I learn better, I shall cease to do what I am doing unwillingly. You, however, have avoided my company and were unwilling to instruct me, but you bring me here, where the law requires one to bring those who are in need of punishment, not of instruction.

And so, gentlemen of the jury, what I said is clearly true: Meletus has never been at all concerned with these matters. Nonetheless tell us, Meletus, how you say that I corrupt the young; or is it obvious from your deposition that it is by teaching them not to believe in the gods in whom the city believes but in other new spiritual things? Is this not what you say I teach and so corrupt them? —That is most certainly what I do say.

Then by those very gods about whom we are talking, Meletus, make this clearer to me and to the jury: I cannot be sure whether you mean that I teach the belief that there are some gods—and therefore I myself believe that there are gods and am not altogether an atheist, nor am I guilty of that—not, however, the gods in whom the city believes, but others, and that this is the charge against me, that they are others. Or whether you mean that I do not believe in gods at all, and that this is what I teach to others. —This is what I mean, that you do not believe in gods at all.

You are a strange fellow, Meletus. Why do you say this? Do I not believe, as other men do, that the sun and the moon are gods? —No, by Zeus, gentlemen of the jury, for he says that the sun is stone, and the moon earth.

My dear Meletus, do you think you are prosecuting Anaxagoras? Are you so contemptuous of the jury and think them so ignorant of letters as not to know that the books of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae are full of those theories, and further, that the young men learn from me what they can buy from time to time for a drachma, at most, in the bookshops, and ridicule Socrates if he pretends that these theories are his own, especially as they are so absurd? Is that, by Zeus, what you think of me, Meletus, that I do not believe that there are any gods? —That is what I say, that you do not believe in the gods at all.

You cannot be believed, Meletus, even, I think, by yourself. The man appears to me, gentlemen of the jury, highly insolent and uncontrolled. He seems to have made this deposition out of insolence, violence and youthful zeal. He is like one who composed a riddle and is trying it out: "Will the wise Socrates realize that I am jesting and contradicting myself, or shall I deceive him and others?" I think he contradicts himself in the affidavit, as if he said: "Socrates is guilty of not believing in gods but believing in gods," and surely that is the part of a jester!

Examine with me, gentlemen, how he appears to contradict himself, and you, Meletus, answer us. Remember, gentlemen, what I asked you when I began, not to create a disturbance if I proceed in my usual manner.
Does any man, Meletus, believe in human activities who does not believe in humans? Make him answer, and not again and again create a disturbance. Does any man who does not believe in horses believe in horsemen's activities? Or in flute-playing activities but not in flute-players? No, my good sir, no man could. If you are not willing to answer, I will tell you and the jury. Answer the next question, however. Does any man believe in spiritual activities who does not believe in spirits?—No one.

Thank you for answering, if reluctantly, when these gentlemen made you. Now you say that I believe in spiritual things and teach about them, whether new or old, but at any rate spiritual things according to what you say, and to this you have sworn in your deposition. But if I believe in spiritual things I must quite inevitably believe in spirits. Is that not so? It is indeed. I shall assume that you agree, as you do not answer. Do we not believe spirits to be either gods or the children of gods? Yes or no?—Of course.

Then since I do believe in spirits, as you admit, if spirits are gods, this is what I mean when I say you speak in riddles and in jest, as you state that I do not believe in gods and then again that I do, since I do believe in spirits. If on the other hand the spirits are children of the gods, bastard children of the gods by nymphs or some other mothers, as they are said to be, what man would believe children of the gods to exist, but not gods? That would be just as absurd as to believe the young of horses and asses, namely mules, to exist, but not to believe in the existence of horses and asses. You must have made this deposition, Meletus, either to test us or because you were at a loss to find any true wrongdoing of which to accuse me. There is no way in which you could persuade anyone of even small intelligence that it is possible for one and the same man to believe in spiritual but not also in divine things, and then again for that same man to believe neither in spirits nor in gods nor in heroes.

I do not think, men of Athens, that it requires a prolonged defense to prove that I am not guilty of the charges in Meletus' deposition, but this is sufficient. On the other hand, you know that what I said earlier is true, that I am very unpopular with many people. This will be my undoing, if I am undone, not Meletus or Anytus but the slanders and envy of many people. This has destroyed many other good men and will, I think, continue to do so. There is no danger that it will stop at me.

Someone might say: "Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have followed the kind of occupation that has led to your being now in danger of death?" However, I should be right to reply to him: "You are wrong, sir, if you think that a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man." According to your view, all the heroes who died at Troy were inferior people, especially the son of Thetis who was so contemptuous of danger compared with disgrace. When he was eager to kill Hector, his goddess mother warned him, as I believe, in some such words as these: "My child, if you avenge the death of your comrade, Patroclus, and you kill Hector, you will die yourself, for your death is to follow immediately after Hector's." Hearing this, he despised death and danger and was much more afraid to live a coward who did not avenge his friends. "Let me die at once," he said, "when once I have given the wrongdoer his deserts, rather than remain here, a laughing-stock by the curved ships, a burden upon the earth." Do you think he gave thought to death and danger?

This is the truth of the matter, men of Athens: wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace. It would have been a dreadful way to behave, gentlemen of the jury, if, at Potidaea, Amphipolis and Delium, I had, at

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3i.e., Achilles. See Iliad xviii.94 ff.
the risk of death, like anyone else, remained at my post where those you had elected to command had ordered me, and then, when the god ordered me, as I thought and believed, to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others, I had abandoned my post for fear of death or anything else. That would have been a dreadful thing, and then I might truly have justly been brought here for not believing that there are gods, disobeying the oracle, fearing death, and thinking I was wise when I was not. To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this that as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have. I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man. I shall never fear or avoid things of which I do not know, whether they may not be good rather than things that I know to be bad. Even if you acquitted me now and did not believe Anytus, who said to you that either I should not have been brought here in the first place, or that now I am here, you cannot avoid executing me, for if I should be acquitted, your sons would practice the teachings of Socrates and all be thoroughly corrupted; if you said to me in this regard: "Socrates, we do not believe Anytus now; we acquit you, but only on condition that you spend no more time on this investigation and do not practice philosophy, and if you are caught doing so you will die;" if, as I say, you were to acquit me on those terms, I would say to you: "Men of Athens, I am grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to anyone of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth or the best possible state of your soul?" Then, if one of you disputes this and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once or leave him, but I shall question him, examine him and test him, and if I do not think he has attained the goodness that he says he has, I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things. I shall treat in this way anyone I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger, and more so the citizens because you are more kindred to me. Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively."\(^4\)

Now if by saying this I corrupt the young, this advice must be harmful, but if anyone says that I give different advice, he is talking nonsense. On this point I would say to you, gentlemen of the jury: "Whether you believe Anytus or not, whether you acquit me or not, do so on the understanding that this is my course of action, even if I am to face death many times." Do not create a disturbance, gentlemen, but abide by my request not to cry out at what I say but to listen, for I think it will be to your advantage to listen, and I am about to say other things at which you will perhaps cry out. By no means do this. Be sure that if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you

\(^4\)Alternatively, this sentence could be translated: “Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence brings about wealth and all other public and private blessings for men.”
will not harm me more than yourselves. Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way; he could not harm me, for I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse; certainly he might kill me, or perhaps banish or disfranchise me, which he and maybe others think to be great harm, but I do not think so. I think he is doing himself much greater harm doing what he is doing now, attempting to have a man executed unjustly. Indeed, gentlemen of the jury, I am far from making a defense now on my own behalf, as might be thought, but on yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god's gift to you by condemning me; for if you kill me you will not easily find another like me. I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company.

Another such man will not easily come to be among you, gentlemen, and if you believe me you will spare me. You might easily be annoyed with me as people are when they are aroused from a doze, and strike out at me; if convinced by Anytus you could easily kill me, and then you could sleep on for the rest of your days, unless the god, in his care for you, sent you someone else. That I am the kind of person to be a gift of the god to the city you might realize from the fact that it does not seem like human nature for me to have neglected all my own affairs and to have tolerated this neglect now for so many years while I was always concerned with you, approaching each one of you like a father or an elder brother to persuade you to care for virtue. Now if I profited from this by charging a fee for my advice, there would be some sense to it, but you can see for yourselves that, for all their shameless accusations, my accusers have not been able in their impudence to bring forward a witness to say that I have ever received a fee or ever asked for one. I, on the other hand, have a convincing witness that I speak the truth, my poverty.

It may seem strange that while I go around and give this advice privately and interfere in private affairs, I do not venture to go to the assembly and there advise the city. You have heard me give the reason for this in many places. I have a divine or spiritual sign which Meletus has ridiculed in his deposition. This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything. This is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs, and I think it was quite right to prevent me. Be sure, gentlemen of the jury, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth; no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.

I shall give you great proofs of this, not words but what you esteem, deeds. Listen to what happened to me, that you may know that I will not yield to any man contrary to what is right, for fear of death, even if I should die at once for not yielding. The things I shall tell you are commonplace and smack of the lawcourts, but they are true. I have never held any other office in the city, but I served as a member of the Council, and our tribe Antiochis was presiding at the time when you wanted to try as a body the ten generals who had failed to pick up the survivors of the naval battle. This was illegal, as you all recognized later. I was the only member of the presiding committee to oppose your doing something contrary to the laws, and I voted against it. The orators

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5This was the battle of Arginusae (south of Lesbos) in 406 BC, the last Athenian victory of the war. A violent storm prevented the Athenians from rescuing the survivors. For this they were tried in Athens and sentenced to death by the assembly.
were ready to prosecute me and take me away; and your shouts were egging them on, but I thought I should run any risk on the side of law and justice rather than join you, for fear of prison or death, when you were engaged in an unjust course.

This happened when the city was still a democracy. When the oligarchy was established, the Thirty\(^6\) summoned me to the Hall, along with four others, and ordered us to bring Leon from Salamis, that he might be executed. They gave many such orders to many people, in order to implicate as many as possible in their guilt. Then I showed again, not in words but in action, that, if it were not rather vulgar to say so, death is something I couldn't care less about, but that my whole concern is not to do anything unjust or impious. That government, powerful as it was, did not frighten me into any wrongdoing. When we left the Hall, the other four went to Salamis and brought in Leon, but I went home. I might have been put to death for this, had not the government fallen shortly afterwards. There are many who will witness to these events.

Do you think I would have survived all these years if I were engaged in public affairs and, acting as a good man must, came to the help of justice and considered this the most important thing? Far from it, gentlemen of the jury, nor would any other man. Throughout my life, in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life. I have never come to an agreement with anyone to act unjustly, neither with anyone else nor with anyone of those who they slanderously say are my pupils. I have never been anyone's teacher. If anyone, young or old, desires to listen to me when I am talking and dealing with my own concerns, I have never begrudged this to anyone, but I do not converse when I receive a fee and not when I do not. I am equally ready to question the rich and the poor if anyone is willing to answer my questions and listen to what I say. And I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so. If anyone says that he has learned anything from me, or that he heard anything privately that the others did not hear, be assured that he is not telling the truth.

Why then do some people enjoy spending considerable time in my company? You have heard why, men of Athens, I have told you the whole truth. They enjoy hearing those being questioned who think they are wise, but are not. And this is not unpleasant. To do this has, as I say, been enjoined upon me by the god, by means of oracles and dreams, and in every other way that a divine manifestation has ever ordered a man to do anything. This is true, gentlemen, and can easily be established.

If I corrupt some young men and have corrupted others, then surely some of them who have grown older and realized that I gave them bad advice when they were young should now themselves come up here to accuse me and avenge themselves. If they were unwilling to do so themselves, then some of their kindred, their fathers or brothers or other relations should recall it now if their family had been harmed by me. I see many of these present here, first Crito, my contemporary and fellow demesman, the father of Critoboulos here; next Lysanias of Sphettus, the father of Aeschines here; also Antiphon the Cephisian, the father of Epigenes; and others whose brothers spent their time in this way; Nicostratus, the son of Theozotides, brother of Theodotus, and Theodotus has died so he could not influence him; Paralius here, son of Demodocus, whose brother was Theages; there is Adeimantus, son of Ariston, brother of Plato here; Aeantodorus, brother of Apollodorus here.

I could mention many others, some one of whom surely Meletus should have brought in as witness in his own speech. If he forgot to do so, then let him do it now; I will yield time if he has

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\(^6\)This was the harsh oligarchy that was set up after the final defeat of Athens in 404 BC, and that ruled Athens for some nine months in 404-3 before the democracy was restored.
anything of the kind to say. You will find quite the contrary, gentlemen. These men are all ready
to come to the help of the corruptor, the man who has harmed their kindred, as Meletus and Anytus
say. Now those who were corrupted might well have reason to help me, but the uncorrupted, their
kindred who are older men, have no reason to help me except the right and proper one, that they
know that Meletus is lying and that I am telling the truth.

Very well, gentlemen. This, and maybe other similar things, is what I have to say in my
defense. Perhaps one of you might be angry as he recalls that when he himself stood trial on a less
dangerous charge, he begged and implored the jury with many tears, that he brought his children
and many of his friends and family into court to arouse as much pity as he could, but that I do none
of these things, even though I may seem to be running the ultimate risk. Thinking of this, he might
feel resentful toward me and, angry about this, cast his vote in anger. If there is such a one among
you—I do not deem there is, but if there is—I think it would be right to say in reply: My good sir,
I too have a household and, in Homer's phrase, I am not born "from oak or rock" but from men, so
that I have a family, indeed three sons, men of Athens, of whom one is an adolescent while two
are children. Nevertheless, I will not beg you to acquit me by bringing them here. Why do I do
none of these things? Not through arrogance, gentlemen, nor through lack of respect for you.
Whether I am brave in the face of death is another matter, but with regard to my reputation and
yours and that of the whole city, it does not seem right to me to do these things, especially at my
age and with my reputation. For it is generally believed, whether it be true or false, that in certain
respects Socrates is superior to the majority of men. Now if those of you who are considered
superior, be it in wisdom or courage or whatever other virtue makes them so, are seen behaving
like that, it would be a disgrace. Yet I have often seen them do this sort of thing when standing
trial, men who are thought to be somebody, doing amazing things as if they thought it a terrible
thing to die, and as if they were to be immortal if you did not execute them. I think these men bring
shame upon the city so that a stranger, too, would assume that those who are outstanding in virtue
among the Athenians, whom they themselves select from themselves to fill offices of state and
receive other honors, are in no way better than women. You should not act like that, gentlemen of
the jury, those of you who have any reputation at all, and if we do, you should not allow it. You
should make it very clear that you will more readily convict a man who performs these pitiful
dramatics in court and so makes the city a laughingstock, than a man who keeps quiet.

Quite apart from the question of reputation, gentlemen, I do not think it right to supplicate the
jury and to be acquitted because of this but to teach and persuade them. It is not the purpose of a
juryman's office to give justice as a favor to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according
to law, and this he has sworn to do. We should not accustom you to perjure yourselves, nor should
you make a habit of it. This is irreverent conduct for either of us.

Do not deem it right for me, gentlemen of the jury, that I should act towards you in a way that
I do not consider to be good or just or pious, especially, by Zeus, as I am being prosecuted by
Meletus here for impiety; clearly, if I convinced you by my supplication to do violence to your
oath of office, I would be teaching you not to believe that there are gods, and my defense would
convict me of not believing in them. This is far from being the case, gentlemen, for I do believe in
them as none of my accusers do. I leave it to you and the god to judge me in the way that will be
best for me and for you.

[The jury now gives its verdict of guilty, and Meletus asks for the penalty of death.]
There are many other reasons for my not being angry with you for convicting me, men of Athens, and what happened was not unexpected. I am much more surprised at the number of votes cast on each side, for I did not think the decision would be by so few votes but by a great many. As it is, a switch of only thirty votes would have acquitted me. I think myself that I have been cleared on Meletus' charges, and not only this, but it is clear to all that, if Anytus and Lycon had not joined him in accusing me, he would have been fined a thousand drachmas for not receiving a fifth of the votes.

He assesses the penalty at death. So be it. What counter-assessment should I propose to you, men of Athens? Clearly it should be a penalty I deserve, and what do I deserve to suffer or to pay because I have deliberately not led a quiet life but have neglected what occupies most people: wealth, household affairs, the position of general or public orator or the other offices, the political clubs and factions that exist in the city? I thought myself too honest to survive if I occupied myself with those things. I did not follow that path that would have made me of no use either to you or to myself, but I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit, by trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible, not to care for the city's possessions more than for the city itself, and to care for other things in the same way. What do I deserve for being such a man? Some good, gentlemen of the jury, if I must truly make an assessment according to my deserts, and something suitable. What is suitable for a poor benefactor who needs leisure to exhort you? Nothing is more suitable, gentlemen, than for such a man to be fed in the Prytaneum, much more suitable for him than for anyone of you who has won a victory at Olympia with a pair or a team of horses. The Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy; I make you be happy. Besides, he does not need food, but I do. So if I must make a just assessment of what I deserve, I assess it at this: free meals in the Prytaneum.

When I say this you may think, as when I spoke of appeals to pity and entreaties, that I speak arrogantly, but that is not the case, men of Athens; rather it is like this: I am convinced that I never willingly wrong anyone, but I am not convincing you of this, for we have talked together but a short time. If it were the law with us, as it is elsewhere, that a trial for life should not last one but many days, you would be convinced, but now it is not easy to dispel great slanders in a short time. Since I am convinced that I wrong no one, I am not likely to wrong myself, to say that I deserve some evil and to make some such assessment against myself. What should I fear? That I should suffer the penalty Meletus has assessed against me, of which I say I do not know whether it is good or bad? Am I then to choose in preference to this something that I know very well to be an evil and assess the penalty at that? Imprisonment? Why should I live in prison, always subjected to the ruling magistrates, the Eleven? A fine, and imprisonment until I pay it? That would be the same thing for me, as I have no money. Exile? for perhaps you might accept that assessment.

I should have to be inordinately fond of life, gentlemen of the jury, to be so unreasonable as to suppose that other men will easily tolerate my company and conversation when you, my fellow citizens, have been unable to endure them, but found them a burden and resented them so that you are now seeking to get rid of them. Far from it, gentlemen. It would be a fine life at my age to be driven out of one city after another, for I know very well that wherever I go the young men will listen to my talk as they do here. If I drive them away, they will themselves persuade their elders to drive me out; if I do not drive them away, their fathers and relations will drive me out on their behalf.

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7The Prytaneum was the magistrates’ hall or town hall of Athens. Free meals at the Prytaneum was the reward given to the victorious Olympic athletes.
Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less.

What I say is true, gentlemen, but it is not easy to convince you. At the same time, I am not accustomed to think that I deserve any penalty. If I had money, I would assess the penalty at the amount I could pay, for that would not hurt me, but I have none, unless you are willing to set the penalty at the amount I can pay, and perhaps I could pay you one mina of silver. So that is my assessment.

Plato here, gentlemen of the jury, and Crito and Critobulus and Apollodorus bid me put the penalty at thirty minae, and they will stand surety for the money. Well then, that is my assessment, and they will be sufficient guarantee of payment.

[The jury now votes again and sentences Socrates to death.]

It is for the sake of a short time, gentlemen of the jury, that you will acquire the reputation and the guilt, in the eyes of those who want to denigrate the city, of having killed Socrates, a wise man, for they who want to revile you will say that I am wise even if I am not. If you had waited but a little while, this would have happened of its own accord. You see my age, that I am already advanced in years and close to death. I am saying this not to all of you but to those who condemned me to death, and to these same jurors I say: Perhaps you think that I was convicted for lack of such words as might have convinced you, if I thought I should say or do all I could to avoid my sentence. Far from it. I was convicted because I lacked not words but boldness and shamelessness and the willingness to say to you what you would most gladly have heard from me, laments and tears and my saying and doing many things that I say are unworthy of me but that you are accustomed to hear from others. I did not think then that the danger I ran should make me do anything mean, nor do I now regret the nature of my defense. I would much rather die after this kind of defense than live after making the other kind. Neither I nor any other man should, on trial or in war, contrive to avoid death at any cost. Indeed it is often obvious in battle that one could escape death by throwing away one's weapons and by turning to supplicate one's pursuers, and there are many ways to avoid death in every kind of danger if one will venture to do or say anything to avoid it. It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen; it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death. Slow and elderly as I am, I have been caught by the slower pursuer, whereas my accusers, being clever and sharp, have been caught by the quicker, wickedness. I leave you now, condemned to death by you, but they are condemned by truth to wickedness and injustice. So I maintain my assessment, and they maintain theirs. This perhaps had to happen, and I think it is as it should be.

Now I want to prophesy to those who convicted me, for I am at the point when men prophesy most, when they are about to die. I say gentlemen, to those who voted to kill me, that vengeance will come upon you immediately after my death, a vengeance much harder to bear than that which you took in killing me. You did this in the belief that you would avoid giving an account of your

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8One mina was the equivalent of 100 drachmas. In the late fifth century, one drachma was the standard daily wage of a laborer. A mina, then, was a considerable sum.
life, but I maintain that quite the opposite will happen to you. There will be more people to test you, whom I now held back, but you did not notice it. They will be more difficult to deal with as they will be younger and you will resent them more. You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way. To escape such tests is neither possible nor good, but it is best and easiest not to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible. With this prophecy to you who convicted me, I part from you.

I should be glad to discuss what has happened with those who voted for my acquittal during the time that the officers of the court are busy and I do not yet have to depart to my death. So, gentlemen, stay with me awhile, for nothing prevents us from talking to each other while it is allowed. To you, as being my friends, I want to show the meaning of what has occurred. A surprising thing has happened to me, jurymen—you I would rightly call jurymen. At all previous times my familiar prophetic power, my spiritual manifestation, frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong, but now that, as you can see for yourselves, I was faced with what one might think, and what is generally thought to be, the worst of evils, my divine sign has not opposed me, either when I left home at dawn, or when I came into court, or at any time that I was about to say something during my speech. Yet in other talks it often held me back in the middle of my speaking, but now it has opposed no word or deed of mine. What do I think is the reason for this? I will tell you. What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. I have convincing proof of this, for it is impossible that my familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right.

Let us reflect in this way, too, that there is good hope that death is a blessing, for it is one of two things: either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place. If it is complete lack of perception, like a dreamless sleep, then death would be a great advantage. For I think that if one had to pick out that night during which a man slept soundly and did not dream, put beside it the other nights and days of his life, and then see how many days and nights had been better and more pleasant than that night, not only a private person but the great king would find them easy to count compared with the other days and nights. If death is like this I say it is an advantage, for all eternity would then seem to be no more than a single night. If, on the other hand, death is a change from here to another place, and what we are told is true and all who have died are there, what greater blessing could there be, gentlemen of the jury? If anyone arriving in Hades will have escaped from those who call themselves jurymen here, and will find those true jurymen who are said to sit in judgement there, Minos andRadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus and the other demi-gods who have been upright in their own life, would that be a poor kind of change? Again, what would one of you give to keep company with Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer? I am willing to die many times if that is true. It would be a wonderful way for me to spend my time whenever I met Palamedes and Ajax, the son of Telamon, and any other of the men of old who died through an unjust conviction, to compare my experience with theirs. I think it would be pleasant. Most important, I could spend my time testing and examining people there, as I do here, as to who among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not.

What would one not give, gentlemen of the jury, for the opportunity to examine the man who led the great expedition against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, and innumerable other men and women one could mention. It would be an extraordinary happiness to talk with them, to keep company with them and examine them. In any case, they would certainly not put one to death for
doing so. They are happier there than we are here in other respects, and for the rest of time they are deathless, if indeed what we are told is true.

You too must be of good hope as regards death, gentlemen of the jury, and keep this one truth in mind, that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods. What has happened to me now has not happened of itself, but it is clear to me that it was better for me to die now and to escape from trouble. That is why my divine sign did not oppose me at any point. So I am certainly not angry with those who convicted me, or with my accusers. Of course that was not their purpose when they accused and convicted me, but they thought they were hurting me, and for this they deserve blame. This much I ask from them: when my sons grow up, avenge yourselves by causing them the same kind of grief that I caused you, if you think they care for money or anything else more than they care for virtue, or if they think they are somebody when they are nobody. Reproach them as I reproach you, that they do not care for the right things and think they are worthy when they are not worthy of anything. If you do this, I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also.

Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god.
The Allegory of the Cave

Plato


Plato (429-347, B.C.E.) is a foundational figure in Western intellectual history. After the death of Socrates, his teacher and mentor, Plato founded the Academy, a school that would remain open for hundreds of years and ultimately be the source of the word ‘academic’ and related terms. This allegory, or extended metaphor, taken from Book VII of his most important work, the Republic, presents metaphorical imagery central to human thought.

[A conversation between Socrates and Glaucon. Socrates speaks first.]

Next, I said, compare the effect of education and of the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this: Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They’ve been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the firs. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets.

I’m imagining it.

Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it – statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you’d expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent.

It’s a strange image you’re describing, and strange prisoners.

They’re like us. Do you suppose, first of all, that these prisoners see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them?

How could they, if they have to keep their heads motionless throughout life?

What about the things being carried along the wall? Isn’t the same true of them?

Of course.

And if they could talk to one another, don’t you think they’d suppose that the names they used applied to the thing they see passing before them?

They’d have to.

And what if their prison also had an echo from the wall facing them? Don’t you think they’d believe that the shadows passing in front of them were talking whenever one of the carriers passing along the wall was doing so?

I certainly do.

Then the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts.

They must surely believe that.

Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like, if something like this came to pass. When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he’d be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he’d seen before. What do you think he’d say, if we
told him that what he’d seen before was inconsequential but that now – because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are more – he sees more correctly? Or, to put it another way, if we pointed to each of the things passing by, asked him what each of them is, and compelled him to answer, don’t you think he’d be at a loss and that he’d believe that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown?

Much truer.

And if someone compelled him to look at the light itself, wouldn’t his eyes hurt, and wouldn’t he turn around and flee towards the things he’s able to see, believing that they’re really clearer than the ones he’s being shown?

He would.

And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn’t let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight, would he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? And when he came into the light, with the sun filling his eyes, would he be unable to see a single one of the things now said to be true?

He would be unable to see them, at least at first.

I suppose, then, that he’d need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above. At first, he’d see shadows most easily, then images of men and other things in water, then the things themselves. Of these, he’d be able to study the things in the sky and the sky itself more easily at night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than during the day, looking at the sun and the light of the sun.

Of course.

Finally, I suppose, he’d be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place, and be able to study it.

Necessarily so.

And at this point he would infer and conclude that the sun provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see.

It’s clear that would be his next step.

What about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, his fellow prisoners, and what passed for wisdom there? Don’t you think that he’d count himself happy for the change and pity the others?

Certainly.

And if there had been any honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by and who remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously, and who could this best divine the future, do you think that our man would desire these rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power? Instead, wouldn’t he feel, with Homer, that he’d much prefer to “work the earth as a serf to another, one without possessions,” and go through any sufferings, rather than share their opinions and live as they do?

I suppose he would rather suffer anything than live like that.

Consider this too. If this man went down into the cave again and sat down in his same seat, wouldn’t his eyes – coming suddenly out of the sun like that – be filled with darkness.

They certainly would.

And before his eyes had recovered – and the adjustment would not be quick – while his vision was still dim, if he had to compete again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, would he invite ridicule? Wouldn’t it be said of him that he’d returned from his upward journey
with his eyesight ruined and that it isn’t worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And, as for anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, would they kill him?

They certainly would.

This whole image, Glaucon, must be fitted together with what we said before. The visible realm should be linked to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you’ll grasp what I hope to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it’s true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it: In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.

I have the same thought, at least as far as I’m able.

Come, then, share with me this thought also: It isn’t surprising that the ones who get to this point are unwilling to occupy themselves with human affairs and that their souls are always pressing upwards, eager to spend their time above, for, after all, this is surely what we’d expect, if indeed things fit the image I described before.

It is.

What about what happens when someone turns from divine study to the evils of human life? Do you think it’s surprising, since his sight is still dim, and he hasn’t yet become accustomed to the darkness around him, compelled, either in the courts or elsewhere, to contend about the shadows of justice or the statutes of which they are the shadows and to dispute about the way these things are understood by people who have never seen justice itself?

That’s not surprising at all.

No it isn’t. But anyone with any understanding would remember that the eyes may be confused in two ways and from two causes, namely, when they’ve come from the light into the darkness and when they’ve come from the darkness into the light. Realizing that the same applies to the soul, when someone sees a soul disturbed and unable to see something, he won’t laugh mindlessly, but he’ll take into consideration whether it has come from a brighter life and is dimmed through not having yet become accustomed to the dark or whether it has come from greater ignorance into greater light and is dazzled by the increased brilliance. Then he’ll declare the first soul happy in its experience and life, and he’ll pity the latter – but even if he chose to make fun of it, at least he’d be less ridiculous than if he laughed at a soul that has come from the light above.

What you say is very reasonable.

If that’s true, then here’s what we must think about these matters: Education isn’t what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes.

They do say that.

But our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good. Isn’t that right?

Yes.
Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn’t the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn’t turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.

So it seems.

Now, it looks as though the other so-called virtues of the soul are akin to those of the body, for they really aren’t there beforehand but are added later by habit and practice. However, the virtue of reason seems to belong above all to something more divine, which never loses it power but is either useful and beneficial or useless and harmful, depending on the way it is turned. Or have you never noticed this about people who are said to be vicious but clever, how keen the vision of their little soul is and how sharply it distinguishes the things it is turned towards? This shows that its sight isn’t inferior but rather is forced to serve evil ends, so that the sharper it sees, the more evil it accomplishes.

Absolutely.

However, if a nature of this sort had been hammered at from childhood and freed from the bonds of kinship with becoming, which have been fastened to it by feasting, greed, and other such pleasures and which, like leaden weights, pull its vision downwards – if, being rid of these, it turned to look at true things, then I say that the same soul of the same person would see these most sharply, just as it now does the things it is presently turned towards.

Probably so.

And what about the uneducated who have no experience of truth? Isn’t it likely – indeed, doesn’t it follow necessarily from what was said before – that they will never adequately govern a city? But neither would those who’ve been allowed to spend their whole lives being educated. The former would fail because they don’t have a single goal at which all their actions, public and private, inevitably aim; the latter would fail because they’d refuse to act, thinking that they had settled while still alive in the faraway Isled of the Blessed.

That’s true.

It is our task as founders, then, to compel the best natures to reach the study we said before is the most important, namely, to make the ascent and see the good. But when they’ve make it and looked sufficiently, we mustn’t allow them to do what they’re allowed to do today.

What’s that?

To stay there and refuse to go down again to the prisoners in the cave and share their labors and honors, whether they are of less worth or of greater.

Then are we to do them an injustice by making them live a worse life when they could live a better one?

You are forgetting again that it isn’t the law’s concern to make any one class in the city outstandingly happy but to contrive to spread happiness throughout the city by bringing the citizens into harmony with each other through persuasion or compulsion and by making them share with each other the benefits that each class can confer on the community. The law produces such people in the city, not in order to allow them to turn in whatever direction they want, but to make use of them to bind the city together.

That’s true, I had forgotten.

Observe, then, Glaucon, that we won’t be doing an injustice to those who’ve become philosophers in our city and that what we’ll say to them, when we compel them to guard and care for the others, will be just. We’ll say: “When people like you come to be in other cities, they’re justified in not sharing in their city’s labors, for they’ve grown there spontaneously, against the
will of the constitution. And what grows of its own accord and owes no debt for its upbringing has justice on its side when it isn’t keen to pay anyone for that upbringing. But we’ve made you kings in our city and leaders of the swarm, as it were, both for yourselves and for the rest of the city. You’re better and more completely educated than the others and grow accustomed to seeing in the dark. When you are used to it, you’ll see vastly better than the people there. And because you’ve seen the truth about fine, just, and good things, you’ll know each image for what it is and also that of which it is the image. Thus, for you and for us, the city will be governed, not like the majority of cities nowadays, by people who fight over shadows and struggle against one another in order to rule – as if that were a great good – but by people who are awake rather than dreaming, for the truth is surely this: A City whose prospective rulers are least eager to rule must of necessity be most free from civil war, whereas a city with the opposite kind of rulers is governed in the opposite way.”

Absolutely.

Then do you think that those we’ve nurtured will disobey us and refuse to share the labors of the city, each in turn, while living the greater part of their time with one another in the pure realm?

It isn’t possible, for we’ll be giving just orders to just people. Each of them will certainly go to rule as to something compulsory, however, which is exactly the opposite of what’s done by those who now rule in each city.

This is how it is. If you can find a way of life that’s better than ruling for the prospective rulers, your well-governed city will become a possibility, for only in it will the truly rich rule – not those who are rich in gold but those who are rich in the wealth that the happy must have, namely, a good and rational life. But if beggars hungry for private good go into public life, thinking that the good is there for the seizing, then the well-governed city is impossible, for then ruling is something fought over, and this civil and domestic war destroys these people and the rest of the city as well.

That’s very true.

Can you name any life that despise political rule besides that of the true philosopher?

No, by god, I can’t.

But surely it is those who are not lovers of ruling who must rule, for if they don’t, the lovers of it, who are rivals, will fight over it.

Of course.

Then who will you compel to become guardians of the city, if not those who have the best understanding of what matters for good government and who have other honors than political ones, and a better life as well?

No one.
Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here? A Word to the Incoming Class

Mark Edmundson


Mark Edmundson (1952-) currently serves as University Professor at the University of Virginia. With a specialty in 19th century British and American poetry, he earned a Ph.D. in English from Yale University in 1985. He is the author of a dozen books on topics as diverse as Freud, the relationship between literature and philosophy, Gothic culture, rock & roll, and even American football. Most of his books and speaking engagements, however, focus on the topic for which he is most known: articulating and defending the value of traditional liberal learning in American higher education.

WELCOME AND CONGRATULATIONS: Getting to the first day of college is a major achievement. You’re to be commended, and not just you, but the parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts who helped get you here.

It’s been said that raising a child effectively takes a village: Well, as you may have noticed, our American village is not in very good shape. We’ve got guns, drugs, wars, fanatical religions, a slime-based popular culture, and some politicians who—a little restraint here—aren’t what they might be. Merely to survive in this American village and to win a place in the entering class has taken a lot of grit on your part. So, yes, congratulations to all.

You now may think that you’ve about got it made. Amid the impressive college buildings, in company with a high-powered faculty, surrounded by the best of your generation, all you need is to keep doing what you’ve done before: Work hard, get good grades, listen to your teachers, get along with the people around you, and you’ll emerge in four years as an educated young man or woman. Ready for life.

Do not believe it. It is not true. If you want to get a real education in America, you’re going to have to fight—and I don’t mean just fight against the drugs and the violence and against the slime-based culture that is still going to surround you. I mean something a little more disturbing. To get an education, you’re probably going to have to fight against the institution that you find yourself in—no matter how prestigious it may be. (In fact, the more prestigious the school, the more you’ll probably have to push.) You can get a terrific education in America now—there are astonishing opportunities at almost every college—but the education will not be presented to you wrapped and bowed. To get it, you’ll need to struggle and strive, to be strong, and occasionally even to piss off some admirable people.

I came to college with few resources, but one of them was an understanding, however crude, of how I might use my opportunities there. This I began to develop because of my father, who had never been to college—in fact, he’d barely gotten out of high school. One night after dinner, he and I were sitting in our kitchen at 58 Clewley Road in Medford, Massachusetts, hatching plans about the rest of my life. I was about to go off to college, a feat no one in my family had accomplished in living memory. “I think I might want to be prelaw,” I told my father. I had no idea what being prelaw was. My father compressed his brow and blew twin streams of smoke, dragonlike, from his magnificent nose. “Do you want to be a lawyer?” he asked. My father had some experience with lawyers, and with policemen, too; he was not well disposed toward either. “I’m not really sure,” I told him, “but lawyers make pretty good money, right?”
My father detonated. (That was not uncommon. He detonated a lot.) He told me that I was going to go to college only once, and that while I was there I had better study what I wanted. He said that when rich kids went to school, they majored in the subjects that interested them, and that my younger brother Philip and I were as good as any rich kids. (We were rich kids minus the money.) Wasn’t I interested in literature? I confessed that I was. Then I had better study literature, unless I had inside information to the effect that reincarnation wasn’t just hype, and I’d be able to attend college thirty or forty times. If I had such info, prelaw would be fine, and maybe even a tour through invertebrate biology could also be tossed in. But until I had the reincarnation stuff from a solid source, I better get to work and pick out some English classes from the course catalog.

“How about the science requirements?” I asked.

“Take ’em later,” he said. “You never know.”

My father, Wright Auckenhead Edmundson, Malden High School class of 1948 (by a hair), knew the score. What he told me that evening at the Clewley Road kitchen table was true in itself, and it also contains the germ of an idea about what a university education should be. But apparently almost everyone else—students, teachers, trustees, and parents—see the matter much differently. They have it wrong.

Education has one salient enemy in present-day America, and that enemy is education—university education in particular. To almost everyone, university education is a means to an end. For students, that end is a good job. Students want the credentials that will help them get ahead. They want the certificate that will grant them access to Wall Street, or entrance into law or medical or business school. And how can we blame them? America values power and money, big players with big bucks. When we raise our children, we tell them in multiple ways that what we want most for them is success—material success. To be poor in America is to be a failure. It’s to be without decent health care, without basic necessities, often without dignity. Then there are those backbreaking student loans: People leave school as servants, indentured to pay massive bills, so that first job better be a good one. Students come to college with the goal of a diploma in mind—what happens to them in between, especially in classrooms, is often of no deep and determining interest to them.

In college, life is elsewhere. Life is at parties, at clubs, in music, with friends, in sports. Life is what celebrities have. The idea that the courses you take should be the primary objective of going to college is tacitly considered absurd. In terms of their work, students live in the future and not the present; they live with their prospects for success. If universities stopped issuing credentials, half of the clients would be gone by tomorrow morning, with the remainder following fast behind.

The faculty, too, is often absent: Their real lives are also elsewhere. Like most of their students, they aim to get on. The work they are compelled to do to advance—get tenure, promotion, raises, outside offers—is, broadly speaking, scholarly work. No matter what anyone says, this work has precious little to do with the fundamentals of teaching. The proof is that virtually no undergraduate students can read and understand their professors’ scholarly publications. The public senses this disparity and so thinks of the professors’ work as being silly or beside the point. Some of it is. But the public also senses that because professors don’t pay full-bore attention to teaching, they don’t have to work very hard—they’ve created a massive feather bed for themselves and called it a university.

This is radically false. Ambitious professors, the ones who, like their students, want to get ahead in America, work furiously. Scholarship, even if pretentious and almost unreadable, is nonetheless labor-intense. One can slave for a year or two on a single article for publication in this or that refereed journal. These essays are honest: Their footnotes reflect real reading, real
assimilation, and real dedication. Shoddy work—in which the author cheats, cuts corners, copies from others—is quickly detected. The people who do the work have highly developed intellectual powers, and they push themselves hard to reach a certain standard. That the results have almost no practical relevance for students, the public, or even, frequently, other scholars is a central element in the tragicomedy that is often academia.

The students and the professors have made a deal: Neither of them has to throw himself heart and soul into what happens in the classroom. The students write their abstract, overintellectualized essays; the professors grade the students for their capacity to be abstract and overintellectual—and often genuinely smart. For their essays can be brilliant, in a chilly way; they can also be clipped from the Internet, and often are. Whatever the case, no one wants to invest too much in them—for life is elsewhere. The professor saves his energies for the profession, while the student saves his for friends, social life, volunteer work, making connections, and getting in position to clasp hands on the true grail, the first job.

No one in this picture is evil; no one is criminally irresponsible. It’s just that smart people are prone to look into matters to see how they might go about buttering their toast. Then they butter their toast.

As for the administrators, their relation to the students often seems based not on love but fear. Administrators fear bad publicity, scandal, and dissatisfaction on the part of their customers. More than anything else, though, they fear lawsuits. Throwing a student out of college for this or that piece of bad behavior is very difficult, almost impossible. The student will sue your eyes out. One kid I knew (and rather liked) threatened on his blog to mince his dear and esteemed professor (me) with a samurai sword for the crime of having taught a boring class. (The class was a little boring—I had a damn cold—but the punishment seemed a bit severe.) The dean of students laughed lightly when I suggested that this behavior might be grounds for sending the student on a brief vacation. I was, you might say, discomfited, and showed up to class for a while with my cell phone jiggered to dial 911 with one touch.

Still, this was small potatoes. Colleges are even leery of disciplining guys who have committed sexual assault, or assault plain and simple. Instead of being punished, these guys frequently stay around, strolling the quad and swilling the libations, an affront (and sometimes a terror) to their victims.

You’ll find that cheating is common as well. As far as I can discern, the student ethos goes like this: If the professor is so lazy that he gives the same test every year, it’s okay to go ahead and take advantage—you’ve got better things to do. The Internet is amok with services selling term papers, and those services exist, capitalism being what it is, because people purchase the papers—lots of them. Fraternity files bulge with old tests from a variety of courses. Periodically, the public gets exercised about this situation and there are articles in the national news. But then interest dwindles and matters go back to normal.

One of the reasons professors sometimes look the other way when they sense cheating is that it sends them into a world of sorrow. A friend of mine had the temerity to detect cheating on the part of a kid who was the nephew of a well-placed official in an Arab government complexly aligned with the U.S. Black limousines pulled up in front of his office and disgorged decorously suited negotiators. Did my pal fold? No, he’s not the type. But he did not enjoy the process.

What colleges generally want are well-rounded students, civic leaders, people who know what the system demands, how to keep matters light and not push too hard for an education or anything else; people who get their credentials and leave professors alone to do their brilliant work so they may rise and enhance the rankings of the university. Such students leave and become donors and
so, in their own turn, contribute immeasurably to the university’s standing. They’ve done a fine job skating on surfaces in high school—the best way to get an across-the-board outstanding record—and now they’re on campus to cut a few more figure eights.

In a culture where the major and determining values are monetary, what else could you do? How else would you live if not by getting all you can, succeeding all you can, making all you can?

The idea that a university education really should have no substantial content, should not be about what John Keats was disposed to call “Soul-making,” is one that you might think professors and university presidents would be discreet about. Not so. This view informed an address that Richard Brodhead gave to the senior class at Yale before he departed to become president of Duke. Brodhead, an impressive, articulate man, seems to take as his educational touchstone the Duke of Wellington’s precept that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. Brodhead suggests that the content of the course isn’t really what matters. In five years (or five months, or minutes), the student is likely to have forgotten how to do the problem sets and will only hazily recollect what happens in the ninth book of *Paradise Lost*. The legacy of their college years will be a legacy of difficulties overcome. When they face equally arduous tasks later in life, students will tap their old resources of determination, and they’ll win.

All right, there’s nothing wrong with this as far as it goes—after all, the student who writes a brilliant forty-page thesis in a hard week has learned more than a little about her inner resources. Maybe it will give her needed confidence in the future. But doesn’t the content of the courses matter at all?

On the evidence of this talk, no. Trying to figure out whether the stuff you’re reading is true or false and being open to having your life changed is a fraught, controversial activity. Doing so requires energy from the professor—which is better spent on other matters. This kind of perspective-altering teaching and learning can cause the things that administrators fear above all else: trouble, arguments, bad press, et cetera. After the kid-samurai episode, the chair of my department not unsympathetically suggested that this was the sort of incident that could happen when you brought a certain intensity to teaching. At the time I found this remark a tad detached, but maybe he was right.

So if you want an education, the odds aren’t with you: The professors are off doing what they call their own work; the other students, who’ve doped out the way the place runs, are busy leaving their professors alone and getting themselves in position for bright and shining futures; the student-services people are trying to keep everyone content, offering plenty of entertainment and building another state-of-the-art workout facility every few months. The development office is already scanning you for future donations.

So why make trouble? Why not just go along? Let the profs roam free in the realms of pure thought, let yourselves party in the realms of impure pleasure, and let the student-services gang assert fewer prohibitions and newer delights for you. You’ll get a good job, you’ll have plenty of friends, you’ll have a driveway of your own.

You’ll also, if my father and I are right, be truly and righteously screwed. The reason for this is simple. The quest at the center of a liberal arts education is not a luxury quest; it’s a necessity quest. If you do not undertake it, you risk leading a life of desperation—maybe quiet; maybe, in time, very loud—and I am not exaggerating. For you risk trying to be someone other than who you are, which, in the long run, is killing.

By the time you come to college, you will have been told who you are numberless times. Your parents and friends, your teachers, your counselors, your priests and rabbis and ministers and imams have all had their say. They’ve let you know how they size you up, and they’ve let you
know what they think you should value. They’ve given you a sharp and protracted taste of what they feel is good and bad, right and wrong. Much is on their side. They have confronted you with scriptures—holy books that, whatever their actual provenance, have given people what they feel to be wisdom for thousands of years. They’ve given you family traditions—you’ve learned the ways of your tribe and community. And, too, you’ve been tested, probed, looked at up and down and through. The coach knows what your athletic prospects are, the guidance office has a sheaf of test scores that relegate you to this or that ability quadrant, and your teachers have got you pegged. You are, as Foucault might say, the intersection of many evaluative and potentially determining discourses: You, boy, you, girl, have been made.

And—contra Foucault—that’s not so bad. Embedded in all of the major religions are profound truths. Schopenhauer, who despised belief in transcendent things, nonetheless taught Christianity to be of inexpressible worth. He couldn’t believe in the divinity of Jesus or in the afterlife, but to Schopenhauer, a deep pessimist, a religion that had as its central emblem the figure of a man being tortured on a cross couldn’t be entirely misleading. To the Christian, Schopenhauer said, pain was at the center of the understanding of life, and that was just as it should be.

One does not need to be as harsh as Schopenhauer to understand the use of religion, even if one does not believe in an otherworldly God. And all those teachers and counselors and friends—and the prognosticating uncles, the dithering aunts, the fathers and mothers with their hopes for your fulfillment, or their fulfillment in you—should not necessarily be cast aside or ignored. Families have their wisdom. The question “Who do they think you are at home?” is never an idle one.

The major conservative thinkers have always been very serious about what goes by the name of common sense. Edmund Burke saw common sense as a loosely made but often profound collective work in which humanity deposited its hard-earned wisdom—the precipitate of joy and tears—over time. You have been raised in proximity to common sense, if you’ve been raised at all, and common sense is something to respect, though not quite—peace unto the formidable Burke—to revere.

You may be all that the good people who raised you say you are; you may want all they have shown you is worth wanting; you may be someone who is truly your father’s son or your mother’s daughter. But then again, you may not be.

For the power that is in you, as Emerson suggested, may be new in nature. You may not be the person that your parents take you to be. And—this thought is both more exciting and more dangerous—you may not be the person that you take yourself to be, either. You may not have read yourself aright, and college is the place where you can find out whether you have or not. The reason to read Blake and Dickinson and Freud and Dickens is not to become more cultivated or more articulate or to be someone who, at a cocktail party, is never embarrassed (or can embarrass others). The best reason to read them is to see if they know you better than you know yourself. You may find your own suppressed and rejected thoughts following back to you with an “alienated majesty.” Reading the great writers, you may have the experience Longinus associated with the sublime: You feel that you have actually created the text yourself. For somehow your predecessors are more yourself than you are.

This was my own experience reading the two writers who have influenced me the most, Sigmund Freud and Ralph Waldo Emerson. They gave words to thoughts and feelings that I had never been able to render myself. They shone a light onto the world, and what they saw, suddenly I saw, too. From Emerson I learned to trust my own thoughts, to trust them even when every voice seems to be on the other side. I need the wherewithal, as Emerson did, to say what’s on my mind.
and to take the inevitable hits. Much more I learned from the sage—about character, about loss, about joy, about writing and its secret sources, but Emerson most centrally preaches the gospel of self-reliance, and that is what I have tried most to take from him. I continue to hold in mind one of Emerson’s most memorable passages: “Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.”

Emerson’s greatness lies not only in showing you how powerful names and customs can be, but also in demonstrating how exhilarating it is to buck them. When he came to Harvard to talk about religion, he shocked the professors and students by challenging the divinity of Jesus and the truth of his miracles. He wasn’t invited back for decades.

From Freud I found a great deal to ponder as well. I don’t mean Freud the aspiring scientist, but the Freud who was a speculative essayist and interpreter of the human condition like Emerson. Freud challenges nearly every significant human ideal. He goes after religion. He says that it comes down to the longing for the father. He goes after love. He calls it “the overestimation of the erotic object.” He attacks our desire for charismatic popular leaders. We’re drawn to them because we hunger for absolute authority. He declares that dreams don’t predict the future and that there’s nothing benevolent about them. They’re disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes.

Freud has something challenging and provoking to say about virtually every human aspiration. I learned that if I wanted to affirm any consequential ideal, I had to talk my way past Freud. He was—and is—a perpetual challenge and goad.

Never has there been a more shrewd and imaginative cartographer of the psyche. His separation of the self into three parts, and his sense of the fraught, anxious, but often negotiable relations among them (negotiable when you come to the game with a Freudian knowledge), does a great deal to help one navigate experience. (Though sometimes—and I owe this to Emerson—it seems right to let the psyche fall into civil war, accepting barrage of anxiety and grief for this or that good reason.)

The battle is to make such writers one’s own, to winnow them out and to find their essential truths. We need to see where they fall short and where they exceed the mark, and then to develop them a little, as the ideas themselves, one comes to see, actually developed others. (Both Emerson and Freud live out of Shakespeare—but only a giant can be truly influenced by Shakespeare.) In reading, I continue to look for one thing—to be influenced, to learn something new, to be thrown off my course and onto another, better way.

My father knew that he was dissatisfied with life. He knew that none of the descriptions people had for him quite fit. He understood that he was always out of joint with life as it was. He had talent: My brother and I each got about half the raw ability he possessed, and that’s taken us through life well enough. But what to do with that talent—there was the rub for my father. He used to stroll through the house intoning his favorite line from Groucho Marx’s ditty “Whatever It Is, I’m Against It.” (I recently asked my son, now twenty-one, if he thought I was mistaken in teaching him this particular song when he was six years old. “No!” he said, filling the air with an invisible forest of exclamation points.) But what my father never managed to get was a sense of who he might become. He never had a world of possibilities spread before him, never made sustained contact with the best that has been thought and said. He didn’t get to revise his understanding of himself, figure out what he’d do best that might give the world some profit.

My father was a gruff man but also a generous one, so that night at the kitchen table at 58 Clewley Road he made an effort to let me have the chance that had been denied to him by both
fate and character. He gave me the chance to see what I was all about, and if it proved to be different from him, proved even to be something he didn’t like or entirely comprehend, then he’d deal with it.

Right now, if you’re going to get a real education, you may have to be aggressive and assertive. Your professors will give you some fine books to read, and they’ll probably help you understand them. What they won’t do, for reasons that perplex me, is ask you if the books contain truths you could live your life by. When you read Plato, you’ll probably learn about his metaphysics and his politics and his way of conceiving the soul. But no one will ask you if his ideas are good enough to believe in. No one will ask you, in the words of Emerson’s disciple William James, what their “cash value” might be. No one will suggest that you might use Plato as your bible for a week or a year or longer. No one, in short, will ask you to use Plato to help you change your life.

That will be up to you. You must put the question of Plato to yourself. You must ask whether reason should always rule the passions, philosophers should always rule the state, and poets should inevitably be banished from a just commonwealth. You have to ask yourself if wildly expressive music (rock and rap and the rest) deranges the soul in ways that are destructive to its health. You must inquire of yourself if balanced calm is the most desirable human state.

Occasionally—for you will need some help in fleshing out the answers—you may have to prod your professors to see if they will take the text at hand—in this case the divine and disturbing Plato—to be true. And you will have to be tough if the professor mocks you for uttering a sincere question instead of keeping matters easy for all concerned by staying detached and analytical. (Detached analysis has a place, but in the end you’ve got to speak from the heart and pose the question of truth.) You’ll be the one who pester your teachers. You’ll ask your history teacher about whether there is a design to our history, whether we’re progressing or declining, or whether, in the words of a fine recent play, The History Boys, history’s “just one fuckin’ thing after another.” You’ll be the one who challenges your biology teacher about the intellectual conflict between evolutionist and creationist thinking. You’ll not only question the statistics teacher about what numbers can explain but what they can’t.

Because every subject you study is a language, and since you may adopt one of these languages as your own, you’ll want to know how to speak it expertly and also how it fails to deal with those concerns for which it has no adequate words. You’ll be looking into the reach of every metaphor that every discipline offers, and you’ll be trying to see around their corners.

The whole business is scary, of course. What if you arrive at college devoted to premed, sure that nothing will make you and your family happier than life as a physician, only to discover that elementary teaching is where your heart is?

You might learn that you’re not meant to be a doctor at all. Of course, given your intellect and discipline, you can still probably be one. You can pound your round peg through the very square hole of medical school, then go off into the profession. And society will help you. Society has a cornucopia of resources to encourage you in doing what society needs done but that you don’t much like doing and are not cut out to do. To ease your grief, society offers alcohol, television, drugs, divorce, and buying, buying, buying what you don’t need. But all those, too, have their costs.

Education is about finding out what form of work for you is close to being play—work you do so easily that it restores you as you go. Randall Jarrell once said that if he were a rich man, he would pay money to teach poetry to students. (I would, too, for what it’s worth.) In saying that, he (like my father) hinted in the direction of a profound and true theory of learning.
Having found what’s best for you to do, you may be surprised by how far you rise, how prosperous, even against your own projections, you become. The student who eschews medical school to follow his gift for teaching small children spends his twenties in low-paying but pleasurable and soul-rewarding toil. He’s always behind on his student-loan payments; he still lives in a house with four other guys, not all of whom got proper instructions on how to clean a bathroom. He buys shirts from the Salvation Army, has intermittent Internet, and vacations where he can. But lo—he has a gift for teaching. He writes an essay about how to teach, then a book—which no one buys. But he writes another—in part out of a feeling of injured merit, perhaps—and that one they do buy.

Money is still a problem, but in a new sense. The world wants him to write more, lecture, travel more, and will pay him for his efforts, and he likes this a good deal. But he also likes staying around and showing up at school and figuring out how to get this or that little runny-nosed specimen to begin learning how to read. These are the kinds of problems that are worth having, and if you advance, as Thoreau asked us to do, in the general direction of your dreams, you may have them. If you advance in the direction of someone else’s dreams—if you want to live someone else’s dreams rather than yours—then get a TV for every room, buy yourself a lifetime supply of your favorite quaff, crank up the porn channel, and groove away. But when we expend our energies in rightful ways, Robert Frost observed, we stay whole and vigorous and we don’t get weary. “Strongly spent,” the poet says, “is synonymous with kept.”
The Learning Curve
Atul Gawande


Atul Gawande (1965-) is a winner of the MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship and many other accolades for his work on modern surgical practices and medical ethics. A practicing surgeon, he is professor in both the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Harvard School of Public Health and the Department of Surgery at Harvard Medical School. His four books have all been New York Times bestsellers; his fourth, Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End, was released October 2014.

The patient needed a central line. “Here's your chance,” S., the chief resident, said. I had never done one before. “Get set up and then page me when you're ready to start.”

It was my fourth week in surgical training. The pockets of my short white coat bulged with patient printouts, laminated cards with instructions for doing CPR and reading EKGs and using the dictation system, two surgical handbooks, a stethoscope, wound-dressing supplies, meal tickets, a penlight, scissors, and about a dollar in loose change. As I headed up the stairs to the patient's floor, I rattled.

This will be good, I tried to tell myself: my first real procedure. The patient – fiftyish, stout, taciturn – was recovering from abdominal surgery he'd had about a week earlier. His bowel function hadn't yet returned, and he was unable to eat. I explained to him that he needed intravenous nutrition and that this required a “special line” that would go into his chest. I said that I would put the line in him while he was in his bed, and that it would involve my numbing a spot on his chest with a local anesthetic, and then threading the line in. I did not say that the line was eight inches long and would go into his vena cava, the main blood vessel to his heart. Nor did I say how tricky the procedure could be. There were “slight risks” involved, I said, such as bleeding and lung collapse; in experienced hands, complications of this sort occur in fewer than one case in a hundred.

But, of course, mine were not experienced hands. And the disasters I knew about weighed on my mind: the woman who had died within minutes from massive bleeding when a resident lacerated her vena cava; the man whose chest had to be opened because a resident lost hold of a wire inside the line, which then floated down to the patient's heart; the man who had a cardiac arrest when the procedure put him into ventricular fibrillation. I said nothing of such things, naturally, when I asked the patient's permission to do his line. He said, “O.K.”

I had seen S. do two central lines; one was the day before, and I'd attended to every step. I watched how she set out her instruments and laid her patient down and put a rolled towel between his shoulder blades to make his chest arch out. I watched how she swabbed his chest with antiseptic, injected lidocaine, which is a local anesthetic, and then, in full sterile garb, punctured his chest near his clavicle with a fat three-inch needle on a syringe. The patient hadn't even flinched. She told me how to avoid hitting the lung (“Go in at a steep angle,” she'd said. “Stay right under the clavicle”), and how to find the subclavian vein, a branch to the vena cava lying atop the lung near its apex (“Go in at a steep angle. Stay right under the clavicle”). She pushed the needle in almost all the way. She drew back on the syringe. And she was in. You knew because the syringe filled with maroon blood. (“If it's bright red, you've hit an artery,” she said. “That's not good.”)

Once you have the tip of this needle poking in the vein, you somehow have to widen the hole in
the vein wall, fit the catheter in, and snake it in the right direction – down to the heart, rather than up to the brain – all without tearing through vessels, lung, or anything else.

To do this, S. explained, you start by getting a guide wire in place. She pulled the syringe off, leaving the needle in. Blood flowed out. She picked up a two-foot-long twenty-gauge wire that looked like the steel D string of an electric guitar, and passed nearly its full length through the needle's bore, into the vein, and onward toward the vena cava. “Never force it in,” she warned, “and never, ever let go of it.” A string of rapid heartbeats fired off on the cardiac monitor, and she quickly pulled the wire back an inch. It had poked into the heart, causing momentary fibrillation. “Guess we're in the right place,” she said to me quietly. Then to the patient: “You're doing great. Only a few minutes now.” She pulled the needle out over the wire and replaced it with a bullet of thick, stiff plastic, which she pushed in tight to widen the vein opening. She then removed this dilator and threaded the central line – a spaghetti-thick, flexible yellow plastic tube – over the wire until it was all the way in. Now she could remove the wire. She flushed the line with a heparin solution and sutured it to the patient's chest. And that was it.

Today, it was my turn to try. First, I had to gather supplies – a central-line kit, gloves, gown, cap, mask, lidocaine – which took me forever. When I finally had the stuff together, I stopped for a minute outside the patient's door, trying to recall the steps. They remained frustratingly hazy. But I couldn't put it off any longer. I had a page-long list of other things to get done: Mrs. A needed to be discharged; Mr. B needed an abdominal ultrasound arranged; Mrs. C needed her skin staples removed. And every fifteen minutes or so I was getting paged with more tasks: Mr. X was nauseated and needed to be seen; Miss Y’s family was here and needed “someone” to talk to them; Mr. Z needed a laxative. I took a deep breath, put on my best don't-worry-I-know-what-I'm-doing look, and went in.

I placed the supplies on a bedside table, untied the patient's gown, and laid him down flat on the mattress, with his chest bare and his arms at his sides. I flipped on a fluorescent overhead light and raised his bed to my height. I paged S. I put on my gown and gloves and, on a sterile tray, laid out the central line, the guide wire, and other materials from the kit. I drew up five cc's of lidocaine in a syringe, soaked two sponge sticks in the yellow-brown Betadine, and opened up the suture packaging.

S. arrived. “What's his platelet count?”

My stomach knotted. I hadn't checked. That was bad: too low and he could have a serious bleed from the procedure. She went to check a computer. The count was acceptable.

Chastened, I started swabbing his chest with the sponge sticks. “Got the shoulder roll underneath him?” S. asked. Well, no, I had forgotten that, too. The patient gave me a look. S., saying nothing, got a towel, rolled it up, and slipped it under his back for me. I finished applying the antiseptic and then draped him so that only his right upper chest was exposed. He squirmed a bit beneath the drapes. S. now inspected my tray. I girded myself.

“Where's the extra syringe for flushing the line when it's in?” Damn. She went out and got it. I felt for my landmarks. Here? I asked with my eyes, not wanting to undermine the patient's confidence any further. She nodded. I numbed the spot with lidocaine. (“You'll feel a stick and a burn now, sir.”) Next, I took the three-inch needle in hand and poked it through the skin. I advanced it slowly and uncertainly, a few millimetres at a time. This is a big goddam needle, I kept thinking. I couldn't believe I was sticking it into someone's chest. I concentrated on maintaining a steep angle of entry, but kept spearing his clavicle instead of slipping beneath it.

“Ow!” he shouted.
“Sorry,” I said. S. signaled with a kind of surfing hand gesture to go underneath the clavicle. This time, it went in. I drew back on the syringe. Nothing. She pointed deeper. I went in deeper. Nothing. I withdrew the needle, flushed out some bits of tissue clogging it, and tried again.

“Oh!”

Too steep again. I found my way underneath the clavicle once more. I drew the syringe back. Still nothing. He's too obese, I thought. S. slipped on gloves and a gown. “How about I have a look?” she said. I handed her the needle and stepped aside. She plunged the needle in, drew back on the syringe, and, just like that, she was in. “We'll be done shortly,” she told the patient.

She let me continue with the next steps, which I bumbled through. I didn't realize how long and floppy the guide wire was until I pulled the coil out of its plastic sleeve, and, putting one end of it into the patient, I very nearly contaminated the other. I forgot about the dilating step until she reminded me. Then, when I put in the dilator, I didn't push quite hard enough, and it was really S. who pushed it all the way in. Finally, we got the line in, flushed it, and sutured it in place.

Outside the room, S. said that I could be less tentative the next time, but that I shouldn't worry too much about how things had gone. “You'll get it,” she said. “It just takes practice.” I wasn't so sure. The procedure remained wholly mysterious to me. And I could not get over the idea of jabbing a needle into someone's chest so deeply and so blindly. I awaited the X-ray afterward with trepidation. But it came back fine: I had not injured the lung and the line was in the right place.

Not everyone appreciates the attractions of surgery. When you are a medical student in the operating room for the first time, and you see the surgeon press the scalpel to someone's body and open it like a piece of fruit, you either shudder in horror or gape in awe. I gaped. It was not just the blood and guts that enthralled me. It was also the idea that a person, a mere mortal, would have the confidence to wield that scalpel in the first place.

There is a saying about surgeons: “Sometimes wrong; never in doubt.” This is meant as a reproof, but to me it seemed their strength. Every day, surgeons are faced with uncertainties. Information is inadequate; the science is ambiguous; one's knowledge and abilities are never perfect. Even with the simplest operation, it cannot be taken for granted that a patient will come through better off — or even alive. Standing at the operating table, I wondered how the surgeon knew that all the steps would go as planned, that bleeding would be controlled and infection would not set in and organs would not be injured. He didn't, of course. But he cut anyway.

Later, while still a student, I was allowed to make an incision myself. The surgeon drew a six-inch dotted line with a marking pen across an anesthetized patient's abdomen and then, to my surprise, had the nurse hand me the knife. It was still warm from the autoclave. The surgeon had me stretch the skin taut with the thumb and forefinger of my free hand. He told me to make one smooth slice down to the fat. I put the belly of the blade to the skin and cut. The experience was odd and addictive, mixing exhilaration from the calculated violence of the act, anxiety about getting it right, and a righteous faith that it was somehow for the person's good. There was also the slightly nauseating feeling of finding that it took more force than I'd realized. (Skin is thick and springy, and on my first pass I did not go nearly deep enough; I had to cut twice to get through.) The moment made me want to be a surgeon — not an amateur handed the knife for a brief moment but someone with the confidence and ability to proceed as if it were routine.

A resident begins, however, with none of this air of mastery — only an overpowering instinct against doing anything like pressing a knife against flesh or jabbing a needle into someone's chest. On my first day as a surgical resident, I was assigned to the emergency room. Among my first patients was a skinny, dark-haired woman in her late twenties who hobbled in, teeth gritted, with a two-foot-long wooden chair leg somehow nailed to the bottom of her foot. She explained that a
kitchen chair had collapsed under her and, as she leaped up to keep from falling, her bare foot had stomped down on a three-inch screw sticking out of one of the chair legs. I tried very hard to look like someone who had not got his medical diploma just the week before. Instead, I was determined to be nonchalant, the kind of guy who had seen this sort of thing a hundred times before. I inspected her foot, and could see that the screw was embedded in the bone at the base of her big toe. There was no bleeding and, as far as I could feel, no fracture.

“Wow, that must hurt,” I blurted out, idiotically.

The obvious thing to do was give her a tetanus shot and pull out the screw. I ordered the tetanus shot, but I began to have doubts about pulling out the screw. Suppose she bled? Or suppose I fractured her foot? Or something worse? I excused myself and tracked down Dr. W., the senior surgeon on duty. I found him tending to a car-crash victim. The patient was a mess, and the floor was covered with blood. People were shouting. It was not a good time to ask questions.

I ordered an X-ray. I figured it would buy time and let me check my amateur impression that she didn't have a fracture. Sure enough, getting the X-ray took about an hour, and it showed no fracture – just a common screw embedded, the radiologist said, “in the head of the first metatarsal.” I showed the patient the X-ray. “You see, the screw's embedded in the head of the first metatarsal,” I said. And the plan? she wanted to know. Ah, yes, the plan.

I went to find Dr. W. He was still busy with the crash victim, but I was able to interrupt to show him the X-ray. He chuckled at the sight of it and asked me what I wanted to do. “Pull the screw out?” I ventured. “Yes,” he said, by which he meant “Duh.” He made sure I'd given the patient a tetanus shot and then shooed me away.

Back in the examining room, I told her that I would pull the screw out, prepared for her to say something like “You?” Instead she said, “O.K., Doctor.” At first, I had her sitting on the exam table, dangling her leg off the side. But that didn't look as if it would work. Eventually, I had her lie with her foot jutting off the table end, the board poking out into the air. With every move, her pain increased. I injected a local anesthetic where the screw had gone in and that helped a little.

Now I grabbed her foot in one hand, the board in the other, and for a moment I froze. Could I really do this? Who was I to presume?

Finally, I gave her a one-two-three and pulled, gingerly at first and then hard. She groaned. The screw wasn't budging. I twisted, and abruptly it came free. There was no bleeding. I washed the wound out, and she found she could walk. I warned her of the risks of infection and the signs to look for. Her gratitude was immense and flattering, like the lion's for the mouse – and that night I went home elated.

In surgery, as in anything else, skill, judgment, and confidence are learned through experience, haltingly and humiliatingly. Like the tennis player and the oboist and the guy who fixes hard drives, we need practice to get good at what we do. There is one difference in medicine, though: we practice on people.

My second try at placing a central line went no better than the first. The patient was in intensive care, mortally ill, on a ventilator, and needed the line so that powerful cardiac drugs could be delivered directly to her heart. She was also heavily sedated, and for this I was grateful. She'd be oblivious of my fumbling.

My preparation was better this time. I got the towel roll in place and the syringes of heparin on the tray. I checked her lab results, which were fine. I also made a point of draping more widely, so that if I flopped the guide wire around by mistake again, it wouldn't hit anything unsterile.

For all that, the procedure was a bust. I stabbed the needle in too shallow and then too deep. Frustration overcame tentativeness and I tried one angle after another. Nothing worked. Then, for
one brief moment, I got a flash of blood in the syringe, indicating that I was in the vein. I anchored the needle with one hand and went to pull the syringe off with the other. But the syringe was jammed on too tightly, so that when I pulled it free I dislodged the needle from the vein. The patient began bleeding into her chest wall. I held pressure the best I could for a solid five minutes, but still her chest turned black and blue around the site. The hematoma made it impossible to put a line through there anymore. I wanted to give up. But she needed a line and the resident supervising me – a second-year this time – was determined that I succeed. After an X-ray showed that I had not injured her lung, he had me try on the other side, with a whole new kit. I missed again, and he took over. It took him several minutes and two or three sticks to find the vein himself and that made me feel better. Maybe she was an unusually tough case.

When I failed with a third patient a few days later, though, the doubts really set in. Again, it was stick, stick, stick, and nothing. I stepped aside. The resident watching me got it on the next try.

Surgeons, as a group, adhere to a curious egalitarianism. They believe in practice, not talent. People often assume that you have to have great hands to become a surgeon, but it’s not true. When I interviewed to get into surgery programs, no one made me sew or take a dexterity test or checked to see if my hands were steady. You do not even need all ten fingers to be accepted. To be sure, talent helps. Professors say that every two or three years they’ll see someone truly gifted come through a program – someone who picks up complex manual skills unusually quickly, sees tissue planes before others do, anticipates trouble before it happens. Nonetheless, attending surgeons say that what’s most important to them is finding people who are conscientious, industrious, and boneheaded enough to keep at practicing this one difficult thing day and night for years on end. As a former residency director put it to me, given a choice between a Ph.D. who had cloned a gene and a sculptor, he’d pick the Ph.D. every time. Sure, he said, he’d bet on the sculptor’s being more physically talented; but he’d bet on the Ph.D.’s being less “flaky.” And in the end that matters more. Skill, surgeons believe, can be taught; tenacity cannot. It’s an odd approach to recruitment, but it continues all the way up the ranks, even in top surgery departments. They start with minions with no experience in surgery, spend years training them, and then take most of their faculty from these same homegrown ranks.

And it works. There have now been many studies of elite performers – concert violinists, chess grand masters, professional ice-skaters, mathematicians, and so forth – and the biggest difference researchers find between them and lesser performers is the amount of deliberate practice they’ve accumulated. Indeed, the most important talent may be the talent for practice itself. K. Anders Ericsson, a cognitive psychologist and an expert on performance, notes that the most important role that innate factors play may be in a person’s willingness to engage in sustained training. He has found, for example, that top performers dislike practicing just as much as others do. (That’s why, for example, athletes and musicians usually quit practicing when they retire.) But, more than others, they have the will to keep at it anyway.

I wasn’t sure I did. What good was it, I wondered, to keep doing central lines when I wasn’t coming close to hitting them? If I had a clear idea of what I was doing wrong, then maybe I’d have something to focus on. But I didn’t. Everyone, of course, had suggestions. Go in with the bevel of the needle up. No, go in with the bevel down. Put a bend in the middle of the needle. No, curve the needle. For a while, I tried to avoid doing another line. Soon enough, however, a new case arose.

The circumstances were miserable. It was late in the day, and I’d had to work through the previous night. The patient weighed more than three hundred pounds. He couldn’t tolerate lying
flat because the weight of his chest and abdomen made it hard for him to breathe. Yet he had a badly infected wound, needed intravenous antibiotics, and no one could find veins in his arms for a peripheral I.V. I had little hope of succeeding. But a resident does what he is told, and I was told to try the line.

I went to his room. He looked scared and said he didn't think he'd last more than a minute on his back. But he said he understood the situation and was willing to make his best effort. He and I decided that he'd be left sitting propped up in bed until the last possible minute. We'd see how far we got after that.

I went through my preparations: checking his blood counts from the lab, putting out the kit, placing the towel roll, and so on. I swabbed and draped his chest while he was still sitting up. S., the chief resident, was watching me this time, and when everything was ready I had her tip him back, an oxygen mask on his face. His flesh rolled up his chest like a wave. I couldn't find his clavicle with my fingertips to line up the right point of entry. And already he was looking short of breath, his face red. I gave S. a “Do you want to take over?” look. Keep going, she signalled. I made a rough guess about where the right spot was, numbed it with lidocaine, and pushed the big needle in. For a second, I thought it wouldn't be long enough to reach through, but then I felt the tip slip underneath his clavicle. I pushed a little deeper and drew back on the syringe. Unbelievably, it filled with blood. I was in. I concentrated on anchoring the needle firmly in place, not moving it a millimetre as I pulled the syringe off and threaded the guide wire in. The wire fed in smoothly. The patient was struggling hard for air now. We sat him up and let him catch his breath. And then, laying him down one more time, I got the entry dilated and slid the central line in. “Nice job” was all S. said, and then she left.

I still have no idea what I did differently that day. But from then on my lines went in. That's the funny thing about practice. For days and days, you make out only the fragments of what to do. And then one day you've got the thing whole. Conscious learning becomes unconscious knowledge, and you cannot say precisely how.

I have now put in more than a hundred central lines. I am by no means infallible. Certainly, I have had my fair share of complications. I punctured a patient's lung, for example – the right lung of a chief of surgery from another hospital, no less – and, given the odds, I'm sure such things will happen again. I still have the occasional case that should go easily but doesn't, no matter what I do. (We have a term for this. “How'd it go?” a colleague asks. “It was a total flog,” I reply. I don't have to say anything more.)

But other times everything unfolds effortlessly. You take the needle. You stick the chest. You feel the needle travel – a distinct glide through the fat, a slight catch in the dense muscle, then the subtle pop through the vein wall – and you're in. At such moments, it is more than easy; it is beautiful.

Surgical training is the recapitulation of this process – floundering followed by fragments followed by knowledge and, occasionally, a moment of elegance – over and over again, for ever harder tasks with ever greater risks. At first, you work on the basics: how to glove and gown, how to drape patients, how to hold the knife, how to tie a square knot in a length of silk suture (not to mention how to dictate, work the computers, order drugs). But then the tasks become more daunting: how to cut through skin, handle the electrocautery, open the breast, tie off a bleeder, excise a tumor, close up a wound. At the end of six months, I had done lines, lumpectomies, appendectomies, skin grafts, hernia repairs, and mastectomies. At the end of a year, I was doing limb amputations, hemorrhoidectomies, and laparoscopic gallbladder operations. At the end of two years, I was beginning to do tracheotomies, small-bowel operations, and leg-artery bypasses.
I am in my seventh year of training, of which three years have been spent doing research. Only now has a simple slice through skin begun to seem like the mere start of a case. These days, I'm trying to learn how to fix an abdominal aortic aneurysm, remove a pancreatic cancer, open blocked carotid arteries. I am, I have found, neither gifted nor maladroit. With practice and more practice, I get the hang of it.

Doctors find it hard to talk about this with patients. The moral burden of practicing on people is always with us, but for the most part it is unspoken. Before each operation, I go over to the holding area in my scrubs and introduce myself to the patient. I do it the same way every time. “Hello, I'm Dr. Gawande. I'm one of the surgical residents, and I'll be assisting your surgeon.” That is pretty much all I say on the subject. I extend my hand and smile. I ask the patient if everything is going O.K. so far. We chat. I answer questions. Very occasionally, patients are taken aback. “No resident is doing my surgery,” they say. I try to be reassuring. “Not to worry – I just assist,” I say. “The attending surgeon is always in charge.”

None of this is exactly a lie. The attending is in charge, and a resident knows better than to forget that. Consider the operation I did recently to remove a seventy-five-year-old woman's colon cancer. The attending stood across from me from the start. And it was he, not I, who decided where to cut, how to position the opened abdomen, how to isolate the cancer, and how much colon to take. Yet I'm the one who held the knife. I'm the one who stood on the operator's side of the table, and it was raised to my six-foot-plus height. I was there to help, yes, but I was there to practice, too. This was clear when it came time to reconnect the colon. There are two ways of putting the ends together – handsewing and stapling. Stapling is swifter and easier, but the attending suggested I handsew the ends – not because it was better for the patient but because I had had much less experience doing it. When it's performed correctly, the results are similar, but he needed to watch me like a hawk. My stitching was slow and imprecise. At one point, he caught me putting the stitches too far apart and made me go back and put extras in between so the connection would not leak. At another point, he found I wasn't taking deep enough bites of tissue with the needle to insure a strong closure. “Turn your wrist more,” he told me. “Like this?” I asked. “Uh, sort of,” he said.

In medicine, there has long been a conflict between the imperative to give patients the best possible care and the need to provide novices with experience. Residencies attempt to mitigate potential harm through supervision and graduated responsibility. And there is reason to think that patients actually benefit from teaching. Studies commonly find that teaching hospitals have better outcomes than non-teaching hospitals. Residents may be amateurs, but having them around checking on patients, asking questions, and keeping faculty on their toes seems to help. But there is still no avoiding those first few unsteady times a young physician tries to put in a central line, remove a breast cancer, or sew together two segments of colon. No matter how many protections are in place, on average these cases go less well with the novice than with someone experienced.

Doctors have no illusions about this. When an attending physician brings a sick family member in for surgery, people at the hospital think twice about letting trainees participate. Even when the attending insists that they participate as usual, the residents scrubbing in know that it will be far from a teaching case. And if a central line must be put in, a first-timer is certainly not going to do it. Conversely, the ward services and clinics where residents have the most responsibility are populated by the poor, the uninsured, the drunk, and the demented. Residents have few opportunities nowadays to operate independently, without the attending docs scrubbed in, but
when we do – as we must before graduating and going out to operate on our own – it is generally with these, the humblest of patients.

And this is the uncomfortable truth about teaching. By traditional ethics and public insistence (not to mention court rulings), a patient's right to the best care possible must trump the objective of training novices. We want perfection without practice. Yet everyone is harmed if no one is trained for the future. So learning is hidden, behind drapes and anesthesia and the elisions of language. And the dilemma doesn't apply just to residents, physicians in training. The process of learning goes on longer than most people know.

I grew up in the small Appalachian town of Athens, Ohio, where my parents are both doctors. My mother is a pediatrician and my father is a urologist. Long ago, my mother chose to practice part time, which she could afford to do because my father's practice became so busy and successful. He has now been at it for more than twenty-five years, and his office is cluttered with the evidence of this. There is an overflowing wall of medical files, gifts from patients displayed everywhere (books, paintings, ceramics with Biblical sayings, hand-painted paperweights, blown glass, carved boxes, a figurine of a boy who, when you pull down his pants, pees on you), and, in an acrylic case behind his oak desk, a few dozen of the thousands of kidney stones he has removed.

Only now, as I get glimpses of the end of my training, have I begun to think hard about my father's success. For most of my residency, I thought of surgery as a more or less fixed body of knowledge and skill which is acquired in training and perfected in practice. There was, I thought, a smooth, upward-sloping arc of proficiency at some rarefied set of tasks (for me, taking out gallbladders, colon cancers, bullets, and appendixes; for him, taking out kidney stones, testicular cancers, and swollen prostates). The arc would peak at, say, ten or fifteen years, plateau for a long time, and perhaps tail off a little in the final five years before retirement. The reality, however, turns out to be far messier. You do get good at certain things, my father tells me, but no sooner do you master something than you find that what you know is outmoded. New technologies and operations emerge to supplant the old, and the learning curve starts all over again. “Three-quarters of what I do today I never learned in residency,” he says. On his own, fifty miles from his nearest colleague – let alone a doctor who could tell him anything like “You need to turn your wrist more” – he has had to learn to put in penile prostheses, to perform microsurgery, to reverse vasectomies, to do nerve-sparing prostatectomies, to implant artificial urinary sphincters. He's had to learn to use shock-wave lithotripters, electrohydraulic lithotripters, and laser lithotripters (all instruments for breaking up kidney stones); to deploy Double J ureteral stents and Silicone Figure Four Coil stents and Retro-Inject Multi-Length stents (don't even ask); and to maneuver fibre-optic ureteroscopes. All these technologies and techniques were introduced after he finished training. Some of the procedures built on skills he already had. Many did not.

This is the experience that all surgeons have. The pace of medical innovation has been unceasing, and surgeons have no choice but to give the new thing a try. To fail to adopt new techniques would mean denying patients meaningful medical advances. Yet the perils of the learning curve are inescapable – no less in practice than in residency.

For the established surgeon, inevitably, the opportunities for learning are far less structured than for a resident. When an important new device or procedure comes along, as happens every year, surgeons start by taking a course about it – typically a day or two of lectures by some surgical grandees with a few film clips and step-by-step handouts. You take home a video to watch. Perhaps you pay a visit to observe a colleague perform the operation – my father often goes up to the Cleveland Clinic for this. But there's not much by way of hands-on training. Unlike a resident, a visitor cannot scrub in on cases, and opportunities to practice on animals or cadavers are few and
far between. (Britain, being Britain, actually bans surgeons from practicing on animals.) When the pulse-dye laser came out, the manufacturer set up a lab in Columbus where urologists from the area could gain experience. But when my father went there the main experience provided was destroying kidney stones in test tubes filled with a urinelike liquid and trying to penetrate the shell of an egg without hitting the membrane underneath. My surgery department recently bought a robotic surgery device—a staggeringly sophisticated nine-hundred-and-eighty-thousand-dollar robot, with three arms, two wrists, and a camera, all millimetres in diameter, which, controlled from a console, allows a surgeon to do almost any operation with no hand tremor and with only tiny incisions. A team of two surgeons and two nurses flew out to the manufacturer’s headquarters, in Mountain View, California, for a full day of training on the machine. And they did get to practice on a pig and on a human cadaver. (The company apparently buys the cadavers from the city of San Francisco.) But even this was hardly thorough training. They learned enough to grasp the principles of using the robot, to start getting a feel for using it, and to understand how to plan an operation. That was about it. Sooner or later, you just have to go home and give the thing a try on someone.

Patients do eventually benefit—often enormously—but the first few patients may not, and may even be harmed. Consider the experience reported by the pediatric cardiac-surgery unit of the renowned Great Ormond Street Hospital, in London, as detailed in the British Medical Journal last April. The doctors described their results from three hundred and twenty-five consecutive operations between 1978 and 1998 on babies with a severe heart defect known as transposition of the great arteries. Such children are born with their heart’s outflow vessels transposed: the aorta emerges from the right side of the heart instead of the left and the artery to the lungs emerges from the left instead of the right. As a result, blood coming in is pumped right back out to the body instead of first to the lungs, where it can be oxygenated. The babies died blue, fatigued, never knowing what it was to get enough breath. For years, it wasn’t technically feasible to switch the vessels to their proper positions. Instead, surgeons did something known as the Senning procedure: they created a passage inside the heart to let blood from the lungs cross backward to the right heart. The Senning procedure allowed children to live into adulthood. The weaker right heart, however, cannot sustain the body’s entire blood flow as long as the left. Eventually, these patients’ hearts failed, and although most survived to adulthood, few lived to old age.

By the nineteen-eighties, a series of technological advances made it possible to do a switch operation safely, and this became the favored procedure. In 1986, the Great Ormond Street surgeons made the changeover themselves, and their report shows that it was unquestionably an improvement. The annual death rate after a successful switch procedure was less than a quarter that of the Senning, resulting in a life expectancy of sixty-three years instead of forty-seven. But the price of learning to do it was appalling. In their first seventy switch operations, the doctors had a twenty-five-per-cent surgical death rate, compared with just six per cent with the Senning procedure. Eighteen babies died, more than twice the number during the entire Senning era. Only with time did they master it: in their next hundred switch operations, five babies died.

As patients, we want both expertise and progress; we don’t want to acknowledge that these are contradictory desires. In the words of one British public report, “There should be no learning curve as far as patient safety is concerned.” But this is entirely wishful thinking.

Recently, a group of Harvard Business School researchers who have made a specialty of studying learning curves in industry decided to examine learning curves among surgeons instead of in semiconductor manufacture or airplane construction, or any of the usual fields their colleagues examine. They followed eighteen cardiac surgeons and their teams as they took on the
new technique of minimally invasive cardiac surgery. This study, I was surprised to discover, is the first of its kind. Learning is ubiquitous in medicine, and yet no one had ever compared how well different teams actually do it.

The new heart operation – in which new technologies allow a surgeon to operate through a small incision between ribs instead of splitting the chest open down the middle – proved substantially more difficult than the conventional one. Because the incision is too small to admit the usual tubes and clamps for rerouting blood to the heart-bypass machine, surgeons had to learn a trickier method, which involved balloons and catheters placed through groin vessels. And the nurses, anesthesiologists, and perfusionists all had new roles to master. As you'd expect, everyone experienced a substantial learning curve. Whereas a fully proficient team takes three to six hours for such an operation, these teams took on average three times as long for their early cases. The researchers could not track complication rates in detail, but it would be foolish to imagine that they were not affected.

What's more, the researchers found striking disparities in the speed with which different teams learned. All teams came from highly respected institutions with experience in adopting innovations and received the same three-day training session. Yet, in the course of fifty cases, some teams managed to halve their operating time while others improved hardly at all. Practice, it turned out, did not necessarily make perfect. The crucial variable was how the surgeons and their teams practiced.

Richard Bohmer, the only physician among the Harvard researchers, made several visits to observe one of the quickest-learning teams and one of the slowest, and he was startled by the contrast. The surgeon on the fast-learning team was actually quite inexperienced compared with the one on the slow-learning team. But he made sure to pick team members with whom he had worked well before and to keep them together through the first fifteen cases before allowing any new members. He had the team go through a dry run before the first case, then deliberately scheduled six operations in the first week, so little would be forgotten in between. He convened the team before each case to discuss it in detail and afterward to debrief. He made sure results were tracked carefully. And Bohmer noticed that the surgeon was not the stereotypical Napoleon with a knife. Unbidden, he told Bohmer, “The surgeon needs to be willing to allow himself to become a partner [with the rest of the team] so he can accept input.” At the other hospital, by contrast, the surgeon chose his operating team almost randomly and did not keep it together. In the first seven cases, the team had different members every time, which is to say that it was no team at all. And the surgeon had no pre-briefings, no debriefings, no tracking of ongoing results.

The Harvard Business School study offered some hopeful news. We can do things that have a dramatic effect on our rate of improvement – like being more deliberate about how we train, and about tracking progress, whether with students and residents or with senior surgeons and nurses. But the study's other implications are less reassuring. No matter how accomplished, surgeons trying something new got worse before they got better, and the learning curve proved longer, and was affected by a far more complicated range of factors, than anyone had realized.

This, I suspect, is the reason for the physician's dodge: the “I just assist” rap; the “We have a new procedure for this that you are perfect for” speech; the “You need a central line” without the “I am still learning how to do this.” Sometimes we do feel obliged to admit when we're doing something for the first time, but even then we tend to quote the published complication rates of experienced surgeons. Do we ever tell patients that, because we are still new at something, their risks will inevitably be higher, and that they'd likely do better with doctors who are more
experienced? Do we ever say that we need them to agree to it anyway? I've never seen it. Given
the stakes, who in his right mind would agree to be practiced upon?

Many dispute this presumption. “Look, most people understand what it is to be a doctor,” a
health policy expert insisted, when I visited him in his office not long ago. “We have to stop lying
to our patients. Can people take on choices for societal benefit?” He paused and then answered his
question. “Yes,” he said firmly.

It would certainly be a graceful and happy solution. We’d ask patients – honestly, openly – and
they’d say yes. Hard to imagine, though. I noticed on the expert's desk a picture of his child, born
just a few months before, and a completely unfair question popped into my mind. “So did you let
the resident deliver?” I asked.

There was silence for a moment. “No,” he admitted. “We didn't even allow residents in the
room.”

One reason I doubt whether we could sustain a system of medical training that depended on
people saying “Yes, you can practice on me” is that I myself have said no. When my eldest child,
Walker, was eleven days old, he suddenly went into congestive heart failure from what proved to
be a severe cardiac defect. His aorta was not transposed, but a long segment of it had failed to grow
at all. My wife and I were beside ourselves with fear – his kidneys and liver began failing, too –
but he made it to surgery, the repair was a success, and although his recovery was erratic, after two
and a half weeks he was ready to come home.

We were by no means in the clear, however. He was born a healthy six pounds plus but now,
a month old, he weighed only five, and would need strict monitoring to insure that he gained
weight. He was on two cardiac medications from which he would have to be weaned. And in the
longer term, the doctors warned us, his repair would prove inadequate. As Walker grew, his aorta
would require either dilation with a balloon or replacement by surgery. They could not say
precisely when and how many such procedures would be necessary over the years. A pediatric
cardiologist would have to follow him closely and decide.

Walker was about to be discharged, and we had not indicated who that cardiologist would be.
In the hospital, he had been cared for by a full team of cardiologists, ranging from fellows in
specialty training to attendings who had practiced for decades. The day before we took Walker
home, one of the young fellows approached me, offering his card and suggesting a time to bring
Walker to see him. Of those on the team, he had put in the most time caring for Walker. He saw
Walker when we brought him in inexplicably short of breath, made the diagnosis, got Walker the
drugs that stabilized him, coordinated with the surgeons, and came to see us twice a day to answer
our questions. Moreover, I knew, this was how fellows always got their patients. Most families
don't know the subtle gradations among players, and after a team has saved their child's life they
take whatever appointment they're handed.

But I knew the differences. “I'm afraid we're thinking of seeing Dr. Newburger,” I said. She
was the hospital's associate cardiologist-in-chief, and a published expert on conditions like
Walker's. The young physician looked crestfallen. It was nothing against him, I said. She just had
more experience, that was all.

“You know, there is always an attending backing me up,” he said. I shook my head.

I know this was not fair. My son had an unusual problem. The fellow needed the experience.
As a resident, I of all people should have understood this. But I was not torn about the decision.
This was my child. Given a choice, I will always choose the best care I can for him. How can
anybody be expected to do otherwise? Certainly, the future of medicine should not rely on it.
In a sense, then, the physician's dodge is inevitable. Learning must be stolen, taken as a kind of bodily eminent domain. And it was, during Walker's stay—on many occasions, now that I think back on it. A resident intubated him. A surgical trainee scrubbed in for his operation. The cardiology fellow put in one of his central lines. If I had the option to have someone more experienced, I would have taken it. But this was simply how the system worked—no such choices were offered—and so I went along.

The advantage of this coldhearted machinery is not merely that it gets the learning done. If learning is necessary but causes harm, then above all it ought to apply to everyone alike. Given a choice, people wriggle out, and such choices are not offered equally. They belong to the connected and the knowledgeable, to insiders over outsiders, to the doctor's child but not the truck driver's. If everyone cannot have a choice, maybe it is better if no one can.

It is 2 P.M. I am in the intensive-care unit. A nurse tells me Mr. G.'s central line has clotted off. Mr. G. has been in the hospital for more than a month now. He is in his late sixties, from South Boston, emaciated, exhausted, holding on by a thread—or a line, to be precise. He has several holes in his small bowel, and the bilious contents leak out onto his skin through two small reddened openings in the concavity of his abdomen. His only chance is to be fed by vein and wait for these fistulae to heal. He needs a new central line.

I could do it, I suppose. I am the experienced one now. But experience brings a new role: I am expected to teach the procedure instead. “See one, do one, teach one,” the saying goes, and it is only half in jest.

There is a junior resident on the service. She has done only one or two lines before. I tell her about Mr. G. I ask her if she is free to do a new line. She misinterprets this as a question. She says she still has patients to see and a case coming up later. Could I do the line? I tell her no. She is unable to hide a grimace. She is burdened, as I was burdened, and perhaps frightened, as I was frightened.

She begins to focus when I make her talk through the steps—a kind of dry run, I figure. She hits nearly all the steps, but forgets about checking the labs and about Mr. G.'s nasty allergy to heparin, which is in the flush for the line. I make sure she registers this, then tell her to get set up and page me.

I am still adjusting to this role. It is painful enough taking responsibility for one's own failures. Being handmaiden to another's is something else entirely. It occurs to me that I could have broken open a kit and had her do an actual dry run. Then again maybe I can't. The kits must cost a couple of hundred dollars each. I'll have to find out for next time.

Half an hour later, I get the page. The patient is draped. The resident is in her gown and gloves. She tells me that she has saline to flush the line with and that his labs are fine.

"Have you got the towel roll?" I ask.

She forgot the towel roll. I roll up a towel and slip it beneath Mr. G.'s back. I ask him if he's all right. He nods. After all he's been through, there is only resignation in his eyes. The junior resident picks out a spot for the stick. The patient is hauntingly thin. I see every rib and fear that the resident will puncture his lung. She injects the numbing medication. Then she puts the big needle in, and the angle looks all wrong. I motion for her to reposition. This only makes her more uncertain. She pushes in deeper and I know she does not have it. She draws back on the syringe; no blood. She takes out the needle and tries again. And again the angle looks wrong. This time, Mr. G. feels the jab and jerks up in pain. I hold his arm. She gives him more numbing medication. It is all I can do not to take over. But she cannot learn without doing, I tell myself. I decide to let her have one more try.
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Anyone in the market for a good used machine tool should talk to Noel Dempsey, a dealer in Richmond, Virginia. Noel’s bustling warehouse is full of metal lathes, milling machines, and table saws, and it turns out that most of it is from schools. EBay is awash in such equipment, also from schools. It appears shop class is becoming a thing of the past, as educators prepare students to become “knowledge workers.”

At the same time, an engineering culture has developed in recent years in which the object is to “hide the works,” rendering the artifacts we use unintelligible to direct inspection. Lift the hood on some cars now (especially German ones), and the engine appears a bit like the shimmering, featureless obelisk that so enthralled the cavemen in the opening scene of the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey. Essentially, there is another hood under the hood. This creeping concealedness takes various forms. The fasteners holding small appliances together now often require esoteric screwdrivers not commonly available, apparently to prevent the curious or the angry from interrogating the innards. By way of contrast, older readers will recall that until recent decades, Sears catalogues included blown-up parts diagrams and conceptual schematics for all appliances and many other mechanical goods. It was simply taken for granted that such information would be demanded by the consumer.

A decline in tool use would seem to betoken a shift in our mode of inhabiting the world: more passive and more dependent. And indeed, there are fewer occasions for the kind of spiritedness that is called forth when we take things in hand for ourselves, whether to fix them or to make them. What ordinary people once made, they buy; and what they once fixed for themselves, they replace entirely or hire an expert to repair, whose expert fix often involves installing a pre-made replacement part.

So perhaps the time is ripe for reconsideration of an ideal that has fallen out of favor: manual competence, and the stance it entails toward the built, material world. Neither as workers nor as consumers are we much called upon to exercise such competence, most of us anyway, and merely to recommend its cultivation is to risk the scorn of those who take themselves to be the most hard-headed: the hard-headed economist will point out the opportunity costs of making what can be bought, and the hard-headed educator will say that it is irresponsible to educate the young for the trades, which are somehow identified as the jobs of the past. But we might pause to consider just how hard-headed these presumptions are, and whether they don’t, on the contrary, issue from a peculiar sort of idealism, one that insistently steers young people toward the most ghostly kinds of work.

Judging from my admittedly cursory survey, articles began to appear in vocational education journals around 1985 with titles such as “The Soaring Technology Revolution” and “Preparing
Kids for High-Tech and the Global Future.” Of course, there is nothing new about American future-ism. What is new is the wedding of future-ism to what might be called “virtualism”: a vision of the future in which we somehow take leave of material reality and glide about in a pure information economy. New and yet not so new — for fifty years now we’ve been assured that we are headed for a “post-industrial economy.” While manufacturing jobs have certainly left our shores to a disturbing degree, the manual trades have not. If you need a deck built, or your car fixed, the Chinese are of no help. Because they are in China. And in fact there are reported labor shortages in both construction and auto repair. Yet the trades and manufacturing are lumped together in the mind of the pundit class as “blue collar,” and their requiem is intoned. Even so, the Wall Street Journal recently wondered whether “skilled [manual] labor is becoming one of the few sure paths to a good living.” This possibility was brought to light for many by the bestseller The Millionaire Next Door, which revealed that the typical millionaire is the guy driving a pickup, with his own business in the trades. My real concern here is not with the economics of skilled manual work, but rather with its intrinsic satisfactions. I mention these economic rumors only to raise a suspicion against the widespread prejudice that such work is somehow not viable as a livelihood.

The Psychic Appeal of Manual Work

I began working as an electrician’s helper at age fourteen, and started a small electrical contracting business after college, in Santa Barbara. In those years I never ceased to take pleasure in the moment, at the end of a job, when I would flip the switch. “And there was light.” It was an experience of agency and competence. The effects of my work were visible for all to see, so my competence was real for others as well; it had a social currency. The well-founded pride of the tradesman is far from the gratuitous “self-esteem” that educators would impart to students, as though by magic.

I was sometimes quieted at the sight of a gang of conduit entering a large panel in a commercial setting, bent into nestled, flowing curves, with varying offsets, that somehow all terminated in the same plane. This was a skill so far beyond my abilities that I felt I was in the presence of some genius, and the man who bent that conduit surely imagined this moment of recognition as he worked. As a residential electrician, most of my work got covered up inside walls. Yet even so, there is pride in meeting the aesthetic demands of a workmanlike installation. Maybe another electrician will see it someday. Even if not, one feels responsible to one’s better self. Or rather, to the thing itself — craftsmanship might be defined simply as the desire to do something well, for its own sake. If the primary satisfaction is intrinsic and private in this way, there is nonetheless a sort of self-disclosing that takes place. As Alexandre Kojève writes:

The man who works recognizes his own product in the World that has actually been transformed by his work: he recognizes himself in it, he sees in it his own human reality, in it he discovers and reveals to others the objective reality of his humanity, of the originally abstract and purely subjective idea he has of himself.

The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering interpretations of himself to vindicate his worth. He can simply point: the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on. Boasting is what a boy does, who has no real effect in the world. But craftsmanship must reckon with the infallible judgment of reality, where one’s failures or shortcomings cannot be interpreted away.
Hobbyists will tell you that making one’s own furniture is hard to justify economically. And yet they persist. Shared memories attach to the material souvenirs of our lives, and producing them is a kind of communion, with others and with the future. Finding myself at loose ends one summer in Berkeley, I built a mahogany coffee table on which I spared no expense of effort. At that time I had no immediate prospect of becoming a father, yet I imagined a child who would form indelible impressions of this table and know that it was his father’s work. I imagined the table fading into the background of a future life, the defects in its execution as well as inevitable stains and scars becoming a surface textured enough that memory and sentiment might cling to it, in unnoticed accretions. More fundamentally, the durable objects of use produced by men “give rise to the familiarity of the world, its customs and habits of intercourse between men and things as well as between men and men,” as Hannah Arendt says. “The reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially even more permanent than the lives of their authors.”

Because craftsmanship refers to objective standards that do not issue from the self and its desires, it poses a challenge to the ethic of consumerism, as the sociologist Richard Sennett has recently argued. The craftsman is proud of what he has made, and cherishes it, while the consumer discards things that are perfectly serviceable in his restless pursuit of the new. The craftsman is then more possessive, more tied to what is present, the dead incarnation of past labor; the consumer is more free, more imaginative, and so more valorous according to those who would sell us things. Being able to think materially about material goods, hence critically, gives one some independence from the manipulations of marketing, which typically divert attention from what a thing is to a back-story intimated through associations, the point of which is to exaggerate minor differences between brands. Knowing the production narrative, or at least being able to plausibly imagine it, renders the social narrative of the advertisement less potent. The tradesman has an impoverished fantasy life compared to the ideal consumer; he is more utilitarian and less given to soaring hopes. But he is also more autonomous.

This would seem to be significant for any political typology. Political theorists from Aristotle to Thomas Jefferson have questioned the republican virtue of the mechanic, finding him too narrow in his concerns to be moved by the public good. Yet this assessment was made before the full flowering of mass communication and mass conformity, which pose a different set of problems for the republican character: enervation of judgment and erosion of the independent spirit. Since the standards of craftsmanship issue from the logic of things rather than the art of persuasion, practiced submission to them perhaps gives the craftsman some psychic ground to stand on against fantastic hopes aroused by demagogues, whether commercial or political. The craftsman’s habitual deference is not toward the New, but toward the distinction between the Right Way and the Wrong Way. However narrow in its application, this is a rare appearance in contemporary life — a disinterested, articulate, and publicly affirmable idea of the good. Such a strong ontology is somewhat at odds with the cutting-edge institutions of the new capitalism, and with the educational regime that aims to supply those institutions with suitable workers — pliable generalists unfettered by any single set of skills.

Today, in our schools, the manual trades are given little honor. The egalitarian worry that has always attended tracking students into “college prep” and “vocational ed” is overlaid with another: the fear that acquiring a specific skill set means that one’s life is determined. In college, by contrast, many students don’t learn anything of particular application; college is the ticket to an open future. Craftsmanship entails learning to do one thing really well, while the ideal of the new economy is to be able to learn new things, celebrating potential rather than achievement. Somehow, every
worker in the cutting-edge workplace is now supposed to act like an “intrapreneur,” that is, to be actively involved in the continuous redefinition of his own job. Shop class presents an image of stasis that runs directly counter to what Richard Sennett identifies as “a key element in the new economy’s idealized self: the capacity to surrender, to give up possession of an established reality.” This stance toward “established reality,” which can only be called psychedelic, is best not indulged around a table saw. It is dissatisfied with what Arendt calls the “reality and reliability” of the world. It is a strange sort of ideal, attractive only to a peculiar sort of self — gratuitous ontological insecurity is no fun for most people.

As Sennett argues, most people take pride in being good at something specific, which happens through the accumulation of experience. Yet the flitting disposition is pressed upon workers from above by the current generation of management revolutionaries, for whom the ethic of craftsmanship is actually something to be rooted out from the workforce. Craftsmanship means dwelling on a task for a long time and going deeply into it, because one wants to get it right. In management-speak, this is called being “ingrown.” The preferred role model is the management consultant, who swoops in and out, and whose very pride lies in his lack of particular expertise. Like the ideal consumer, the management consultant presents an image of soaring freedom, in light of which the manual trades appear cramped and paltry.

The Cognitive Demands of Manual Work

In The Mind at Work, Mike Rose provides “cognitive biographies” of several trades, and depicts the learning process in a wood shop class. He writes that “our testaments to physical work are so often focused on the values such work exhibits rather than on the thought it requires. It is a subtle but pervasive omission.... It is as though in our cultural iconography we are given the muscled arm, sleeve rolled tight against biceps, but no thought bright behind the eye, no image that links hand and brain.”

Skilled manual labor entails a systematic encounter with the material world, precisely the kind of encounter that gives rise to natural science. From its earliest practice, craft knowledge has entailed knowledge of the “ways” of one’s materials — that is, knowledge of their nature, acquired through disciplined perception and a systematic approach to problems. And in fact, in areas of well-developed craft, technological developments typically preceded and gave rise to advances in scientific understanding, not vice versa. The steam engine is a good example. It was developed by mechanics who observed the relations between volume, pressure, and temperature. This at a time when theoretical scientists were tied to the caloric theory of heat, which later turned out to be a conceptual dead end. The success of the steam engine contributed to the development of what we now call classical thermodynamics. This history provides a nice illustration of a point made by Aristotle: “Lack of experience diminishes our power of taking a comprehensive view of the admitted facts. Hence those who dwell in intimate association with nature and its phenomena are more able to lay down principles such as to admit of a wide and coherent development; while those whom devotion to abstract discussions has rendered unobservant of facts are too ready to dogmatize on the basis of a few observations.”

Another example is the Vernier scale used on machinists’ calipers and micrometers. Invented in 1631, it is a sort of mechanical calculus that renders continuous measurement in discrete digital approximation to four decimal places. Such inventions capture a reflective moment in which some skilled worker has made explicit the assumptions that are implicit in his manual skill.

In what has to be the best article ever published in an education journal, the cognitive scientists Mike Eisenberg and Ann Nishioka Eisenberg give real pedagogical force to this reflective moment,
and draw out its theoretical implications ("Shop Class for the Next Millennium: Education Through Computer-Enriched Handicrafts," in the Journal of Interactive Media in Education). They offer a computer program to facilitate making origami, or rather Archimedean solids, by unfolding these solids into two dimensions. But they then have their students actually make the solids, out of paper cut according to the computer’s instructions. “Computational tools for crafting are entities poised somewhere between the abstract, untouchable world of software objects and the homey constraints of human dexterity; they are therefore creative exercises in making conscious those aspects of craft work ... that are often more easily represented ‘in the hand’ than in language.” It is worth pausing to consider their efforts, as they have implications well beyond mathematics instruction.

In our early work with HyperGami, we often ran into situations in which the program provided us with a folding net that was mathematically correct — i.e., a technically correct unfolding of the desired solid — but otherwise disastrous. Here, we are trying to create an approximation to a cone — a pyramid on a regular octagonal base. HyperGami provides us with a folding net that will, indeed, produce a pyramid; but typically, no paper crafter would come up with a net of this sort, since it is fiendishly hard to join together those eight tall triangles into a single vertex. In fact, this is an illustrative example of a more general idea — the difficulty of formalizing, in purely mathematical terms, what it means to produce a ‘realistic’ (and not merely technically correct) solution to an algorithmic problem derived from human practice.

I take their point to be that the crafting problem is in fact not reducible to an algorithmic problem. More precisely, any algorithmic solution to the crafting problem cannot itself be generated algorithmically, as it must include ad hoc constraints known only through practice, that is, through embodied manipulations. Those constraints cannot be arrived at deductively, starting from mathematical entities. It is worth noting in passing that this has implications for the theory of mind favored by artificial intelligence researchers, as it speaks to the “computability” of pragmatic cognition. It would be a task for cognitive science to determine if these considerations place a theoretical limit on the automation of work, but I can speak firsthand to how one area of work is resistant to algorithmic thinking.

Following graduate school in Chicago, I took a job in a Washington, D.C. think tank. I hated it, so I left and opened a motorcycle repair shop in Richmond. When I would come home from work, my wife would sniff at me and say “carbs” or “brakes,” corresponding to the various solvents used. Leaving a sensible trace, my day was at least imaginable to her. But while the filth and odors were apparent, the amount of head-scratching I’d done since breakfast was not. Mike Rose writes that in the practice of surgery, “dichotomies such as concrete versus abstract and technique versus reflection break down in practice. The surgeon’s judgment is simultaneously technical and deliberative, and that mix is the source of its power.” This could be said of any manual skill that is diagnostic, including motorcycle repair. You come up with an imagined train of causes for manifest symptoms and judge their likelihood before tearing anything down. This imagining relies on a stock mental library, not of natural kinds or structures, like that of the surgeon, but rather the functional kinds of an internal combustion engine, their various interpretations by different manufacturers, and their proclivities for failure. You also develop a library of sounds and smells and feels. For example, the backfire of a too-lean fuel mixture is subtly different from an ignition backfire. If the motorcycle is thirty years old, from an obscure maker that went out of business twenty years ago, its proclivities are known mostly through lore. It would probably be impossible to do such work in isolation, without access to a collective historical memory; you have to be embedded in a community of mechanic-antiquarians. These relationships are maintained by
telephone, in a network of reciprocal favors that spans the country. My most reliable source, Fred Cousins in Chicago, had such an encyclopedic knowledge of obscure European motorcycles that all I could offer him in exchange was regular shipments of obscure European beer.

There is always a risk of introducing new complications when working on decrepit machines, and this enters the diagnostic logic. Measured in likelihood of screw-ups, the cost is not identical for all avenues of inquiry when deciding which hypothesis to pursue. For example, the fasteners holding the engine covers on 1970s-era Hondas are Phillips-head, and they are always stripped and corroded. Do you really want to check the condition of the starter clutch, if each of ten screws will need to be drilled out and extracted, risking damage to the engine case? Such impediments can cloud one’s thinking. Put more neutrally, the attractiveness of any hypothesis is determined in part by physical circumstances that have no logical connection to the diagnostic problem at hand, but a strong pragmatic bearing on it (kind of like origami). The factory service manuals tell you to be systematic in eliminating variables, but they never take such factors into account. So you have to develop your own decision tree for the particular circumstances. The problem is that at each node of this new tree, your own, unquantifiable risk aversion introduces ambiguity. There comes a point where you have to step back and get a larger gestalt. Have a cigarette and walk around the lift. Any mechanic will tell you that it is invaluable to have other mechanics around to test your reasoning against, especially if they have a different intellectual disposition.

My shop-mate Tommy Van Auken was an accomplished visual artist, and I was repeatedly struck by his ability to literally see things that escaped me. I had the conceit of being an empiricist, but seeing things is not a simple matter. Even on the relatively primitive vintage bikes that were our specialty, some diagnostic situations contain so many variables, and symptoms can be so under-determining of causes, that explicit analytical reasoning comes up short. What is required then is the kind of judgment that arises only from experience; hunches rather than rules. There was more thinking going on in the bike shop than in the think tank.

Socially, being the proprietor of a bike shop in a small city gave me a feeling I never had before. I felt I had a place in society. Whereas “think tank” is an answer that, at best, buys you a few seconds when someone asks what you do, while you try to figure out what it is that you in fact do, with “motorcycle mechanic” I got immediate recognition. I bartered services with machinists and metal fabricators, which has a very different feel than transactions with money, and further increased my sense of social embeddedness. There were three restaurants with cooks whose bikes I had restored, where unless I deceive myself I was treated as a sage benefactor. I felt pride before my wife when we would go out to dinner and be given preferential treatment, or simply a hearty greeting. There were group rides, and bike night every Tuesday at a certain bar. Sometimes one or two people would be wearing my shop’s T-shirt. It felt good.

Given the intrinsic richness of manual work, cognitively, socially, and in its broader psychic appeal, the question becomes why it has suffered such a devaluation in recent years as a component of education. The economic rationale so often offered, namely that manual work is somehow going to disappear, is questionable if not preposterous, so it is in the murky realm of culture that we must look to understand these things. To this end, perhaps we need to consider the origins of shop class, so that we can better understand its demise.

**Arts, Crafts, and the Assembly Line**

At a time when Teddy Roosevelt preached the strenuous life and elites worried about their state of “over-civilized” spiritual decay, the project of getting back in touch with “real life” took various forms. One was romantic fantasy about the pre-modern craftsman. This was
understandable given changes in the world of work at the turn of the century, a time when the bureaucratization of economic life was rapidly increasing the number of paper shufflers. The tangible elements of craft were appealing as an antidote to vague feelings of unreality, diminished autonomy, and a fragmented sense of self that were especially acute among the professional classes.

The Arts and Crafts movement thus fit easily with the new therapeutic ethic of self-regeneration. Depleted from his workweek in the corporate world, the office worker repaired to his basement workshop to putter about and tinker, refreshing himself for the following week. As T. J. Jackson Lears writes in his history of the Progressive era, *No Place of Grace*, “toward the end of the nineteenth century, many beneficiaries of modern culture began to feel they were its secret victims.” Various forms of antimodernism gained wide currency in the middle and upper classes, including the ethic of craftsmanship. Some Arts and Crafts enthusiasts conceived their task to be evangelizing good taste as embodied in the works of craft, as against machine-age vulgarity. Cultivating an appreciation for objets d’art was thus a form of protest against modernity, with a view to providing a livelihood to dissident craftsmen. But it dovetailed with, and gave a higher urgency to, the nascent culture of luxury consumption. As Lears tells the story, the great irony is that antimodernist sentiments of aesthetic revolt against the machine paved the way for certain unattractive features of late-modern culture: therapeutic self-absorption and the hankering after “authenticity,” precisely those psychic hooks now relied upon by advertisers. Such spiritualized, symbolic modes of craft practice and craft consumption represented a kind of compensation for, and therefore an accommodation to, new modes of routinized, bureaucratic work.

But not everyone worked in an office. Indeed, there was class conflict brewing, with unassimilated immigrants accumulating in America’s Eastern cities and serious labor violence in Chicago and elsewhere. To the upper classes of those same cities, enamored of the craft ideal, the possibility presented itself that the laboring classes might remain satisfied with their material lot if they found joy in their labor. Shop class could serve to put the proper spin on manual work. Any work, it was posited, could be “artful” if done in the proper spirit; somehow a movement that had started with reverence for the craftsman now offered an apologistic for factory work. As Lears writes, “By shifting their attention from the conditions of labor to the laborer’s frame of mind, craft ideologues could acclaim the value of any work, however monotonous.”

The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 gave federal funding for manual training in two forms: as part of general education and as a separate vocational program. The invention of modern shop class thus serviced both cultural reflexes of the Arts and Crafts movement at once. The children of the managerial class could take shop as enrichment to the college-prep curriculum, making a bird-feeder to hang outside mom’s kitchen window, while the children of laborers would be socialized into the work ethic appropriate to their station through what was now called “industrial arts” education. The need for such socialization was not simply a matter of assimilating immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who lacked a Protestant work ethic. It was recognized as a necessity for the broader working-class population, precisely because the institutions that had previously served this socializing function, apprenticeship and guild traditions, had been destroyed by new modes of labor. Writing in 1918, one Robert Hoxie worried thus: “It is evident ... that the native efficiency of the working class must suffer from the neglect of apprenticeship, if no other means of industrial education is forthcoming. Scientific managers, themselves, have complained bitterly of the poor and lawless material from which they must recruit their workers, compared with the efficient and self-respecting craftsmen who applied for employment twenty years ago.”
Needless to say, “scientific managers” were concerned more with the “efficient” part of this formula than with the “self-respecting” part, yet the two are not independent. The quandary was how to make workers efficient and attentive, when their actual labor had been degraded by automation. The motivation previously supplied by the intrinsic satisfactions of manual work was to be replaced with ideology; industrial arts education now concerned itself with moral formation. Lears writes that “American craft publicists, by treating craftsmanship ... as an agent of socialization, abandoned [the] effort to revive pleasurable labor. Manual training meant specialized assembly line preparation for the lower classes and educational or recreational experiences for the bourgeoisie.”

Of the Smith-Hughes Act’s two rationales for shop class, vocational and general ed, only the latter emphasized the learning of aesthetic, mathematical, and physical principles through the manipulation of material things (Dewey’s “learning by doing”). It is not surprising, then, that the act came four years after Henry Ford’s innovation of the assembly line. The act’s dual educational scheme mirrored the assembly line’s severing of the cognitive aspects of manual work from its physical execution. Such a partition of thinking from doing has bequeathed us the dichotomy of “white collar” versus “blue collar,” corresponding to mental versus manual. These seem to be the categories that inform the educational landscape even now, and this entails two big errors. First, it assumes that all blue collar work is as mindless as assembly line work, and second, that white collar work is still recognizably mental in character. Yet there is evidence to suggest that the new frontier of capitalism lies in doing to office work what was previously done to factory work: draining it of its cognitive elements. Paradoxically, educators who would steer students toward cognitively rich work options might do this best by rehabilitating the manual trades, based on a firmer grasp of what such work is really like. And would this not be in keeping with their democratic mission? Let them publicly honor those who gain real craft knowledge, the sort we all depend on every day.

The Degradation of Blue-Collar Work

The degradation of work in the last century is often tied to the evils of technology in one way or another. And it is certainly true that “technical progress has multiplied the number of simplified jobs,” as one French sociologist wrote in the 1950s. This writer pointed out a resemblance between the Soviet bloc and the Western bloc with regard to work; both rival civilizations were developing “that separation between planning and execution which seems to be in our day a common denominator linking all industrial societies together.” Yet while technology plays a role in facilitating this separation of planning and execution, the basic logic that drives the separation rests not on technological progress, but rather on a certain mode of economic relations, as Harry Braverman has shown in his masterpiece of economic reflection, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Braverman was an avowed Marxist, writing in 1974. With the Cold War now safely decided, we may consider anew, without defensive ire, the Marxian account of alienated labor. Braverman gives a richly descriptive account of the degradation of many different kinds of work. In doing so, he offers nothing less than an explanation of why we are getting more stupid with every passing year — which is to say, the degradation of work is ultimately a cognitive matter.

The central culprit in Braverman’s account is “scientific management,” which “enters the workplace not as the representative of science, but as the representative of management masquerading in the trappings of science.” The tenets of scientific management were given their first and frankest articulation by Frederick Winslow Taylor, an unembarrassed evangelist of
efficiency whose *Principles of Scientific Management* was hugely influential in the early decades of the twentieth century. Stalin was a big fan, as were the founders of the first MBA program, at Harvard, where Taylor was invited to lecture annually. Taylor writes, “The managers assume ... the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae.” Scattered craft knowledge is concentrated in the hands of the employer, then doled out again to workers in the form of minute instructions needed to perform some part of what is now a work process. This process replaces what was previously an integral activity, rooted in craft tradition and experience, animated by the worker’s own mental image of, and intention toward, the finished product. Thus, according to Taylor, “All possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or lay-out department.” It is a mistake to suppose that the primary purpose of this partition is to render the work process more efficient. It may or may not result in extracting more value from a given unit of labor time. The concern is rather with labor cost. Once the cognitive aspects of the job are located in a separate management class, or better yet in a process that, once designed, requires no ongoing judgment or deliberation, skilled workers can be replaced with unskilled workers at a lower rate of pay. Taylor writes that the “full possibilities” of his system “will not have been realized until almost all of the machines in the shop are run by men who are of smaller caliber and attainments, and who are therefore cheaper than those required under the old system.”

What becomes of the skilled workers? They go elsewhere, of course. But the competitive labor-cost advantage now held by the more modern firm, which has aggressively separated planning from execution, compels the whole industry to follow the same route, and entire skilled trades disappear. Thus craft knowledge dies out, or rather gets instantiated in a different form, as process engineering knowledge. The conception of the work is remote from the worker who does it.

Scientific management introduced the use of “time and motion analysis” to describe the physiological capabilities of the human body in machine terms. As Braverman writes, “the more labor is governed by classified motions which extend across the boundaries of trades and occupations, the more it dissolves its concrete forms into the general types of work motions. This mechanical exercise of human faculties according to motion types which are studied independently of the particular kind of work being done, brings to life the Marxist conception of ‘abstract labor.’”

The clearest example of abstract labor is thus the assembly line. The activity (in the Aristotelian sense) of self-directed labor, conducted by the worker, is dissolved into abstract parts and then reconstituted as a process controlled by management.

At the turn of the last century, the manufacture of automobiles was done by craftsmen recruited from bicycle and carriage shops: all-around mechanics who knew what they were doing. In *The Wheelwright’s Shop*, George Sturt relates his experience in taking over his family business of making wheels for carriages, in 1884, shortly before the advent of the automobile. He had been a school teacher with literary ambitions, but now finds himself almost overwhelmed by the cognitive demands of his new trade. In Sturt’s shop, working exclusively with hand tools, the skills required to build a wheel regress all the way to the selection of trees to fell for timber, the proper time for felling them, how to season them, and so forth. To select but one minor task out of the countless he describes, here is Sturt’s account of fabricating a part of a wheel’s rim called a felloe:

Yet it is in vain to go into details at this point; for when the simple apparatus had all been gotten together for one simple-looking process, a never-ending series of variations was introduced by the material. What though two felloes might seem much alike when finished?
It was the wheelwright himself who had to make them so. He it was who hewed out that resemblance from quite dissimilar blocks, for no two felloe-blocks were ever alike. Knots here, shakes there, rind-galls, waney edges (edges with more or less bark in them), thicknesses, thinnesses, were forever affording new chances or forbidding previous solutions, whereby a fresh problem confronted the workman’s ingenuity every few minutes. He had no band-saw (as now [1923]) to drive, with ruthless unintelligence, through every resistance. The timber was far from being prey, a helpless victim, to a machine. Rather it would lend its own special virtues to the man who knew how to humour it.

Given their likely acquaintance with such a cognitively rich world of work, it is hardly surprising that when Henry Ford introduced the assembly line in 1913, workers simply walked out. One of Ford’s biographers wrote, “So great was labor’s distaste for the new machine system that toward the close of 1913 every time the company wanted to add 100 men to its factory personnel, it was necessary to hire 963.”

This would seem to be a crucial moment in the history of political economy. Evidently, the new system provoked natural revulsion. Yet, at some point, workers became habituated to it. How did this happen? One might be tempted to inquire in a typological mode: What sort of men were these first, the 100 out of 963 who stuck it out on the new assembly line? Perhaps it was the men who felt less revulsion because they had less pride in their own powers, and were therefore more tractable. Less republican, we might say. But if there was initially such a self-selection process, it quickly gave way to something less deliberate, more systemic.

In a temporary suspension of the Taylorist logic, Ford was forced to double the daily wage of his workers to keep the line staffed. As Braverman writes, this “opened up new possibilities for the intensification of labor within the plants, where workers were now anxious to keep their jobs.” These anxious workers were more productive. Indeed, Ford himself later recognized his wage increase as “one of the finest cost-cutting moves we ever made,” as he was able to double, and then triple, the rate at which cars were assembled by simply speeding up the conveyors. By doing so he destroyed his competitors, and thereby destroyed the possibility of an alternative way of working. (It also removed the wage pressure that comes from the existence of more enjoyable jobs.) At the Columbian World Expo held in Chicago in 1893, no fewer than seven large-scale carriage builders from Cincinnati alone presented their wares. Adopting Ford’s methods, the industry would soon be reduced to the Big Three. So workers eventually became habituated to the abstraction of the assembly line. Evidently, it inspires revulsion only if one is acquainted with more satisfying modes of work.

Here the concept of wages as compensation achieves its fullest meaning, and its central place in modern economy. Changing attitudes toward consumption seemed to play a role. A man whose needs are limited will find the least noxious livelihood and work in a subsistence mode, and indeed the experience of early (eighteenth-century) capitalism, when many producers worked at home on a piece-rate basis, was that only so much labor could be extracted from them. Contradicting the assumptions of “rational behavior” of classical economics, it was found that when employers would increase the piece rate in order to boost production, it actually had the opposite effect: workers would produce less, as now they could meet their fixed needs with less work. Eventually it was learned that the only way to get them to work harder was to play upon the imagination, stimulating new needs and wants. The habituation of workers to the assembly line was thus perhaps made easier by another innovation of the early twentieth century: consumer debt. As Jackson Lears
has shown in a recent article, through the installment plan, previously unthinkable acquisitions became thinkable, and more than thinkable: it became normal to carry debt. The display of a new car bought on installment became a sign that one was trustworthy. In a wholesale transformation of the old Puritan moralism, expressed by Benjamin Franklin (admittedly no Puritan) with the motto “Be frugal and free,” the early twentieth century saw the moral legitimation of spending. Indeed, 1907 saw the publication of a book with the immodest title _The New Basis of Civilization_, by Simon Nelson Patten, in which the moral valence of debt and spending is reversed, and the multiplication of wants becomes not a sign of dangerous corruption but part of the civilizing process. That is, part of the disciplinary process. As Lears writes, “Indebtedness could discipline workers, keeping them at routinized jobs in factories and offices, graying but in harness, meeting payments regularly.”

**The Degradation of White-Collar Work**

Much of the “jobs of the future” rhetoric surrounding the eagerness to end shop class and get every warm body into college, thence into a cubicle, implicitly assumes that we are heading to a “post-industrial” economy in which everyone will deal only in abstractions. Yet trafficking in abstractions is not the same as thinking. White collar professions, too, are subject to routinization and degradation, proceeding by the same process as befell manual fabrication a hundred years ago: the cognitive elements of the job are appropriated from professionals, instantiated in a system or process, and then handed back to a new class of workers — clerks — who replace the professionals. If genuine knowledge work is not growing but actually shrinking, because it is coming to be concentrated in an ever-smaller elite, this has implications for the vocational advice that students ought to receive.

“Expert systems,” a term coined by artificial intelligence researchers, were initially developed by the military for battle command, then used to replicate industrial expertise in such fields as oil-well drilling and telephone-line maintenance. Then they found their way into medical diagnosis, and eventually the cognitively murky, highly lucrative, regions of financial and legal advice. In _The Electronic Sweatshop: How Computers are Transforming the Office of the Future into the Factory of the Past_, Barbara Garson details how “Extraordinary human ingenuity has been used to eliminate the need for human ingenuity.” She finds that, like Taylor’s rationalization of the shop floor, the intention of expert systems is “to transfer knowledge, skill, and decision making from employee to employer.” While Taylor’s time and motion studies broke every concrete work motion into minute parts,

The modern knowledge engineer performs similar detailed studies, only he anatomizes decision making rather than bricklaying. So the time-and-motion study has become a time-and-thought study.... To build an expert system, a living expert is debriefed and then cloned by a knowledge engineer. That is to say, an expert is interviewed, typically for weeks or months. The knowledge engineer watches the expert work on sample problems and asks exactly what factors the expert considered in making his apparently intuitive decisions. Eventually hundreds or thousands of rules of thumb are fed into the computer. The result is a program that can ‘make decisions’ or ‘draw conclusions’ heuristically instead of merely calculating with equations. Like a real expert, a sophisticated expert system should be able to draw inferences from ‘iffy’ or incomplete data that seems to suggest or tends to rule out. In other words it uses (or replaces) judgment.
The human expert who is cloned achieves a vast dominion and immortality, in a sense. It is other experts, and future experts, who are displaced as expertise is centralized. “This means that more people in the advice or human service business will be employed as the disseminators, rather than the originators, of this advice,” Garson writes. In his 2006 book The Culture of the New Capitalism, Richard Sennett describes just such a process, “especially in the cutting-edge realms of high finance, advanced technology, and sophisticated services”: genuine knowledge work comes to be concentrated in an ever-smaller elite. It seems we must take a cold-eyed view of “knowledge work,” and reject the image of a rising sea of pure mentation that lifts all boats. More likely is a rising sea of clerkdom. To expect otherwise is to hope for a reversal in the basic logic of the modern economy — that is, cognitive stratification. It is not clear to me what this hope could be based on, though if history is any guide we have to wonder whether the excitation of such a hope has become an instrument by which young people are prepared for clerkdom, in the same perverse way that the craft ideology prepared workers for the assembly line. Both provide a lens that makes the work look appealing from afar, but only by presenting an image that is upside down.

**The Craftsman as Stoic**

We are recalled to the basic antagonism of economic life: work is toilsome and necessarily serves someone else’s interests. That’s why you get paid. Thus chastened, we may ask the proper question: what is it that we really want for a young person when we give them vocational advice? The only creditable answer, it seems to me, is one that avoids utopianism while keeping an eye on the human good: work that engages the human capacities as fully as possible. What I have tried to show is that this humane and commonsensical answer goes against the central imperative of capitalism, which assiduously partitions thinking from doing. What is to be done? I offer no program, only an observation that might be of interest to anyone called upon to give guidance to the young.

Since manual work has been subject to routinization for over a century, the nonroutinized manual work that remains, outside the confines of the factory, would seem to be resistant to much further routinization. There still appear developments around the margins; for example, in the last twenty years pre-fabricated roof trusses have eliminated some of the more challenging elements from the jobs of framers who work for large tract developers, and pre-hung doors have done the same for finish carpenters generally. But still, the physical circumstances of the jobs performed by carpenters, plumbers, and auto mechanics vary too much for them to be executed by idiots; they require circumspection and adaptability. One feels like a man, not a cog in a machine. The trades are then a natural home for anyone who would live by his own powers, free not only of deadening abstraction, but also of the insidious hopes and rising insecurities that seem to be endemic in our current economic life. This is the stoic ideal.

So what advice should one give to a young person? By all means, go to college. In fact, approach college in the spirit of craftsmanship, going deep into liberal arts and sciences. In the summers, learn a manual trade. You’re likely to be less damaged, and quite possibly better paid, as an independent tradesman than as a cubicle-dwelling tender of information systems. To heed such advice would require a certain contrarian streak, as it entails rejecting a life course mapped out by others as obligatory and inevitable.
The Law of Gravitation, an Example of Physical Law

Richard P. Feynman


Richard P. Feynman (1918-1999), winner of the 1965 Nobel Prize in Physics for his work developing the theory of Quantum Electrodynamics (QED), was one of the most famous theoretical physicists of the 20th century. His contributions spanned many decades from his work developing the atomic bomb on the Manhattan Project to serving on the Presidential Rogers Commission, which was tasked with investigating the space shuttle Challenger disaster. From 1961-1963, Feynman taught the 2-year introductory physics sequence at Caltech, which were published as The Feynman Lectures on Physics. In the first lecture, he explains the scientific way of knowing:

The principle of science, the definition, almost, is the following: The test of all knowledge is experiment. Experiment is the sole judge of scientific “truth.” But what is the source of knowledge? Where do the laws that are to be tested come from? Experiment, itself, helps to produce these laws, in the sense that it gives us hints. But also needed is imagination to create from these hints the great generalizations—to guess at the wonderful, simple, but very strange patterns beneath them all, and then to experiment to check again whether we have made the right guess. (From The Feynman Lectures on Physics, 1963, Chapter 1).

In 1964, Feynman was asked to give Cornell University’s annual Messenger Lectures. The following reading is the first of seven lectures in the series, recounting the history and methodology behind the Law of Gravitation.

It is odd, but on the infrequent occasions when I have been called upon in a formal place to play the bongo drums, the introducer never seems to find it necessary to mention that I also do theoretical physics. I believe that is probably because we respect the arts more than the sciences. The artists of the Renaissance said that man’s main concern should be for man, and yet there are other things of interest in the world. Even the artists appreciate sunsets, and the ocean waves, and the march of the stars across the heavens. There is then some reason to talk of other things sometimes. As we look into these things we get an aesthetic pleasure from them directly on observation. There is also a rhythm and a pattern between the phenomena of nature which is not apparent to the eye, but only to the eye of analysis; and it is these rhythms and patterns which we call Physical Laws. What I want to discuss in this series of lectures is the general characteristic of these Physical Laws; that is another level, if you will, of higher generality over the laws themselves. Really what I am considering is nature as seen as a result of detailed analysis, but mainly I wish to speak about only the most overall general qualities of nature.

Now such a topic has a tendency to become too philosophical because it becomes so general, and a person talks in such generalities, that everybody can understand him. It is then considered to be some deep philosophy. I would like to be rather more special, and I would like to be understood in an honest way rather than in a vague way. So in this first lecture I am going to try to give, instead of only the generalities, an example of physical law, so that you have at least one
example of the things about which I am speaking generally. In this way I can use this example again and again to give an instance, or to make a reality out of something which will otherwise be too abstract. I have chosen for my special example of physical law the theory of gravitation, the phenomena of gravity. Why I chose gravity I do not know. Actually it was one of the first great laws to be discovered and it has an interesting history. You may say, ‘Yes, but then it is old hat, I would like to hear something about a more modern science’. More recent perhaps, but not more modern. Modern science is exactly in the same tradition as the discoveries of the Law of Gravitation. It is only more recent discoveries that we would be talking about. I do not feel at all bad about telling you about the Law of Gravitation because in describing its history and methods, the character of its discovery, its quality, I am being completely modern.

This law has been called ‘the greatest generalization achieved by the human mind’, and you can guess already from my introduction that I am interested not so much in the human mind as in the marvel of a nature which can obey such an elegant and simple law as this law of gravitation. Therefore our main concentration will not be on how clever we are to have found it all out, but on how clever nature is to pay attention to it.

The Law of Gravitation is that two bodies exert a force upon each other which varies inversely as the square of the distance between them, and varies directly as the product of their masses. Mathematically we can write that great law down in the formula:

\[ F = G \frac{mm'}{r^2} \]

some kind of a constant multiplied by the product of the two masses, divided by the square of the distance. Now if I add the remark that a body reacts to a force by accelerating, or by changing its velocity every second to an extent inversely as its mass, or that it changes its velocity more if the mass is lower, inversely as the mass, then I have said everything about the Law of Gravitation that needs to be said. Everything else is a mathematical consequence of those two things. Now I know that you are not all mathematicians, and you cannot immediately see all of the consequences of these two remarks, so what I would like to do here is to tell you briefly of the story of the discovery, what some of the consequences are, what effect this discovery had on the history of science, what kind of mysteries such a law entails, something about the refinements made by Einstein, and possibly the relation to the other laws of physics.

The history of the thing, briefly, is this. The ancients first observed the way the planets seemed to move in the sky and concluded that they all, along with the earth, went around the sun. This discovery was later made independently by Copernicus, after people had forgotten that it had already been made. Now the next question that came up for study was: exactly how do they go around the sun, that is, with exactly what kind of motion? Do they go with the sun as the centre of a circle, or do they go in some other kind of curve? How fast do they move? And so on. This discovery took longer to make. The times after Copernicus were times in which there were great debates about whether the planets in fact went around the sun along with the earth, or whether the earth was at the centre of the universe and so on. Then a man named Tycho Brahe (1546-1601, Danish astronomer) evolved a way of answering the question. He thought that it might perhaps be a good idea to look very very carefully and to record exactly where the planets appear in the sky, and then the alternative theories might be distinguished from one another. This is the key of modern science and it was the beginning of the true understanding of Nature - this idea to look at the thing, to record the details, and to hope that in the information thus obtained might lie a clue
to one or another theoretical interpretation. So Tycho, a rich man who owned an island near Copenhagen, outfitted his island with great brass circles and special observing positions, and recorded night after night the position of the planets. It is only through such hard work that we can find out anything.

When all these data were collected they came into the hands of Kepler (1571-1630, German astronomer and mathematician, assistant to Brahe), who then tried to analyse what kind of motion the planets made around the sun. And he did this by a method of trial and error. At one stage he thought he had it; he figured out that they went round the sun in circles with the sun off centre. Then Kepler noticed that one planet, I think it was Mars, was eight minutes of arc off, and he decided this was too big for Tycho Brahe to have made an error, and that this was not the right answer. So because of the precision of the experiments he was able to proceed to another trial and ultimately found out three things.

First, he found that the planets went in ellipses around the sun with the sun as a focus. An ellipse is a curve all artists know about because it is a foreshortened circle. Children also know because someone told them that if you put a ring on a piece of cord, anchored at each end, and then put a pencil in the ring, it will draw an ellipse (fig. 1).

![Figure 1](image1.png)

The two points A and B are the foci. The orbit of a planet around the sun is an ellipse with the sun at one focus. The next question is: In going around the ellipse, how does the planet go? Does it go faster when it is near the sun? Does it go slower when it is farther from the sun? Kepler found the answer to this too (fig. 2).

![Figure 2](image2.png)
He found that, if you put down the position of a planet at two times, separated by some definite period, let us say three weeks - then in another place on its orbit two positions of the planet again separated by three weeks, and draw lines (technically called radius vectors) from the sun to the planet, then the area that is enclosed in the orbit of the planet and the two lines that are separated by the planet’s position three weeks apart is the same, in any part of the orbit. So that the planet has to go faster when it is closer to the sun, and slower when it is farther away, in order to show precisely the same area.

Some several years later Kepler found a third rule, which was not concerned only with the motion of a single planet around the sun but related various planets to each other. It said that the time the planet took to go all around the sun was related to the size of the orbit, and that the times varied as the square root of the cube of the size of the orbit and for this the size of the orbit is the diameter across the biggest distance on the ellipse. Kepler then had these three laws which are summarized by saying that the orbit forms an ellipse, and that equal areas are swept in equal times and that the time to go round varies as a three half power of the size, that is, the square root of the cube of the size. These three laws of Kepler give a complete description of the motion of the planets around the sun.

The next question was - what makes planets go around the sun? At the time of Kepler some people answered this problem by saying that there were angels behind them beating their wings and pushing the planets around an orbit. As you will see, the answer is not very far from the truth. The only difference is that the angels sit in a different direction and their wings push inwards.

In the meantime, Galileo was investigating the laws of motion of ordinary objects at hand on the earth. In studying these laws, and doing a number of experiments to see how balls run down inclined planes, and how pendulums swing, and so on, Galileo discovered a great principle called the principle of inertia, which is this: that if an object has nothing acting on it and is going along at a certain velocity in a straight line it will go at the same velocity in exactly the same straight line for ever. Unbelievable as that may sound to anybody who has tried to make a ball roll for ever, if this idealization were correct, and there were no influences acting, such as the friction of the floor and so on, the ball would go at a uniform speed for ever.

The next point was made by Newton, who discussed the question: ‘When it does not go in a straight line then what?’ And he answered it this way: that a force is needed to change the velocity in any manner. For instance, if you are pushing a ball in the direction that it moves it will speed up. If you find that it changes direction, then the force must have been sideways. The force can be measured by the product of two effects. How much does the velocity change in a small interval of time? That’s called the acceleration, and when it is multiplied by the coefficient called the mass of an object, or its inertia coefficient, then that together is the force. One can measure this. For instance, if one has a stone on the end of a string and swings it in a circle over the head, one finds one has to pull, the reason is that although the speed is not changing as it goes round in a circle, it is changing its direction; there must be a perpetually in-pulling force, and this is proportional to the mass. So that if we were to take two different objects, and swing first one and then the other at the same speed around the head, and measure the force in the second one, then that second force is bigger than the other force in proportion as the masses are different. This is a way of measuring the masses by what force is necessary to change the speed. Newton saw from this that, to take a simple example, if a planet is going in a circle around the sun, no force is needed to make it go sideways, tangentially; if there were no force at all then it would just keep coasting along. But actually the planet does not keep coasting along, it finds itself later not way out where it would go if there were no force at all, but farther down towards the sun. (fig. 3.)
In other words, its velocity, its motion, has been deflected towards the sun. So that what the angels have to do is to beat their wings in towards the sun all the time.

But the motion to keep the planet going in a straight line has no known reason. The reason why things coast for ever has never been found out. The law of inertia has no known origin. Although the angels do not exist the continuation of the motion does, but in order to obtain the falling operation we do need a force. It became apparent that the origin of the force was towards the sun. As a matter of fact Newton was able to demonstrate that the statement that equal areas are swept in equal times was a direct consequence of the simple idea that all the changes in velocity are directed exactly towards the sun, even in the elliptical case, and in the next lecture I shall be able to show you how it works, in detail.

From this law Newton confirmed the idea that the force is towards the sun, and from knowing how the periods of the differed planets vary with the distance away from the sun, it is possible to determine how that force must weaken at different distances. He was able to determine that the force must vary inversely as the square of the distance.

So far Newton has not said anything, because he has only stated two things which Kepler said in a different language. One is exactly equivalent to the statement that the force is towards the sun, and the other is exactly equivalent to the statement that the force is inversely as the square of the distance.

But people had seen in telescopes Jupiter’s satellites going around Jupiter, and it looked like a little solar system, as if the satellites were attracted to Jupiter. The moon is attracted to the earth and goes round the earth and is attracted in the same way. It looks as though everything is attracted to everything else, and so the next statement was to generalize this and to say that every object attracts every object. If so, the earth must be pulling on the moon, just as the sun pulls on the planet. But it is known that the earth is pulling on things - because you are all sitting tightly on your seats in spite of your desire to float into the air. The pull for objects on the earth was well known in the phenomena of gravitation, and it was Newton’s idea that maybe the gravitation that held the moon in orbit was the same gravitation that pulled the object towards the earth.

It is easy to figure out how far the moon falls in one second, because you know the size of the orbit, you know the moon takes a month to go around the earth, and if you figure out how far it goes in one second you can figure out how far the circle of the moon’s orbit has fallen below the straight line that it would have been in if it did not go the way it does go. This distance is one twentieth of an inch. The moon is sixty times as far away from the earth’s centre as we are; we are 4,000 miles away from the centre, and the moon is 240,000 miles away from the centre, so if the law of inverse square is right, an object at the earth’s surface should fall in one second by 1/20 inch x 3,600 (the square of 60) because the force in getting out there to the moon, has been weakened by 60 x 60 by the inverse square law. 1/20 inch x 3,600 is about 16 feet, and it was
known already from Galileo’s measurements that things fall in one second on the earth’s surface by 16 feet. So this meant that Newton was on the right track, there was no going back now, because a new fact which was completely independent previously, the period of the moon’s orbit and its distance from the earth, was connected to another fact, how long it takes something to fall in one second at the earth’s surface. This was a dramatic test that everything is all right.

Further, Newton had a lot of other predictions. He was able to calculate what the shape of the orbit should be if the law were the inverse square, and he found, indeed, that it was an ellipse - so he got three for two as it were. In addition, a number of new phenomena had obvious explanations. One was the tides. The tides were due to the pull of the moon on the earth and its waters. This had sometimes been thought of before, with the difficulty that if it was the pull of the moon on the waters, making the water higher on the side where the moon was, then there would only be one tide a day under the moon (fig. 4), but actually we know there are tides roughly every twelve hours, and that is two tides a day. There was also another school of thought that came to a different conclusion. Their theory was that it was the earth pulled by the moon away from the water. Newton was actually the first one to realize what was going on; that the force of the moon on the earth and on the water is the same at the same distance, and that the water at y is closer to the moon and the water at x is farther from the moon than the rigid earth. The water is pulled more towards the moon at y, and at x is less towards the moon than the earth, so there is a combination of those two pictures that makes a double tide. Actually the earth does the same trick as the moon, it goes around in a circle. The force of the moon on the earth is balanced, but by what? By the fact that just as the moon goes in a circle to balance the earth’s force, the earth is also going in a circle. The centre of the circle is somewhere inside the earth. It is also going in a circle to balance the moon. The two of them go around a common centre so the forces are balanced for the earth, but the water at x is pulled less, and at y more by the moon and it bulges out at both sides. At any rate tides were then explained, and the fact that there were two a day. A lot of other things became clear: how the earth is round because everything gets pulled in, and how it is not round because it is spinning and the outside gets thrown out a little bit, and it balances; how the sun and moon are round, and so on.

As science developed and measurements were made more accurate, the tests of Newton’s Law became more stringent, and the first careful tests involved the moons of Jupiter. By accurate
observations of the way they went around over long periods of time one could check that everything was according to Newton, and it turned out to be not the case. The moons of Jupiter appeared to get sometimes eight minutes ahead of time and sometimes eight minutes behind time, where the time is the calculated value according to Newton’s Laws. It was noticed that they were ahead of schedule when Jupiter was close to the earth and behind schedule when it was far away, a rather odd circumstance. Mr. Roemer (1644-1710, Danish astronomer) having confidence in the Law of Gravitation, came to the interesting conclusion that it takes light some time to travel from the moons of Jupiter to the earth, and what we are looking at when we see the moons is not how they are now but how they were the time ago it took the light to get here. When Jupiter is near us it takes less time for the light to come, and when Jupiter is farther from us it takes longer time, so Roemer had to correct the observations for the differences in time and by the fact that they were this much early or that much late. In this way he was able to determine the velocity of light. This was the first demonstration that light was not an instantaneously propagating material.

I bring this particular matter to your attention because it illustrates that when a law is right it can be used to find another one. If we have confidence in a law, then if something appears to be wrong it can suggest to us another phenomenon. If we had not known the Law of Gravitation we would have taken much longer to find the speed of light, because we would not have known what to expect of Jupiter’s satellites. This process has developed into an avalanche of discoveries, each new discovery permits the tools for much more discovery, and this is the beginning of the avalanche which has gone on now for 400 years in a continuous process, and we are still avalanching along at high speed.

Another problem came up - the planets should not really go in ellipses, because according to Newton’s Laws they are not only attracted by the sun but also they pull on each other a little - only a little, but that little is something, and will alter the motion a little bit. Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus were big planets that were known, and calculations were made about how slightly different from the perfect ellipses of Kepler the planets ought to be going by the pull of each on the others. And at the end of the calculations and observations it was noticed that Jupiter and Saturn went according to the calculations, but that Uranus was doing something funny. Another opportunity for Newton’s Laws to be found wanting; but take courage! Two men, Adams (1819-92, mathematical astronomer) and Leverrier (1811-77, French astronomer), who made these calculations independently and at almost exactly the same time, proposed that the motions of Uranus were due to an unseen planet, and they wrote letters to their respective observatories telling them - ‘Turn your telescope and look there and you will find a planet’. ‘How absurd,’ said one of the observatories, ‘some guy sitting with pieces of paper and pencils can tell us where to look to find some new planet.’ The other observatory was more ... well, the administration was different, and they found Neptune!

More recently, in the beginning of the twentieth century, it became apparent that the motion of the planet Mercury was not exactly right. This caused a lot of trouble and was not explained until it was shown by Einstein that Newton’s Laws were slightly off and that they had to be modified.

The question is, how far does this law extend? Does it extend outside the solar system? And so I show on Plate 1 evidence that the Law of Gravitation is on a wider scale than just the fortunately in the picture so that you can see they are really turning around and that nobody simply turned the frames of the pictures around, which is easy to do on astronomical pictures.
Plate 1. Three photographs taken at different times of the same double star system.
The stars are actually going around, and you can see the orbit that they make on figure 5.

It is evident that they are attracting each other and that they are going around in an ellipse according to the way expected. These are a succession of positions at various times going around clockwise. You will be happy except when you notice, if you have not noticed already, that the centre is not a focus of the ellipse but is quite a bit off. So something is the matter with the law? No, God has not presented us with this orbit face-on; it is tilted at a funny angle. If you take an ellipse and mark its focus and hold the paper at an odd angle and look at it in projection, you will find that the focus does not have to be at the focus of the projected image. It is because the orbit is tilted in space that it looks that way.

How about a bigger distance? This force is between two stars; does it go any farther than distances which are not more than two or three times the solar system’s diameter? Here is something in plate 2 that is 100,000 times as big as the solar system in diameter; this is a tremendous number of stars. This large white spot is not a solid white spot; it appears like that because of the failure of the instruments to resolve it, but there are very very tiny spots just like other stars, well separated from each other, not hitting one another, each one falling through and back and forth in this great globular cluster. It is one of the most beautiful things in the sky; it is as beautiful as sea waves and sunsets. The distribution of this material is perfectly clear. The thing that holds this galaxy together is the gravitational attraction of the stars for each other. The
distribution of the material and the sense of distance permits one to find out roughly what the law of force is between the stars ... and, of course, it comes out that it is roughly the inverse square. Accuracy in these calculations and measurements is not anywhere near as careful as in the solar system.

Onward, gravity extends still farther. That cluster was just a little pin-point inside the big galaxy in plate 3, which shows a typical galaxy, and it is clear that again this thing is held together by some force, and the only candidate that is reasonable is gravitation. When we get to this size we have no way of checking the inverse square law, but there seems to be no doubt that in these great agglomerations of stars - these galaxies are 50,000 to 100,000 light years across, while the distance from the earth to the sun is only eight light minutes - gravity is extending even over these distances. In plate 4 is evidence that it extends even farther. This is what is called a cluster of galaxies; they are all in one lump and analogous to the cluster of stars, but this time what is clustered are those big babies shown in plate 3.
This is as far as about one tenth, maybe a hundredth, of the size of the Universe, as far as we have any direct evidence that gravitational forces extend. So the earth’s gravitation has no edge, although you may read in the papers that something gets outside the field of gravitation. It becomes weaker and weaker inversely as the square of the distance, divided by four each time you get twice as far away, until it is lost in the confusion of the strong fields of other stars. Together with the stars in its neighbourhood it pulls the other stars to form the galaxy, and all together they pull on other galaxies and make a pattern, a cluster, of galaxies. So the earth’s gravitational field never ends, but peters out very slowly in a precise and careful law, probably to the edges of the Universe.
The Law of Gravitation is different from many of the others. Clearly it is very important in the economy, in the machinery, of the Universe; there are many places where gravity has its practical applications as far as the Universe is concerned. But atypically the knowledge of the Laws of Gravitation has relatively few practical applications compared with the other laws of physics. This is one case where I have picked an atypical example. It is impossible, by the way, by picking one of anything to pick one that is not atypical in some sense. That is the wonder of the world. The only applications of the knowledge of the law that I can think of are in geophysical prospecting, in predicting the tides, and nowadays, more modernly, in working out the motions of the satellites and planet probes that we send up, and so on; and finally, also modernly, to calculate the predictions of the planets’ positions, which have great utility for astrologists who publish their predictions in horoscopes in the magazines. It is a strange world we live in - that all the new advances in understanding are used only to continue the nonsense which has existed for 2,000 years.

I must mention the important places where gravitation does have some real effect in the behaviour of the Universe, and one of the interesting ones is in the formation of new stars. Plate 5 is a gaseous nebula inside our own galaxy; it is not a lot of stars; it is gas. The black specks are places where the gas has been compressed or attracted to itself. Perhaps it starts by some kind of shock waves, but the remainder of the phenomenon is that gravitation pulls the gas closer and closer together so that big mobs of gas and dust collect and form balls; and as they fall still farther, the heat generated by falling lights them up, and they become stars.

Plate 5: a gaseous nebula

And we have in plate 6 some evidence of the creation of new stars.
So this is how stars are born, when the gas collects together too much by gravitation. Sometimes when they explode the stars belch out dirt and gases, and the dirt and gases collect back again and make new stars - it sounds like perpetual motion.

I have already shown that gravitation extends to great distances, but Newton said that everything attracted everything else. Is it really true that two things attract each other? Can we make a direct test and not just wait to see whether the planets attract each other? A direct test was made by Cavendish (1731-1810, English physicist and chemist) on equipment which you see indicated in figure 6. The idea was to hang by a very very fine quartz fibre a
rod with two balls, and then put two large lead balls in the positions indicated next to it on the side. Because of the attraction of the balls there would be a slight twist to the fibre, and the gravitational force between ordinary things is very very tiny indeed. It was possible to measure the force between the two balls. Cavendish called his experiment ‘weighing the earth’. With pedantic and careful teaching today we would not let our students say that; we would have to say ‘measuring the mass of the earth’. By a direct experiment Cavendish was able to measure the force, the two masses and the distance, and thus determine the gravitational constant, $G$. You say, ‘Yes, but we have the same situation here. We know what the pull is and we know what the mass of the object pulled is, and we know how far away we are, but we do not know either the mass of the earth or the constant, only the combination’. By measuring the constant, and knowing the facts about the pull of the earth, the mass of the earth could be determined.

Indirectly this experiment was the first determination of how heavy or massive is the ball on which we stand. It is an amazing achievement to find that out, and I think that is why Cavendish named his experiment ‘weighing the earth’, instead of ‘determining the constant in the gravitational equation’. He, incidentally, was weighing the sun and everything else at the same time, because the pull of the sun is known in the same manner.

One other test of the law of gravity is very interesting, and that is the question whether the pull is exactly proportional to the mass. If the pull is exactly proportional to the mass, and the reaction to force, the motions induced by forces, changes in velocity, are inversely proportional to the mass. That means that two objects of different mass will change their velocity in the same manner in a gravitational field; or two different things in a vacuum, no matter what their mass, will fall the same way to the earth. That is Galileo’s old experiment from the leaning tower of Pisa. It means, for example, that in a man-made satellite, an object inside will go round the earth in the same kind of orbit as one on the outside, and thus apparently float in the middle. The fact that the force is exactly proportional to the mass, and that the reactions are inversely proportional to the mass, has this very interesting consequence.

How accurate is it? It was measured in an experiment by a man named Eotvos (1848-1919, Hungarian physicist) in 1909 and very much more recently and more accurately by Dicke (American physicist) and is known to one part in 10,000,000,000. The forces are exactly
proportional to the mass. How is it possible to measure with that accuracy? Suppose you wanted to measure whether it is true for the pull of the sun. You know the sun is pulling us all, it pulls the earth too, but suppose you wanted to know whether the pull is exactly proportional to the inertia. The experiment was first done with sandalwood; lead and copper have been used, and now it is done with polyethylene. The earth is going around the sun, so the things are thrown out by inertia and they are thrown out to the extent that the two objects have inertia. But they are attracted to the sun to the extent that they have mass, in the attraction law. So if they are attracted to the sun in a different proportion from that thrown out by inertia, one will be pulled towards the sun, and the other away from it, and so, hanging them on opposite ends of a rod on another Cavendish quartz fibre, the thing will twist towards the sun. It does not twist at this accuracy, so we know that the sun’s attraction to the two objects is exactly proportional to the centrifugal effect, which is inertia; therefore, the force of attraction on an object is exactly proportional to its coefficient of inertia; in other words, its mass.

One thing is particularly interesting. The inverse square law appears again - in the electrical laws, for instance. Electricity also exerts forces inversely as the square of the distance, this time between charges, and one thinks perhaps that the inverse square of the distance has some deep significance. No one has ever succeeded in making electricity and gravity different aspects of the same thing. Today our theories of physics, the laws of physics, are a multitude of different parts and pieces that do not fit together very well. We do not have one structure from which all is deduced; we have several pieces that do not quite fit exactly yet. That is the reason why in these lectures instead of having the ability to tell you what the law of physics is, I have to talk about the things that are common to the various laws; we do not understand the connection between them. But what is very strange is that there are certain things which are the same in both. Now let us look again at the law of electricity.

The force goes inversely as the square of the distance, but the thing that is remarkable is the tremendous difference in the strength of the electrical and gravitational forces. People who want to make electricity and gravitation out of the same thing will find that electricity is so much more powerful than gravity, it is hard to believe they could both have the same origin. How can I say one thing is more powerful than another? It depends upon how much charge you have, and how much mass you have. You cannot talk about how strong gravity is by saying: ‘I take a lump of such a size’, because you chose the size. If we try to get something that Nature produces - her own pure number that has nothing to do with inches or years or anything to do with our own dimensions - we can do it this way. If we take a fundamental particle such as an electron - any different one will give a different number, but to give an idea say electrons - two electrons are two fundamental particles, and they repel each other inversely as the square of the distance due to electricity, and they attract each other inversely as the square of the distance due to gravitation.
Question: What is the ratio of the gravitational force to the electrical force? That is

\[
\frac{\text{Gravitation Attraction}}{\text{Electrical Repulsion}} = \frac{1}{4.17 \times 10^{42}}
\]

Illustrated in figure 7. The ratio of the gravitational attraction to electrical repulsion is given by a number with 42 digits tailing off. Now therein lies a very deep mystery. Where could such a tremendous number come from? If you ever had a theory from which both of these things are to come, how could they come in such disproportion? What equation has a solution which has for two kinds of forces an attraction and repulsion with that fantastic ratio?

People have looked for such a large ratio in other places. They hope, for example, that there is another large number, and if you want a large number why not take the diameter of the Universe to the diameter of a proton - amazingly enough it also is a number with 42 digits. And so an interesting proposal is made that this ratio is the same as the ratio of the size of the Universe to the diameter of a proton. But the Universe is expanding with time and that means that the gravitational constant is changing with time, and although that is a possibility there is no evidence to indicate that it is a fact. There are several partial indications that the gravitational constant has not changed in that way. So this tremendous number remains a mystery.

To finish about the theory of gravitation, I must say two more things. One is that Einstein had to modify the Laws of Gravitation in accordance with his principles of relativity. The first of the principles was that ‘x’ cannot occur instantaneously, while Newton’s theory said that the force was instantaneous. He had to modify Newton’s laws. They have very small effects, these modifications. One of them is that all masses fall, light has energy and energy is equivalent to
mass. So light falls and it means that light going near the sun is deflected; it is. Also the force of gravitation is slightly modified in Einstein’s theory, so that the law has changed very very slightly, and it is just the right amount to account for the slight discrepancy that was found in the movement of Mercury.

Finally, in connection with the laws of physics on a small scale, we have found that the behaviour of matter on a small scale obeys laws very different from things on a large scale. So the question is, how does gravity look on a small scale? That is called the Quantum Theory of Gravity. There is no Quantum Theory of Gravity today. People have not succeeded completely in making a theory which is consistent with the uncertainty principles and the quantum mechanical principles.

You will say to me, ‘Yes, you told us what happens, but what is gravity? Where does it come from? What is it? Do you mean to tell me that a planet looks at the sun, sees how far it is, calculates the inverse square of the distance and then decides to move in accordance with that law?’ In other words, although I have stated the mathematical law, I have given no clue about the mechanism. I will discuss the possibility of doing this in the next lecture, ‘The relation of mathematics to physics’.

In this lecture I would like to emphasize, just at the end, some characteristics that gravity has in common with the other laws that we mentioned as we passed along. First, it is mathematical in its expression; the others are that way too. Second, it is not exact; Einstein had to modify it, and we know it is not quite right yet, because we have still to put the quantum theory in. That is the same with all our other laws - they are not exact. There is always an edge of mystery, always a place where we have some fiddling around to do yet. This may or may not be a property of Nature, but it certainly is common to all the laws as we know them today. It may be only a lack of knowledge.

But the most impressive fact is that gravity is simple. It is simple to state the principles completely and not have left any vagueness for anybody to change the ideas of the law. It is simple, and therefore it is beautiful. It is simple in its pattern. I do not mean it is simple in its action - the motions of the various planets and the perturbations of one on the other can be quite complicated to work out, and to follow how all those stars in a globular cluster move is quite beyond our ability. It is complicated in its actions, but the basic pattern or the system beneath the whole thing is simple. This is common to all our laws; they all turn out to be simple things, although complex in their actual actions.

Finally comes the universality of the gravitational law, and the fact that it extends over such enormous distances that Newton, in his mind, worrying about the solar system, was able to predict what would happen in an experiment of Cavendish, where Cavendish’s little model of the solar system, two balls attracting, has to be expanded ten million million times to become the solar system. Then ten million million times larger again we find galaxies attracting each other by exactly the same law. Nature uses only the longest threads to weave her patterns, so each small piece of her fabric reveals the organization of the entire tapestry.
Concerning Whether God Exists

St. Thomas Aquinas


St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a Catholic philosopher and theologian whose works have repeatedly been cited by the Church as being critical in understanding Christian revelation. Philosophically, he is best known for an interpretation of Aristotle that brought Aristotle's philosophy in line with Christian theology, and vice versa. In doing so, he helped establish a conception of the relationship between faith and reason that would hold until the scientific revolution.

QUESTION 2: THE EXISTENCE OF GOD (In Three Articles)

Concerning whether God exists, there are three points of inquiry:

(1) Whether the proposition "God exists" is self-evident?
(2) Whether it is demonstrable?
(3) Whether God exists?

FIRST ARTICLE [I, Q. 2, Art. 1] Whether the proposition “God exists” is self-evident?

Objection 1: It seems that the existence of God is self-evident. Now those things are said to be self-evident to us the knowledge of which is naturally implanted in us, as we can see in regard to first principles. But as Damascene says [John of Damascus (De Fide Orth.[The Orthodox Faith] i, 1,3)], "the knowledge of God is naturally implanted in all." Therefore the existence of God is self-evident.

Objection 2: Further, those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known, which the Philosopher [Aristotle, Posterior Analytics 1,3] says is true of the first principles of demonstration. Thus, when the nature of a whole and of a part is known, it is at once recognized that every whole is greater than its part. But as soon as the signification of the word "God" is understood, it is at once seen that God exists. For by this word is signified that thing than which nothing greater can be conceived. But that which exists actually and mentally is greater than that which exists only mentally. Therefore, since as soon as the word "God" is understood it exists mentally, it also follows that it exists actually. Therefore the proposition "God exists" is self-evident.

Objection 3: Further, the existence of truth is self-evident. For whoever denies the existence of truth grants that truth does not exist: and, if truth does not exist, then the proposition "Truth does not exist" is true: and if there is anything true, there must be truth. But God is truth itself: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) Therefore "God exists" is self-evident.

On the contrary, No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident; as the Philosopher [Aristotle (Metaphysics. iv, lect. vi)] states concerning the first principles of demonstration. But the opposite of the proposition "God is" can be mentally admitted: "The fool said in his heart, There is no God" (Ps. 52:1). Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident.

I answer that, A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways: on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us. A proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the essence of the subject, as "Man is an animal," for animal
is contained in the essence of man. If, therefore the essence of the predicate and subject be known to all, the proposition will be self-evident to all; as is clear with regard to the first principles of demonstration, the terms of which are common things that no one is ignorant of, such as being and non-being, whole and part, and such like. If, however, there are some to whom the essence of the predicate and subject is unknown, the proposition will be self-evident in itself, but not to those who do not know the meaning of the predicate and subject of the proposition. Therefore, it happens, as Boethius says (Hebdom., the title of which is: "Whether all that is, is good" [De hebdomadibus]), "that there are some mental concepts self-evident only to the learned, as that incorporeal substances are not in space." Therefore I say that this proposition, "God exists," of itself is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as the subject, because God is His own existence as will be hereafter shown (Q. 3, Art. 4). Now because we do not know the essence of God, the proposition is not self-evident to us; but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us, though less known in their nature—namely, by effects.

Reply Objection 1: To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by man must be naturally known to him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching: for many there are who imagine that man's perfect good which is happiness, consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others in something else.

Reply Objection 2: Perhaps not everyone who hears this word "God" understands it to signify something than which nothing greater can be thought, seeing that some have believed God to be a body. Yet, granted that everyone understands that by this word "God" is signified something than which nothing greater can be thought, nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally. Nor can it be argued that it actually exists, unless it be admitted that there actually exists something than which nothing greater can be thought; and this precisely is not admitted by those who hold that God does not exist.

Reply Objection 3: The existence of truth in general is self-evident but the existence of a Primal Truth is not self-evident to us.

SECOND ARTICLE [I, Q. 2, Art. 2]
Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists?

Objection 1: It seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated. For it is an article of faith that God exists. But what is of faith cannot be demonstrated, because a demonstration produces scientific knowledge; whereas faith is of the unseen (Heb. 11:1). Therefore it cannot be demonstrated that God exists.

Objection 2: Further, the essence is the middle term of demonstration. But we cannot know in what God's essence consists, but solely in what it does not consist; as Damascene says [John of Damascus (De Fide Orth. i, 4)]. Therefore we cannot demonstrate that God exists.

Objection 3: Further, if the existence of God were demonstrated, this could only be from His effects. But His effects are not proportionate to Him, since He is infinite and His effects are finite; and between the finite and infinite there is no proportion. Therefore, since a cause cannot be demonstrated by an effect not proportionate to it, it seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated.
On the contrary, The Apostle says: "The invisible things of Him are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Rom. 1:20). But this would not be unless the existence of God could be demonstrated through the things that are made; for the first thing we must know of anything is whether it exists.

I answer that. Demonstration can be made in two ways: One is through the cause, and is called a priori, and this is to argue from what is prior absolutely. The other is through the effect, and is called a demonstration a posteriori; this is to argue from what is prior relatively only to us. When an effect is better known to us than its cause, from the effect we proceed to the knowledge of the cause. And from every effect the existence of its proper cause can be demonstrated, so long as its effects are better known to us; because since every effect depends upon its cause, if the effect exists, the cause must pre-exist. Hence the existence of God, in so far as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effects which are known to us.

Reply Objection 1: The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected. Nevertheless, there is nothing to prevent a man, who cannot grasp a proof, accepting, as a matter of faith, something which in itself is capable of being scientifically known and demonstrated.

Reply Objection 2: When the existence of a cause is demonstrated from an effect, this effect takes the place of the definition of the cause in proof of the cause's existence. This is especially the case in regard to God, because, in order to prove the existence of anything, it is necessary to accept as a middle term the meaning of the word, and not its essence, for the question of its essence follows on the question of its existence. Now the names given to God are derived from His effects; consequently, in demonstrating the existence of God from His effects, we may take for the middle term the meaning of the word "God".

Reply Objection 3: From effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence of the cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; though from them we cannot perfectly know God as He is in His essence.

THIRD ARTICLE [I, Q. 2, Art. 3]
Whether God exists?

Objection 1: It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word "God" means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist.

Objection 2: Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence.

On the contrary, It is said in the person of God: "I am Who am." (Ex. 3:14)

I answer that. The existence of God can be proved in five ways.

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in
motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or only one. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But more and less are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being,
as it is written in *Metaphysics*, ii. [Aristotle]. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

**Reply Objection 1:** As Augustine says (Enchiridion xi): "Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil." This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.

**Reply Objection 2:** Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must needs be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done voluntarily must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, since these can change or fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle, as was shown in the body of the Article.
O Me! O Life!

Walt Whitman

From Leaves of Grass, 1855.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892), was a famous poet, journalist, and essay writer. He was born in Long Island, New York, and finished his formal schooling at age 11, at which time he became an apprentice for a printer. He worked as a journalist for a number of years, and eventually became more interested in poetry. His collection of poems titled Leaves of Grass is still considered to include some of the best American poetry, even though it was considered quite risqué during his lifetime. His affinity with deism and transcendentalism can been in his poems.

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill’d with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew’d,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring – What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.
That you are here – that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.
Introduction to Life’s Too Short to Pretend You’re Not Religious, InterVarsity Press, 2016.

David Dark (1969–) is the critically acclaimed author of The Sacredness of Questioning Everything, Everyday Apocalypse, and The Gospel According to America. He began his teaching career as a high school English teacher; his fascination with story stayed with him through his doctoral work in Religion at Vanderbilt University. He is Assistant Professor of Religion and the Arts at Belmont University, and he also teaches at the Tennessee Prison for Women. He has had articles published in Pitchfork, Killing the Buddha, Books and Culture, and Christian Century, among others. A frequent speaker, Dark has also appeared on C-SPAN’s Book-TV and in the award-winning documentaries, Marketing the Message and American Jesus. As his publications and this chapter indicate, Dark does not see popular culture as an evil plague upon the land, but as a vibrant contemporary means of exploring humankind’s biggest questions.

It wasn’t their fault, it wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t even a matter of fault.
Elmore Leonard, The Switch

“No one doesn’t believe in God as much as I do,” a slightly intoxicated friend assured me as we huddled together in a busy restaurant one Saturday evening. I knew we were in for an extraordinary conversation. Sometimes this kind of thing comes up when I’m asked what I do.

When I could honestly call myself a high school English teacher, my responses generated less heat. Someone might recite Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” recall a beloved teacher or ask for a reading recommendation, but it rarely took a turn for the intensely personal. Now that I work with undergraduates, they want to know what it is I teach, exactly.

Religion.
But what classes?
Bible. World religions.

And now we’re awash in the prickliest of questions—the existence of God. The moment my friend asserted his superlative disbelief in God did not come out of the blue. We’d been at it a while on the subject of weird religious backgrounds (his and mine), life after death, music, science and all the different things people say the Bible says. I suspect I surprised him a little when I noted that we read it badly until we learn to read it as a collection and that, wherever one lands on the question of the existence of God, the Bible’s likely as good as it gets when it comes to challenging everyday injustice.

He wanted to know if I believed it, and I assured him that I did. But I described my love for the Bible with so many seemingly diverse points of entry that he seemed a little taken aback: Kurt Vonnegut’s devotion to the Sermon on the Mount, the ethical momentum set in motion within human societies by the prophets, the vision of beloved community in the civil rights movement and my own dependence on the wisdom of my incarcerated students. Before we knew it, we were talking about the power of love, the joys and difficulties of true neighborliness and the long-haul work of human hopefulness. Who would want to be a hater when it comes to these things? Why not pay this busy little book club a visit from time to time?
It was right about then that he felt understandably compelled to drop a clarifying word amid our escalating love fest: “Nobody doesn’t believe in God as much as I do.” Boom. Was it something I said? Can we still be friends?

I was pleasantly stumped and strangely excited. Why the rush to disassociate? Was there a problem? Did he think I was trying to sell him on something? I wasn’t looking to keep him on any kind of hook or ask him to sign a statement of belief, but I so didn’t want our commonality to end. I wanted him to know—and said so—that he was kin to many a psalmist, poet and pilgrim within the Bible who shared his disbelief. I wanted him to believe that there was still so much we could have a good time talking about. Was there a way I might playfully overcome this defensiveness? How might I keep the frequency open?

Here’s what I’m up to. I come to you as one bummed out by the way people talk about religion. Be it an online rant, a headline, a news report or a conversation overheard, I feel a jolt of sympathy pain whenever someone characterizes someone else as religious. It’s as if a door just got slammed. A person has been somehow shrink-wrapped. Some sweet and perfectly interesting somebody gets left out. And in a subtle, hard-to-get-a-handle-on kind of way, it’s kind of like someone’s been told to shut up.

This is the way it goes with our words. When I label people, I no longer have to deal with them thoughtfully. I no longer have to feel overwhelmed by their complexity, the lives they live, the dreams they have. I know exactly where they are inside—or forever outside—my field of care, because they’ve been taken care of. The mystery of their existence has been solved and led away before I’ve had a chance to be moved by them or even begun to catch a glimpse of who they might be. They’ve been neutralized. There’s hardly any action quite so undemanding, so utterly unimaginative, as the affixing of a label. It’s the costliest of mental shortcuts.

Of course we get to call it like we see it. What else can we do? But when we do so with undue haste, when we’re neither remotely inquisitive nor especially curious in our regard for other people, we may find that a casual demonization comes to pepper our conversations. This is why it often seems to me that calling someone liberal, conservative, fundamentalist, atheist or extremist is to largely deal in curse words. It puts a person in what we take to be their place, but it only speaks in shorthand. When I go no further in my consideration of my fellow human, I betray my preference for caricature over perception, a shrug as opposed to a vision of the lived fact of somebody in a body. In the face of a perhaps beautifully complicated life, I’ve opted for oversimplification.

And so it goes with the application of that impossibly broad brush called religion. It’s as if we can’t even speak the word without walking into the mine field of someone else’s wounds. Guards go up immediately and with good reason. It’s the ultimate conversation-stopper, an association to end all associations. Who would want to get caught anywhere near it? And in our day, could calling someone religious ever function as a compliment? It’s one more label we use as a placeholder of persons and populations, as if we’ve somehow gotten to the bottom of who they are with an adjective.

I want very much to take this attitude aside and punch it lovingly in the stomach. I want good humor and candor and more truth between us than a label could ever afford. And if it’s the case that mention of religion mostly shuts conversation down, I want very badly to somehow crack it open again. If we’re open to it, the word need not always signal a dead end; it might even be a means to a breakthrough, a way of fessing up to the facts of what we’re all up to.
Religion as Controlling Story

Let’s talk about religion. In its root meaning, religion (from the Latin religare, to bind again, to bind back) is simply a tying together, a question of how we see fit to organize ourselves and our resources, a question, we might say, of how things have been tied together so far and of how they might be tied together differently, a binding, an unbinding and a binding again. As has always been the case, the organizing of selves and societies can go beautifully or badly or both, but the development of bonds—like the dissolution of bonds—is inescapable. With this in mind, I find it most helpful to define religion as follows: a religion is a controlling story, and there are at least as many as there are people. Stories change but the fact of story doesn’t. When we escape a bad story—or see through one into the shock, the awe or the absurdity of what’s really going on—we haven’t escaped stories; we’ve simply awakened our way into better and truer ones, and we’ve probably only managed that feat with the considerate assistance of others, whether living or dead. No one awakens all by themselves. Conversions occur all the time. For better and worse, we drink the Kool-Aid. Religion happens.

We’re often admonished to keep religion out of politics (or vice versa), and civil exchange does require that no one be allowed to hog the microphone while decreeing that the God in his head trumps the reasoning power in everyone else’s. But human life won’t divide itself up quite so neatly. Given the overwhelming complications of trying to negotiate a just, joyful and more-helpful-than-not existence in a world of raw data with which we often have no idea what to do, we can perhaps be forgiven for wanting to rope off one issue from the other. (“That’s political. That’s religious. That’s a private matter. This is worship. That’s a guilty pleasure. And this one over here is just . . . it’s just business. It is what it is. It’s nothing personal. Sorry about that.”) But these divisions can obscure the living fact of certain connections and often leave us estranged from our own sense of ourselves, insulated from the possibility of undivided living.

If we’re willing to apply religion to the whole of our own lives as readily as we level it at others, it can wonderfully disrupt whatever it was we thought we were talking about, whatever we thought we had in mind and hand. Like culture, it cuts to the core of what we’re really doing and believing, of what values—we all have them—lurk behind our words and actions. Yes, we can use it to disavow and detract. (“I used to be religious.” “I’m spiritual but not religious.” “Let’s keep religion out of it.”) But I believe there’s something dishonest and deluded at work when we speak as if it’s only other people who are guided by unreasoning rage or strange notions about the way the world works, only others who, as the saying goes, have an agenda. In this view, religion is only a word for the way intellectually underdeveloped people get carried away, a snob’s word, and it strikes me as a strange disowning of one’s own vulnerability and, if you like, gullibility; it’s a rude denial of the fact of our common creatureliness.

My fellow creatures, I propose that we not play that way. If what we believe is what we see is what we do is who we are, there’s no getting away from religion. We all want to know who we are, where and how we fit in, and what our lives might yet mean. And in this sense, religion might be the best word we have for seeing, naming, confessing and really waking up to what we’re after in all we do, of becoming aware of what’s going on in our minds. Putting religion on the table in this way, if we’re open to doing so, might be the most pressing, interesting and wide-ranging conversation we can have. We might even find ourselves amused.

How’s that? Because religion can radically name the specific ways we’ve put our lives together and, perhaps more urgently, the ways we’ve allowed other people to put our lives together for us. To be clear, I’m not trying to encourage anyone to begin self-identifying as religious. That’s as futile and redundant a move as calling yourself political or cultural. But I am arguing that we
should cease and desist from referring to others as religious as if they’re participants in games we ourselves aren’t playing, as if they’re somehow weirdly and hopelessly enmeshed in cultures of which we’re always only detached observers. On the one hand, this is a distancing move that keeps us detached from the fact of our own enthusiasms, our own rituals, our own enmeshments and our own loves. But it also holds another person—the ostensibly religious person—under a scrutiny I have yet to apply to myself. Calling someone else religious doesn’t answer the question of my own.

Religion as Relationship
To be attentive to the question of religion is to see relationally, to examine the stories we inherit and hand down to others without too much thought as well as those we cobble together to work a crowd, fund a campaign, target a market or convince ourselves to get out of bed in the morning. Sociology invites us to form the words belief systems around these phenomena. Doing so is profoundly helpful in the work of achieving a degree of critical distance when it comes to our perceived have-tos. (“Our belief systems may differ here and there, but we both want better public schools, right? Right.”) And in the age-old task of listening sympathetically to our fellow creatures, of imagining them well, we need all the help we can get. Thank you, social science.

But I’m not sure anyone’s ever experienced enlightenment, been born again, been called to repentance or decided to sell their belongings on account of a system. The voice, the tale, the image, the parable that gets through to you—that wins your heart—religiously is the one that makes it past your defenses. You’ve been won over, and you probably didn’t see it coming. You’ve been enlisted into a drama, whether positively or negatively, and it shouldn’t be controversial to note that it happens all the time. When you really think about it, there’s one waiting around every corner. It’s as near as the story, song or image you can’t get out of your head.

Religion happens when we get pulled in, moved, called out or compelled by something outside ourselves. It could be a car commercial, a lyric, a painting, a theatrical performance or the magnetic pull of an Apple store. The calls to worship are everywhere. And when we see as much, we begin to understand why Marx would insist that “the critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique.” It is that with which we have to do (or the way we do everything we do or think we do). It is certainly often an opiate for the masses, but it can also function as the poetry of the people. Whether we spy it in ritual, symbol or ceremony, religion isn’t something one can be coherently for or against or decide to somehow suddenly engage, because it’s always already there. Or as the old Palmolive commercial once put it, we’re soaking in it. Whatever the content of the script we’re sticking to for dear life—that would be our religion—it binds us for worse or for better till we begin to critique it religiously and relentlessly, in view of the possibility of conversion to better boundedness, different and more redeeming orientations or, to put it a little strangely, less bad religion. And a person’s religiosity is never not in play. It names the patterns, shifting or consistent, avowed or not, of all our interactions. Religion is the question of how we dispose our energies, how we see fit to organize our own lives and, in many cases, the lives of others.

This need be neither buzzkill nor bummer. On the contrary, it’s an invitation to be more present to my own life, to access and examine more deeply what I’m up to. It also levels the playing field more than a little, because suddenly a Muslim going to prayers isn’t more or less religious than a grown man with a big piece of pretend cheese on his head going to watch a Green Bay Packers game. Is it good religion? Bad religion? True? False? Idolatrous? Righteous? Opinions will vary. But to hit Pause long enough to consider the content of our devotion, our lives and our
investments is to begin to see the question clearly. What are my controlling stories? Do I like the stories my one life tells? Do I need to see about changing them?

In this sense, we’re never not speaking and acting upon our religion. We’re never not involved in everyday worship. We’re always in the thick of it, this living fact of what our human hands have wrought under the dictation of what’s actually going on in our human hearts and minds. Our real sense of what’s really sacred is regularly on display. David Byrne of the Talking Heads bears witness to the religious situation when he invites us to consider the cities. Having made a regular habit of biking through as many as he can as often as he can, he describes his ongoing realization that cities are nothing less than “physical manifestations of our deepest beliefs and our often unconscious thoughts.” It’s merely a matter of recognition: “A cognitive scientist need only look at what we have made—the hives we have created—to know what we think and what we believe to be important. . . . It’s all there, in plain view, right out in the open.” We evade. We compartmentalize. We say this doesn’t have anything to do with that. But what we’re up to isn’t, as it turns out, a secret: “You don’t need CAT scans and cultural anthropologists to show you what’s going on inside the human mind; its inner workings are manifested in three dimensions.”

Our religion, practically speaking, is, after all, alarmingly self-evident if we’re open to taking a hard look around: “Our values and hopes are sometimes awfully embarrassingly easy to read. They’re right there—in the storefronts, museums, temples, shops, and office buildings. . . . They say, in their unique visual language, ‘This is what we think matters, this is how we live and how we play.’”

No Communion Without Nuance

Like God and the devil, religion is in the details. Like any artist, Byrne would have us begin to think about them, to lean into the fact of certain connections we’re in the weird habit of denying, to move through the world with our antennae out, saying—or singing—what we see. To do so artfully is to engage in the kind of poetic thinking we associate with Byrne or any creative personality determined to be awake and alive to the myths in which we otherwise swim unknowingly, myths in which we’ve been immersed so long that they’ve become second nature to us, myths by and through which we’ve measured our lives so unconsciously that we’ve forgotten how arbitrary they are, myths from which we’re perfectly free to withdraw our consent when we begin to ask ourselves, “Well, how did we get here?”

To genuinely ask this kind of question is to be a practitioner of simple self-awareness, a way of wondering at ourselves and all the strange things we put up with, sustain and perpetuate, a way of bringing it all to consciousness. What task could be more urgent for a person? For my money, religion is the farthest-reaching readily available concept for looking hard and honestly at our own lives, for really leveling with ourselves and for abandoning our dysfunctional ideas for better ones, truer, livelier, more sustainable ways of negotiating our existences. Life’s too short to pretend we’re not religious.

Why do I insist on framing the conversation this way? I’m in it for beauty. As someone who has dared to try to teach people for most of my adult life, I often suspect that what I’m up to is, in large part, an effort to try to stop people from becoming bored and giving up too soon, to help them find their own lives and the lives of others powerfully interesting, weird and somehow beautiful. Look again, re-spect, stay with me and consider the possibility that there might be more going on in a neighbor, a novel, an image or an issue than your mind grasped the first time around, something worthy of your time, something beautiful. In this, I share Elaine Scarry’s conviction that the “willingness continually to revise one’s own location in order to place oneself in the path
of beauty is the basic impulse underlying education.” This is to define education as a journey, certainly, but it is also to envision education as a creative task that involves finding and seeing beauty in the very places where we’ve grown accustomed to only sensing and feeling conflict.

Which brings us back to religion as a divider. I want very badly to challenge the ease with which we succumb to the false divide of labels, that moment in which our empathy gives out and we refuse to respond openhandedly or even curiously to people with whom we differ. As I see it, to refuse the possibility of finding another person interesting, complex and as complicated as oneself is a form of violence. At bottom, this is a refusal of nuance, and I wish to posit that nuance is sacred. To call it sacred is to value it so much and esteem it so highly that we find it fitting to somehow set it apart as something to which we’re forever committed. Nuance refuses to envision others degradingly, denying them the content of their own experience, and talks us down tenderly from the false ledges we’ve put ourselves on. When we take it on as a sacred obligation, nuance also delivers us out of the deadly habit of cutting people out of our own imaginations. This opens us up to the possibility of at least occasionally finding one another beautiful, the possibility of communion. I happen to live for these openings, and I suspect I write “NUANCE” in the margins of research papers more than any other word. It could be that there’s no communion without it.

I hasten to add that the communion I’m hoping for isn’t a retreat from the everyday or the realistic but a more profound engagement with it. This brings to mind Iris Murdoch’s definition of love: “Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality.”

The work of consciousness, we begin to understand, is never done.

**Religion Is Witness**

In this vein, I offer my vision of religion as central to all human experience as a way of getting unstuck from our failures of imagination in the way we see ourselves and others, those mean mental habits with which we casually but all too definitively deny commitment, connection and kinship to neighbors, strangers and family when they disturb our defensive sense of our own identities. By letting religion name all our own ultimate concerns and the ways we pursue them, we open our lives to an ever-renewed perception and recognition of our profoundly interdependent relationship to the rest of the world. I view this as a summons to see ourselves anew and to discover reality as it is—not making connections exactly, because the truth is they’re already there, preceding us as the very facts on the ground, whether we recognize them or not. To begin to respond to such a summons is to enter the kind of accountability—the deep awareness—that occurs when we see and think poetically, because poetry is the work of recognition, the work of seeing beautifully.

It would have been a mouthful, and good conversations know no definitive ending, but what I hoped to convey—and still do—to my disbelieving friend is that we lose no ground when we note that there are myriad ways to be a true believer and that we might even gain something in the way of candor, ownership, transparency and substance if we can fess up to our own devotions. What manner of devotee art thou? What’s the what, the how and the why of your day-to-day? Let’s hold our devotions out with open hands. Or as Leonard Cohen so memorably puts it, let us compare mythologies.

It’s a life’s work for sure, but with humor and compassion we can try to own what we’re up to; we can try to be true in all we do. Your obsession with *Game of Thrones*? Religious. Your determination to hold on to that plastic bottle till you’ve found a recycling receptacle? Religious. The song you sing when you’re alone? Religious. Your response to your fellow pilgrim who just
cut you off in traffic? Religious. The bad ideas you’re leaving behind and the new ones you’re trying on: Religious.

You’re always telling your controlling story. Or to borrow a phrase from Jesus of Nazareth, we’ll be known by our fruit. The operative term—the excruciatingly helpful word I have in mind here—is witness. As much as I’d often prefer otherwise, there is no on-and-off switch when it comes to my witness. It’s simply the evidence of my output. My witness is the sum of everything I do and leave undone. The words are there, but the actions speak louder.

Our witness isn’t what we say we believe or even what we think we believe. Neither is it the image, pose or posture we try to present to others. It’s what we do, what we give, what we take and what we actually bring to our little worlds. Witness knows no division. In some sense, the future will know what our witness was better than we can, the ways we rang true (or didn’t). Time’s the revelator when it comes to what your witness is or what your religion, as it turns out, was. Your religion is your witness is the shape your love takes. In all things.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Before I go too far asking anyone to consider the ups and downs of their weird religious background, I’d like to devote some space to describing, as best as I can, my own. For every hero or villain, there’s always an origin story. Here’s hoping that our neuroses might also be, in some deep sense, our wisdom. I’ll go first.

1 David Byrne, Bicycle Diaries (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009), 2.
Of Our Spiritual Strivings
W.E.B. DuBois

Chapter 1 in The Souls of Black Folk. Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903.

W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963) was one of the greatest American intellectuals and activists of the twentieth century. A polymath, he published books and articles in, among other things, philosophy, history, sociology, political thought and literature. DuBois was among the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the first editor of its influential magazine, The Crisis. Throughout his long career, DuBois advanced the cause of black people in America, along the way doing important, startlingly perceptive and even prescient work conceptualizing black identity, politics, and art. A committed internationalist and cosmopolitan, DuBois was also among the founders of the transatlantic political movement among peoples of African descent known as Pan-Africanism. In one of those strange historical coincidences, he died in exile in Ghana in the summer of 1963, a day before the March on Washington, arguably the high point of the American civil rights movement. This essay, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” is best known as a part of one of the great nonfiction works written by an American in the 20th century, The Souls of Black Folk (1903).

O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,
All night long crying with a mournful cry,
As I lie and listen, and cannot understand
The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,
O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?
All night long the water is crying to me.

Unresting water, there shall never be rest
Till the last moon droop and the last tide fail,
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea,
All life long crying without avail,
As the water all night long is crying to me.

ARTHUR SYMONS.

[ musical notation from "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"]
Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

And yet, being a problem is a strange experience, -- peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe. It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards -- ten cents a package -- and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, -- refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head, -- some way. With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny: their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, -- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.
This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten. The shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx. Through history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness. Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness, -- it is the contradiction of double aims. The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan -- on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde -- could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause. By the poverty and ignorance of his people, the Negro minister or doctor was tempted toward quackery and demagogy; and by the criticism of the other world, toward ideals that made him ashamed of his lowly tasks. The would-be black savant was confronted by the paradox that the knowledge his people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood. The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people. This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people, -- has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves.

Away back in the days of bondage they thought to see in one divine event the end of all doubt and disappointment; few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites. In song and exhortation swelled one refrain -- Liberty; in his tears and curses the God he implored had Freedom in his right hand. At last it came, -- suddenly, fearfully, like a dream. With one wild carnival of blood and passion came the message in his own plaintive cadences: --

"Shout, O children!
Shout, you're free!
For God has bought your liberty!"

Years have passed away since then, -- ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation's feast. In vain do we cry to this our vastest social problem: --

"Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble!"

The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep
disappointment rests upon the Negro people, -- a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people.

The first decade was merely a prolongation of the vain search for freedom, the boon that seemed ever barely to elude their grasp, -- like a tantalizing will-o'-the-wisp, maddening and misleading the headless host. The holocaust of war, the terrors of the Ku-Klux Klan, the lies of carpet-baggers, the disorganization of industry, and the contradictory advice of friends and foes, left the bewildered serf with no new watchword beyond the old cry for freedom. As the time flew, however, he began to grasp a new idea. The ideal of liberty demanded for its attainment powerful means, and these the Fifteenth Amendment gave him. The ballot, which before he had looked upon as a visible sign of freedom, he now regarded as the chief means of gaining and perfecting the liberty with which war had partially endowed him. And why not? Had not votes made war and emancipated millions? Had not votes enfranchised the freedmen? Was anything impossible to a power that had done all this? A million black men started with renewed zeal to vote themselves into the kingdom. So the decade flew away, the revolution of 1876 came, and left the half-free serf weary, wondering, but still inspired. Slowly but steadily, in the following years, a new vision began gradually to replace the dream of political power, -- a powerful movement, the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided, another pillar of fire by night after a clouded day. It was the ideal of "book-learning"; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life.

Up the new path the advance guard toiled, slowly, heavily, doggedly; only those who have watched and guided the faltering feet, the misty minds, the dull understandings, of the dark pupils of these schools know how faithfully, how piteously, this people strove to learn. It was weary work. The cold statistician wrote down the inches of progress here and there, noted also where here and there a foot had slipped or some one had fallen. To the tired climbers, the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, the Canaan was always dim and far away. If, however, the vistas disclosed as yet no goal, no resting-place, little but flattery and criticism, the journey at least gave leisure for reflection and self-examination; it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, -- darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem. He felt his poverty; without a cent, without a home, without land, tools, or savings, he had entered into competition with rich, landed, skilled neighbors. To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships. He felt the weight of his ignorance, -- not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities; the accumulated sloth and shirking and awkwardness of decades and centuries shackled his hands and feet. Nor was his burden all poverty and ignorance. The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race, meant not only the loss of ancient African chastity, but also the hereditary weight of a mass of corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home. A people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world, but rather allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems. But alas! while sociologists gleefully count his bastards and his prostitutes, the very soul of the toiling, sweating black man is darkened by the
shadow of a vast despair. Men call the shadow prejudice, and learnedly explain it as the natural defence of culture against barbarism, learning against ignorance, purity against crime, the "higher" against the "lower" races. To which the Negro cries Amen! and swears that to so much of this strange prejudice as is founded on just homage to civilization, culture, righteousness, and progress, he humbly bows and meekly does obeisance. But before that nameless prejudice that leaps beyond all this he stands helpless, dismayed, and well-nigh speechless; before that personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systematic humiliation, the distortion of fact and wanton license of fancy, the cynical ignoring of the better and the boisterous welcoming of the worse, the all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black, from Toussaint to the devil, -- before this there rises a sickening despair that would disarm and discourage any nation save that black host to whom "discouragement" is an unwritten word.

But the facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate. Whisperings and portents came home upon the four winds: Lo! we are diseased and dying, cried the dark hosts; we cannot write, our voting is vain; what need of education, since we must always cook and serve? And the Nation echoed and enforced this self-criticism, saying: Be content to be servants, and nothing more; what need of higher culture for half-men? Away with the black man's ballot, by force or fraud, -- and behold the suicide of a race! Nevertheless, out of the evil came something of good, -- the more careful adjustment of education to real life, the clearer perception of the Negroes' social responsibilities, and the sober realization of the meaning of progress.

So dawned the time of Sturm und Drang: storm and stress to-day rocks our little boat on the mad waters of the world-sea; there is within and without the sound of conflict, the burning of body and rending of soul; inspiration strives with doubt, and faith with vain questionings. The bright ideals of the past, -- physical freedom, political power, the training of brains and the training of hands, -- all these in turn have waxed and waned, until even the last grows dim and overcast. Are they all wrong, -- all false? No, not that, but each alone was over-simple and incomplete, -- the dreams of a credulous race-childhood, or the fond imaginings of the other world which does not know and does not want to know our power. To be really true, all these ideals must be melted and welded into one. The training of the schools we need to-day more than ever, -- the training of deft hands, quick eyes and ears, and above all the broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds and pure hearts. The power of the ballot we need in sheer self-defence, -- else what shall save us from a second slavery? Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek, -- the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture, liberty, -- all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack. We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness. Will America be poorer if she replace her
brutal dyspeptic blundering with light-hearted but determined Negro humility? or her coarse and cruel wit with loving jovial good-humor? or her vulgar music with the soul of the Sorrow Songs?

Merely a concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic is the Negro Problem, and the spiritual striving of the freedmen’s sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers’ fathers, and in the name of human opportunity.

And now what I have briefly sketched in large outline let me on coming pages tell again in many ways, with loving emphasis and deeper detail, that men may listen to the striving in the souls of black folk.
In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

Alice Walker


Alice Walker (1944-) is a noted writer and international activist for women's issues and political justice. Best known for her Pulitzer Prize novel, The Color Purple (1982), she is the author of over 40 volumes of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and essays. Born to a sharecropping family in Georgia, Walker attended Spelman and Sarah Lawrence Colleges and was active in the Civil Rights movement before launching her career as a writer. She served as contributing editor at MS., a magazine established in 1972 to provide a progressive forum for women's issues, where this essay was first published.

I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression... I pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them. I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day... I sang, with a strange quiver in my voice, a promise song.

-Jean Toomer, “Avey”
Cane

The poet speaking to a prostitute who falls asleep while he's talking-

When the poet Jean Toomer walked through the South in the early twenties, he discovered a curious thing: Black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than "sexual objects," more even than mere women: they became Saints. Instead of being perceived as whole persons, their bodies became shrines: what was thought to be their minds became temples suitable for worship. These crazy "Saints" stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics-or quietly, like suicides; and the "God" that was in their gaze was as mute as a great stone.

Who were these "Saints"? These crazy, loony, pitiful women?
Some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers.

In the still heat of the Post-Reconstruction South, this is how they seemed to Jean Toomer: exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as "the mule of the world." They dreamed dreams that no one knew-not even themselves, in any coherent fashion-and saw visions no one could understand. They wandered or sat about the countryside crooning lullabies to ghosts, and drawing the mother of Christ in charcoal on courthouse walls.
They forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay. And when those frail whirlwinds fell, in scattered particles, upon the ground, no one mourned. Instead, men lit candies to celebrate the emptiness that remained, as people do who enter a beautiful but vacant space to resurrect a God.

Our mothers and grandmothers, some of them: moving to music not yet written. And they waited.

They waited for a day when the unknown thing that was in them would be made known; but guessed, somehow in their darkness, that on the day of their revelation they would be long dead. Therefore to Toomer they walked, and even ran, in slow motion. For they were going nowhere immediate, and the future was not yet within their grasp. And men took our mothers and grandmothers, "but got no pleasure from it." So complex was their passion and their calm.

To Toomer, they lay vacant and fallow as autumn fields with harvest time never in sight: and he saw them enter loveless marriages, without joy; and become prostitutes, without resistance; and become mothers of children, without fulfillment.

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not "Saints," but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality-which is the basis of Art-that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane. Throwing away this spirituality was their pathetic attempt to lighten the soul to a weight their work-worn, sexually abused bodies could bear.

What did it mean for a Black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.

Did you have a genius of a great-great-grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets, or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasturelands? Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her)-eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children-when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of Rebellion, in stone or clay?

How was the creativity of the Black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years Black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a Black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist. Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if singing, too, had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life. Then you may begin to comprehend the lives of our "crazy," "Sainted" mothers and grandmothers. The agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short Story Writers, who died with their real gifts stifled within them.

And if this were the end of the story, we would have cause to cry out in my paraphrase of Okot p'Bitek's great poem:

O, my clanswomen  
Let us all cry together!  
Come,  
Let us mourn the death of our mother,  
The death of a Queen  
The ash that was produced
By a great fire,
O this homestead is utterly dead
Close the gates
With lacari thorns,
For our mother
The creator of the
Stool is lost!
And all the young women
Have perished in the wilderness!

But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, ourselves—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we Black American women are.

One example, perhaps the most pathetic, most misunderstood one, can provide a backdrop: Phillis Wheatley, a slave in the 1700s.

Virginia Woolf, in her book, *A Room of One's Own*, wrote that in order for a woman to write fiction she must have two things, certainly: a room of her own (with key and lock) and enough money to support herself.

What then are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself? This sickly, frail, Black girl who required a servant of her own at times—her health was so precarious—and who, had she been white would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day.

Virginia Woolf wrote further, speaking of course not of our Phillis, that "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century [insert eighteenth century, insert Black woman, insert born or made a slave] would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard [insert Saint], feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts [add chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one's body by someone else, submission to an alien religion] that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty."

The key words, as they relate to Phillis, are "contrary instincts." For when we read the poetry of Phillis Wheatley—as when we read the novels of Nella Larsen or the oddly false-sounding autobiography of that freest of all Black women writers, Zora Hurston—evidence of "contrary instincts" is everywhere. Her loyalties were completely divided, as was, without question, her mind.

But how could this be otherwise? Captured at seven, a slave of wealthy, doting whites who instilled in her the "savagery" of the Africa they "rescued" her from . . . one wonders if she was even able to remember her homeland as she had known it, or as it really was.

Yet, because she did try to use her gift for poetry in a world that made her a slave, she was "so thwarted and hindered by . . . contrary instincts, that she . . . lost her health. . . ." In the last years of her brief life, burdened not only with the need to express her gift but also with a penniless, friendless "freedom" and several small children for whom she was forced to do strenuous work to feed, she lost her health. Suffering from malnutrition and neglect and who knows what mental agonies, Phillis Wheatley died.
So torn by "contrary instincts" was Black, kidnapped, enslaved Phillis that her description of "the Goddess"—as she poetically called the liberty she did not have—is ironically, cruelly humorous. And, in fact, has held Phillis up to ridicule for more than a century. It is usually read prior to hanging Phillis's memory as that of a fool. She wrote:

The Goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel binds her golden hair
Wherever shines this native of the skies
Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise. [My italics]

It is obvious that Phillis, the slave, combed the "Goddess's" hair every morning; prior, perhaps to bringing in the milk, or fixing her mistress's lunch. She took her imagery from the one thing she saw elevated above all others.

With the benefit of hindsight we ask "How could she?"

But at last, Phillis, we understand. No more snickering when your stiff, struggling ambivalent lines are forced on us. We know now that you were not an idiot nor a traitor; only a sickly little Black girl, snatched from your home and country and made a slave; a woman who still struggled to sing the song that was your gift, although in a land of barbarians who praised you for your bewildered tongue. It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song.

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, "the mule of the world," because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—everyone else—refused to carry. We have also been called "Matriarchs," "Superwomen," and "Mean and Evil Bitches." Not to mention "Castraters" and "Sapphire's Mama." When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in a far corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. To be an artist, and a Black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be.

Therefore we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers knew, even without "knowing" it, the reality of their spirituality, even if they didn't recognize it beyond what happened in the singing at church—and they never had any intention of giving it up.

How they did it: those millions of Black women who were not Phillis Wheatley, or Lucy Terry or Frances Harper or Zora Hurston or Nella Larsen or Bessie Smith—or Elizabeth Catlett, nor Katherine Dunham, either—brings me to the title of this essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," which is a personal account that is yet shared, by all of us. I found, while thinking about the far-reaching world of the creative Black woman, that often the truest answer to a question that really matters can be found very close. So I was not surprised when my own mother popped into my mind.

In the late 1920s my mother ran away from home to marry my father. Marriage, if not running away, was expected of 17-year-old girls. By the time she was 20, she had two children and was pregnant with a third. Five children later, I was born. And this is how I came to know my mother: she seemed a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home. Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not need to go to school.
She made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers’ overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds.

During the “working” day, she labored beside—not behind—my father in the fields. Her day began before sunup, and did not end until late at night. There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts; never a time free from interruption—by work or the noisy inquiries of her many children. And yet, it is to my mother—and all our mothers who were not famous—that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the Black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day.

But when, you will ask, did my overworked mother have time to know or care about feeding the creative spirit?

The answer is so simple that many of us have spent years discovering it. We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high-and-low.

For example: in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quiltmaking, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago."

If we could locate this “anonymous” Black woman, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers - an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use.

As Virginia Woolf wrote further, in *A Room of One's Own*:

> Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working class. [Change this to slaves and the wives and daughters of sharecroppers.] Now and again an Emily Brontë or a Robert Burns [change this to a Zora Hurston or a Richard Wright] blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils [or Sainthood], of a wise woman selling herbs [our rootworkers], or even a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen. . . . Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman. . . .

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.

And so it is, certainly, with my own mother. Unlike "Ma" Rainey's songs, which retained their creator's name even while blasting forth from Bessie Smith's mouth, no song or poem will bear my mother's name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded. It is probably for this reason that so much of what I have written is about characters whose counterparts in real life are so much older than I am.
But the telling of these stories, which came from my mother's lips as naturally as breathing, was not the only way my mother showed herself as an artist. For stories, too, were subject to being distracted, to dying without conclusion. Dinners must be started, and cotton must be gathered before the big rains. The artist that was and is my mother showed itself to me only after many years. This is what I finally noticed:

Like Mem, a character in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over 50 different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until it was too dark to see.

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena . . . and on and on.

And I remember people coming to my mother's yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art.

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.

Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She had handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them.

For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work Black women have done for a very long time.

This poem is not enough, but it is something, for the woman who literally covered the holes in our walls with sunflowers:

They were women then
My mama's generation
Husky of voice - Stout of Step
With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
And ironed
Starched white
Shirts
How they led
Armies
Headragged Generals
Across mined
Fields
Booby-trapped
Ditches
To discover books
Desks
A place for us
How they knew what we
Must know
Without knowing a page
Of it
Themselves.

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden, I found my own.

And perhaps in Africa over 200 years ago, there was just such a mother; perhaps she painted vivid and daring decorations in oranges and yellows and greens on the walls of her hut; perhaps she sang in a voice like Roberta Flack's—sweetly over the compounds of her village; perhaps she wove the most stunning mats or told the most ingenious stories of all the village storytellers. Perhaps she was herself a poet—though only her daughter's name is signed to the poems that we know.

Perhaps Phillis Wheatley's mother was also an artist.

Perhaps in more than Phillis Wheatley's biological life is her mother's signature made clear.
William Stafford (1914-1993) was born in Kansas and attended the University of Kansas and University of Iowa, from which he received the Ph.D. He lived most of his adult life in Oregon; he taught at Lewis and Clark College from 1948-1980. Stafford received the National Book Award for poetry in 1963 and served as Consultant for Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1970 (the precursor to “Poet Laureate”). Widely admired among American poets of the second half of the 20th century, Stafford wrote in a style unlike most modernist poets. He cultivated a quiet, conversational voice, a folksinger’s voice, through which to explore his frequent themes of the wilderness, social isolation and community, and moral choices in an ambiguous world. “A Ritual to Read to Each Other” was drafted in 1953 and published in West of Your City in 1960.

If you don’t know the kind of person I am
and I don’t know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant’s talk,
but if one wanders the circus won’t find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep,
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear; the darkness around us is deep.
Consider the Lobster

*David Foster Wallace*


*David Foster Wallace* (1962-2008) was a US American novelist, short story author, essayist and journalist, generally considered one of the most significant writers of the latter part of the 20th Century. Known especially for a dry approach to humor, as well as a fascination with footnotes, Wallace was particularly fond of taking often mundane or by-the-way events and facts of life (cruises, mid-level tennis players, state fairs, lobster festivals) and with subtlety placing them in front of the audience for consideration. His most well known novel is *Infinite Jest* (1996). “Consider the Lobster” was originally published for *Gourmet* magazine, and is the title of a collection of Wallace essays published in 2005.

For 56 years, the Maine Lobster Festival has been drawing crowds with the promise of sun, fun, and fine food. One visitor would argue that the celebration involves a whole lot more.

The enormous, pungent, and extremely well marketed Maine Lobster Festival is held every late July in the state’s midcoast region, meaning the western side of Penobscot Bay, the nerve stem of Maine’s lobster industry. What’s called the midcoast runs from Owl’s Head and Thomaston in the south to Belfast in the north. (Actually, it might extend all the way up to Bucksport, but we were never able to get farther north than Belfast on Route 1, whose summer traffic is, as you can imagine, unimaginable.) The region’s two main communities are Camden, with its very old money and yachty harbor and five-star restaurants and phenomenal B&Bs, and Rockland, a serious old fishing town that hosts the Festival every summer in historic Harbor Park, right along the water.¹

Tourism and lobster are the midcoast region’s two main industries, and they’re both warm-weather enterprises, and the Maine Lobster Festival represents less an intersection of the industries than a deliberate collision, joyful and lucrative and loud. The assigned subject of this article is the 56th Annual MLF, July 30 to August 3, 2003, whose official theme was “Lighthouses, Laughter, and Lobster.” Total paid attendance was over 80,000, due partly to a national CNN spot in June during which a Senior Editor of a certain other epicurean magazine hailed the MLF as one of the best food-themed festivals in the world. 2003 Festival highlights: concerts by Lee Ann Womack and Orleans, annual Maine Sea Goddess beauty pageant, Saturday’s big parade, Sunday’s William G. Atwood Memorial Crate Race, annual Amateur Cooking Competition, carnival rides and midway attractions and food booths, and the MLF’s Main Eating Tent, where something over 25,000 pounds of fresh-caught Maine lobster is consumed after preparation in the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker near the grounds’ north entrance. Also available are lobster rolls, lobster turnovers, lobster sauté, Down East lobster salad, lobster bisque, lobster ravioli, and deep-fried lobster dumplings. Lobster Thermidor is obtainable at a sit-down restaurant called The Black Pearl on Harbor Park’s northwest wharf. A large all-pine booth sponsored by the Maine Lobster Promotion

¹ There’s a comprehensive native apothegm: “Camden by the sea, Rockland by the smell.”
Council has free pamphlets with recipes, eating tips, and Lobster Fun Facts. The winner of Friday’s Amateur Cooking Competition prepares Saffron Lobster Ramekins, the recipe for which is available for public downloading at www.mainelobsterfestival.com. There are lobster T-shirts and lobster bobblehead dolls and inflatable lobster pool toys and clamp-on lobster hats with big scarlet claws that wobble on springs. Your assigned correspondent saw it all, accompanied by one girlfriend and both his own parents – one of which parents was actually born and raised in Maine, albeit in the extreme northern inland part, which is potato country and a world away from the touristic midcoast.²

For practical purposes, everyone knows what a lobster is. As usual, though, there’s much more to know than most of us care about – it’s all a matter of what your interests are. Taxonomically speaking, a lobster is a marine crustacean of the family Homaridae, characterized by five pairs of jointed legs, the first pair terminating in large pincerish claws used for subduing prey. Like many other species of benthic carnivore, lobsters are both hunters and scavengers. They have stalked eyes, gills on their legs, and antennae. There are dozens of different kinds worldwide, of which the relevant species here is the Maine lobster, Homarus americanus. The name “lobster” comes from the Old English loppestre, which is thought to be a corrupt form of the Latin word for locust combined with the Old English loppe, which meant spider.

Moreover, a crustacean is an aquatic arthropod of the class Crustacea, which comprises crabs, shrimp, barnacles, lobsters, and freshwater crayfish. All this is right there in the encyclopedia. And an arthropod is an invertebrate member of the phylum Arthropoda, which phylum covers insects, spiders, crustaceans, and centipedes/millipedes, all of whose main commonality, besides the absence of a centralized brain-spine assembly, is a chitinous exoskeleton composed of segments, to which appendages are articulated in pairs.

The point is that lobsters are basically giant sea-insects.³ Like most arthropods, they date from the Jurassic period, biologically so much older than mammalia that they might as well be from another planet. And they are – particularly in their natural brown-green state, brandishing their claws like weapons and with thick antennae awhip – not nice to look at. And it’s true that they are garbagemen of the sea, eaters of dead stuff,⁴ although they’ll also eat some live shellfish, certain kinds of injured fish, and sometimes each other.

But they are themselves good eating. Or so we think now. Up until sometime in the 1800s, though, lobster was literally low-class food, eaten only by the poor and institutionalized. Even in the harsh penal environment of early America, some colonies had laws against feeding lobsters to inmates more than once a week because it was thought to be cruel and unusual, like making people eat rats. One reason for their low status was how plentiful lobsters were in old New England. “Unbelievable abundance” is how one source describes the situation, including accounts of Plymouth pilgrims wading out and capturing all they wanted by hand, and of early Boston’s seashore being littered with lobsters after hard storms – these latter were treated as a smelly nuisance and ground up for fertilizer. There is also the fact that premodern lobster was often cooked dead and then preserved, usually packed in salt or crude hermetic containers. Maine’s earliest lobster industry was based around a dozen such seaside canneries in the 1840s, from which

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² N.B. All personally connected parties have made it clear from the start that they do not want to be talked about in this article.
³ Midcoasters’ native term for a lobster is, in fact, “bug,” as in “Come around on Sunday and we’ll cook up some bugs.”
⁴ Factoid: Lobster traps are usually baited with dead herring.
lobster was shipped as far away as California, in demand only because it was cheap and high in protein, basically chewable fuel.

Now, of course, lobster is posh, a delicacy, only a step or two down from caviar. The meat is richer and more substantial than most fish, its taste subtle compared to the marine-gaminess of mussels and clams. In the U.S. pop-food imagination, lobster is now the seafood analog to steak, with which it’s so often twinned as Surf ‘n’ Turf on the really expensive part of the chain steak house menu.

In fact, one obvious project of the MLF, and of its omnipresently sponsorial Maine Lobster Promotion Council, is to counter the idea that lobster is unusually luxe or rich or unhealthy or expensive, suitable only for effete palates or the occasional blow-the-diet treat. It is emphasized over and over in presentations and pamphlets at the Festival that Maine lobster meat has fewer calories, less cholesterol, and less saturated fat than chicken. And in the Main Eating Tent, you can get a “quarter” (industry shorthand for a 1¼-pound lobster), a 4-ounce cup of melted butter, a bag of chips, and a soft roll w/butter-pat for around $12.00, which is only slightly more expensive than supper at McDonald’s.

Be apprised, though, that the Main Eating Tent’s suppers come in Styrofoam trays, and the soft drinks are iceless and flat, and the coffee is convenience-store coffee in yet more Styrofoam, and the utensils are plastic (there are none of the special long skinny forks for pushing out the tail meat, though a few savvy diners bring their own). Nor do they give you near enough napkins, considering how messy lobster is to eat, especially when you’re squeezed onto benches alongside children of various ages and vastly different levels of fine-motor development—not to mention the people who’ve somehow smuggled in their own beer in enormous aisle-blocking coolers, or who all of a sudden produce their own plastic tablecloths and try to spread them over large portions of tables to try to reserve them (the tables) for their little groups. And so on. Any one example is no more than a petty inconvenience, of course, but the MLF turns out to be full of irksome little downers like this—see for instance the Main Stage’s headliner shows, where it turns out that you have to pay $20 extra for a folding chair if you want to sit down; or the North Tent’s mad scramble for the NyQuil-cup-size samples of finalists’ entries handed out after the Cooking Competition; or the much-touted Maine Sea Goddess pageant finals, which turn out to be excruciatingly long and to consist mainly of endless thanks and tributes to local sponsors. What the Maine Lobster Festival really is is a midlevel county fair with a culinary hook, and in this respect it’s not unlike Tidewater crab festivals, Midwest corn festivals, Texas chili festivals, etc., and shares with these venues the core paradox of all teeming commercial demotic events: It’s not for everyone.

Of course, the common practice of dipping the lobster meat in melted butter torpedoes all these happy fat-specs, which none of the Council’s promotional stuff ever mentions, any more than potato-industry PR talks about sour cream and bacon bits.

In truth, there’s a great deal to be said about the differences between working-class Rockland and the heavily populist flavor of its Festival versus comfortable and elitist Camden with its expensive view and shops given entirely over to $200 sweaters and great rows of Victorian homes converted to upscale B&Bs. And about these differences as two sides of the great coin that is U.S. tourism. Very little of which will be said here, except to amplify the above-mentioned paradox and to reveal your assigned correspondent’s own preferences. I confess that I have never understood why so many people’s idea of a fun vacation is to don flip-flops and sunglasses and crawl through maddening traffic to loud hot crowded tourist venues in order to sample a “local flavor” that is by definition ruined by the presence of tourists. This may (as my Festival companions keep pointing out) all be a matter of personality and hardwired taste: The fact that I just do not like tourist venues means that I’ll never understand their appeal and so am probably not the one to talk about it (the supposed appeal). But, since this note will almost surely not survive magazine-editing anyway, here goes:
the aforementioned euphoric Senior Editor, but I’d be surprised if she’d spent much time here in Harbor Park, watching people slap canal-zone mosquitoes as they eat deep-fried Twinkies and watch Professor Paddywhack, on six-foot stilts in a raincoat with plastic lobsters protruding from all directions on springs, terrify their children.

Lobster is essentially a summer food. This is because we now prefer our lobsters fresh, which means they have to be recently caught, which for both tactical and economic reasons takes place at depths of less than 25 fathoms. Lobsters tend to be hungriest and most active (i.e., most trappable) at summer water temperatures of 45–50°F. In the autumn, some Maine lobsters migrate out into deeper water, either for warmth or to avoid the heavy waves that pound New England’s coast all winter. Some burrow into the bottom. They might hibernate; nobody’s sure. Summer is also lobsters’ molting season – specifically early- to mid-July. Chitinous arthropods grow by molting, rather the way people have to buy bigger clothes as they age and gain weight. Since lobsters can live to be over 100, they can also get to be quite large, as in 20 pounds or more – though truly senior lobsters are rare now, because New England’s waters are so heavily trapped. Anyway, hence the culinary distinction between hard- and soft-shell lobsters, the latter sometimes a.k.a. shedders. A soft-shell lobster is one that has recently molted. In midcoast restaurants, the summer menu often offers both kinds, with shedders being slightly cheaper even though they’re easier to dismantle and the meat is allegedly sweeter. The reason for the discount is that a molting lobster uses a layer of seawater for insulation while its new shell is hardening, so there’s slightly less actual meat when you crack open a shedder, plus a redolent gout of water that gets all over everything and can sometimes jet out lemonlike and catch a tablemate right in the eye. If it’s winter or you’re buying lobster someplace far from New England, on the other hand, you can almost bet that the lobster is a hard-shell, which for obvious reasons travel better.

As an à la carte entrée, lobster can be baked, broiled, steamed, grilled, sautéed, stir-fried, or microwaved. The most common method, though, is boiling. If you’re someone who enjoys having lobster at home, this is probably the way you do it, since boiling is so easy. You need a large kettle w/ cover, which you fill about half full with water (the standard advice is that you want 2.5 quarts of water per lobster). Seawater is optimal, or you can add two tbsp salt per quart from the tap. It also helps to know how much your lobsters weigh. You get the water boiling, put in the lobsters one at a time, cover the kettle, and bring it back up to a boil. Then you bank the heat and let the kettle simmer – ten minutes for the first pound of lobster, then three minutes for each pound after that. (This is assuming you’ve got hard-shell lobsters, which, again, if you don’t live between Boston and Halifax, is probably what you’ve got. For shedders, you’re supposed to subtract three minutes from the total.) The reason the kettle’s lobsters turn scarlet is that boiling somehow

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As I see it, it probably really is good for the soul to be a tourist, even if it’s only once in a while. Not good for the soul in a refreshing or enlivening way, though, but rather in a grim, steely-eyed, let’s-look-honestly-at-the-facts-and-find-some-way-to-deal-with-them way. My personal experience has not been that traveling around the country is broadening or relaxing, or that radical changes in place and context have a salutary effect, but rather that intranational tourism is radically constricting, and humbling in the hardest way – hostile to my fantasy of being a real individual, of living somehow outside and above it all. (Coming up is the part that my companions find especially unhappy and repellent, a sure way to spoil the fun of vacation travel.) To be a mass tourist, for me, is to become a pure late-date American: alien, ignorant, greedy for something you cannot ever have, disappointed in a way you can never admit. It is to spoil, by way of sheer ontology, the very unspoiledness you are there to experience. It is to impose yourself on places that in all noneconomic ways would be better, realer, without you. It is, in lines and gridlock and transaction after transaction, to confront a dimension of yourself that is as inescapable as it is painful: As a tourist, you become economically significant but existentially loathsome, an insect on a dead thing.

Datum: In a good year, the U.S. industry produces around 80 million pounds of lobster, and Maine accounts for more than half that total.
suppresses every pigment in their chitin but one. If you want an easy test of whether the lobsters are done, you try pulling on one of their antennae – if it comes out of the head with minimal effort, you’re ready to eat.

A detail so obvious that most recipes don’t even bother to mention it is that each lobster is supposed to be alive when you put it in the kettle. This is part of lobster’s modern appeal: It’s the freshest food there is. There’s no decomposition between harvesting and eating. And not only do lobsters require no cleaning or dressing or plucking (though the mechanics of actually eating them are a different matter), but they’re relatively easy for vendors to keep alive. They come up alive in the traps, are placed in containers of seawater, and can, so long as the water’s aerated and the animals’ claws are pegged or banded to keep them from tearing one another up under the stresses of captivity, survive right up until they’re boiled. Most of us have been in supermarkets or restaurants that feature tanks of live lobster, from which you can pick out your supper while it watches you point. And part of the overall spectacle of the Maine Lobster Festival is that you can see actual lobstermen’s vessels docking at the wharves along the northeast grounds and unloading freshly caught product, which is transferred by hand or cart 100 yards to the great clear tanks stacked up around the Festival’s cooker – which is, as mentioned, billed as the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker and can process over 100 lobsters at a time for the Main Eating Tent.

So then here is a question that’s all but unavoidable at the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker, and may arise in kitchens across the U.S.: Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure? A related set of concerns: Is the previous question irksomely PC or sentimental? What does “all right” even mean in this context? Is it all just a matter of individual choice?

As you may or may not know, a certain well-known group called People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals thinks that the morality of lobster-boiling is not just a matter of individual conscience. In fact, one of the very first things we hear about the MLF … well, to set the scene: We’re coming in by cab from the almost indescribably odd and rustic Knox County Airport very late on the night before the Festival opens, sharing the cab with a wealthy political consultant who lives on Vinalhaven Island in the bay half the year (he’s headed for the island ferry in Rockland). The consultant and cabdriver are responding to informal journalistic probes about how people who live in the midcoast region actually view the MLF, as in is the Festival just a big-dollar tourist thing or is it something local residents look forward to attending, take genuine civic pride in, etc. The cabdriver – who’s in his seventies, one of apparently a whole platoon of retirees the cab company puts on to help with the summer rush, and wears a U.S.-flag lapel pin, and drives in what can only be called a very deliberate way – assures us that locals do endorse and enjoy the MLF, although he himself hasn’t gone in years, and now come to think of it no one he and his wife know has, either. However, the demilocal consultant’s been to recent Festivals a couple times (one gets the impression it was at his wife’s behest), of which his most vivid impression was that “you have

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8 N.B. Similar reasoning underlies the practice of what’s termed “debeaking” broiler chickens and brood hens in modern factory farms. Maximum commercial efficiency requires that enormous poultry populations be confined in unnaturally close quarters, under which conditions many birds go crazy and peck one another to death. As a purely observational side-note, be apprised that debeaking is usually an automated process and that the chickens receive no anesthetic. It’s not clear to me whether most gourmet readers know about debeaking, or about related practices like dehorning cattle in commercial feedlots, cropping swine’s tails in factory hog farms to keep psychotically bored neighbors from chewing them off, and so forth. It so happens that your assigned correspondent knew almost nothing about standard meat-industry operations before starting work on this article.

9 The terminal used to be somebody’s house, for example, and the lost-luggage-reporting room was clearly once a pantry.
to line up for an ungodly long time to get your lobsters, and meanwhile there are all these ex–flower children coming up and down along the line handing out pamphlets that say the lobsters die in terrible pain and you shouldn’t eat them.”

And it turns out that the post-hippies of the consultant’s recollection were activists from PETA. There were no PETA people in obvious view at the 2003 MLF, but they’ve been conspicuous at many of the recent Festivals. Since at least the mid-1990s, articles in everything from The Camden Herald to The New York Times have described PETA urging boycotts of the MLF, often deploying celebrity spokespeople like Mary Tyler Moore for open letters and ads saying stuff like “Lobsters are extraordinarily sensitive” and “To me, eating a lobster is out of the question.” More concrete is the oral testimony of Dick, our florid and extremely gregarious rental–car guy, to the effect that PETA’s been around so much in recent years that a kind of brittlely tolerant homeostasis now obtains between the activists and the Festival’s locals, e.g.: “We had some incidents a couple years ago. One lady took most of her clothes off and painted herself like a lobster, almost got herself arrested. But for the most part they’re let alone. [Rapid series of small ambiguous laughs, which with Dick happens a lot.] They do their thing and we do our thing.”

This whole interchange takes place on Route 1, 30 July, during a four-mile, 50-minute ride from the airport to the dealership to sign car-rental papers. Several irreproducible segues down the road from the PETA anecdotes, Dick – whose son-in-law happens to be a professional lobsterman and one of the Main Eating Tent’s regular suppliers – articulates what he and his family feel is the crucial mitigating factor in the whole morality-of-boiling-lobsters-alive issue: “There’s a part of the brain in people and animals that lets us feel pain, and lobsters’ brains don’t have this part.”

Besides the fact that it’s incorrect in about 11 different ways, the main reason Dick’s statement is interesting is that its thesis is more or less echoed by the Festival’s own pronouncement on lobsters and pain, which is part of a Test Your Lobster IQ quiz that appears in the 2003 MLF program courtesy of the Maine Lobster Promotion Council: “The nervous system of a lobster is very simple, and is in fact most similar to the nervous system of the grasshopper. It is decentralized with no brain. There is no cerebral cortex, which in humans is the area of the brain that gives the experience of pain.”

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10 It turned out that one Mr. William R. Rivas-Rivas, a high-ranking PETA official out of the group’s Virginia headquarters, was indeed there this year, albeit solo, working the Festival’s main and side entrances on Saturday, August 2, handing out pamphlets and adhesive stickers emblazoned with “Being Boiled Hurts,” which is the tagline in most of PETA’s published material about lobster. I learned that he’d been there only later, when speaking with Mr. Rivas-Rivas on the phone. I’m not sure how we missed seeing him in situ at the Festival, and I can’t see much to do except apologize for the oversight – although it’s also true that Saturday was the day of the big MLF parade through Rockland, which basic journalistic responsibility seemed to require going to (and which, with all due respect, meant that Saturday was maybe not the best day for PETA to work the Harbor Park grounds, especially if it was going to be just one person for one day, since a lot of diehard MLF partisans were off-site watching the parade (which, again with no offense intended, was in truth kind of cheesy and boring, consisting mostly of slow homemade floats and various midcoast people waving at one another, and with an extremely annoying man dressed as Blackbeard ranging up and down the length of the crowd saying “Arrr” over and over and brandishing a plastic sword at people, etc.; plus it rained)).

11 The short version regarding why we were back at the airport after already arriving the previous night involves lost luggage and a miscommunication about where and what the local National Car Rental franchise was – Dick came out personally to the airport and got us, out of no evident motive but kindness. (He also talked nonstop the entire way, with a very distinctive speaking style that can be described only as manically laconic; the truth is that I now know more about this man than I do about some members of my own family.)
Though it sounds more sophisticated, a lot of the neurology in this latter claim is still either false or fuzzy. The human cerebral cortex is the brain-part that deals with higher faculties like reason, metaphysical self-awareness, language, etc. Pain reception is known to be part of a much older and more primitive system of nociceptors and prostaglandins that are managed by the brain stem and thalamus. On the other hand, it is true that the cerebral cortex is involved in what’s variously called suffering, distress, or the emotional experience of pain – i.e., experiencing painful stimuli as unpleasant, very unpleasant, unbearable, and so on.

Before we go any further, let’s acknowledge that the questions of whether and how different kinds of animals feel pain, and of whether and why it might be justifiable to inflict pain on them in order to eat them, turn out to be extremely complex and difficult. And comparative neuroanatomy is only part of the problem. Since pain is a totally subjective mental experience, we do not have direct access to anyone or anything’s pain but our own; and even just the principles by which we can infer that others experience pain and have a legitimate interest in not feeling pain involve hard-core philosophy – metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, ethics. The fact that even the most highly evolved nonhuman mammals can’t use language to communicate with us about their subjective mental experience is only the first layer of additional complication in trying to extend our reasoning about pain and morality to animals. And everything gets progressively more abstract and convolved as we move farther and farther out from the higher-type mammals into cattle and swine and dogs and cats and rodents, and then birds and fish, and finally invertebrates like lobsters.

The more important point here, though, is that the whole animal-cruelty-and-eating issue is not just complex, it’s also uncomfortable. It is, at any rate, uncomfortable for me, and for just about everyone I know who enjoys a variety of foods and yet does not want to see herself as cruel or unfeeling. As far as I can tell, my own main way of dealing with this conflict has been to avoid thinking about the whole unpleasant thing. I should add that it appears to me unlikely that many readers of Gourmet wish to think hard about it, either, or to be queried about the morality of their eating habits in the pages of a culinary monthly. Since, however, the assigned subject of this article is what it was like to attend the 2003 MLF, and thus to spend several days in the midst of a great mass of Americans all eating lobster, and thus to be more or less impelled to think hard about lobster and the experience of buying and eating lobster, it turns out that there is no honest way to avoid certain moral questions.

There are several reasons for this. For one thing, it’s not just that lobsters get boiled alive, it’s that you do it yourself – or at least it’s done specifically for you, on-site. As mentioned, the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker, which is highlighted as an attraction in the Festival’s program, is right out there on the MLF’s north grounds for everyone to see. Try to imagine a Nebraska Beef

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12 To elaborate by way of example: The common experience of accidentally touching a hot stove and yanking your hand back before you’re even aware that anything’s going on is explained by the fact that many of the processes by which we detect and avoid painful stimuli do not involve the cortex. In the case of the hand and stove, the brain is bypassed altogether; all the important neurochemical action takes place in the spine.

13 Morality-wise, let’s concede that this cuts both ways. Lobster-eating is at least not abetted by the system of corporate factory farms that produces most beef, pork, and chicken. Because, if nothing else, of the way they’re marketed and packaged for sale, we eat these latter meats without having to consider that they were once conscious, sentient creatures to whom horrible things were done. (N.B. PETA distributes a certain video – the title of which is being omitted as part of the elaborate editorial compromise by which this note appears at all – in which you can see just about everything meat-related you don’t want to see or think about. (N.B. Not that PETA’s any sort of font of unspun truth. Like many partisans in complex moral disputes, the PETA people are fanatics, and a lot of their rhetoric seems simplistic and self-righteous. Personally, though, I have to say that I found this unnamed video both credible and deeply upsetting.))
Festival at which part of the festivities is watching trucks pull up and the live cattle get driven down the ramp and slaughtered right there on the World’s Largest Killing Floor or something – there’s no way.

The intimacy of the whole thing is maximized at home, which of course is where most lobster gets prepared and eaten (although note already the semiconscious euphemism “prepared,” which in the case of lobsters really means killing them right there in our kitchens). The basic scenario is that we come in from the store and make our little preparations like getting the kettle filled and boiling, and then we lift the lobsters out of the bag or whatever retail container they came home in ...whereupon some uncomfortable things start to happen. However stuporous the lobster is from the trip home, for instance, it tends to come alarmingly to life when placed in boiling water. If you’re tilting it from a container into the steaming kettle, the lobster will sometimes try to cling to the container’s sides or even to hook its claws over the kettle’s rim like a person trying to keep from going over the edge of a roof. And worse is when the lobster’s fully immersed. Even if you cover the kettle and turn away, you can usually hear the cover rattling and clanking as the lobster tries to push it off. Or the creature’s claws scraping the sides of the kettle as it thrashes around. The lobster, in other words, behaves very much as you or I would behave if we were plunged into boiling water (with the obvious exception of screaming). A blunter way to say this is that the lobster acts as if it’s in terrible pain, causing some cooks to leave the kitchen altogether and to take one of those little lightweight plastic oven timers with them into another room and wait until the whole process is over.

There happen to be two main criteria that most ethicists agree on for determining whether a living creature has the capacity to suffer and so has genuine interests that it may or may not be our moral duty to consider. One is how much of the neurological hardware required for pain-experience the animal comes equipped with – nociceptors, prostaglandins, neuronal opioid receptors, etc. The other criterion is whether the animal demonstrates behavior associated with pain. And it takes a lot of intellectual gymnastics and behaviorist hairsplitting not to see struggling, thrashing, and lid-clattering as just such pain-behavior. According to marine zoologists, it usually takes lobsters between 35 and 45 seconds to die in boiling water. (No source I could find talked about how long it takes them to die in superheated steam; one rather hopes it’s faster.)

Is it significant that “lobster,” “fish,” and “chicken” are our culture’s words for both the animal and the meat, whereas most mammals seem to require euphemisms like “beef” and “pork” that help us separate the meat we eat from the living creature the meat once was? Is this evidence that some kind of deep unease about eating higher animals is endemic enough to show up in English usage, but that the unease diminishes as we move out of the mammalian order? (And is “lamb”/“lamb” the counterexample that sinks the whole theory, or are there special, biblically-historical reasons for that equivalence?)

There’s a relevant populist myth about the high-pitched whistling sound that sometimes issues from a pot of boiling lobster. The sound is really vented steam from the layer of seawater between the lobster’s flesh and its carapace (this is why shedders whistle more than hard-shells), but the pop version has it that the sound is the lobster’s rabbitlike death scream. Lobsters communicate via pheromones in their urine and don’t have anything close to the vocal equipment for screaming, but the myth’s very persistent – which might, once again, point to a low-level cultural unease about the boiling thing.

“Interests” basically means strong and legitimate preferences, which obviously require some degree of consciousness, responsiveness to stimuli, etc. See, for instance, the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, whose 1974 Animal Liberation is more or less the bible of the modern animal-rights movement: “It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its welfare. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being kicked along the road, because it will suffer if it is.”
There are, of course, other fairly common ways to kill your lobster on-site and so achieve maximum freshness. Some cooks’ practice is to drive a sharp heavy knife point-first into a spot just above the midpoint between the lobster’s eyestalks (more or less where the Third Eye is in human foreheads). This is alleged either to kill the lobster instantly or to render it insensate – and is said at least to eliminate the cowardice involved in throwing a creature into boiling water and then fleeing the room. As far as I can tell from talking to proponents of the knife-in-the-head method, the idea is that it’s more violent but ultimately more merciful, plus that a willingness to exert personal agency and accept responsibility for stabbing the lobster’s head honors the lobster somehow and entitles one to eat it. (There’s often a vague sort of Native American spirituality-of-the-hunt flavor to pro-knife arguments.) But the problem with the knife method is basic biology: Lobsters’ nervous systems operate off not one but several ganglia, a.k.a. nerve bundles, which are sort of wired in series and distributed all along the lobster’s underside, from stem to stern. And disabling only the frontal ganglion does not normally result in quick death or unconsciousness. Another alternative is to put the lobster in cold salt water and then very slowly bring it up to a full boil. Cooks who advocate this method are going mostly on the analogy to a frog, which can supposedly be kept from jumping out of a boiling pot by heating the water incrementally. In order to save a lot of research-summarizing, I’ll simply assure you that the analogy between frogs and lobsters turns out not to hold.

Ultimately, the only certain virtues of the home-lobotomy and slow-heating methods are comparative, because there are even worse/crueler ways people prepare lobster. Time-thrifty cooks sometimes microwave them alive (usually after poking several extra vent holes in the carapace, which is a precaution most shellfish-microwavers learn about the hard way). Live dismemberment, on the other hand, is big in Europe: Some chefs cut the lobster in half before cooking; others like to tear off the claws and tail and toss only these parts in the pot.

And there’s more unhappy news respecting suffering-criterion number one. Lobsters don’t have much in the way of eyesight or hearing, but they do have an exquisite tactile sense, one facilitated by hundreds of thousands of tiny hairs that protrude through their carapace. “Thus,” in the words of T.M. Prudden’s industry classic About Lobster, “it is that although encased in what seems a solid, impenetrable armor, the lobster can receive stimuli and impressions from without as readily as if it possessed a soft and delicate skin.” And lobsters do have nociceptors, as well as invertebrate versions of the prostaglandins and major neurotransmitters via which our own brains register pain.

Lobsters do not, on the other hand, appear to have the equipment for making or absorbing natural opioids like endorphins and enkephalins, which are what more advanced nervous systems use to try to handle intense pain. From this fact, though, one could conclude either that lobsters are maybe even more vulnerable to pain, since they lack mammalian nervous systems’ built-in analgesia, or, instead, that the absence of natural opioids implies an absence of the really intense pain-sensations that natural opioids are designed to mitigate. I for one can detect a marked upswing in mood as I contemplate this latter possibility: It could be that their lack of endorphin/enkephalin hardware means that lobsters’ raw subjective experience of pain is so radically different from mammals’ that it may not even deserve the term pain. Perhaps lobsters are more like those frontal-lobotomy patients one reads about who report experiencing pain in a totally different way than you and I. These patients evidently do feel physical pain, neurologically speaking, but don’t dislike it

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17 This is the neurological term for special pain receptors that are (according to Jane A. Smith and Kenneth M. Boyd’s Lives in the Balance) “sensitive to potentially damaging extremes of temperature, to mechanical forces, and to chemical substances which are released when body tissues are damaged.”
– though neither do they like it; it’s more that they feel it but don’t feel anything about it – the point being that the pain is not distressing to them or something they want to get away from. Maybe lobsters, who are also without frontal lobes, are detached from the neurological-registration-of-injury-or-hazard we call pain in just the same way. There is, after all, a difference between (1) pain as a purely neurological event, and (2) actual suffering, which seems crucially to involve an emotional component, an awareness of pain as unpleasant, as something to fear/dislike/want to avoid. Maybe lobsters, who are also without frontal lobes, are detached from the neurological-registration of injury or hazard we call pain in just the same way. There is, after all, a difference between (1) pain as a purely neurological event, and (2) actual suffering, which seems crucially to involve an emotional component, an awareness of pain as unpleasant, as something to fear/dislike/want to avoid.

Still, after all the abstract intellecction, there remain the facts of the frantically clanking lid, the pathetic clinging to the edge of the pot. Standing at the stove, it is hard to deny in any meaningful way that this is a living creature experiencing pain and wishing to avoid/escape the painful experience. To my lay mind, the lobster’s behavior in the kettle appears to be the expression of a preference; and it may well be that an ability to form preferences is the decisive criterion for real suffering. The logic of this (preference → suffering) relation may be easiest to see in the negative case. If you cut certain kinds of worms in half, the halves will often keep crawling around and going about their vermiform business as if nothing had happened. When we assert, based on their post-op behavior, that these worms appear not to be suffering, what we’re really saying is that there’s no sign that the worms know anything bad has happened or would prefer not to have gotten cut in half.

Lobsters, however, are known to exhibit preferences. Experiments have shown that they can detect changes of only a degree or two in water temperature; one reason for their complex migratory cycles (which can often cover 100-plus miles a year) is to pursue the temperatures they like best. And, as mentioned, they’re bottom-dwellers and do not like bright light: If a tank of food lobsters is out in the sunlight or a store’s fluorescence, the lobsters will always congregate in whatever part is darkest. Fairly solitary in the ocean, they also clearly dislike the crowding that’s part of their captivity in tanks, since (as also mentioned) one reason why lobsters’ claws are banded on capture is to keep them from attacking one another under the stress of close-quarter storage. In any event, at the Festival, standing by the bubbling tanks outside the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker, watching the fresh-caught lobsters pile over one another, wave their hobbled claws impotently, huddle in the rear corners, or scrabble frantically back from the glass as you approach, it is difficult not to sense that they’re unhappy, or frightened, even if it’s some

18 “Preference” is maybe roughly synonymous with “interest,” but it is a better term for our purposes because it’s less abstractly philosophical – “preference” seems more personal, and it’s the whole idea of a living creature’s personal experience that’s at issue.

19 Of course, the most common sort of counterargument here would begin by objecting that “like best” is really just a metaphor, and a misleadingly anthropomorphic one at that. The counterarguer would posit that the lobster seeks to maintain a certain optimal ambient temperature out of nothing but unconscious instinct (with a similar explanation for the low-light affinities about to be mentioned in the main text). The thrust of such a counterargument will be that the lobster’s thrashings and clankings in the kettle express not unpreferred pain but involuntary reflexes, like your leg shooting out when the doctor hits your knee. Be advised that there are professional scientists, including many researchers who use animals in experiments, who hold to the view that nonhuman creatures have no real feelings at all, only “behaviors.” Be further advised that this view has a long history that goes all the way back to Descartes, although its modern support comes mostly from behaviorist psychology.

To these what-look-like-pain-are-really-only-reflexes counterarguments, however, there happen to be all sorts of scientific and pro-animal-rights countercounterarguments. And then further attempted rebuttals and redirects, and so on. Suffice to say that both the scientific and the philosophical arguments on either side of the animal-suffering issue are involved, abstruse, technical, often informed by self-interest or ideology, and in the end so totally inconclusive that as a practical matter, in the kitchen or restaurant, it all still seems to come down to individual conscience, going with (no pun) your gut.
rudimentary version of these feelings ... and, again, why does rudimentariness even enter into it? Why is a primitive, inarticulate form of suffering less urgent or uncomfortable for the person who’s helping to inflict it by paying for the food it results in? I’m not trying to give you a PETA-like screed here – at least I don’t think so. I’m trying, rather, to work out and articulate some of the troubling questions that arise amid all the laughter and saltation and community pride of the Maine Lobster Festival. The truth is that if you, the Festival attendee, permit yourself to think that lobsters can suffer and would rather not, the MLF can begin to take on aspects of something like a Roman circus or medieval torture-fest.

Does that comparison seem a bit much? If so, exactly why? Or what about this one: Is it not possible that future generations will regard our own present agribusiness and eating practices in much the same way we now view Nero’s entertainments or Aztec sacrifices? My own immediate reaction is that such a comparison is hysterical, extreme – and yet the reason it seems extreme to me appears to be that I believe animals are less morally important than human beings; and when it comes to defending such a belief, even to myself, I have to acknowledge that (a) I have an obvious selfish interest in this belief, since I like to eat certain kinds of animals and want to be able to keep doing it, and (b) I have not succeeded in working out any sort of personal ethical system in which the belief is truly defensible instead of just selfishly convenient.

Given this article’s venue and my own lack of culinary sophistication, I’m curious about whether the reader can identify with any of these reactions and acknowledgments and discomforts. I am also concerned not to come off as shrill or preachy when what I really am is confused. Given the (possible) moral status and (very possible) physical suffering of the animals involved, what ethical convictions do gourmets evolve that allow them not just to eat but to savor and enjoy flesh-based viands (since of course refined enjoyment, rather than just ingestion, is the whole point of gastronomy)? And for those gourmets who’ll have no truck with convictions or rationales and who regard stuff like the previous paragraph as just so much pointless navel-gazing, what makes it feel okay, inside, to dismiss the whole issue out of hand? That is, is their refusal to think about any of this the product of actual thought, or is it just that they don’t want to think about it? Do they ever think about their reluctance to think about it? After all, isn’t being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one’s food and its overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet? Or is all the gourmet’s extra attention and sensibility just supposed to be aesthetic, gustatory?

These last couple queries, though, while sincere, obviously involve much larger and more abstract questions about the connections (if any) between aesthetics and morality, and these questions lead straightaway into such deep and treacherous waters that it’s probably best to stop the public discussion right here. There are limits to what even interested persons can ask of each other.

20 Meaning a lot less important, apparently, since the moral comparison here is not the value of one human’s life vs. the value of one animal’s life, but rather the value of one animal’s life vs. the value of one human’s taste for a particular kind of protein. Even the most diehard carniphile will acknowledge that it’s possible to live and eat well without consuming animals.
Of Cannibals

Michel de Montaigne


French statesman and philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) is credited with the invention of the modern essay, in which an author explores a topic by blending historical details and philosophical insights with elements of the author’s own experience. His three volumes of essays display a perceptive mind, a remarkably modern and humanistic temperament, and a robust skepticism of received wisdom (his famous motto was “what do I know?”). A Roman Catholic himself, Montaigne was disgusted by the violence and inhumanities perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestants during the “Wars of Religion” of his day. While in the town of Rouen in 1562, he met a cannibal who had recently been brought to France from Brazil, and for some years he employed a man who had lived in Brazil and observed the customs there. In this essay, he writes about the “barbarians” of the New World and tries to understand them in their own terms, displaying a nascent sense of cultural relativism and prefiguring later ideas about the “noble savage.”

When King Pyrrhus passed over into Italy, after he had reconnoitered the formation of the army that the Romans were sending to meeting him, he said: “I do not know what barbarians these are” (for so the Greeks called all foreign nations), “but the formation of this army that I see is not at all barbarous” (Plutarch, Life of Pyrrhus). The Greeks said as much of the army that Flaminius brought into their country, and so did Philip, seeing from a knoll the order and distribution of the Roman camp, in his kingdom, under Publius Sulpicius Galba. Thus we should beware of clinging to vulgar opinions, and judge things by reason’s way, not by popular say.

I had with me for a long time a man who had lived for ten or twelve years in that other world which has been discovered in our century, in the place where Villegagnon landed [in Brazil in 1557], and which he called Antarctic France. This discovery of a boundless country seems worthy of consideration. I don't know if I can guarantee that some other such discovery will not be made in the future, so many personages greater than ourselves having been mistaken about this one. I am afraid we have eyes bigger than our stomachs, and more curiosity than capacity. We embrace everything, but we clasp only wind.

Plato brings in Solon, telling how he had learned from the priests of the city of Sas in Egypt that in days of old, before the Flood, there was a great island named Atlantis, right at the mouth of the Strait of Gibraltar, which contained more land than Africa and Asia put together, and that the kings of that country, who not only possessed that island but had stretched out so far on the mainland that they held the breadth of Africa as far as Egypt, and the length of Europe as far as Tuscany, undertook to step over into Asia and subjugate all the nations that border on the Mediterranean, as far as the Black Sea; and for this purpose crossed the Spainis, Gaul, Italy, as far as Greece, where the Athenians checked them; but that some time after, both the Athenians and themselves and their island were swallowed up by the Flood.

It is quite likely that that extreme devastation of waters made amazing changes in the habitations of the earth, as people maintain that the sea cut off Sicily from Italy – “’Tis said an earthquake once asunder tore / These lands with dreadful havoc, which before / Formed but one land, one coast” (Virgil, Aeneid) – Cyprus from Syria, the island of Euboea from the mainland of Boeotia; and elsewhere joined lands that were divided, filling the channels between them with sand and mud: “A sterile marsh, long fit for rowing, now / Feeds neighbor towns, and feels the heavy plow” (Horace, Ars Poetica). But there is no great likelihood that that island was the new
world which we have just discovered; for it almost touched Spain, and it would be an incredible result of a flood to have forced it away as far as it is, more than twelve hundred leagues; besides, the travels of the moderns have already almost revealed that it is not an island, but a mainland connected with the East Indies on one side, and elsewhere with the lands under the two poles; or, if it is separated from them, it is by so narrow a strait and interval that it does not deserve to be called an island on that account.

It seems that there are movements, some natural, others feverish, in these great bodies, just as in our own. When I consider the inroads that my river, the Dordogne, is making in my lifetime into the right bank in its descent, and that in twenty years it has gained so much ground and stolen away the foundations of several buildings, I clearly see that this is an extraordinary disturbance; for if it had always gone at this rate, or was to do so in the future, the face of the world would be turned topsy-turvy. But rivers are subject to changes: now they overflow in one direction, now in another, now they keep to their course. I am not speaking of the sudden inundations whose causes are manifest. In Mdoc, along the seashore, my brother, the sieur d'Arsac, can see an estate of his buried under the sands that the sea spews forth; the tops of some buildings are still visible; his farms and domains have changed into very thin pasturage. The inhabitants say that for some time the sea has been pushing toward them so hard that they have lost four leagues of land. These sands are its harbingers; and we see great dunes of moving sand that march half a league ahead of it and keep conquering land.

The other testimony of antiquity with which some would connect this discovery is in Aristotle, at least if that little book Of Unheard-of Wonders is by him. He there relates that certain Carthaginians, after setting out upon the Atlantic Ocean from the Strait of Gibraltar and sailing a long time, at last discovered a great fertile island, all clothed in woods and watered by great deep rivers, far remote from any mainland; and that they, and others since, attracted by the goodness and fertility of the soil, went there with their wives and children, and began to settle there. The lords of Carthage, seeing that their country was gradually becoming depopulated, expressly forbade anyone to go there any more, on pain of death, and drove out these new inhabitants, fearing, it is said, that in course of time they might come to multiply so greatly as to supplant their former masters and ruin their state. This story of Aristotle does not fit our new lands any better than the other.

This man I had was a simple, crude fellow – a character fit to bear true witness; for clever people observe more things and more curiously, but they interpret them; and to lend weight and conviction to their interpretation, they cannot help altering history a little. They never show you things as they are, but bend and disguise them according to the way they have seen them; and to give credence to their judgment and attract you to it, they are prone to add something to their matter, to stretch it out and amplify it. We need a man either very honest, or so simple that he has not the stuff to build up false inventions and give them plausibility; and wedded to no theory. Such was my man; and besides this, he at various times brought sailors and merchants, whom he had known on that trip, to see me. So I content myself with his information, without inquiring what the cosmographers say about it.

We ought to have topographers who would give us an exact account of the places where they have been. But because they have over us the advantage of having seen Palestine, they want to enjoy the privilege of telling us news about all the rest of the world. I would like everyone to write what he knows, not only in this, but in all other subjects; for a man may have some special knowledge and experience of the nature of a river or a fountain, who in other matters knows only
what everybody knows. However, to circulate this little scrap of knowledge, he will undertake to write the whole of physics. From this vice spring many great abuses.

Now, to return to my subject, I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinion and customs of the country we live in. There is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished manners in all things. Those people are wild, just as we call wild the fruits that Nature has produced by herself and in her normal course; where really it is those that we have changed artificially and led astray from the common order, that we should rather call wild. The former retain alive and vigorous their genuine, their most useful and natural, virtues and properties, which we have debased in the latter in adapting them to gratify our corrupted taste. And yet for all that, the savor and delicacy of some uncultivated fruits of those countries is quite as excellent, even to our taste, as that of our own. It is not reasonable that art should win the place of honor over our great and powerful mother Nature. We have so overloaded the beauty and richness of her works by our inventions that we have quite smothered her. Yet wherever her purity shines forth, she wonderfully puts to shame our vain and frivolous attempts: “Ivy comes readier without our care;/In lonely caves the arbutus grows more fair;/No art with artless bird song can compare” (Propertius). All our efforts cannot even succeed in reproducing the nest of the tiniest little bird, its contexture, its beauty and convenience; or even the web of the puny spider. All things, says Plato (Laws), are produced by nature, by fortune, or by art; the greatest and most beautiful by one or the other of the first two, the least and most imperfect by the last.

These nations, then, seem to me barbarous in this sense, that they have been fashioned very little by the human mind, and are still very close to their original naturalness. The laws of nature still rule them, very little corrupted by ours; and they are in such a state of purity that I am sometimes vexed that they were unknown earlier, in the days when there were men able to judge them better than we. I am sorry that Lycurgus and Plato did not know of them; for it seems to me that what we actually see in these nations surpasses not only all the pictures in which poets have idealized the golden age and all their inventions in imagining a happy state of man, but also the conceptions and the very desire of philosophy. They could not imagine a naturalness so pure and simple as we see by experience; nor could they believe that our society could be maintained with so little artifice and human soldier. This is a nation, I should say to Plato, in which there is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate of for political superiority, no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contacts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations but leisure ones, no care for any but common kinship, no clothes, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wine or wheat. The very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, belittling, pardon – unheard of. How far from this perfection would he find the republic that he imagines: Men fresh sprung from the gods (Seneca, Epistle). “These manners nature first ordained” (Virgil, Georgics).

For the rest, they live in a country with a very pleasant and temperate climate, so that according to my witnesses it is rare to see a sick man there; and they have assured me that they never saw one palsied, bleary-eyed, toothless, or bent with age. They are settled along the sea and shut in on the land side by great high mountains, with a stretch about a hundred leagues wide in between. They have a great abundance of fish and flesh which bear no resemblance to ours, and they eat them with no other artifice than cooking. The first man who rode a horse there, though he had had dealings with them on several other trips, so horrified them in this posture that they shot him dead with arrows before they could recognize him. Their buildings are very long, with a capacity of two
or three hundred souls; they are covered with the bark of great trees, the strips reaching to the ground at one end and supporting and leaning on one another at the top, in the manner of some of our barns, whose covering hangs down to the ground and acts as a side. They have wood so hard that they cut with it and make of it their swords and grills to cook their food. Their beds are of a cotton weave, hung from the roof like those in our ships, each man having his own; for the wives sleep apart from their husbands.

They get up with the sun, and eat immediately upon rising, to last them through the day; for they take no other meal than that one. Like some other Eastern peoples, of whom Suidas tells us, who drank apart from meals, they do not drink then; but they drink several times a day, and to capacity. Their drink is made of some root, and is of the color of our claret wines. They drink it only lukewarm. This beverage keeps only two or three days; it has a slightly sharp taste, is not at all heady, is good for the stomach, and has a laxative effect upon those who are not used to it; it is a very pleasant drink for anyone who is accustomed to it. In place of bread they use a certain white substance like preserved coriander. I have tried it; it tastes sweet and a little flat.

The whole day is spent in dancing. The younger men go to hunt animals with bows. Some of the women busy themselves meanwhile with warming their drink, which is their chief duty. Some one of the old men, in the morning before they begin to eat, preaches to the whole barnful in common, walking from one end to the other, and repeating one single sentence several times until he has completed the circuit (for the buildings are fully a hundred paces long). He recommends to them only two things: valor against the enemy and love for their wives. And they never fail to point out this obligation, as their refrain, that it is their wives who keep their drink warm and seasoned.

There may be seen in several places, including my own house, specimens of their beds, of their ropes, of their wooden swords and the bracelets with which they cover their wrists in combats, and of the big canes, open at one end, by whose sound they keep time in their dances. They are close shaven all over, and shave themselves much more cleanly than we, with nothing but a wooden or stone razor. They believe that souls are immortal and that those who have deserved well of the gods are lodged in that part of heaven where the sun rises, and the damned in the west.

They have some sort of priests and prophets, but they rarely appear before the people, having their home in the mountains. On their arrival there is a great feast and solemn assembly of several villages – each barn, as I have described it, makes up a village, and they are about one French league from each other. The prophet speaks to them in public, exhorting them to virtue and their duty; but their whole ethical science contains only these two articles; resoluteness in war and affection for their wives. He prophesies to them things to come and the results they are to expect from their undertakings, and urges them to war or holds them back from it; but this is on the condition that when he fails to prophesy correctly, and if things turn out otherwise than he has predicted, he is cut into a thousand pieces if they catch him, and condemned as a false prophet. For this reason, the prophet who has once been mistaken is never seen again.

Divination is a gift of God; that is why its abuse should be punished as imposture. Among the Scythians, when the soothsayers failed to hit the mark, they were laid, chained hand and foot, on carts full of heather and drawn by oxen, on which they were burned. Those who handle matters subject to the control of human capacity are excusable if they do the best they can. But these others, who come and trick us with assurances of an extraordinary faculty that is beyond our ken, should they not be punished for making good their promise, and for the temerity of their imposture?

They have their wars with the nations beyond the mountains, further inland, to which they go quite naked, with no other arms than bows or wooden swords ending in a sharp point, in the manner
of the tongues of our boar spears. It is astonishing what firmness they show in their combats, which never end but in slaughter and bloodshed; for as to routs and terror, they know nothing of either.

Each man brings back as his trophy the head of the enemy he has killed, and sets it up at the entrance to his dwelling. After they have treated their prisoners well for a long time with all the hospitality they can think of, each man who has a prisoner calls a great assembly of his acquaintances. He ties a rope to one of the prisoner's arms, by the end of which he holds him, a few steps away, for fear of being hurt, and gives his dearest friend the other arm to hold in the same way; and these two, in the presence of the whole assembly, kill him with their swords. This done, they roast him and eat him in common and send some pieces to their absent friends. This is not, as people think, for nourishment, as of old the Scythians used to do; it is to betoken an extreme revenge. And the proof of this came when they saw the Portuguese, who had joined forces with their adversaries, inflict a different kind of death on them when they took them prisoner, which was to bury them up to the waist, shoot the rest of their body full of arrows, and afterward hang them. They thought that these people from the other world, being men who had sown the knowledge of many vices among their neighbors and were much greater masters than themselves in every sort of wickedness, did not adopt this sort of vengeance without some reason, and that it must be more painful than their own; so they began to give up their old method and to follow this one.

I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only read but seen within fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the pretext of piety and religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead.

Indeed, Chrysippus and Zeno, heads of the Stoic sect, thought there was nothing wrong in using our carcasses for any purpose in case of need, and getting nourishment from them; just as our ancestors, when besieged by Caesar in the city of Alsia, resolved to relieve their famine by eating old men, women, and other people useless for fighting. “The Gascons once, 'tis said, their life renewed / By eating of such food” (Juvenal, **Satires**). And physicians do not fear to use human flesh in all sorts of ways for our health, applying it either inwardly or outwardly. But there never was any opinion so disordered as to excuse treachery, disloyalty, tyranny, and cruelty, which are our ordinary vices.

So we may well call these people barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity.

Their warfare is wholly noble and generous, and as excusable and beautiful as this human disease can be; its only basis among them is their rivalry in valor. They are not fighting for the conquest of new lands, for they still enjoy that natural abundance that provides them without toil and trouble with all necessary things in such profusion that they have no wish to enlarge their boundaries. They are still in that happy state of desiring only as much as their natural needs demand; anything beyond that is superfluous to them.

They generally call those of the same age, brothers; those who are younger, children; and the old men are fathers to all the others. These leave to their heirs in common the full possession of their property, without division or any other title at all than just the one that Nature gives to her creatures in bringing them into the world.
If their neighbors cross the mountains to attack them and win a victory, the gain of the victor is glory, and the advantage of having proved the master in valor and virtue; for apart from this they have no use for the goods of the vanquished, and they return to their own country, where they lack neither anything necessary nor that great thing, the knowledge of how to enjoy their condition happily and be content with it. These men of ours do the same in their turn. They demand of their prisoners no other ransom than that they confess and acknowledge their defeat. But there is not one in a whole century who does not choose to die rather than to relax a single bit, by word or look, from the grandeur of an invincible courage; not one who would not rather be killed and eaten than so much as ask not to be. They treat them very freely, so that life may be all the dearer to them, and usually entertain them with threats of their coming death, of the torments they will have to suffer, the preparations that are being made for that purpose, the cutting up of their limbs, and the feast that will be made at their expense. All this is done for the purpose of extorting from their lips some weak or base word, or making them want to flee, so as to gain the advantage of having terrified them and broken down their firmness. For indeed, if you take it the right way, it is in this point alone that true victory lies: “It is no victory / Unless the vanquished foe admits your mastery” (Claudian).

The Hungarians, very bellicose fighters, did not in olden times pursue their advantage beyond putting the enemy at their mercy. For having wrung a confession from him to this effect, they let him go unharmed and unransomed, except, at most, for exacting his promise never again to take up arms against them.

We win enough advantages over our enemies that are borrowed advantages, not really our own. It is the quality of a porter, not of valor, to have sturdier arms and legs; agility is a dead and corporeal quality; it is a stroke of luck to make our enemy stumble, or dazzle his eyes by the sunlight; it is a trick of art and technique, which may be found in a worthless coward, to be an able fencer. The worth and value of a man is in his heart and his will; there lies his real honor. Valor is the strength, not of legs and arms, but of heart and soul; it consists not in the worth of our horse or our weapons, but in our own. He who falls obstinate in his courage, if he has fallen, he fights on his knees (Seneca). He who releases none of his assurance, no matter how great the danger of imminent death; who, giving up his soul, still looks firmly and scornfully at his enemy – he is beaten not by us, but by fortune; he is killed, not conquered.

The most valiant are sometimes the most unfortunate. Thus there are triumphant defeats that rival victories. Nor did those four sister victories, the fairest that the sun ever set eyes on – Salamis, Plataea, Mycale, and Sicily – ever date match all their combined glory against the glory of the annihilation of King Leonidas and his men at the pass of Thermopylae.

Who ever hastened with more glorious and ambitious desire to win a battle than Captain Ischolas to lose one (Diodorus Siculus)? Who ever secured his safety more ingeniously and painstakingly than he did his destruction? He was charged to defend a certain pass in the Peloponnesus against the Arcadians. Finding himself wholly incapable of doing this, in view of the nature of the place and the inequality of the forces, he made up his mind that all who confronted the enemy would necessarily have to remain on the field. On the other hand, deeming it unworthy both of his own virtue and magnanimity and of the Lacedaemonian name to fail in his charge, he took a middle course between these two extremes, in this way. The youngest and fittest of his band he preserved for the defense and service of their country, and sent them home; and with those whose loss was less important, he determined to hold this pass, and by their death to make the enemy buy their entry as dearly as he could. And so it turned out. For he was presently surrounded on all sides by the Arcadians, and after slaughtering a large number of them, he and his men were
all put to the sword. Is there a trophy dedicated to victors that would not be more due to these vanquished? The role of true victory is in fighting, not in coming off safely; and the honor of valor consists in combating, not in beating.

To return to our story. These prisoners are so far from giving in, in spite of all that is done to them; that on the contrary, during the two or three months that they are kept, they wear a gay expression; they urge their captors to hurry and put them to the test; they defy them, insult them, reproach them with their own cowardice and the number of battles they have lost to the prisoners’ own people.

I have a song composed by a prisoner which contains this challenge, that they should all come boldly and gather to dine off him, for they will be eating at the same time their own fathers and grandfathers, who have served to feed and nourish his body. “These muscles,” he says, “this flesh and these veins are your own, poor fools that you are. You do not recognize that the substance of your ancestors’ limbs is still contained in them. Savor them well; you will find in them the taste of your own flesh.” An idea that certainly does not smack of barbarity. Those that paint these people dying, and who show the execution, portray the prisoner spitting in the face of his slayers and scowling at them. Indeed, to the last gasp they never stop braving and defying their enemies by word and look. Truly here are real savages by our standards; for either they must be thoroughly so, or we must be; there is an amazing distance between their character and ours.

The men there have several wives, and the higher their reputation for valor the more wives they have. It is a remarkably beautiful thing about their marriages that the same jealousy our wives have to keep us from the affection and kindness of other women, theirs have to win this for them. Being more concerned for their husbands' honor than for anything else, they strive and scheme to have as many companions as they can, since that is a sign of their husbands' valor.

Our wives will cry “Miracle!” but it is no miracle. It is a properly matrimonial virtue, but one of the highest order. In the Bible, Leah, Rachel, Sarah, and Jacob’s wives gave their beautiful handmaids to their husbands; and Livia seconded the appetites of Augustus, to her own disadvantage; and Stratonice, the wife of King Deiotarus, not only lent her husband for his use a very beautiful young chambermaid in her service, but carefully brought up her children, and backed them up to succeed to their father's estates.

And lest it be thought that all this is done through a simple and servile bondage to usage and through the pressure of the authority of their ancient customs, without reasoning or judgement, and because their minds are so stupid that they cannot take any other course, I must cite some examples of their capacity. Besides the warlike song I have just quoted, I have another, a love song, which begins in this vein: “Adder, stay; stay, adder, that from the pattern of your coloring my sister may draw the fashion and the workmanship of a rich girdle that I may give to my love; so may your beauty and your pattern be forever preferred to all other serpents.” This first couplet is the refrain of the song. Now I am familiar enough with poetry to be a judge of this: not only is there nothing barbarous in this fancy, but it is altogether Anacreontic [note: refers to 5th cent B.C. poet Anacreon]. Their language, moreover, is a soft language, with an agreeable sound, somewhat like Greek in its ending.

Three of these men, ignorant of the price they will pay some day, in loss of repose and happiness, for gaining knowledge of the corruptions of this side of the ocean; ignorant also of the fact that of this intercourse will come their ruin (which I suppose is already well advanced: poor wretches, to let themselves be tricked by the desire for new things, and to have left the serenity of their own sky to come and see ours!) – three of these men were at Rouen, at the time the late King Charles IX [1562-1574] was there. The king talked to them for a long time; they were shown our
ways, our splendor, the aspect of a fine city. After that, someone asked their opinion, and wanted to know what they had found most amazing. They mentioned three things, of which I have forgotten the third, and I am very sorry for it; but I still remember two of them. They said that in the first place they thought it very strange that so many grown men, bearded, strong, and armed, who were around the king (it is likely that they were talking about the Swiss of his guard) should submit to obey a child, and that one of them was not chosen to command instead. Second (they have a way in their language of speaking of men as halves of one another, they had noticed that there were among us men full and gorged with all sorts of good things, and that their other halves were beggars at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty; and they thought it strange that these needy halves could endure such an injustice, and did not take the others by the throat, or set fire to their houses.

I had a very long talk with one of them; but I had an interpreter who followed my meaning so badly, and who was so hindered by his stupidity in taking in my ideas, that I could get hardly any satisfaction from the man. When I asked him what profit he gained from his superior position among his people (for he was a captain, and our sailors called him king), he told me that it was to march foremost in war. How many men followed him? He pointed to a piece of ground, to signify as many as such a space could hold; it might have been four or five thousand men. Did all his authority expire with the war? He said that this much remained, that when he visited the villages dependent on him, they made paths for him through the underbrush by which he might pass quite comfortably.

All this is not bad – but what's the use? They don't wear breeches.
Japanese Mothers and Obentōs: The Lunch-Box as Ideological State Apparatus
Anne Allison


Anne Allison (1950- ) is an American professor of cultural anthropology at Duke University who specializes in contemporary Japanese culture. Cultural anthropologists often make use of “participant observation” – living for long periods within the country or culture they are studying, making careful observations about cultural phenomena and trying to understand a culture from the inside. Yet as scholars they go beyond mere observation, seeking to understand how culture is linked to other areas like politics, economics, education, and technology. Note how in this essay – written for a scholarly peer-reviewed journal – the author uses the seemingly prosaic school lunch-box as a jumping-off point for reflections on state ideology, symbolic uses of food, conceptions of gender, and the socialization of Japanese children. Things are rarely as simple as they seem.

Obentōs are boxed lunches Japanese mothers make for their nursery school children. Following Japanese codes for food preparation – multiple courses that are aesthetically arranged – these lunches have a cultural order and meaning. Using the obentō as a school ritual and chore – it must be consumed in its entirety in the company of all the children – the nursery school also endows the obentō with ideological meanings. The child must eat the obentō; the mother must make an obentō the child will eat. Both mother and child are being judged; the subjectivities of both are being guided by the nursery school as an institution. It is up to the mother to make the ideological operation entrusted to the obentō by the state-linked institution of the nursery school, palatable and pleasant for her child, and appealing and pleasurable for her as a mother. [food, mother, Japan, education, ideology]

Introduction

Japanese nursery school children, going off to school for the first time, carry with them a boxed lunch (obentō) prepared by their mothers at home. Customarily these obentōs are highly crafted elaborations of food: a multitude of miniature portions, artistically designed and precisely arranged, in a container that is sturdy and cute. Mothers tend to expend inordinate time and attention on these obentōs in efforts both to please their children and to affirm that they are good mothers. Children at nursery school are taught in turn that they must consume their entire meal according to school rituals.

Food in an obentō is an everyday practice of Japanese life. While its adoption at the nursery school level may seem only natural to Japanese and unremarkable to outsiders, I will argue in this article that the obentō is invested with a gendered state ideology. Overseen by the authorities of the nursery school, an institution which is linked to, if not directly monitored by, the state, the practice of the obentō situates the producer as a woman and mother, and the consumer, as a child of a mother and a student of a school. Food in this context is neither casual nor arbitrary. Eaten quickly in its entirety by the student, the obentō must be fashioned by the mother so as to expedite this chore for the child. Both mother and child are being watched, judged, and constructed; and it is only through their joint effort that the goal can be accomplished.

I use Althusser’s concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (1971) to frame my argument. I will briefly describe how food is coded as a cultural and aesthetic apparatus in Japan, and what
authority the state holds over schools in Japanese society. Thus situating the parameters within which the *obentō* is regulated and structured in the nursery school setting, I will examine the practice both of making and eating *obentō* within the context of one nursery school in Tokyo. As an anthropologist and mother of a child who attended this school for fifteen months, my analysis is based on my observations, on discussions with other mothers, daily conversations and an interview with my son's teacher, examination of *obentō* magazines and cookbooks, participation in school rituals, outings, and Mothers' Association meetings, and the multifarious experiences of my son and myself as we faced the *obentō* process every day.

I conclude that *obentōs* as a routine, task, and art form of nursery school culture are endowed with ideological and gendered meanings that the state indirectly manipulates. The manipulation is neither total nor totally coercive, however, and I argue that pleasure and creativity for both mother and child are also products of the *obentō*.

**Cultural Ritual and State Ideology**

As anthropologists have long understood, not only are the worlds we inhabit symbolically constructed, but also the constructions of our cultural symbols are endowed with, or have the potential for, power. How we see reality, in other words, is also how we live it. So the conventions by which we recognize our universe are also those by which each of us assumes our place and behavior within that universe. Culture is, in this sense, doubly constructive: constructing both the world for people and people for specific worlds.

The fact that culture is not necessarily innocent, and power not necessarily transparent, has been revealed by much theoretical work conducted both inside and outside the discipline of anthropology. The scholarship of the neo-Marxist Louis Althusser (1971), for example, has encouraged the conceptualization of power as a force which operates in ways that are subtle, disguised, and accepted as everyday social practice. Althusser differentiated between two major structures of power in modern capitalist societies. The first, he called, (Repressive) State Apparatus (SA), which is power that the state wields and manages primarily through the threat of force. Here the state sanctions the usage of power and repression through such legitimized mechanisms as the law and police (1971: 143-5).

Contrasted with this is a second structure of power – Ideological State Apparatus(es) (ISA). These are institutions which have some overt function other than a political and/or administrative one: mass media, education, health and welfare, for example. More numerous, disparate, and functionally polymorphous than the SA, the ISA exert power not primarily through repression but through ideology. Designed and accepted as practices, with another purpose – to educate (the school system), entertain (film industry), inform (news media), the ISA serve not only their stated objective but also an unstated one – that of indoctrinating people into seeing the world a certain way and of accepting certain identities as their own within that world (1971: 143-7).

While both structures of power operate simultaneously and complementarily, it is the ISA, according to Althusser, which in capitalist societies is the more influential of the two. Disguised and screened by another operation, the power of ideology in ISA can be both more far-reaching and insidious than the SA's power of coercion. Hidden in the movies we watch, the music we hear, the liquor we drink, the textbooks we read, it is overlooked because it is protected and its protection – or its alibi (Barthes 1957:109-111) – allows the terms and relations of ideology to spill into and infiltrate our everyday lives.

A world of commodities, gender inequalities, and power differentials is seen not therefore in these terms but as a naturalized environment, one that makes sense because it has become our
experience to live it and accept it in precisely this way. This commonsense acceptance of a particular world is the work of ideology, and it works by concealing the coercive and repressive elements of our everyday routines but also by making those routines of the everyday familiar, desirable, and simply our own. This is the critical element of Althusser's notion of ideological power: ideology is so potent because it becomes not only ours but us – the terms and machinery by which we structure ourselves and identify who we are.

Japanese Food as Cultural Myth

An author in one obentō magazine, the type of medium-sized publication that, filled with glossy pictures of obentōs and ideas and recipes for successfully recreating them, sells in the bookstores across Japan, declares, “...the making of the obentō is the one most worrisome concern facing the mother of a child going off to school for the first time (Shufunotomo 1980: inside cover). Another obentō journal, this one heftier and packaged in the encyclopedic series of the prolific women's publishing firm, Shufunotomo, articulates the same social fact: “first-time obentōs are a strain on both parent and child” (“hajimete no obentō wa, oya mo ko mo kinchōshimasu”) (Shufunotomo 1981: 55).

An outside observer might ask: What is the real source of worry over obentō? Is it the food itself or the entrance of the young child into school for the first time? Yet, as one look at a typical child's obentō – a small box packaged with a five or six-course miniaturized meal whose pieces and parts are artistically arranged, perfectly cut, and neatly arranged – would immediately reveal, no food is “just” food in Japan. What is not so immediately apparent, however, is why a small child with limited appetite and perhaps scant interest in food is the recipient of a meal as elaborate and as elaborately prepared as any made for an entire family or invited guests?

Certainly, in Japan much attention is focussed on the obentō, investing it with a significance far beyond that of the merely pragmatic, functional one of sustaining a child with nutritional foodstuffs. Since this investment beyond the pragmatic is true of any food prepared in Japan, it is helpful to examine culinary codes for food preparation that operate generally in the society before focussing on children's obentōs.

As has been remarked often about Japanese food, the key element is appearance. Food must be organized, re-organized, arranged, re-arranged, stylized, and re-stylized to appear in a design that is visually attractive. Presentation is critical: not to the extent that taste and nutrition are displaced, as has been sometimes attributed to Japanese food, but to the degree that how food looks is at least as important as how it tastes and how good and sustaining it is for one's body.

As Donald Richie has pointed out in his eloquent and informative book A taste of Japan (1985), presentational style is the guiding principle by which food is prepared in Japan, and the style is conditioned by a number of codes. One code is for smallness, separation, and fragmentation. Nothing large is allowed, so portions are all cut to be bite-sized, served in small amounts on tiny individual dishes, and are arranged on a table (or on a tray, or in an obentō box) in an array of small, separate containers.¹ There is no one big dinner plate with three large portions of vegetable,

¹ As Dorinne Kondo has pointed out, however, these cuisinal principles may be conditioned by factors of both class and circumstance. Her shitamachi (more traditional area of Tokyo) informants, for example, adhered only casually to this coding and other Japanese she knew followed them more carefully when preparing food for guests rather than family and when eating outside rather than inside the home (Kondo 1990: 61-2).
starch, and meat as in American cuisine. Consequently the eye is pulled not toward one totalizing center but away to a multiplicity of de-centered parts.  

Visually, food substances are presented according to a structural principle not only of segmentation but also of opposition. Foods are broken or cut to make contrasts of color, texture, and shape. Foods are meant to oppose one another and clash: pink against green, roundish foods against angular ones, smooth substances next to rough ones. This oppositional code operates not only within and between the foodstuffs themselves, but also between the attributes of the food and those of the containers in or on which they are placed: a circular mound in a square dish, a bland colored food set against a bright plate, a translucent sweet in a heavily textured bowl (Richie 1985: 40-1).

The container is as important as what is contained in Japanese cuisine, but it is really the containment that is stressed, that is, how food has been (re)constructed and (re)arranged from nature to appear, in both beauty and freshness, perfectly natural. This stylizing of nature is a third code by which presentation is directed; the injunction is not only to retain, as much as possible, the innate naturalness of ingredients – shopping daily so food is fresh and leaving much of it either raw or only minimally cooked – but also to recreate in prepared food the promise and appearance of being “natural.” As Richie writes, “…the emphasis is on presentation of the natural rather than the natural itself. It is not what nature has wrought that excites admiration but what man has wrought with what nature has wrought” (1985: 11).

This naturalization of food is rendered through two main devices. One is by constantly hinting at and appropriating the nature that comes from outside – decorating food with seasonal reminders, such as a maple leaf in the fall or a flower in the spring, serving in-season fruits and vegetables, and using season-coordinated dishes such as glassware in the summer and heavy pottery in the winter. The other device, to some degree the inverse of the first, is to accentuate and perfect the preparation process to such an extent that the food appears not only to be natural, but more nearly perfect than nature without human intervention ever could be. This is nature made artificial. Thus, by naturalization, nature is not only taken in by Japanese cuisine, but taken over.

It is this ability both to appropriate “real” nature (the maple leaf on the tray) and to stamp the human reconstruction of that nature as “natural” that lends Japanese food its potential for cultural and ideological manipulation. It is what Barthes calls a second order myth (1957: 114-7): a language which has a function people accept as only pragmatic – the sending of roses to lovers, the consumption of wine with one’s dinner, the cleaning up a mother does for her child – which is taken over by some interest or agenda to serve a different end – florists who can sell roses, liquor companies who can market wine, conservative politicians who campaign for a gendered division of labor with women kept at home. The first order of language (“language-object”), thus emptied of its original meaning, is converted into an empty form by which it can assume a new, additional, second order of signification (“metalanguage” or “second-order semiological system”). As Barthes points out however, the primary meaning is never lost. Rather, it remains and stands as an alibi, the cover under which the second, politicized meaning can hide. Roses sell better, for example,

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2 Rice is often, if not always, included in a meal; and it may substantially as well as symbolically constitute the core of the meal. When served at a table it is put in a large pot or electric rice maker and will be spooned into a bowl, still no bigger or predominant than the many other containers from which a person eats. In an obentō rice may he in one, perhaps the largest, section of a multi-sectioned obentō box, yet it will be arranged with a variety of other foods. In a sense rice provides the syntactic and substantial center to a meal yet the presentation of the food rarely emphasizes this core. The rice bowl is refilled rather than heaped as in the preformed obentō box, and in the obentō rice is often embroidered, supplemented, and/or covered with other foodstuffs.
when lovers view them as a vehicle to express love rather than the means by which a company stays in business.

At one level, food is just food in Japan – the medium by which humans sustain their nature and health. Yet under and through this code of pragmatics, Japanese cuisine carries other meanings that in Barthes' terms are mythological. One of these is national identity: food being appropriated as a sign of the culture. To be Japanese is to eat Japanese food, as so many Japanese confirm when they travel to other countries and cite the greatest problem they encounter to be the absence of “real” Japanese food. Stated the other way around, rice is so symbolically central to Japanese culture (meals and obentō often being assembled with rice as the core and all other dishes, multifarious as they may be, as mere compliments or side dishes) that Japanese say they can never feel full until they have consumed their rice at a particular meal or at least once during the day.3

Embedded within this insistence on eating Japanese food, thereby reconfirming one as a member of the culture, are the principles by which Japanese food is customarily prepared: perfection, labor, small distinguishable parts, opposing segments, beauty, and the stamp of nature. Overarching all these more detailed codings are two that guide the making and ideological appropriation of the nursery school obentō most directly: 1) there is an order to the food: a right way to do things, with everything in its place and each place coordinated with every other, and 2) the one who prepares the food takes on the responsibility of producing food to the standards of perfection and exactness that Japanese cuisine demands. Food may not be casual, in other words, nor the producer casual in her production. In these two rules is a message both about social order and the role gender plays in sustaining and nourishing that order.

**School, State, and Subjectivity**

In addition to language and second order meanings I suggest that the rituals and routines surrounding obentōs in Japanese nursery schools present, as it were, a third order, manipulation. This order is a use of a currency already established – one that has already appropriated a language of utility (food feeds hunger) to express and implant cultural behaviors. State-guided schools borrow this coded apparatus: using the natural convenience and cover of food not only to code a cultural order, but also to socialize children and mothers into the gendered roles and subjectivities they are expected to assume in a political order desired and directed by the state.

In modern capitalist societies such as Japan, it is the school, according to Althusser, which assumes the primary role of ideological state apparatus. A greater segment of the population spends longer hours and more years here than in previous historical periods. Also education has now taken over from other institutions, such as religion, the pedagogical function of being the major shaper and inculcator of knowledge for the society. Concurrently, as Althusser has pointed out for capitalist modernism (1971: 152, 156), there is the gradual replacement of repression by ideology as the prime mechanism for behavior enforcement. Influenced less by the threat of force and more by the devices that present and inform us of the world we live in and the subjectivities that world demands, knowledge and ideology become fused, and education emerges as the apparatus for pedagogical and ideological indoctrination.

In practice, as school teaches children how and what to think, it also shapes them for the roles and positions they will later assume as adult members of the society. How the social order is organized through vectors of gender, power, labor, and/or class, in other words, is not only as

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3 Japanese will both endure a high price for rice at home and resist American attempts to export rice to Japan in order to stay domestically self-sufficient in this national food *qua* cultural symbol. Rice is the only foodstuff in which the Japanese have retained self-sufficient production.
important a lesson as the basics of reading and writing, but is transmitted through and embedded in those classroom lessons. Knowledge thus is not only socially constructed, but also differentially acquired according to who one is or will be in the political society one will enter in later years. What precisely society requires in the way of workers, citizens, and parents will be the condition determining or influencing instruction in the schools.

This latter equation, of course, depends on two factors: 1) the convergence or divergence of different interests in what is desired as subjectivities, and 2) the power any particular interest, including that of the state, has in exerting its desires for subjects on or through the system of education. In the case of Japan, the state wields enormous control over the systematization of education. Through its Ministry of Education (Monbushō), one of the most powerful and influential ministries in the government, education is centralized and managed by a state bureaucracy that regulates almost every aspect of the educational process. On any given day, for example, what is taught in every public school follows the same curriculum, adheres to the same structure, and is informed by textbooks from the prescribed list. Teachers are nationally screened, school boards uniformly appointed (rather than elected), and students institutionally exhorted to obey teachers given their legal authority, for example, to write secret reports (naishinsho), that may obstruct a student's entrance into high school.\(^4\)

The role of the state in Japanese education is not limited, however, to such extensive but codified authorities granted to the Ministry of Education. Even more powerful is the principle of the “gakureki shakkai” (lit. academic pedigree society) by which careers of adults are determined by the schools they attend as youth. A reflection and construction of the new economic order of post-war Japan,\(^5\) school attendance has become the single most important determinant of who will achieve the most desirable positions in industry, government, and the professions. School attendance is itself based on a single criterion: a system of entrance exams which determines entrance selection and it is to this end – preparation for exams – that school, even at the nursery school level, is increasingly oriented. Learning to follow directions, do as one is told, and “ganbaru” (Asanuma 1987) are social imperatives, sanctioned by the state, and taught in the schools.

**Nursery School and Ideological Appropriation of the Obentō**

The nursery school stands outside the structure of compulsory education in Japan. Most nursery schools are private; and, though not compelled by the state, a greater proportion of the three to six-year old population of Japan attends pre-school than in any other industrialized nation (Tobin 1989; Hendry 1986; Boocock 1989).

Differentiated from the hoikuen, another preschool institution with longer hours which is more like daycare than school,\(^6\) the yōchien (nursery school) is widely perceived as instructional, not necessarily in a formal curriculum but more in indoctrination to attitudes and structures of Japanese schooling. Children learn less about reading and writing than they do about how to become a

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\(^4\) The primary sources on education used are Horio 1988; Duke 1986; Rohlen 1983; Cummings 1980.

\(^5\) Neither the state's role in overseeing education nor a system of standardized tests is a new development in post-World War II Japan. What is new is the national standardization of tests and, in this sense, the intensified role the state has thus assumed in overseeing them. See Dore (1965) and Horio (1988).

\(^6\) Boocock (1989) differs from Tobin et al. (1989) on this point and asserts that the institutional differences are insignificant. She describes extensively how both yōchien and hoikuen are administered (yōchien are under the authority of Monbushō and hoikuen are under the authority of the Köseishō, the Ministry of Health and Welfare) and how both feed into the larger system of education. She emphasizes diversity: though certain trends are common amongst preschools, differences in teaching styles and philosophies are plentiful as well.
Japanese student, and both parts of this formula—Japanese and student—are equally stressed. As Rohlen has written, “social order is generated” in the nursery school, first and foremost, by a system of routines (1989: 10, 21). Educational routines and rituals are therefore of heightened importance in yochien, for whereas these routines and rituals may be the format through which subjects are taught in higher grades, they are both form and subject in the yochien.

While the state (through its agency, the Ministry of Education) has no direct mandate over nursery school attendance, its influence is nevertheless significant. First, authority over how the yochien is run is in the hands of the Ministry of Education. Second, most parents and teachers see the yochien as the first step to the system of compulsory education that starts in the first grade and is closely controlled by Monbushō. The principal of the yochien my son attended, for example, stated that he saw his main duty to be preparing children to enter more easily the rigors of public education soon to come. Third, the rules and patterns of “group living” (shūdanseikatsu), a Japanese social ideal that is reiterated nationwide by political leaders, corporate management, and marriage counselors, is first introduced to the child in nursery school.7

The entry into nursery school marks a transition both away from home and into the “real world,” which is generally judged to be difficult, even traumatic, for the Japanese child (Peak 1989). The obentō is intended to ease a child's discomfiture and to allow a child's mother to manufacture something of herself and the home to accompany the child as s/he moves into the potentially threatening outside world. Japanese use the cultural categories of soto and uchi; soto connotes the outside, which in being distanced and other, is dirty and hostile; and uchi identifies as clean and comfortable what is inside and familiar. The school falls initially and, to some degree, perpetually, into a category of soto. What is ultimately the definition and location of uchi, by contrast, is the home, where family and mother reside.8 By producing something from the home, a mother both girds and goads her child to face what is inevitable in the world that lies beyond. This is the mother's role and her gift; by giving of herself and the home (which she both symbolically represents and in reality manages9), the soto of the school is, if not transformed into the uchi of home, made more bearable by this sign of domestic and maternal hearth a child can bring to it.

The obentō is filled with the meaning of mother and home in a number of ways. The first is by sheer labor. Women spend what seems to be an inordinate amount of time on the production of this one item. As an experienced obentō maker, I can attest to the intense attention and energy

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7 According to Rohlen (1989), families are incapable of indoctrinating the child into this social pattern of shūdanseikatsu by their very structure and particularly by the relationship (of indulgence and dependence) between mother and child. For this reason and the importance placed on group structures in Japan, the nursery school's primary objective, argues Rohlen, is teaching children how to assimilate into groups. For further discussion of this point see also Peak 1989; Lewis 1989; Sano 1989; and the Journal of Japanese Studies issue [15(1)] devoted to Japanese preschool education in which these articles, including Boocock's, are published.

8 For a succinct anthropological discussion of these concepts, see Hendry (1987: 39–41). For an architectural study of Japan's management and organization of space in terms of such cultural categories as uchi and soto, see Greenbie (1988).

9 Endless studies, reports, surveys, and narratives document the close tie between women and home; domesticity and femininity in Japan. A recent international survey conducted for a Japanese housing construction firm, for example, polled couples with working wives in three cities, finding that 97% (of those polled) in Tokyo prepared breakfast for their families almost daily (compared with 43% in New York and 34% in London); 70% shopped for groceries on a daily basis (3% in New York, 14% in London), and that only 22% of them had husbands who assisted or were willing to assist with housework (62% in New York, 77% in London) (quoted in Chicago Tribune 1991). For a recent anthropological study of Japanese housewives in English, see Imamura (1987). Japanese sources include Juristo zōkan sōgō tokushu 1985; Miraï shakan 1979; Ohirasōri no seifū kenkyūkai 3.
devoted to this one chore. On the average, mothers spend 20-45 minutes every morning cooking, preparing, and assembling the contents of one obentō for one nursery school-aged child. In addition, the previous day they have planned, shopped, and often organized a supper meal with left-overs in mind for the next day's obentō. Frequently women discuss obentō ideas with other mothers, scan obentō cookbooks or magazines for recipes, buy or make objects with which to decorate or contain (part of) the obentō, and perhaps make small food portions to freeze and retrieve for future obentō.11

Of course, effort alone does not necessarily produce a successful obentō. Casualness was never indulged, I observed, and even mothers with children who would eat anything prepared obentōs as elaborate as anyone else's. Such labor is intended for the child but also the mother: it is a sign of a woman's commitment as a mother and her inspiring her child to being similarly committed as a student. The obentō is thus a representation of what the mother is and what the child should become. A model for school is added to what is gift and reminder from home.

This equation is spelled out more precisely in a nursery school rule— all of the obentō must be eaten. Though on the face of it this is petty and mundane, the injunction is taken very seriously by nursery school teachers and is one not easily realized by very small children. The logic is that it is time for the child to meet certain expectations. One of the main agendas of the nursery school, after all, is to introduce and indoctrinate children into the patterns and rigors of Japanese education (Rohlen 1989; Sano 1989; Lewis 1989). And Japanese education, by all accounts, is not about fun (Duke 1986).

Learning is hard work with few choices or pleasures. Even obentōs from home stop once the child enters first grade.12 The meals there are institutional: largely bland, unappealing, and prepared with only nutrition in mind. To ease a youngster into these upcoming (educational, social, disciplinary, culinary) routines, yochien obentōs are designed to be pleasing and personal. The obentō is also designed, however, as a test for the child. And the double meaning is not unintentional. A structure already filled with a signification of mother and home is then emptied to provide a new form: one now also written with the ideological demands of being a member of Japanese culture as well as a viable and successful Japanese in the realms of school and later work.

The exhortation to consume one's entire obentō is articulated and enforced by the nursery school teacher. Making high drama out of eating by, for example, singing a song; collectively thanking Buddha (in the case of Buddhist nursery schools), one's mother for making the obentō,13 through 141

10 My comments pertain directly, of course, to only the women I observed, interviewed, and interacted with at the one private nursery school serving middle-class families in urban Tokyo. The profusion of obentō-related materials in the press plus the revelations made to me by Japanese and observations made by other researchers in Japan (for example, Tobin 1989; Fallows 1990), however, substantiate this as a more general phenomenon.

11 To illustrate this preoccupation and consciousness: during the time my son was not eating all his obentō many fellow mothers gave me suggestions, one mother lent me a magazine, his teacher gave me a full set of obentō cookbooks (one per season), and another mother gave me a set of small frozen food portions she had made in advance for future obentōs.

12 My son's teacher, Hamada-sensei, cited this explicitly as one of the reasons why the obentō was such an important training device for nursery school children. “Once they become ichinensei (first-graders) they'll be faced with a variety of food, prepared without elaboration or much spice, and will need to eat it within a delimited time period.”

13 An anonymous reviewer questioned whether such emphasis placed on consumption of food in nursery school leads to food problems and anxieties in later years. Although I have heard that anorexia is a phenomenon now in Japan, I question its connection to nursery school obentōs. Much of the meaning of the latter practice, as I interpret it, has to do with the interface between production and consumption, and its gender linkage comes from the production end (mothers making it) rather than the consumption end (children eating it). Hence while control is taught through food, it is not a control linked primarily to females or bodily appearance, as anorexia may tend to be in this culture.
and one's father for providing the means to make the obentō; having two assigned class helpers pour the tea, the class eats together until everyone has finished. The teacher examines the children's obentōs, making sure the food is all consumed, and encouraging, sometimes scolding, children who are taking too long. Slow eaters do not fare well in this ritual, because they hold up the other students, who as a peer group also monitor a child's eating. My son often complained about a child whose slowness over food meant that the others were kept inside (rather than being allowed to play on the playground) for much of the lunch period.

Ultimately and officially, it is the teacher, however, whose role and authority it is to watch over food consumption and to judge the person consuming food. Her surveillance covers both the student and the mother, who in the matter of the obentō, must work together. The child's job is to eat the food and the mother's to prepare it. Hence, the responsibility and execution of one's task is not only shared but conditioned by the other. My son's teacher would talk with me daily about the progress he was making finishing his obentōs. Although the overt subject of discussion was my child, most of what was said was directed to me: what I could do in order to get David to consume his lunch more easily.

The intensity of these talks struck me at the time as curious. We had just settled in Japan and David, a highly verbal child, was attending a foreign school in a foreign language he had not yet mastered; he was the only non-Japanese child in the school. Many of his behaviors during this time were disruptive: for example, he went up and down the line of children during morning exercises hitting each child on the head. Hamada-sensei (the teacher), however, chose to discuss the obentōs. I thought surely David's survival in and adjustment to this environment depended much more on other factors, such as learning Japanese. Yet it was the obentō that was discussed with such recall of detail (“David ate all his peas today, but not a single carrot until I asked him to do so three times”) and seriousness that I assumed her attention was being misplaced. The manifest reference was to box-lunches, but was not the latent reference to something else?14

Of course, there was another message, for me and my child. It was an injunction to follow directions, obey rules, and accept the authority of the school system. All of the latter were embedded in and inculcated through certain rituals: the nursery school, as any school (except such non-conventional ones as Waldorf and Montessori) and practically any social or institutional practice in Japan, was so heavily ritualized and ritualistic that the very form of ritual took on a meaning and value in and of itself (Rohlen 1989: 21, 27-8). Both the school day and school year of the nursery school were organized by these rituals. The day, apart from two free periods, for example, was broken by discrete routines – morning exercises, arts and crafts, gym instruction, singing – most of which were named and scheduled. The school year was also segmented into and marked by three annual events – sports day (undōkai) in the fall, winter assembly (seikatsu happyōkai) in December, and dance festival (bon odori) in the summer. Energy was galvanized by these rituals, which demanded a degree of order as well as a discipline and self-control that non-Japanese would find remarkable.

Significantly, David's teacher marked his successful integration into the school system by his mastery not of the language or other cultural skills, but of the school's daily routines – walking in line, brushing his teeth after eating, arriving at school early, eagerly participating in greeting and departure ceremonies, and completing all of his obentō on time. Not only had he adjusted to the school structure, but he had also become assimilated to the other children. Or restated, what once

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14 Fujita argues, from her experience as a working mother of a daycare (hoikuen) child, that the substance of these daily talks between teacher and mother is intentionally insignificant. Her interpretation is that the mother is not to be overly involved in nor too informed about matters of the school (1989).
had been externally enforced now became ideologically desirable; the everyday practices had moved from being alien (soto) to familiar (uchi) to him, from, that is, being someone else's to his own. My American child had to become, in some sense, Japanese, and where his teacher recognized this Japaneseness was in the daily routines such as finishing his obentō. The lesson learned early, which David learned as well, is that not adhering to routines such as completing one's obentō on time leads to not only admonishment from the teacher, but rejection from the other students.

The nursery school system differentiates between the child who does and the child who does not manage the multifarious and constant rituals of nursery school. And for those who do not manage there is a penalty which the child learns either to avoid or wish to avoid. Seeking the acceptance of his peers, the student develops the aptitude, willingness, and in the case of my son – whose outspokenness and individuality were the characteristics most noted in this culture – even the desire to conform to the highly ordered and structured practices of nursery school life. As Althusser (1971) wrote about ideology: the mechanism works when and because ideas about the world and particular roles in that world that serve other (social, political, economic, state) agendas become familiar and one's own.

Rohlen makes a similar point: that what is taught and learned in nursery school is social order. Called shudanseikatsu or group life, it means organization into a group where a person's subjectivity is determined by group membership and not “the assumption of choice and rational self-interest” (1989: 30). A child learns in nursery school to be with others, think like others, and act in tandem with others. This lesson is taught primarily through the precision and constancy of basic routines: “Order is shaped gradually by repeated practice of selected daily tasks…that socialize the children to high degrees of neatness and uniformity” (p. 21). Yet a feeling of coerciveness is rarely experienced by the child when three principles of nursery school instruction are in place: 1) school routines are made “desirable and pleasant” (p. 30), 2) the teacher disguises her authority by trying to make the group the voice and unit of authority, and 3) the regimentation of the school is administered by an attitude of “intimacy” on the part of the teachers and administrators (p. 30). In short, when the desires and routines of the school are made into the desires and routines of the child, they are made acceptable.

Mothering as Gendered Ideological State Apparatus

The rituals surrounding the obentō's consumption in the school situate what ideological meanings the obentō transmits to the child. The process of production within the home, by contrast, organizes its somewhat different ideological package for the mother. While the two sets of meanings are intertwined, the mother is faced with different expectations in the preparation of the obentō than the child is in its consumption. At a pragmatic level the child must simply eat the lunch box, whereas the mother's job is far more complicated. The onus for her is getting the child to consume what she has made, and the general attitude is that this is far more the mother's responsibility (at this nursery school, transitional stage) than the child's. And this is no simple or easy task.

Much of what is written, advised, and discussed about the obentō has this aim explicitly in mind: that is making food in such a way as to facilitate the child's duty to eat it. One magazine advises:
The first day of taking obentō is a worrisome thing for mother and “boku” (child) too. Put in easy-to-eat foods that your child likes and is already used to and prepare this food in small portions (Shufunotomo 1980: 28).

Filled with pages of recipes, hints, pictures, and ideas, the magazine codes each page with “helpful” headings:

- First off, easy-to-eat is step one.
- Next is being able to consume the obentō without leaving anything behind.
- Make it in such a way for the child to become proficient in the use of chopsticks.
- Decorate and fill it with cute dreams (kawairashi yume).
- For older classes (nenchō), make obentō filled with variety.
- Once he’s become used to it, balance foods your child likes with those he dislikes.
- For kids who hate vegetables….
- For kids who hate fish….
- For kids who hate meat… (pp. 28-53).

Laced throughout cookbooks and other magazines devoted to obentō, the obentō guidelines issued by the school and sent home in the school flier every two weeks, and the words of Japanese mothers and teachers discussing obentō, are a number of principles: 1) food should be made easy to eat: portions cut or made small and manipulable with fingers or chopsticks, (child-size) spoons and forks, skewers, toothpicks, muffin tins, containers, 2) portions should be kept small so the obentō can be consumed quickly and without any left-overs, 3) food that a child does not yet like should be eventually added so as to remove fussiness (sukikirai) in food habits, 4) make the obentō pretty, cute, and visually changeable by presenting the food attractively and by adding non-food objects such as silver paper, foil, toothpick flags, paper napkins, cute handkerchiefs, and variously shaped containers for soy sauce and ketchup, and 5) design obentō-related items as much as possible by the mother’s own hands including the obentō bag (obentōfukuro) in which the obentō is carried.

The strictures propounded by publications seem to be endless. In practice I found that visual appearance and appeal were stressed by the mothers. By contrast, the directive to use obentō as a training process – adding new foods and getting older children to use chopsticks and learn to tie the furoshiki – was emphasized by those judging the obentō at the school. Where these two sets of concerns met was, of course, in the child’s success or failure completing the obentō. Ultimately this outcome and the mother’s role in it, was how the obentō was judged in my experience.

The aestheticization of the obentō is by far its most intriguing aspect for a cultural anthropologist. Aesthetic categories and codes that operate generally for Japanese cuisine are applied, though adjusted, to the nursery school format. Substances are many but petite, kept segmented and opposed, and manipulated intensively to achieve an appearance that often changes

15 “Boku” is a personal pronoun that males in Japan use as a familiar reference to themselves. Those in close relationships with males – mothers and wives, for example – can use boku to refer to their sons or husbands. Its use in this context is telling.

16 In the upper third grade of the nursery school (nenchō class; children aged five to six) my son attended, children were ordered to bring their obentō with chopsticks and not forks and spoons (considered easier to use) and in the traditional furoshiki (piece of cloth which enwraps items and is double tied to close it) instead of the easier-to-manage obentō bags with drawstrings. Both furoshiki and chopsticks (o-hashi) are considered traditionally Japanese and their usage marks not only greater effort and skills on the part of the children but their enculturation into being Japanese.
or disguises the food. As a mother insisted to me, the creation of a bear out of miniature hamburgers and rice, or a flower from an apple or peach, is meant to sustain a child's interest in the underlying food. Yet my child, at least, rarely noticed or appreciated the art I had so laboriously contrived. As for other children, I observed that even for those who ate with no obvious “fussiness,” mothers' efforts to create food as style continued all year long.

Thus much of a woman's labor over obentō stems from some agenda other than that of getting the child to eat an entire lunch-box. The latter is certainly a consideration and it is the rationale as well as cover for women being scrutinized by the school's authority figure – the teacher. Yet two other factors are important. One is that the obentō is but one aspect of the far more expansive and continuous commitment a mother is expected to make for and to her child. “Kyōiku mama” (education mother) is the term given to a mother who executes her responsibility to oversee and manage the education of her children with excessive vigor. And yet this excess is not only demanded by the state even at the level of the nursery school; it is conventionally given by mothers. Mothers who manage the home and children, often in virtual absence of a husband/father, are considered the factor that may make or break a child as s/he advances towards that pivotal point of the entrance examinations.17

In this sense, just as the obentō is meant as a device to assist a child in the struggles of first adjusting to school, the mother's role generally is perceived as being the support, goad, and cushion for the child. She will perform endless tasks to assist in her child's study: sharpen pencils and make midnight snacks as the child studies, attend cram schools to verse herself in subjects her child is weak in, make inquiries as to what school is most appropriate for her child, and consult with her child's teachers. If the child succeeds, a mother is complimented; if the child fails, a mother is blamed.

Thus at the nursery school level, the mother starts her own preparation for this upcoming role. Yet the jobs and energies demanded of a nursery school mother are, in themselves, surprisingly consuming. Just as the mother of an entering student is given a book listing all the pre-entry tasks she must complete, for example, making various bags and containers, affixing labels to all clothes in precisely the right place and with the size exactly right, she will be continually expected thereafter to attend Mothers' Association meetings, accompany children on fieldtrips, wash the clothes and indoor shoes of her child every week, add required items to a child's bag on a day's notice, and generally be available. Few mothers at the school my son attended could afford to work in even part-time or temporary jobs. Those women who did tended either to keep their outside work a secret or be reprimanded by a teacher for insufficient devotion to their child. Motherhood, in other words, is institutionalized through the child's school and such routines as making the obentō as a full-time, kept-at-home job.18

The second factor in a woman's devotion to over-elaborating her child's lunch-box is that her experience doing this becomes a part of her and a statement, in some sense, of who she is. Marx writes that labor is the most “essential” aspect to our species-being and that the products we

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17 For the mother's role in the education of her child, see, for example, White (1987). For an analysis, by a Japanese, of the intense dependence on the mother that is created and cultivated in a child, see Doi (1971). For Japanese sources on the mother-child relationship and the ideology (some say pathology) of Japanese motherhood, see Yamamura (1971); Kawai (1976); Kyūoku (1981); Sorifu seisakusho taisaku honbuhen (1981); Kadeshobo shinsha (1981). Fujita's account of the ideology of motherhood at the nursery school level is particularly interesting in this connection (1989).

18 Women are entering the labor market in increasing numbers yet the proportion to do so in the capacity of part-time workers (legally constituting as much as thirty-five hours per week but without the benefits accorded to full-time workers) has also increased. The choice of part-time over full-time employment has much to do with a woman's simultaneous and almost total responsibility for the domestic realm (Juristo 1985; see also Kondo 1990).
produce are the encapsulation of us and therefore our productivity (1970: 71-76). Likewise, women are what they are through the products they produce. An obentō therefore is not only a gift or test for a child, but a representation and product of the woman herself. Of course, the two ideologically converge, as has been stated already, but I would also suggest that there is a potential disjoining. I sensed that the women were laboring for themselves apart from the agenda the obentō was expected to fill at school. Or stated alternatively, in the role that females in Japan are highly pressured and encouraged to assume as domestic manager, mother, and wife, there is, besides the endless and onerous responsibilities, also an opportunity for play. Significantly, women find play and creativity not outside their social roles but within them.

Saying this is not to deny the constraints and surveillance under which Japanese women labor at their obentō. Like their children at school, they are watched by not only the teacher but each other, and perfect what they create, partially at least, so as to be confirmed as a good and dutiful mother in the eyes of other mothers. The enthusiasm with which they absorb this task then is like my son's acceptance and internalization of the nursery school routines; no longer enforced from outside it becomes adopted as one's own.

The making of the obentō is, I would thus argue, a double-edged sword for women. By relishing its creation (for all the intense labor expended, only once or twice did I hear a mother voice any complaint about this task), a woman is ensconcing herself in the ritualization and subjectivity (subjection) of being a mother in Japan. She is alienated in the sense that others will dictate, inspect, and manage her work. On the reverse side, however, it is precisely through this work that the woman expresses, identifies, and constitutes herself. As Althusser pointed out, ideology can never be totally abolished (1971: 170); the elaborations that women work on “natural” food produce an obentō which is creative and, to some degree, a fulfilling and personal statement of themselves.

Minami, an informant, revealed how both restrictive and pleasurable the daily rituals of motherhood can be. The mother of two children – one, aged three and one, a nursery school student, Minami had been a professional opera singer before marrying at the relatively late age of 32. Now, her daily schedule was organized by routines associated with her child's nursery school: for example, making the obentō, taking her daughter to school and picking her up, attending Mothers' Association meetings, arranging daily play dates, and keeping the school uniform clean. While Minami wished to return to singing, if only on a part-time basis, she said that the demands of motherhood, particularly those imposed by her child's attendance at nursery school, frustrated this desire. Secretly snatching only minutes out of any day to practice, Minami missed singing and told me that being a mother in Japan means the exclusion of almost anything else.19

Despite this frustration, however, Minami did not behave like a frustrated woman. Rather she devoted to her mothering an energy, creativity, and intelligence I found to be standard in the Japanese mothers I knew. She planned special outings for her children at least two or three times a week, organized games that she knew they would like and would teach them cognitive skills, created her own stories and designed costumes for afternoon play, and shopped daily for the meals she prepared with her children's favorite foods in mind. Minami told me often that she wished she could sing more, but never once did she complain about her children, the chores of child-raising, or being a mother. The attentiveness displayed otherwise in her mothering was exemplified most fully in Minami's obentōs. No two were ever alike, each had at least four or five parts, and she kept

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19 As Fujita (1989: 72-79) points out, working mothers are treated as a separate category of mothers, and non-working mothers are expected, by definition, to be mothers full time.
trying out new ideas for both new foods and new designs. She took pride as well as pleasure in her obentō handicraft; but while Minami’s obentō creativity was impressive, it was not unusual.

Examples of such extraordinary obentō creations from an obentō magazine include: 1) (“donut obentō”): two donuts, two wieners cut to look like a worm, two cut pieces of apple, two small cheese rolls, one hard-boiled egg made to look like a rabbit with leaf ears and pickle eyes and set in an aluminum muffin tin, cute paper napkin added, 2) (wiener doll obentō): a bed of rice with two doll creations made out of wieners (each consists of eight pieces comprising hat, hair, head, arms, body, legs), a line of pink ginger, a line of green parsley, paper flag of France added, 3) (vegetable flower and tulip obentō): a bed of rice laced with chopped hard-boiled egg, three tulip flowers made out of cut wieners with spinach precisely arranged as stem and leaves, a fruit salad with two raisins, three cooked peaches, three pieces of cooked apple, 4) (sweetheart doll obentō – abekku ningyo no obentō): in a two-section obentō box there are four rice balls on one side, each with a different center, on the other side are two dolls made of quail’s eggs for heads, eyes and mouth added, bodies of cucumber, arranged as if lying down with two raw carrots for the pillow, covers made of one flower – cut cooked carrot, two pieces of ham, pieces of cooked spinach, and with different colored plastic skewers holding the dolls together (Shufunotomo 1980: 27, 30).

The impulse to work and re-work nature in these obentō is most obvious perhaps in the strategies used to transform, shape, and/or disguise foods. Every mother I knew came up with her own repertoire of such techniques, and every obentō magazine or cookbook I examined offered a special section on these devices. It is important to keep in mind that these are treated as only flourishes: embellishments added to parts of an obentō composed of many parts. The following is a list from one magazine: lemon pieces made into butterflies, hard boiled eggs into daruma (popular Japanese legendary figure of a monk without his eyes), sausage cut into flowers, a hard-boiled egg decorated as a baby, an apple piece cut into a leaf, a radish flaked into a flower, a cucumber cut like a flower, a mikan (nectarine orange) piece arranged into a basket, a boat with a sail made from a cucumber, skewered sausage, radish shaped like a mushroom, a quail egg flaked into a cherry, twisted mikan piece, sausage cut to become a crab, a patterned cucumber, a ribboned carrot, a flowered tomato, cabbage leaf flower, a potato cut to be a worm, a carrot designed as a red shoe, an apple cut to simulate a pineapple (pp. 57-60).

Nature is not only transformed but also supplemented by store-bought or mother-made objects which are precisely arranged in the obentō. The former come from an entire industry and commodification of the obentō process: complete racks or sections in stores selling obentō boxes, additional small containers, obentō bags, cups, chopstick and utensil containers (all these with various cute characters or designs on the front), cloth and paper napkins, foil, aluminum tins, colored ribbon or string, plastic skewers, toothpicks with paper flags, and paper dividers. The latter are the objects mothers are encouraged and praised for making themselves: obentō bags, napkins, and handkerchiefs with appliqued designs or the child’s name embroidered. These supplements to the food, the arrangement of the food, and the obentō box’s dividing walls (removable and adjustable) furnish the order of the obentō. Everything appears crisp and neat with each part kept in its own place: two tiny hamburgers set firmly atop a bed of rice; vegetables in a separate compartment in the box; fruit arranged in a muffin tin.

How the specific forms of obentō artistry – for example, a wiener cut to look like a worm and set within a muffin tin – are encoded symbolically is a fascinating subject. Limited here by space, however, I will only offer initial suggestions. Arranging food into a scene recognizable by the child was an ideal mentioned by many mothers and Cookbooks. Why those of animals, human
beings, and other food forms (making a pineapple out of an apple, for example) predominate may have no other rationale than being familiar to children and easily re-produced by mothers. Yet it is also true that this tendency to use a trope of realism – casting food into realistic figures – is most prevalent in the meals Japanese prepare for their children. Mothers I knew created animals and faces in supper meals and/or obentōs made for other outings, yet their impulse to do this seemed not only heightened in the obentō that were sent to school but also played down in food prepared for other age groups.

What is consistent in Japanese cooking generally, as stated earlier, are the dual principles of manipulation and order. Food is manipulated into some other form than it assumes either naturally or upon being cooked: lines are put into mashed potatoes, carrots are flaked, wieners are twisted and sliced. Also, food is ordered by some human rather than natural principle; everything must have neat boundaries and be placed precisely so those boundaries do not merge. These two structures are the ones most important in shaping the nursery school obentō as well, and the inclination to design realistic imagery is primarily a means by which these other culinary codes are learned by and made pleasurable for the child. The simulacrum of a pineapple recreated from an apple therefore is less about seeing the pineapple in an apple (a particular form) and more about reconstructing the apple into something else (the process of transformation).

The intense labor, management, commodification, and attentiveness that goes into the making of an obentō laces it, however, with many and various meanings. Overarching all is the potential to aestheticize a certain social order, a social order which is coded (in cultural and culinary terms) as Japanese. Not only is a mother making food more palatable to her nursery school child, but she is creating food as a more aesthetic and pleasing social structure. The obentō’s message is that the world is constructed very precisely and that the role of any single Japanese in that world must be carried out with the same degree of precision. Production is demanding; and the producer must both keep within the borders of her/his role and work hard.

The message is also that it is women, not men, who are not only sustaining a child through food but carrying the ideological support of the culture that this food embeds. No Japanese man I spoke with had or desired the experience of making a nursery school obentō even once, and few were more than peripherally engaged in their children’s education. The male is assigned a position in the outside world where he labors at a job for money and is expected to be primarily identified by and committed to his place of work.20 Helping in the management of home and raising of children has not become an obvious male concern or interest in Japan, even as more and more women enter what was previously the male domain of work. Females have remained at and as the center of home in Japan and this message too is explicitly transmitted in both the production and consumption of entirely female-produced obentō.

The state accrues benefits from this arrangement. With children depending on the labor women devote to their mothering to such a degree, and women being pressured as well as pleasurized in such routine maternal productions as making the obentō – both effects encouraged and promoted by institutional features of the educational system heavily state-run and at least ideologically guided at even the nursery school level – a gendered division of labor is firmly set in place. Labor from males, socialized to be compliant and hard-working, is more extractable when they have wives to rely on for almost all domestic and familial management. And females become a source of cheap labor, as they are increasingly forced to enter the labor market to pay domestic costs

20 Nakane’s much quoted text on Japanese society states this male position in structuralist terms (1970). Though dated, see also Vogel (1963) and Rohlen (1974) for descriptions of the social roles for middle-class, urban Japanese males. For a succinct recent discussion of gender roles within the family, see Lock (1990).
(including those vast debts incurred in educating children) yet are increasingly constrained to low-paying part-time jobs because of the domestic duties they must also bear almost totally as mothers.

Hence, not only do females, as mothers, operate within the ideological state apparatus of Japan's school system that starts semi-officially, with the nursery school, they also operate as an ideological state apparatus unto themselves. Motherhood is state ideology, working through children at home and at school and through such mother-imprinted labor that a child carries from home to school as with the *obentō*. Hence the post-World War II conception of Japanese education as being egalitarian, democratic, and with no agenda of or for gender differentiation, does not in practice stand up. Concealed within such cultural practices as culinary style and child-focussed mothering, is a worldview in which the position and behavior an adult will assume has everything to do with the anatomy she/ he was born with.

At the end, however, I am left with one question. If motherhood is not only watched and manipulated by the state but made by it into a conduit for ideological indoctrination, could not women subvert the political order by redesigning *obentō*? Asking this question, a Japanese friend, upon reading this paper, recalled her own experiences. Though her mother had been conventional in most other respects, she made her children *obentōs* that did not conform to the prevailing conventions. Basic, simple, and rarely artistic, Sawa also noted, in this connection, that the lines of these *obentōs* resembled those by which she was generally raised: as gender-neutral, treated as a person not “just as a girl,” and being allowed a margin to think for herself. Today she is an exceptionally independent woman who has created a life for herself in America, away from homeland and parents, almost entirely on her own. She loves Japanese food, but the plain *obentōs* her mother made for her as a child, she is newly appreciative of now, as an adult. The *obentōs* fed her, but did not keep her culturally or ideologically attached. For this, Sawa says today, she is glad.

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**References**


The Will to Believe
William James


William James (1842-1910) was a pioneering philosopher and psychologist who also happened to be a member of the one the most colorful and cosmopolitan American families of the 19th century. His father Henry was an irascible and obscure amateur theologian, his sister Alice an odd and brilliant diarist, while his brother Henry was one of the truly great novelists in Western literature. William was among the founders of the American philosophical school known as “Pragmatism,” and became a leading transatlantic public intellectual in the first decade of the 20th century. His masterwork was probably the two volume Principles of Psychology (1890), but his more expressly philosophical works had lasting impact, particularly Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking (1907), A Pluralistic Universe (1909), The Meaning of Truth (1909) and the posthumous Essays in Radical Empiricism (1912). Today, James may be best known as a philosopher of religion. His Varieties of Religious Experience(1902) remains standard reading in many schools of religion and divinity. This essay, “The Will to Believe,” (1896) is classic James, as it reflects his lifelong effort to formulate a philosophical justification for religious faith.

In the recently published Life by Leslie Stephen of his brother, Fitz-James, there is an account of a school to which the latter went when he was a boy. The teacher, a certain Mr. Guest, used to converse with his pupils in this wise: “Gurney, what is the difference between justification and sanctification? – Stephen, prove the omnipotence of God!” etc. In the midst of our Harvard freethinking and indifference we are prone to imagine that here at your good old orthodox College conversation continues to be somewhat upon this order; and to show you that we at Harvard have not lost all interest in these vital subjects, I have brought with me to-night something like a sermon on justification by faith to read to you, – I mean an essay in justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced. ‘The Will to Believe,’ accordingly, is the title of my paper.

I have long defended to my own students the lawfulness of voluntarily adopted faith; but as soon as they have got well imbued with the logical spirit, they have as a rule refused to admit my contention to be lawful philosophically, even though in point of fact they were personally all the time chock-full of some faith or other themselves. I am all the while, however, so profoundly convinced that my own position is correct, that your invitation has seemed to me a good occasion to make my statements more clear. Perhaps your minds will be more open than those with which I have hitherto had to deal. I will be as little technical as I can, though I must begin by setting up some technical distinctions that will help us in the end.

I.

Let us give the name of hypothesis to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either live or dead. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature, – it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi’s followers), the hypothesis is among the mind’s
possibilities: it is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.

Next, let us call the decision between two hypotheses an option. Options may be of several kinds. They may be – 1, living or dead; 2, forced or avoidable; 3, momentous or trivial; and for our purposes we may call an option a genuine option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind.

1. A living option is one in which both hypotheses are live ones. If I say to you: “Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan,” it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: “Be an agnostic or be a Christian,” it is otherwise: trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief.

2. Next, if I say to you: “Choose between going out with your umbrella or without it,” I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all. Similarly, if I say, “Either love me or hate me,” “Either call my theory true or call it false,” your option is avoidable. You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving nor hating, and you may decline to offer any judgment as to my theory. But if I say, “Either accept this truth or go without it,” I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.

3. Finally, if I were Dr. Nansen and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous; for this would probably be your only similar opportunity, and your choice now would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or put at least the chance of it into your hands. He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed. Per contra, the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise. Such trivial options abound in the scientific life. A chemist finds an hypothesis live enough to spend a year in its verification: he believes in it to that extent. But if his experiments prove inconclusive either way, he is quit for his loss of time, no vital harm being done.

It will facilitate our discussion if we keep all these distinctions well in mind.

II.

The next matter to consider is the actual psychology of human opinion. When we look at certain facts, it seems as if our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions. When we look at others, it seems as if they could do nothing when the intellect had once said its say. Let us take the latter facts up first.

Does it not seem preposterous on the very face of it to talk of our opinions being modifiable at will? Can our will either help or hinder our intellect in its perceptions of truth? Can we, by just willing it, believe that Abraham Lincoln’s existence is a myth, and that the portraits of him in McClure’s Magazine are all of some one else? Can we, by any effort of our will, or by any strength of wish that it were true, believe ourselves well and about when we are roaring with rheumatism in bed, or feel certain that the sum of the two one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars? We can say any of these things, but we are absolutely impotent to believe them; and of just such things is the whole fabric of the truths that we do believe in made up, – matters of fact, immediate or remote, as Hume said, and relations between ideas, which are either there or not there for us if we see them so, and which if not there cannot be put there by any action of our own.
In Pascal’s Thoughts there is a celebrated passage known in literature as Pascal’s wager. In it he tries to force us into Christianity by reasoning as if our concern with truth resembled our concern with the stakes in a game of chance. Translated freely his words are these: You must either believe or not believe that God is – which will you do? Your human reason cannot say. A game is going on between you and the nature of things which at the day of judgment will bring out either heads or tails. Weigh what your gains and your losses would be if you should stake all you have on heads, or God’s existence: if you win in such case, you gain eternal beatitude; if you lose, you lose nothing at all. If there were an infinity of chances, and only one for God in this wager, still you ought to stake your all on God; for though you surely risk a finite loss by this procedure, any finite loss is reasonable, even a certain one is reasonable, if there is but the possibility of infinite gain. Go, then, and take holy water, and have masses said; belief will come and stupefy your scruples, – Cela vous fera croire et vous abêtra. Why should you not? At bottom, what have you to lose?

You probably feel that when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming-table, it is put to its last trumps. Surely Pascal’s own personal belief in masses and holy water had far other springs; and this celebrated page of his is but an argument for others, a last desperate snatch at a weapon against the hardness of the unbelieving heart. We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted wilfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith’s reality; and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward. It is evident that unless there be some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, the option offered to the will by Pascal is not a living option. Certainly no Turk ever took to masses and holy water on its account; and even to us Protestants these means of salvation seem such foregone impossibilities that Pascal’s logic, invoked for them specifically, leaves us unmoved. As well might the Mahdi write to us, saying, “I am the Expected One whom God has created in his effulgence. You shall be infinitely happy if you confess me; otherwise you shall be cut off from the light of the sun. Weigh, then, your infinite gain if I am genuine against your finite sacrifice if I am not!” His logic would be that of Pascal; but he would vainly use it on us, for the hypothesis he offers us is dead. No tendency to act on it exists in us to any degree.

The talk of believing by our volition seems, then, from one point of view, simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile. When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men lie buried in its mere foundations; what patience and postponement, what choking down of preference, what submission to the icy laws of outer fact are wrought into its very stones and mortar; how absolutely impersonal it stands in its vast augustness, – then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretending to decide things from out of his private dream! Can we wonder if those bred in the rugged and manly school of science should feel like spewing such subjectivism out of their mouths? The whole system of loyalties which grow up in the schools of science go dead against its toleration; so that it is only natural that those who have caught the scientific fever should pass over to the opposite extreme, and write sometimes as if the incorruptibly truthful intellect ought positively to prefer bitterness and unacceptableness to the heart in its cup.

It fortifies my soul to know
That, though I perish, Truth is so –
sings Clough, while Huxley exclaims: “My only consolation lies in the reflection that, however bad our posterity may become, so far as they hold by the plain rule of not pretending to believe what they have no reason to believe, because it may be to their advantage so to pretend [the word ‘pretend’ is surely here redundant], they will not have reached the lowest depth of immorality.” And that delicious enfant terrible Clifford writes; “Belief is desecrated when given to unproved and unquestioned statements for the solace and private pleasure of the believer... Whoso would deserve well of his fellows in this matter will guard the purity of his belief with a very fanaticism of jealous care, lest at any time it should rest on an unworthy object, and catch a stain which can never be wiped away... If [a] belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence [even though the belief be true, as Clifford on the same page explains] the pleasure is a stolen one... It is sinful because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town... It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”

III.

All this strikes one as healthy, even when expressed, as by Clifford, with somewhat too much of robustious pathos in the voice. Free-will and simple wishing do seem, in the matter of our credences, to be only fifth wheels to the coach. Yet if any one should thereupon assume that intellectual insight is what remains after wish and will and sentimental preference have taken wing, or that pure reason is what then settles our opinions, he would fly quite as directly in the teeth of the facts.

It is only our already dead hypotheses that our willing nature is unable to bring to life again. But what has made them dead for us is for the most part a previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind. When I say ‘willing nature,’ I do not mean only such deliberate volitions as may have set up habits of belief that we cannot now escape from, – I mean all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpression of our caste and set. As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why. Mr. Balfour gives the name of ‘authority’ to all those influences, born of the intellectual climate, that make hypotheses possible or impossible for us, alive or dead. Here in this room, we all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for ‘the doctrine of the immortal Monroe,’ all for no reasons worthy of the name. We see into these matters with no more inner clearness, and probably with much less, than any disbeliever in them might possess. His unconventionality would probably have some grounds to show for its conclusions; but for us, not insight, but the prestige of the opinions, is what makes the spark shoot from them and light up our sleeping magazines of faith. Our reason is quite satisfied, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of every thousand of us, if it can find a few arguments that will do to recite in case our credulity is criticised by some one else. Our faith is faith in some one else’s faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case. Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other, – what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up? We want to have a truth; we want to believe that our experiments and studies and discussions must put us in a continually better and better position towards it; and on this line we agree to fight out our thinking lives. But if a pyrrhonian sceptic asks us how we know all this, can our logic find a reply? No!
certainly it cannot. It is just one volition against another, – we willing to go in for life upon a trust or assumption which he, for his part, does not care to make.\(^1\)

As a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use. Clifford’s cosmic emotions find no use for Christian feelings. Huxley belabors the bishops because there is no use for sacerdotalism in his scheme of life. Newman, on the contrary, goes over to Romanism, and finds all sorts of reasons good for staying there, because a priestly system is for him an organic need and delight. Why do so few ‘scientists’ even look at the evidence for telepathy, so called? Because they think, as a leading biologist, now dead, once said to me, that even if such a thing were true, scientists ought to band together to keep it suppressed and concealed. It would undo the uniformity of Nature and all sorts of other things without which scientists cannot carry on their pursuits. But if this very man had been shown something which as a scientist he might do with telepathy, he might not only have examined the evidence, but even have found it good enough. This very law which the logicians would impose upon us – if I may give the name of logicians to those who would rule out our willing nature here – is based on nothing but their own natural wish to exclude all elements for which they, in their professional quality of logicians, can find no use.

Evidently, then, our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions. There are passional tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief, and it is only the latter that are too late for the fair; and they are not too late when the previous passional work has been already in their own direction. Pascal’s argument, instead of being powerless, then seems a regular clincher, and is the last stroke needed to make our faith in masses and holy water complete. The state of things is evidently far from simple; and pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds.

IV.

Our next duty, having recognized this mixed-up state of affairs, is to ask whether it be simply reprehensible and pathological, or whether, on the contrary, we must treat it as a normal element in making up our minds. The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passional decision, – just like deciding yes or no, – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. The thesis thus abstractly expressed will, I trust, soon become quite clear. But I must first indulge in a bit more of preliminary work.

V.

It will be observed that for the purposes of this discussion we are on ‘dogmatic’ ground, – ground, I mean, which leaves systematic philosophical scepticism altogether out of account. The postulate that there is truth, and that it is the destiny of our minds to attain it, we are deliberately resolving to make, though the sceptic will not make it. We part company with him, therefore, absolutely, at this point. But the faith that truth exists, and that our minds can find it, may be held in two ways. We may talk of the empiricist way and of the absolutist way of believing in truth. The absolutists in this matter say that we not only can attain to knowing truth, but we can know when we have attained to knowing it; while the empiricists think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when. To know is one thing, and to know for certain that we know is another. One may hold to the first being possible without the second; hence the empiricists and the

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\(^1\) Compare the admirable page 310 in S. H. Hodgson’s “Time and Space,” London, 1865.
absolutists, although neither of them is a sceptic in the usual philosophic sense of the term, show very different degrees of dogmatism in their lives.

If we look at the history of opinions, we see that the empiricist tendency has largely prevailed in science, while in philosophy the absolutist tendency has had everything its own way. The characteristic sort of happiness, indeed, which philosophies yield has mainly consisted in the conviction felt by each successive school or system that by it bottom-certitude had been attained.

“Other philosophies are collections of opinions, mostly false; my philosophy gives standing-ground forever,” – who does not recognize in this the key-note of every system worthy of the name? A system, to be a system at all, must come as a closed system, reversible in this or that detail, perchance, but in its essential features never!

Scholastic orthodoxy, to which one must always go when one wishes to find perfectly clear statement, has beautifully elaborated this absolutist conviction in a doctrine which it calls that of ‘objective evidence.’ If, for example, I am unable to doubt that I now exist before you, that two is less than three, or that if all men are mortal then I am mortal too, it is because these things illumine my intellect irresistibly. The final ground of this objective evidence possessed by certain propositions is the adaequatio intellectûs nostri cum rê. The certitude it brings involves an aptitudinem ad extorquendum certum assensum on the part of the truth envisaged, and on the side of the subject a quietem in cognitione, when once the object is mentally received, that leaves no possibility of doubt behind; and in the whole transaction nothing operates but the entitas ipsa of the object and the entitas ipsa of the mind. We slouchy modern thinkers dislike to talk in Latin, – indeed, we dislike to talk in set terms at all; but at bottom our own state of mind is very much like this whenever we uncritically abandon ourselves: You believe in objective evidence, and I do. Of some things we feel that we are certain: we know, and we know that we do know. There is something that gives a click inside of us, a bell that strikes twelve, when the hands of our mental clock have swept the dial and meet over the meridian hour. The greatest empiricists among us are only empiricists on reflection: when left to their instincts, they dogmatize like infallible popes. When the Cliffords tell us how sinful it is to be Christians on such ‘insufficient evidence,’ insufficiency is really the last thing they have in mind. For them the evidence is absolutely sufficient, only it makes the other way. They believe so completely in an anti-christian order of the universe that there is no living option: Christianity is a dead hypothesis from the start.

VI.

But now, since we are all such absolutists by instinct, what in our quality of students of philosophy ought we to do about the fact? Shall we espouse and indorse it? Or shall we treat it as a weakness of our nature from which we must free ourselves, if we can?

I sincerely believe that the latter course is the only one we can follow as reflective men. Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found? I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must free ourselves, if we can.
mere admission of a stuff to be philosophized about. The various philosophies are but so many attempts at expressing what this stuff really is. And if we repair to our libraries what disagreement do we discover! Where is a certainly true answer found? Apart from abstract propositions of comparison (such as two and two are the same as four), propositions which tell us nothing by themselves about concrete reality, we find no proposition ever regarded by any one as evidently certain that has not either been called a falsehood, or at least had its truth sincerely questioned by some one else. The transcending of the axioms of geometry, not in play but in earnest, by certain of our contemporaries (as Zöllner and Charles H. Hinton), and the rejection of the whole Aristotelian logic by the Hegelians, are striking instances in point.

No concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon. Some make the criterion external to the moment of perception, putting it either in revelation, the *consensus gentium*, the instincts of the heart, or the systematized experience of the race. Others make the perceptive moment its own test, – Descartes, for instance, with his clear and distinct ideas guaranteed by the veracity of God; Reid with his ‘common-sense;’ and Kant with his forms of synthetic judgment *a priori*. The inconceivability of the opposite; the capacity to be verified by sense; the possession of complete organic unity or self-relation, realized when a thing is its own other, – are standards which, in turn, have been used. The much lauded objective evidence is never triumphantly there, it is a mere aspiration or *Grenzbegriff*, marking the infinitely remote ideal of our thinking life. To claim that certain truths now possess it, is simply to say that when you think them true and they are true, then their evidence is objective, otherwise it is not. But practically one’s conviction that the evidence one goes by is of the real objective brand, is only one more subjective opinion added to the lot. For what a contradictory array of opinions have objective evidence and absolute certitude been claimed! The world is rational through and through, – its existence is an ultimate brute fact; there is a personal God, – a personal God is inconceivable; there is an extra-mental physical world immediately known, – the mind can only know its own ideas; a moral imperative exists, – obligation is only the resultant of desires; a permanent spiritual principle is in every one, – there are only shifting states of mind; there is an endless chain of causes, – there is an absolute first cause; an eternal necessity, – a freedom; a purpose, – no purpose; a primal One, – a primal Many; a universal continuity, – an essential discontinuity in things; an infinity, – no infinity. There is this, – there is that; there is indeed nothing which some one has not thought absolutely true, while his neighbor deemed it absolutely false; and not an absolutist among them seems ever to have considered that the trouble may all the time be essential, and that the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible signal for knowing whether it be truth or no. When, indeed, one remembers that the most striking practical application to life of the doctrine of objective certitude has been the conscientious labors of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, one feels less tempted than ever to lend the doctrine a respectful ear.

But please observe, now, that when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think. Our great difference from the scholastic lies in the way we face. The strength of his system lies in the principles, the origin, the *terminus a quo* of his thought; for us the strength is in the outcome, the upshot, the *terminus ad quem*. Not where it comes from but what it leads to is to decide. It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true.
VII.

One more point, small but important, and our preliminaries are done. There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion, – ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. *We must know the truth;* and *we must avoid error,* – these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. Although it may indeed happen that when we believe the truth *A,* we escape as an incidental consequence from believing the falsehood *B,* it hardly ever happens that by merely disbelieving *B* we necessarily believe *A.* We may in escaping *B* fall into believing other falsehoods, *C* or *D,* just as bad as *B;* or we may escape *B* by not believing anything at all, not even *A.*

Believe truth! Shun error! – these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. Clifford, in the instructive passage which I have quoted, exhorts us to the latter course. Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford. We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life. Biologically considered, our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as veracity, and he who says, “Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!” merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe. He may be critical of many of his desires and fears, but this fear he slavishly obeys. He cannot imagine any one questioning its binding force. For my own part, I have also a horror of being duped; but I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world: so Clifford’s exhortation has to my ears a thoroughly fantastic sound. It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound. Not so are victories either over enemies or over nature gained. Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf. At any rate, it seems the fittest thing for the empiricist philosopher.

VIII.

And now, after all this introduction, let us go straight at our question. I have said, and now repeat it, that not only as a matter of fact do we find our passional nature influencing us in our opinions, but that there are some options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as an inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice.

I fear here that some of you my hearers will begin to scent danger, and lend an inhospitable ear. Two first steps of passion you have indeed had to admit as necessary, – we must think so as to avoid dupery, and we must think so as to gain truth; but the surest path to those ideal consummations, you will probably consider, is from now onwards to take no further passional step.

Well, of course, I agree as far as the facts will allow. Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of gaining truth away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of believing falsehood, by not making up our minds at all till
objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the case; and even in human affairs in general, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all. Law courts, indeed, have to decide on the best evidence attainable for the moment, because a judge’s duty is to make law as well as to ascertain it, and (as a learned judge once said to me) few cases are worth spending much time over: the great thing is to have them decided on any acceptable principle, and get out of the way. But in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place. Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us, and seldom is there any such hurry about them that the risks of being duped by believing a premature theory need be faced. The questions here are always trivial options, the hypotheses are hardly living (at any rate not living for us spectators), the choice between believing truth or falsehood is seldom forced. The attitude of sceptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes. What difference, indeed, does it make to most of us whether we have or have not a theory of the Röntgen rays, whether we believe or not in mind-stuff, or have a conviction about the causality of conscious states? It makes no difference. Such options are not forced on us. On every account it is better not to make them, but still keep weighing reasons pro et contra with an indifferent hand.

I speak, of course, here of the purely judging mind. For purposes of discovery such indifference is to be less highly recommended, and science would be far less advanced than she is if the passionate desires of individuals to get their own faiths confirmed had been kept out of the game. See for example the sagacity which Spencer and Weismann now display. On the other hand, if you want an absolute duffer in an investigation, you must, after all, take the man who has no interest whatever in its results: he is the warranted incapable, the positive fool. The most useful investigator, because the most sensitive observer, is always he whose eager interest in one side of the question is balanced by an equally keen nervousness lest he become deceived. Science has organized this nervousness into a regular technique, her so-called method of verification; and she has fallen so deeply in love with the method that one may even say she has ceased to care for truth by itself at all. It is only truth as technically verified that interests her. The truth of truths might come in merely affirmative form, and she would decline to touch it. Such truth as that, she might repeat with Clifford, would be stolen in defiance of her duty to mankind. Human passions, however, are stronger than technical rules. “Le cœur a ses raisons,” as Pascal says, “que la raison ne connaît pas;” and however indifferent to all but the bare rules of the game the umpire, the abstract intellect, may be, the concrete players who furnish him the materials to judge of are usually, each one of them, in love with some pet ‘live hypothesis’ of his own. Let us agree, however, that wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal.

The question next arises: Are there not somewhere forced options in our speculative questions, and can we (as men who may be interested at least as much in positively gaining truth as in merely escaping dupery) always wait with impunity till the coercive evidence shall have arrived? It seems a priori improbable that the truth should be so nicely adjusted to our needs and powers as that. In the great boarding-house of nature, the cakes and the butter and the syrup seldom come out so even and leave the plates so clean. Indeed, we should view them with scientific suspicion if they did.

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Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof. A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the worths, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart. Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man. Challenge the statement, and science can only repeat it oracularly, or else prove it by showing that such ascertainment and correction bring man all sorts of other goods which man’s heart in turn declares. The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will. Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for us, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide? If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one. Mephistophelian scepticism, indeed, will satisfy the head’s play-instincts much better than any rigorous idealism can. Some men (even at the student age) are so naturally cool-hearted that the moralistic hypothesis never has for them any pungent life, and in their supercilious presence the hot young moralist always feels strangely ill at ease. The appearance of knowingness is on their side, of naïveté and gullibility on his. Yet, in the inarticulate heart of him, he clings to it that he is not a dupe, and that there is a realm in which (as Emerson says) all their wit and intellectual superiority is no better than the cunning of a fox. Moral scepticism can no more be refuted or proved by logic than intellectual scepticism can. When we stick to it that there is truth (be it of either kind), we do so with our whole nature, and resolve to stand or fall by the results. The sceptic with his whole nature adopts the doubting attitude; but which of us is the wiser, Omniscience only knows.

Turn now from these wide questions of good to a certain class of questions of fact, questions concerning personal relations, states of mind between one man and another. Do you like me or not? – for example. Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking’s existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt, as the absolutists say, ad extorquendum assensum meum, ten to one your liking never comes. How many women’s hearts are vanquished by the mere sanguine insistence of some man that they must love him! he will not consent to the hypothesis that they cannot. The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth’s existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. Who gains promotions, boons, appointments, but the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of live hypotheses, who discounts them, sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance? His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification.

A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted. A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before any one else backs him up. If we believed that the
whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted. There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. *And where faith in a fact can help create the fact,* that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the ‘lowest kind of immorality’ into which a thinking being can fall. Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives!

X.

In truths dependent on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing.

But now, it will be said, these are all childish human cases, and have nothing to do with great cosmical matters, like the question of religious faith. Let us then pass on to that. Religions differ so much in their accidents that in discussing the religious question we must make it very generic and broad. What then do we now mean by the religious hypothesis? Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things.

First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. “Perfection is eternal,” – this phrase of Charles Secrétan seems a good way of putting this first affirmation of religion, an affirmation which obviously cannot yet be verified scientifically at all.

The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true. Now, let us consider what the logical elements of this situation are in *case the religious hypothesis in both its branches be really true.* (Of course, we must admit that possibility at the outset. If we are to discuss the question at all, it must involve a living option. If for any of you religion be a hypothesis that cannot, by any living possibility be true, then you need go no farther. I speak to the ‘saving remnant’ alone.) So proceeding, we see, first, that religion offers itself as a momentous option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our non-belief, a certain vital good. Secondly, religion is a forced option, so far as that good goes. We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue,* we lose the good, *if it be true,* just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. It is as if a man should hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home. Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married some one else? Scepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk. Better risk loss of truth than chance of error, – that is your faith-vetoer’s exact position. He is actively playing his stake as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field. To preach scepticism to us as a duty until ‘sufficient evidence’ for religion be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law. And by what, forsooth, is the supreme wisdom of this passion warranted? Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear? I, for one, can see no proof; and I simply refuse obedience to the scientist’s command to imitate his kind of option, in a case where my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk. If religion be true and the evidence for it be still insufficient, I do not wish, by putting your
extinguisher upon my nature (which feels to me as if it had after all some business in this matter),
to forfeit my sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side, – that chance depending, of
course, on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passionable need of taking the world
religiously might be prophetic and right.

All this is on the supposition that it really may be prophetic and right, and that, even to us who
are discussing the matter, religion is a live hypothesis which may be true. Now, to most of us
religion comes in a still further way that makes a veto on our active faith even more illogical. The
more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having
personal form. The universe is no longer a mere It to us, but a Thou, if we are religious; and any
relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here. For instance, although
in one sense we are passive portions of the universe, in another we show a curious autonomy, as
if we were small active centres on our own account. We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us
were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless
we met the hypothesis half-way. To take a trivial illustration: just as a man who in a company of
gentlemen made no advances, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed no one’s word
without proof, would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more
trusting spirit would earn, – so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicality and try
to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever
from his only opportunity of making the gods’ acquaintance. This feeling, forced on us we know
not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are gods (although not to do so would be so
easy both for our logic and our life) we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems
part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis. If the hypothesis were true in all its parts,
including this one, then pure intellectualism, with its veto on our making willing advances, would
be an absurdity, and some participation of our sympathetic nature would be logically required. I,
therefore, for one cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully
agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason, that a rule of
thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those
kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule. That for me is the long and short of
the formal logic of the situation, no matter what the kinds of truth might materially be.

I confess I do not see how this logic can be escaped. But sad experience makes me fear that
some of you may still shrink from radically saying with me, in abstracto, that we have the right to
believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will. I suspect, however,
that if this is so, it is because you have got away from the abstract logical point of view altogether,
and are thinking (perhaps without realizing it) of some particular religious hypothesis which for
you is dead. The freedom to ‘believe what we will’ you apply to the case of some patent
superstition; and the faith you think of is the faith defined by the schoolboy when he said, “Faith
is when you believe something that you know ain’t true.” I can only repeat that this is
misapprehension. In concreto, the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the
intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him
who has them to consider. When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concreto
men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves,
then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and wait –
acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were not true3 – till doomsday, or till such

3 Since belief is measured by action, he who forbids us to believe religion to be true, necessarily also forbids us to act
as we should if we did believe it to be true. The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action. If the action
required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis,
time as our intellect and senses working together may have raked in evidence enough, — this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave. Were we scholastic absolutists, there might be more excuse. If we had an infallible intellect with its objective certitudes, we might feel ourselves disloyal to such a perfect organ of knowledge in not trusting to it exclusively, in not waiting for its releasing word. But if we are empiricists, if we believe that no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp, then it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell. Indeed we may wait if we will, — I hope you do not think that I am denying that, — but if we do so, we do so at our peril as much as if we believed. In either case we act, taking our life in our hands. No one of us ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another’s mental freedom: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism’s glory; then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things.

I began by a reference to Fitz James Stephen; let me end by a quotation from him. “What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world?... These are questions with which all must deal as it seems good to them. They are riddles of the Sphinx, and in some way or other we must deal with them... In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark... If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too, is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that any one can prove that he is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? ‘Be strong and of a good courage.’ Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes... If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.”

then religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away, and controversy about its legitimacy is a piece of idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds. I myself believe, of course, that the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief.

Excerpt from Meditations on First Philosophy

René Descartes


René Descartes (1596-1650) was a Jesuit educated French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. He developed a technique for geometric display of algebraic relations that is now known as Cartesian coordinates. He also made important, often lasting, contributions to meteorology and optics. He is most well-known, however, for his ideas about the method for establishing knowledge and avoiding error that can be found in these two meditations.

MEDITATION ONE: Concerning Those Things That Can Be Called into Doubt

Several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them. And thus I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences. But the task seemed enormous, and I was waiting until I reached a point in my life that was so timely that no more suitable time for undertaking these plans of action would come to pass. For this reason, I procrastinated for so long that I would henceforth be at fault if I were to waste the time that remains for carrying out the project by brooding over it. Accordingly, I have today suitably freed my mind of all cares, secured for myself a period of leisurely tranquility, and am withdrawing into solitude. At last I will apply myself earnestly and unreservedly to this general demolition of my opinions.

Yet to bring this about I will not need to show that all my opinions are false, which is perhaps something I could never accomplish. But reason persuades me that I should withhold my assent no less carefully from opinions that are not completely certain and indubitable than I would those that are patently false. For this reason, it will suffice for the rejection of all of these opinions, if I find in each of them some reason for doubt. Nor therefore need I survey each opinion individually, a task that would be endless. Rather, because undermining the foundations will cause whatever has been built upon them to crumble of its own accord, I will attack straightaway those principles which supported everything I once believed.

Surely whatever I had admitted until now as most true I received either from the senses or through the senses. However, I have noticed that the senses are sometimes deceptive; and it is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once.

But perhaps, even though the senses do sometimes deceive us when it is a question of very small and distant things, still there are many other matters concerning which one simply cannot doubt, even though they are derived from the very same senses: for example, that I am sitting here next to the fire, wearing my winter dressing gown, that I am holding this sheet of paper in my hands, and the like. But on what grounds could one deny that these hands and this entire body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to the insane, whose brains are impaired by such an unrelenting vapor of black bile that they steadfastly insist that they are kings when they are utter paupers, or that they are arrayed in purple robes when they are naked, or that they have heads made of clay, or that they are gourds, or that they are made of glass. But such people are mad, and I would appear no less mad, were I to take their behavior as an example for myself.
This would all be well and good, were I not a man who is accustomed to sleeping at night, and
to experiencing in my dreams the very same things, or now and then even less plausible ones, as
these insane people do when they are awake. How often does my evening slumber persuade me
of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the
fireplace—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! But right now my eyes are certainly wide
awake when I gaze upon this sheet of paper. This head which I am shaking is not heavy with
sleep. I extend this hand consciously and deliberately, and I feel it. Such things would not be so
distinct for someone who is asleep. As if I did not recall having been deceived on other occasions
even by similar thoughts in my dreams! As I consider these matters more carefully, I see so plainly
that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep. As a
result, I am becoming quite dizzy, and this dizziness nearly convinces me that I am asleep.

Let us assume then, for the sake of argument, that we are dreaming and that such particulars
as these are not true: that we are opening our eyes, moving our head, and extending our hands.
Perhaps we do not even have such hands, or any such body at all. Nevertheless, it surely must be
admitted that the things seen during slumber are, as it were, like painted images, which could
only have been produced in the likeness of true things, and that therefore at least these general
things—eyes, head, hands, and the whole body—are not imaginary things, but are true and exist.
For indeed when painters themselves wish to represent sirens and satyrs by means of especially
bizarre forms, they surely cannot assign to them utterly new natures. Rather, they simply fuse
together the members of various animals. Or if perhaps they concoct something so utterly novel
that nothing like it has ever been seen before (and thus is something utterly fictitious and false),
yet certainly at the very least the colors from which they fashion it ought to be true. And by the
same token, although even these general things—eyes, head, hands and the like—could be
imaginary, still one has to admit that at least certain other things that are even more simple and
universal are true. It is from these components, as if from true colors, that all those images of
things that are in our thought are fashioned, be they true or false.

This class of things appears to include corporeal nature in general, together with its extension;
the shape of extended things; their quantity, that is, their size and number; as well as the place
where they exist; the time through which they endure, and the like.

Thus it is not improper to conclude from this that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all the
other disciplines that are dependent upon the consideration of composite things are doubtful, and
that, on the other hand, arithmetic, geometry, and other such disciplines, which treat of nothing
but the simplest and most general things and which are indifferent as to whether these things do
or do not in fact exist, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or
asleep, 2 plus 3 make 5, and a square does not have more than 4 sides. It does not seem possible
that such obvious truths should be subject to the suspicion of being false.

Be that as it may, there is fixed in my mind a certain opinion of long standing, namely that
there exists a God who is able to do anything and by whom I, such as I am, have been created.
How do I know that he did not bring it about that there is no earth at all, no heavens, no extended
thing, no shape, no size, no place, and yet bringing it about that all these things appear to me to
exist precisely as they do now? Moreover, since I judge that others sometimes make mistakes in
matters that they believe they know most perfectly, may I not, in like fashion, be deceived every
time I add 2 and 3 or count the sides of a square, or perform an even simpler operation, if that can
be imagined? But perhaps God has not willed that I be deceived in this way, for he is said to be
supremely good. Nonetheless, if it were repugnant to his goodness to have created me such that I
be deceived all the time, it would also seem foreign to that same goodness to permit me to be
deceived even occasionally. But we cannot make this last assertion.

Perhaps there are some who would rather deny so powerful a God, than believe that everything
else is uncertain. Let us not oppose them; rather, let us grant that everything said here about God is fictitious. Now they suppose that I came to be what I am either by fate, or by chance, or by a connected chain of events, or by some other way. But because deceived and being mistaken appear to be a certain imperfection, the less powerful they take the author of my origin to be, the more probable it will be that I am so imperfect that I am always deceived. I have nothing to say in response to these arguments. But eventually I am forced to admit that there is nothing among the things I once believed to be true which it is not permissible to doubt—and not out of frivolity or lack of forethought, but for valid and considered arguments. Thus I must be no less careful to withhold assent henceforth even from these beliefs than I would from those that are patently false, if I wish to find anything certain.

But it is not enough simply to have realized these things; I must take steps to keep myself mindful of them. For long-standing opinions keep returning, and, almost against my will, they take advantage of my credulity, as if it were bound over to them by long use and the claims of intimacy. Nor will I ever get out of the habit of believing in them, so long as I take them to be exactly what they are, namely, in some respects doubtful, as has just now been shown, but nevertheless highly probable, so that it is much more consonant with reason to believe them than to deny them. Hence, it seems to me I would do well to deceive myself by turning my will in completely the opposite direction and pretend for a time that these opinions are wholly false and imaginary, until finally, as if with prejudices weighing down each side equally, no bad habit should turn my judgment any further from the correct perception of things. For indeed I know that meanwhile there is no danger or error in following this procedure, and that it is impossible for me to indulge in too much distrust, since I am now concentrating only on knowledge, not on action.

Accordingly, I will suppose not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me. I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes of my dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity.

I will regard myself as not having hands, or eyes, or flesh, or blood, or any senses, but as nevertheless falsely believing that I possess all these things. I will remain resolute and steadfast in this meditation, and even if it is not within my power to know anything true, it certainly is within my power to take care resolutely to withhold my assent to what is false, lest this deceiver, however powerful, however clever he may be, have any effect on me. But this undertaking is arduous, and a certain laziness brings me back to my customary way of living. I am not unlike a prisoner who enjoyed an imaginary freedom during his sleep, but, when he later begins to suspect that he is dreaming, fears being awakened and nonchalantly conspires with these pleasant illusions. In just the same way, I fall back of my own accord into my old opinions, and dread being awakened, lest the toilsome wakefulness which follows upon a peaceful rest must be spent thenceforward not in the light but among the inextricable shadows of the difficulties now brought forward.

**MEDITATION TWO: Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That It Is Better Known than the Body (excerpt)**

Yesterday’s meditation has thrown me into such doubts that I can no longer ignore them, yet I fail to see how they are to be resolved. It is as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool; I am so tossed about that I can neither touch bottom with my foot, nor swim up to the top. Nevertheless I will work my way up and will once again attempt the same path I entered upon yesterday. I will accomplish this by putting aside everything that admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered
it to be completely false. I will stay on this course until I know something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain. Archimedes sought but one firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another. Just so, great things are also to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken.

Therefore I suppose that everything I see is false. I believe that none of what my deceitful memory represents ever existed. I have no senses whatever. Body, shape, extension, movement, and place are all chimeras. What then will be true? Perhaps just the single fact that nothing is certain.

But how do I know there is not something else, over and above all those things that I have just reviewed, concerning which there is not even the slightest occasion for doubt? Is there not some God, or by whatever name I might call him, who instills these very thoughts in me? But why would I think that, since I myself could perhaps be the author of these thoughts? Am I not then at least something? But I have already denied that I have any senses and any body. Still I hesitate; for what follows from this? Am I so tied to a body and to the senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have persuaded myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world: no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Is it then the case that I too do not exist? But doubtless I did exist, if I persuaded myself of something. But there is some deceiver or other who is supremely powerful and supremely sly and who is always deliberately deceiving me. Then too there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement “I am, I exist” is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind.

But I do not yet understand sufficiently what I am—I, who now necessarily exist. And so from this point on, I must be careful lest I unwittingly mistake something else for myself, and thus err in that very item of knowledge that I claim to be the most certain and evident of all. Thus, I will meditate once more on what I once believed myself to be, prior to embarking upon these thoughts. For this reason, then, I will set aside whatever can be weakened even to the slightest degree by the arguments brought forward, so that eventually all that remains is precisely nothing but what is certain and unshaken.

What then did I formerly think I was? A man, of course. But what is a man? Might I not say a “rational animal”? No, because then I would have to inquire what “animal” and “rational” mean. And thus from one question I would slide into many more difficult ones. Nor do I not have enough free time that I want to waste it on subtleties of this sort. Instead, permit me here to focus here on what came spontaneously and naturally into my thinking whenever I pondered what I was. Now it occurred to me first that I had a face, hands, arms, and this entire mechanism of bodily members: the very same as are discerned in a corpse, and which I referred to by the name “body.” It next occurred to me that I took in food, that I walked about, and that I sensed and thought various things; these actions I used to attribute to the soul. But as to what this soul might be, I either did not think about it or else I imagined it a rarefied I-know-not-what, like a wind, or a fire, or ether, which had been infused into my coarser parts. But as to the body I was not in any doubt. On the contrary, I was under the impression that I knew its nature distinctly. Were I perhaps tempted to describe this nature such as I conceived in my mind, I would have described it thus: by “body,” I understand all that is capable of being bounded by some shape, of being enclosed in a place, and of filling up a space in such a way as to exclude any other body from it; of being perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste, or smell; of being moved in several ways, not, of course, by itself, but by whatever else impinges upon it. For it was my view that the power of self-motion and likewise of sensing or of thinking, in no way belonged to the nature of the body.
Indeed I used rather to marvel that such faculties were to be found in certain bodies.

But now what am I, when I suppose that there is some supremely powerful and, if I may be permitted to say so, malicious deceiver who deliberately tries to fool me in any way he can? Can I not affirm that I possess at least a small measure of all those things which I have already said belong to the nature of the body? I focus my attention on them, I think about them, I review them again, but nothing comes to mind. I am tired of repeating this to no purpose. But what about those things I ascribed to the soul? What about being nourished or moving about? Since I now do not have a body, these are surely nothing but fictions. What about sensing? Surely this too does not take place without a body; and I seemed to have sensed in my dreams many things that I later realized I did not sense. What about thinking? Here I make my discovery: thought exists; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am; I exist—this is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking; for perhaps it could also come to pass that if I were to cease all thinking I would then utterly cease to exist. At this time I admit nothing that is not necessarily true. I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason—words of whose meaning I was previously ignorant. Yet I am a true thing and am truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thinking thing.

What else am I? I will set my imagination in motion. I am not that concatenation of members we call the human body. Neither am I even some subtle air infused into these members, nor a wind, nor a fire, nor a vapor, nor a breath, nor anything I devise for myself. For I have supposed these things to be nothing. The assumption still stands; yet nevertheless I am something. But is it perhaps the case that these very things which I take to be nothing, because they are unknown to me, nevertheless are in fact no different from that me that I know? This I do not know, and I will not quarrel about it now. I can make a judgment only about things that are known to me. I know that I exist; I ask now who is this “I” whom I know? Most certainly, in the strict sense the knowledge of this “I” does not depend upon things whose existence I do not yet know. Therefore it is not dependent upon any of those things that I simulate in my imagination. But this word “simulate” warns me of my error. For I would indeed be simulating were I to “imagine” that I was something, because imagining is merely the contemplating of the shape or image of a corporeal thing. But I now know with certainty that I am and also that all these images—and, generally, everything belonging to the nature of the body—could turn out to be nothing but dreams. Once I have realized this, I would seem to be speaking no less foolishly were I to say: “I will use my imagination in order to recognize more distinctly who I am,” than were I to say: “Now I surely am awake and I see something true; but since I do not yet see it clearly enough, I will deliberately fall asleep so that my dreams might represent it to me more truly and more clearly.” Thus I realize that none of what I can grasp by means of the imagination pertains to this knowledge that I have of myself. Moreover, I realize that I must be most diligent about withdrawing my mind from these things so that it can perceive its nature as distinctly as possible.

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses.

Indeed, it is no small matter if all of these things belong to me. But why should they not belong to me? Is it not the very same “I” who now doubts almost everything, who nevertheless understands something, who affirms that this one thing is true, who denies other things, who desires to know more, who wishes not to be deceived, who imagines many things even against my will, who also notices many things which appear to come from the senses? What is there in all of this that is not every bit as true as the fact that I exist—even if I am always asleep or even if my creator makes every effort to mislead me? Which of these things is distinct from my thought? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself? For it is so obvious that it is I who doubt, I who understand, and I who will, that there is nothing by which it could be explained.
more clearly. But indeed it is also the same “I” who imagines; for although perhaps, as I supposed before, absolutely nothing that I imagined is true, still the very power of imagining really does exist, and constitutes a part of my thought. Finally, it is this same “I” who senses or who is cognizant of bodily things as if through the senses. For example, I now see a light, I hear a noise, I feel heat. These things are false, since I am asleep. Yet I certainly do seem to see, hear, and feel warmth. This cannot be false. Properly speaking, this is what in me is called “sensing.” But this, precisely so taken, is nothing other than thinking.
he wailing toddler attached to the end of my arm earns me a disapproving look from a sour-faced lady. My niece is inconsolable, because I made her hold my hand when we crossed the street. She is in full voice now, yelling, "I am not too little, I want to be big!" If she only knew how quickly her wish would come true. Back in the car, after she has whined through the ignominy of being buckled into her car seat, I try to have a reasonable talk with her, reminding her of the advantages of being small. She can fit in the secret fort under the lilac bush, and hide from her brother. What about stories in grandma's lap? But, she's not buying it. She falls asleep on the way home, clutching her new kite, a stubborn pout still on her face.

I brought a moss-covered rock to her preschool for a science show and tell. I asked the kids at preschool what a moss was. They skipped right over the question of animal, vegetable, or mineral and got directly to the most salient feature; mosses are small. Kids recognize that right away. This most obvious attribute has tremendous consequences for the way mosses inhabit the world.

Mosses are small because they lack any support system to hold them upright. Large mosses occur mostly in lakes and streams, where the water can support their weight. Trees stand tall and rigid because of their vascular tissue, the network of xylem, thick-walled tubular cells that conduct water within the plant like wooden plumbing. Mosses are the most primitive of plants and lack any such vascular tissue. Their slender stems couldn't support their weight if they were any taller. This same lack of xylem means that they can't conduct water from the soil to leaves at the top of the shoot. A plant more than a few centimeters high can't keep itself hydrated.

However, being small doesn't mean being unsuccessful. Mosses are successful by any biological measure—they inhabit nearly every ecosystem on earth and number as many as 22,000 species. Like my niece finding small places to hide, mosses can live in a great diversity of small micro-communities where being large would be a disadvantage. Between the cracks of the
sidewalk, on the branches of an oak, on the back of a beetle, or on the ledge of a cliff, mosses can fill in the empty spaces left between the big plants. Beautifully adapted for life in miniature, mosses take full advantage of being small, and grow beyond their sphere at their peril.

With extensive root systems and shading canopies, trees are the undisputed dominants of the forest. Their competitive superiority and heavy leaf fall are no match for mosses. One consequence of being small is that competing for sunlight is simply not possible—the trees will always win. So mosses are usually limited to life in the shade, and they flourish there. The type of chlorophyll in their leaves differs from their sun-loving counterparts, and is fine-tuned to absorb the wavelengths of light that filter through the forest canopy.

Mosses are prolific under the moist shaded canopy of evergreens, often creating a dense carpet of green. But in deciduous forests, autumn makes the forest floor virtually uninhabitable by mosses, smothering them under a dark wet blanket of falling leaves. Mosses find a refuge from the drifting leaves on logs and stumps which rise above the forest floor like buttes above the plain. Mosses succeed by inhabiting places that trees cannot, hard, impermeable substrates such as rocks and cliff faces and bark of trees. But with elegant adaptation, mosses don't suffer from this restriction; rather, they are the undisputed masters of their chosen environment.

Mosses inhabit surfaces: the surfaces of rocks, the bark of trees, the surface of a log, that small space where earth and atmosphere first make contact. This meeting ground between air and land is known as the boundary layer. Lying cheek to cheek with rocks and logs, mosses are intimate with the contours and textures of their substrate. Far from being a liability, the size of mosses allows them to take advantage of the unique microenvironment created within the boundary layer.

What is this interface between atmosphere and earth? Every surface, be it as small as a leaf or as large as a hill, possesses a boundary layer. We've all experienced it in very simple ways. When you lie on the ground on a sunny summer afternoon to look up and watch the clouds go by, you place yourself in the boundary layer of the Earth's surface. When you are flat on the ground, the wind speed is reduced; you can scarcely feel the breeze that would ruffle your hair if you were standing up. It's warm down there as well; the sun-warmed ground radiates heat back at you, and the lack of breeze at the surface lets the heat linger. The climate right next to the ground is different from the one six feet above. The effect that we feel lying on the ground is repeated over every surface, large and small.

Air seems insubstantial, but it interacts in interesting ways with the things it touches, much as moving water interacts with the contours of the riverbed. As moving air passes over a surface like a rock, the surface changes the behavior of the air. Without obstacles, the air would tend to move smoothly in a linear path called laminar flow. If we could see it, it would look like water flowing freely in a smooth deep river. But as the air encounters a surface, friction tugs at the moving air
and slows it down. You see this in the flow of water; when a river meets a rocky bottom or logs fallen in its path, the water slows. As the laminar flow is disrupted by the drag of the surface, the air stream becomes separated into layers of different speed. There is swiftly moving air aloft, flowing in a smooth sheet. Beneath it lies a zone of turbulence, where the air swirls and eddies as it encounters obstacles. Down toward the surface, the air becomes progressively slower and slower until, immediately adjacent to the surface, the air is perfectly still, captured by the friction with the surface itself. It is this layer of still air that you experience while lying on the ground.

At a larger scale, I encounter these layers of air every spring. On the first mild day in April, our beautiful kites that have been hanging draped with cobwebs on the porch all winter rustle in the breeze and remind us of blue sky. So, we take them out to play in the boundary layer. In our sheltered valley, the breezes are seldom strong enough to immediately catch the big dragon kites that the kids and I love. So we run crazily back and forth over the back pasture, dodging cow pies and trying to generate enough wind to carry the kite upward. Close to the surface of the earth, the winds are too slow to support the kites' weight. They are trapped, beyond the reach of the breeze. Only when our mad dashes loft one of the kites up to escape the layer of still air does it pull and dance on the string. Its wild pitches and threatened crashes show that it has ascended into the turbulent zone. And then at last, the kite's string pulls taut and the red and yellow dragon sails into the freely moving air above. Kites were made for the airy zone of laminar flow; mosses were made for the boundary layer.

Our pasture is littered with rocks left by the glacier, and I stop to sit on one and spool out the kite string, listening to meadowlarks. The rock is warm from the sun and softened by mosses. I can imagine the pattern of air, flowing smoothly around it until it encounters the surface, where the mosses live. The sun's warmth gets trapped in the tiny layer of still air. Since the air is nearly motionless, it acts as an insulating layer, much like the dead space in a storm window, which forms a barrier to heat exchange. The spring breeze around me is chilly, but the air right at the surface of the rock is much warmer. Even on a day when the temperature is below freezing, the mosses on a sunlit rock may be bathed in liquid water. By being small, mosses can live in that boundary layer, like a floating greenhouse hovering just above the rock surface.

The boundary layer traps not only heat, but water vapor, as well. Moisture evaporating from the surface of a damp log is captured in the boundary layer, creating a humid zone in which the mosses flourish. Mosses can grow only when they are moist. As soon as they dry out, photosynthesis must cease, and growth is halted. The right conditions for growth can be infrequent, and so mosses grow very slowly. Living within the confines of the boundary layer prolongs the window of opportunity for growth, by keeping the wind from stealing the moisture. Being small
enough to live within the boundary layer allows the mosses to experience a warm, moist habitat unknown by the larger plants.

The boundary layer can also hold gases other than water vapor. The chemical composition of the atmosphere in the slim boundary layer of a log differs considerably from that of the surrounding forest. The decaying log is inhabited by a myriad of microorganisms. Fungi and bacteria are constantly at work degrading the log, with an outcome as sure as that of a wrecking ball. The continual work of the decomposers slowly turns the solid log to crumbling humus and releases vapors rich in carbon dioxide, which is also trapped in the boundary layer. The ambient atmosphere has a carbon dioxide concentration of approximately 380 parts per million. But the boundary layer above a log may contain up to ten times that amount. Carbon dioxide is the raw material of photosynthesis, and is readily absorbed into the moist leaves of the mosses. Thus, the boundary layer can provide not only a favorable microclimate for moss growth, but also an enhanced supply of carbon dioxide, the raw material for photosynthesis. Why live anywhere else?

Being small enough to live in the boundary layer is a distinct advantage. Mosses have found the microhabitats where their size becomes an asset. The growth of a moss would be sharply curtailed if the shoots grew too tall and into the drying air of the turbulent zone. We might predict therefore that all mosses are uniformly small, corresponding to the limits imposed by the boundary layer. However, mosses exhibit a tremendous range in height, equivalent to the height disparity between a blueberry bush and a redwood. They range from tiny crusts only a millimeter high to lush wefts that can be up to ten centimeters tall. These differences in stature can usually be traced to differences in the depth of the boundary layer in the particular habitat. The boundary layer on a rock face exposed to wind and full sun is quite thin. Hence, the mosses of such arid places must be very small in order to stay within the protective boundary layer. In contrast, mosses on a rock in a moist forest can grow much taller and still remain within a favorable microclimate, because the boundary layer on the rock is under the umbrella of the boundary layer of the forest itself. The trees slow the wind and their shade reduces evaporation, buffering the area against the drying atmosphere. In a humid rainforest, the mosses can be lush and tall. The larger the boundary layer, the larger the moss can be.

Mosses can also control the depth of their own boundary layers by changes in their shape. Any feature of a surface that increases friction with moving air can slow the air and create a thicker boundary layer. A roughened surface slows the passage of air more effectively than a smooth one. Imagine being caught in a fierce prairie blizzard with strong winds blasting sheets of snow against your face. To escape the force of the winds, you lie down, taking refuge in the shelter of the earth's boundary layer. Given a choice, would you be warmer lying in the open or in a field of tall grass? The projection of the tall grass into the moving air stream slows the air and makes a larger boundary layer, helping to conserve your body heat. Mosses utilize this same principle to enlarge the boundary layers above them. The surface textures of a moss itself can create resistance to airflow. The greater the resistance, the deeper the boundary layer. Like a tall grassy field in miniature, moss shoots exhibit adaptations that slow air movement. Many moss species have long narrow leaves held upright to slow the airflow around them. Moreover, the leaves of mosses in dry sites often possess dense hairs, long reflective leaf tips, or miniscule spines. These extensions from the leaf surface also slow the moving air and reduce evaporation.

In arid zones, mosses often rely on dew for their daily ration of water. The interplay of the atmosphere and the rock surface creates the conditions for dew formation. At night, when the sun's heat dissipates, the temperature differential between the rock surface (which has retained some warmth) and the air may provide a site for condensation of water. A thin film of dew is created.
right at the air-rock interface, where it can be readily absorbed by the mosses. Only a very small being can take advantage of such a thin and evanescent supply of moisture in the desert, living on dew.

The safe and balmy realm of the boundary layer provides a secure refuge for mosses. But the very same nurturing environment that sustains growth to maturity poses a problem for the next generation. Like my niece, mosses eventually need to escape from protection by their elders and find their own places. Mosses reproduce by the formation of spores, tiny powdery propagules that require wind to carry them far afield. Most spores can't germinate in the leafy carpet of their own parents, so getting away is imperative. Air currents in the still air of the boundary layer are not sufficient to disperse them. So, to catch a breeze and help them leave the home territory, mosses elevate their spores on long setae, stalks that poke up above the boundary layer. The rapidly maturing sporophytes are thrust up through the boundary layer and into the turbulent zone like a kite on the wind. Here vortices of air swirl around the capsules, pulling out the spores and carrying them off to new habitats. Like the young of every species they escape the restrictions of their elders and seek out the freedom of the wide-open spaces.

The length of the seta or stalk is strongly correlated with the depth of the boundary layer. The seta of a forest moss must be quite tall to escape the boundary layer and catch the light breeze that moves over the forest floor. In contrast, mosses of open sites where the boundary layer is thin typically have short setae.

Mosses take possession of spaces from which other plants are excluded by their size. Their ways of being are a celebration of smallness. They succeed by matching the unique properties of their form to the physical laws of interaction between air and earth. In being small, their limitation is their strength. Try telling that to my niece.
The Coddling of the American Mind
Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt

In The Atlantic, September 2015.

Greg Lukianoff (1974—) is president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and a frequent commentator on higher education. Jonathan Haidt (1963—) is a social psychologist and business professor at New York University. This piece, co-authored by the two, was published in The Atlantic in September of 2015 and has sparked a great deal of discussion on college campuses. In brief, it is a defense of free speech on college campuses as a legal, epistemic, and psychological principle. Lukianoff and Haidt contend that free speech on American college campuses is threatened by a growing demand from students that they be “protected” from ideas they deem offensive or troubling. Asserting that there is no right to not be offended, Lukianoff and Haidt advocate what might be called a Socratic approach of engagement. They argue that, like leaving the Plato’s cave, the result is to see the world more as it actually is instead of merely how it initially seems.

Something strange is happening at America’s colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense. Last December, Jeannie Suk wrote in an online article for The New Yorker about law students asking her fellow professors at Harvard not to teach rape law—or, in one case, even use the word violate (as in “that violates the law”) lest it cause students distress. In February, Laura Kipnis, a professor at Northwestern University, wrote an essay in The Chronicle of Higher Education describing a new campus politics of sexual paranoia—and was then subjected to a long investigation after students who were offended by the article and by a tweet she’d sent filed Title IX complaints against her. In June, a professor protecting himself with a pseudonym wrote an essay for Vox describing how gingerly he now has to teach. “I’m a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me,” the headline said. A number of popular comedians, including Chris Rock, have stopped performing on college campuses. Jerry Seinfeld and Bill Maher have publicly condemned the oversensitivity of college students, saying too many of them can’t take a joke.

Two terms have risen quickly from obscurity into common campus parlance. Microaggressions are small actions or word choices that seem on their face to have no malicious intent but that are thought of as a kind of violence nonetheless. For example, by some campus guidelines, it is a microaggression to ask an Asian American or Latino American “Where were you born?,” because this implies that he or she is not a real American. Trigger warnings are alerts that professors are expected to issue if something in a course might cause a strong emotional response. For example, some students have called for warnings that Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart describes racial violence and that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby portrays misogyny and physical abuse, so that students who have been previously victimized by racism or domestic violence can choose to avoid these works, which they believe might “trigger” a recurrence of past trauma.

Some recent campus actions border on the surreal. In April, at Brandeis University, the Asian American student association sought to raise awareness of microaggressions against Asians through an installation on the steps of an academic hall. The installation gave examples of
microaggressions such as “Aren’t you supposed to be good at math?” and “I’m colorblind! I don’t see race.” But a backlash arose among other Asian American students, who felt that the display itself was a microaggression. The association removed the installation, and its president wrote an e-mail to the entire student body apologizing to anyone who was “triggered or hurt by the content of the microaggressions.”

According to the most-basic tenets of psychology, helping people with anxiety disorders avoid the things they fear is misguided.

This new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion. During the 2014–15 school year, for instance, the deans and department chairs at the 10 University of California system schools were presented by administrators at faculty leader-training sessions with examples of microaggressions. The list of offensive statements included: “America is the land of opportunity” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”

The press has typically described these developments as a resurgence of political correctness. That’s partly right, although there are important differences between what’s happening now and what happened in the 1980s and ’90s. That movement sought to restrict speech (specifically hate speech aimed at marginalized groups), but it also challenged the literary, philosophical, and historical canon, seeking to widen it by including more diverse perspectives. The current movement is largely about emotional well-being. More than the last, it presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche, and therefore elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm. The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into “safe spaces” where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable. And more than the last, this movement seeks to punish anyone who interferes with that aim, even accidentally. You might call this impulse vindictive protectiveness. It is creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse.

We have been studying this development for a while now, with rising alarm. (Greg Lukianoff is a constitutional lawyer and the president and CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which defends free speech and academic freedom on campus, and has advocated for students and faculty involved in many of the incidents this article describes; Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist who studies the American culture wars.) The dangers that these trends pose to scholarship and to the quality of American universities are significant; we could write a whole essay detailing them. But in this essay we focus on a different question: What are the effects of this new protectiveness on the students themselves? Does it benefit the people it is supposed to help? What exactly are students learning when they spend four years or more in a community that polices unintentional slights, places warning labels on works of classic literature, and in many other ways conveys the sense that words can be forms of violence that require strict control by campus authorities, who are expected to act as both protectors and prosecutors?

There’s a saying common in education circles: Don’t teach students what to think; teach them how to think. The idea goes back at least as far as Socrates. Today, what we call the Socratic method is a way of teaching that fosters critical thinking, in part by encouraging students to question their own unexamined beliefs, as well as the received wisdom of those around them. Such questioning sometimes leads to discomfort, and even to anger, on the way to understanding.

But vindictive protectiveness teaches students to think in a very different way. It prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong. The harm may be more immediate, too. A campus culture devoted to policing speech and punishing speakers is likely to engender patterns of thought
that are surprisingly similar to those long identified by cognitive behavioral therapists as causes of depression and anxiety. The new protectiveness may be teaching students to think pathologically.

**HOW DID WE GET HERE?**

It’s difficult to know exactly why vindictive protectiveness has burst forth so powerfully in the past few years. The phenomenon may be related to recent changes in the interpretation of federal antidiscrimination statutes (about which more later). But the answer probably involves generational shifts as well. Childhood itself has changed greatly during the past generation. Many Baby Boomers and Gen Xers can remember riding their bicycles around their hometowns, unchaperoned by adults, by the time they were 8 or 9 years old. In the hours after school, kids were expected to occupy themselves, getting into minor scrapes and learning from their experiences. But “free range” childhood became less common in the 1980s. The surge in crime from the ’60s through the early ’90s made Baby Boomer parents more protective than their own parents had been. Stories of abducted children appeared more frequently in the news, and in 1984, images of them began showing up on milk cartons. In response, many parents pulled in the reins and worked harder to keep their children safe.

The flight to safety also happened at school. Dangerous play structures were removed from playgrounds; peanut butter was banned from student lunches. After the 1999 Columbine massacre in Colorado, many schools cracked down on bullying, implementing “zero tolerance” policies. In a variety of ways, children born after 1980—the Millennials—got a consistent message from adults: life is dangerous, but adults will do everything in their power to protect you from harm, not just from strangers but from one another as well.

These same children grew up in a culture that was (and still is) becoming more politically polarized. Republicans and Democrats have never particularly liked each other, but survey data going back to the 1970s show that on average, their mutual dislike used to be surprisingly mild. Negative feelings have grown steadily stronger, however, particularly since the early 2000s. Political scientists call this process “affective partisan polarization,” and it is a very serious problem for any democracy. As each side increasingly demonizes the other, compromise becomes more difficult. A recent study shows that implicit or unconscious biases are now at least as strong across political parties as they are across races.

So it’s not hard to imagine why students arriving on campus today might be more desirous of protection and more hostile toward ideological opponents than in generations past. This hostility, and the self-righteousness fueled by strong partisan emotions, can be expected to add force to any moral crusade. A principle of moral psychology is that “morality binds and blinds.” Part of what we do when we make moral judgments is express allegiance to a team. But that can interfere with our ability to think critically. Acknowledging that the other side’s viewpoint has any merit is risky—your teammates may see you as a traitor.

Social media makes it extraordinarily easy to join crusades, express solidarity and outrage, and shun traitors. Facebook was founded in 2004, and since 2006 it has allowed children as young as 13 to join. This means that the first wave of students who spent all their teen years using Facebook reached college in 2011, and graduated from college only this year.

These first true “social-media natives” may be different from members of previous generations in how they go about sharing their moral judgments and supporting one another in moral campaigns and conflicts. We find much to like about these trends; young people today are engaged with one another, with news stories, and with prosocial endeavors to a greater degree than when the dominant technology was television. But social media has also fundamentally shifted the
balance of power in relationships between students and faculty; the latter increasingly fear what students might do to their reputations and careers by stirring up online mobs against them.

We do not mean to imply simple causation, but rates of mental illness in young adults have been rising, both on campus and off, in recent decades. Some portion of the increase is surely due to better diagnosis and greater willingness to seek help, but most experts seem to agree that some portion of the trend is real. Nearly all of the campus mental-health directors surveyed in 2013 by the American College Counseling Association reported that the number of students with severe psychological problems was rising at their schools. The rate of emotional distress reported by students themselves is also high, and rising. In a 2014 survey by the American College Health Association, 54 percent of college students surveyed said that they had “felt overwhelming anxiety” in the past 12 months, up from 49 percent in the same survey just five years earlier. Students seem to be reporting more emotional crises; many seem fragile, and this has surely changed the way university faculty and administrators interact with them. The question is whether some of those changes might be doing more harm than good.

THE THINKING CURE

For millennia, philosophers have understood that we don’t see life as it is; we see a version distorted by our hopes, fears, and other attachments. The Buddha said, “Our life is the creation of our mind.” Marcus Aurelius said, “Life itself is but what you deem it.” The quest for wisdom in many traditions begins with this insight. Early Buddhists and the Stoics, for example, developed practices for reducing attachments, thinking more clearly, and finding release from the emotional torments of normal mental life.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a modern embodiment of this ancient wisdom. It is the most extensively studied nonpharmaceutical treatment of mental illness, and is used widely to treat depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and addiction. It can even be of help to schizophrenics. No other form of psychotherapy has been shown to work for a broader range of problems. Studies have generally found that it is as effective as antidepressant drugs (such as Prozac) in the treatment of anxiety and depression. The therapy is relatively quick and easy to learn; after a few months of training, many patients can do it on their own. Unlike drugs, cognitive behavioral therapy keeps working long after treatment is stopped, because it teaches thinking skills that people can continue to use.

The goal is to minimize distorted thinking and see the world more accurately. You start by learning the names of the dozen or so most common cognitive distortions (such as overgeneralizing, discounting positives, and emotional reasoning; see the list at the bottom of this article). Each time you notice yourself falling prey to one of them, you name it, describe the facts of the situation, consider alternative interpretations, and then choose an interpretation of events more in line with those facts. Your emotions follow your new interpretation. In time, this process becomes automatic. When people improve their mental hygiene in this way—when they free themselves from the repetitive irrational thoughts that had previously filled so much of their consciousness—they become less depressed, anxious, and angry.

The parallel to formal education is clear: cognitive behavioral therapy teaches good critical-thinking skills, the sort that educators have striven for so long to impart. By almost any definition, critical thinking requires grounding one’s beliefs in evidence rather than in emotion or desire, and learning how to search for and evaluate evidence that might contradict one’s initial hypothesis. But does campus life today foster critical thinking? Or does it coax students to think in more-distorted ways?
Let’s look at recent trends in higher education in light of the distortions that cognitive behavioral therapy identifies. We will draw the names and descriptions of these distortions from David D. Burns’s popular book Feeling Good, as well as from the second edition of Treatment Plans and Interventions for Depression and Anxiety Disorders, by Robert L. Leahy, Stephen J. F. Holland, and Lata K. McGinn.

**HIGHER EDUCATION’S EMBRACE OF “EMOTIONAL REASONING”**

Burns defines emotional reasoning as assuming “that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: ‘I feel it, therefore it must be true.’” Leahy, Holland, and McGinn define it as letting “your feelings guide your interpretation of reality.” But, of course, subjective feelings are not always trustworthy guides; unrestrained, they can cause people to lash out at others who have done nothing wrong. Therapy often involves talking yourself down from the idea that each of your emotional responses represents something true or important.

Emotional reasoning dominates many campus debates and discussions. A claim that someone’s words are “offensive” is not just an expression of one’s own subjective feeling of offendedness. It is, rather, a public charge that the speaker has done something objectively wrong. It is a demand that the speaker apologize or be punished by some authority for committing an offense.

There have always been some people who believe they have a right not to be offended. Yet throughout American history—from the Victorian era to the free-speech activism of the 1960s and ’70s—radicals have pushed boundaries and mocked prevailing sensibilities. Sometime in the 1980s, however, college campuses began to focus on preventing offensive speech, especially speech that might be hurtful to women or minority groups. The sentiment underpinning this goal was laudable, but it quickly produced some absurd results.

What are we doing to our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection?

Among the most famous early examples was the so-called water-buffalo incident at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1993, the university charged an Israeli-born student with racial harassment after he yelled “Shut up, you water buffalo!” to a crowd of black sorority women that was making noise at night outside his dorm-room window. Many scholars and pundits at the time could not see how the term water buffalo (a rough translation of a Hebrew insult for a thoughtless or rowdy person) was a racial slur against African Americans, and as a result, the case became international news.

Claims of a right not to be offended have continued to arise since then, and universities have continued to privilege them. In a particularly egregious 2008 case, for instance, Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis found a white student guilty of racial harassment for reading a book titled Notre Dame vs. the Klan. The book honored student opposition to the Ku Klux Klan when it marched on Notre Dame in 1924. Nonetheless, the picture of a Klan rally on the book’s cover offended at least one of the student’s co-workers (he was a janitor as well as a student), and that was enough for a guilty finding by the university’s Affirmative Action Office.

These examples may seem extreme, but the reasoning behind them has become more commonplace on campus in recent years. Last year, at the University of St. Thomas, in Minnesota, an event called Hump Day, which would have allowed people to pet a camel, was abruptly canceled. Students had created a Facebook group where they protested the event for animal cruelty, for being a waste of money, and for being insensitive to people from the Middle East. The inspiration for the camel had almost certainly come from a popular TV commercial in which a
camel saunters around an office on a Wednesday, celebrating “hump day”; it was devoid of any reference to Middle Eastern peoples. Nevertheless, the group organizing the event announced on its Facebook page that the event would be canceled because the “program [was] dividing people and would make for an uncomfortable and possibly unsafe environment.”

Because there is a broad ban in academic circles on “blaming the victim,” it is generally considered unacceptable to question the reasonableness (let alone the sincerity) of someone’s emotional state, particularly if those emotions are linked to one’s group identity. The thin argument “I’m offended” becomes an unbeatable trump card. This leads to what Jonathan Rauch, a contributing editor at this magazine, calls the “offendedness sweepstakes,” in which opposing parties use claims of offense as cudgels. In the process, the bar for what we consider unacceptable speech is lowered further and further.

Since 2013, new pressure from the federal government has reinforced this trend. Federal antidiscrimination statutes regulate on-campus harassment and unequal treatment based on sex, race, religion, and national origin. Until recently, the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights acknowledged that speech must be “objectively offensive” before it could be deemed actionable as sexual harassment—it would have to pass the “reasonable person” test. To be prohibited, the office wrote in 2003, allegedly harassing speech would have to go “beyond the mere expression of views, words, symbols or thoughts that some person finds offensive.”

But in 2013, the Departments of Justice and Education greatly broadened the definition of sexual harassment to include verbal conduct that is simply “unwelcome.” Out of fear of federal investigations, universities are now applying that standard—defining unwelcome speech as harassment—not just to sex, but to race, religion, and veteran status as well. Everyone is supposed to rely upon his or her own subjective feelings to decide whether a comment by a professor or a fellow student is unwelcome, and therefore grounds for a harassment claim. Emotional reasoning is now accepted as evidence.

If our universities are teaching students that their emotions can be used effectively as weapons—or at least as evidence in administrative proceedings—then they are teaching students to nurture a kind of hypersensitivity that will lead them into countless drawn-out conflicts in college and beyond. Schools may be training students in thinking styles that will damage their careers and friendships, along with their mental health.

**FORTUNE-TELLING AND TRIGGER WARNINGS**

Burns defines *fortune-telling* as “anticipat[ing] that things will turn out badly” and feeling “convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact.” Leahy, Holland, and McGinn define it as “predict[ing] the future negatively” or seeing potential danger in an everyday situation. The recent spread of demands for trigger warnings on reading assignments with provocative content is an example of fortune-telling.

The idea that words (or smells or any sensory input) can trigger searing memories of past trauma—and intense fear that it may be repeated—has been around at least since World War I, when psychiatrists began treating soldiers for what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder. But explicit trigger warnings are believed to have originated much more recently, on message boards in the early days of the Internet. Trigger warnings became particularly prevalent in self-help and feminist forums, where they allowed readers who had suffered from traumatic events like sexual assault to avoid graphic content that might trigger flashbacks or panic attacks. Search-engine trends indicate that the phrase broke into mainstream use online around 2011, spiked in 2014, and reached an all-time high in 2015. The use of trigger warnings on campus appears to have
followed a similar trajectory; seemingly overnight, students at universities across the country have begun demanding that their professors issue warnings before covering material that might evoke a negative emotional response.

In 2013, a task force composed of administrators, students, recent alumni, and one faculty member at Oberlin College, in Ohio, released an online resource guide for faculty (subsequently retracted in the face of faculty pushback) that included a list of topics warranting trigger warnings. These topics included classism and privilege, among many others. The task force recommended that materials that might trigger negative reactions among students be avoided altogether unless they “contribute directly” to course goals, and suggested that works that were “too important to avoid” be made optional.

It’s hard to imagine how novels illustrating classism and privilege could provoke or reactivate the kind of terror that is typically implicated in PTSD. Rather, trigger warnings are sometimes demanded for a long list of ideas and attitudes that some students find politically offensive, in the name of preventing other students from being harmed. This is an example of what psychologists call “motivated reasoning”—we spontaneously generate arguments for conclusions we want to support. Once you find something hateful, it is easy to argue that exposure to the hateful thing could traumatize some other people. You believe that you know how others will react, and that their reaction could be devastating. Preventing that devastation becomes a moral obligation for the whole community. Books for which students have called publicly for trigger warnings within the past couple of years include Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway (at Rutgers, for “suicidal inclinations”) and Ovid’s Metamorphoses (at Columbia, for sexual assault).

Jeannie Suk’s New Yorker essay described the difficulties of teaching rape law in the age of trigger warnings. Some students, she wrote, have pressured their professors to avoid teaching the subject in order to protect themselves and their classmates from potential distress. Suk compares this to trying to teach “a medical student who is training to be a surgeon but who fears that he’ll become distressed if he sees or handles blood.”

However, there is a deeper problem with trigger warnings. According to the most basic tenets of psychology, the very idea of helping people with anxiety disorders avoid the things they fear is misguided. A person who is trapped in an elevator during a power outage may panic and think she is going to die. That frightening experience can change neural connections in her amygdala, leading to an elevator phobia. If you want this woman to retain her fear for life, you should help her avoid elevators.

But if you want to help her return to normalcy, you should take your cues from Ivan Pavlov and guide her through a process known as exposure therapy. You might start by asking the woman to merely look at an elevator from a distance—standing in a building lobby, perhaps—until her apprehension begins to subside. If nothing bad happens while she’s standing in the lobby—if the fear is not “reinforced”—then she will begin to learn a new association: elevators are not dangerous. (This reduction in fear during exposure is called habituation.) Then, on subsequent days, you might ask her to get closer, and on later days to push the call button, and eventually to step in and go up one floor. This is how the amygdala can get rewired again to associate a previously feared situation with safety or normalcy.

Students who call for trigger warnings may be correct that some of their peers are harboring memories of trauma that could be reactivated by course readings. But they are wrong to try to prevent such reactivations. Students with PTSD should of course get treatment, but they should not try to avoid normal life, with its many opportunities for habituation. Classroom discussions are safe places to be exposed to incidental reminders of trauma (such as the word violate). A discussion
of violence is unlikely to be followed by actual violence, so it is a good way to help students change the associations that are causing them discomfort. And they’d better get their habituation done in college, because the world beyond college will be far less willing to accommodate requests for trigger warnings and opt-outs.

The expansive use of trigger warnings may also foster unhealthy mental habits in the vastly larger group of students who do not suffer from PTSD or other anxiety disorders. People acquire their fears not just from their own past experiences, but from social learning as well. If everyone around you acts as though something is dangerous—elevators, certain neighborhoods, novels depicting racism—then you are at risk of acquiring that fear too. The psychiatrist Sarah Roff pointed this out last year in an online article for The Chronicle of Higher Education. “One of my biggest concerns about trigger warnings,” Roff wrote, “is that they will apply not just to those who have experienced trauma, but to all students, creating an atmosphere in which they are encouraged to believe that there is something dangerous or damaging about discussing difficult aspects of our history.”

The new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion or debate.

In an article published last year by Inside Higher Ed, seven humanities professors wrote that the trigger-warning movement was “already having a chilling effect on [their] teaching and pedagogy.” They reported their colleagues’ receiving “phone calls from deans and other administrators investigating student complaints that they have included ‘triggering’ material in their courses, with or without warnings.” A trigger warning, they wrote, “serves as a guarantee that students will not experience unexpected discomfort and implies that if they do, a contract has been broken.” When students come to expect trigger warnings for any material that makes them uncomfortable, the easiest way for faculty to stay out of trouble is to avoid material that might upset the most sensitive student in the class.

MAGNIFICATION, LABELING, AND MICROAGGRESSIONS

Burns defines magnification as “exaggerat[ing] the importance of things,” and Leahy, Holland, and McGinn define labeling as “assign[ing] global negative traits to yourself and others.” The recent collegiate trend of uncovering allegedly racist, sexist, classist, or otherwise discriminatory microaggressions doesn’t incidentally teach students to focus on small or accidental slights. Its purpose is to get students to focus on them and then relabel the people who have made such remarks as aggressors.

The term microaggression originated in the 1970s and referred to subtle, often unconscious racist affronts. The definition has expanded in recent years to include anything that can be perceived as discriminatory on virtually any basis. For example, in 2013, a student group at UCLA staged a sit-in during a class taught by Val Rust, an education professor. The group read a letter aloud expressing their concerns about the campus’s hostility toward students of color. Although Rust was not explicitly named, the group quite clearly criticized his teaching as microaggressive. In the course of correcting his students’ grammar and spelling, Rust had noted that a student had wrongly capitalized the first letter of the word indigenous. Lowercasing the capital I was an insult to the student and her ideology, the group claimed.

Even joking about microaggressions can be seen as an aggression, warranting punishment. Last fall, Omar Mahmood, a student at the University of Michigan, wrote a satirical column for a conservative student publication, The Michigan Review, poking fun at what he saw as a campus tendency to perceive microaggressions in just about anything. Mahmood was also employed at the
campus newspaper, The Michigan Daily. The Daily’s editors said that the way Mahmood had “satirically mocked the experiences of fellow Daily contributors and minority communities on campus … created a conflict of interest.” The Daily terminated Mahmood after he described the incident to two Web sites, The College Fix and The Daily Caller. A group of women later vandalized Mahmood’s doorway with eggs, hot dogs, gum, and notes with messages such as “Everyone hates you, you violent prick.” When speech comes to be seen as a form of violence, vindictive protectiveness can justify a hostile, and perhaps even violent, response.

In March, the student government at Ithaca College, in upstate New York, went so far as to propose the creation of an anonymous microaggression-reporting system. Student sponsors envisioned some form of disciplinary action against “oppressors” engaged in belittling speech. One of the sponsors of the program said that while “not … every instance will require trial or some kind of harsh punishment,” she wanted the program to be “record-keeping but with impact.”

Surely people make subtle or thinly veiled racist or sexist remarks on college campuses, and it is right for students to raise questions and initiate discussions about such cases. But the increased focus on microaggressions coupled with the endorsement of emotional reasoning is a formula for a constant state of outrage, even toward well-meaning speakers trying to engage in genuine discussion.

What are we doing to our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin in the years just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection and enter the workforce? Would they not be better prepared to flourish if we taught them to question their own emotional reactions, and to give people the benefit of the doubt?

**TEACHING STUDENTS TO CATASTROPHIZE AND HAVE ZERO TOLERANCE**

Burns defines catastrophizing as a kind of magnification that turns “commonplace negative events into nightmarish monsters.” Leahy, Holland, and McGinn define it as believing “that what has happened or will happen” is “so awful and unbearable that you won’t be able to stand it.” Requests for trigger warnings involve catastrophizing, but this way of thinking colors other areas of campus thought as well.

Catastrophizing rhetoric about physical danger is employed by campus administrators more commonly than you might think—sometimes, it seems, with cynical ends in mind. For instance, last year administrators at Bergen Community College, in New Jersey, suspended Francis Schmidt, a professor, after he posted a picture of his daughter on his Google+ account. The photo showed her in a yoga pose, wearing a T-shirt that read I WILL TAKE WHAT IS MINE WITH FIRE & BLOOD, a quote from the HBO show Game of Thrones. Schmidt had filed a grievance against the school about two months earlier after being passed over for a sabbatical. The quote was interpreted as a threat by a campus administrator, who received a notification after Schmidt posted the picture; it had been sent, automatically, to a whole group of contacts. According to Schmidt, a Bergen security official present at a subsequent meeting between administrators and Schmidt thought the word fire could refer to AK-47s.

Then there is the eight-year legal saga at Valdosta State University, in Georgia, where a student was expelled for protesting the construction of a parking garage by posting an allegedly “threatening” collage on Facebook. The collage described the proposed structure as a “memorial” parking garage—a joke referring to a claim by the university president that the garage would be part of his legacy. The president interpreted the collage as a threat against his life.

It should be no surprise that students are exhibiting similar sensitivity. At the University of Central Florida in 2013, for example, Hyung-il Jung, an accounting instructor, was suspended after
a student reported that Jung had made a threatening comment during a review session. Jung explained to the Orlando Sentinel that the material he was reviewing was difficult, and he’d noticed the pained look on students’ faces, so he made a joke. “It looks like you guys are being slowly suffocated by these questions,” he recalled saying. “Am I on a killing spree or what?”

After the student reported Jung’s comment, a group of nearly 20 others e-mailed the UCF administration explaining that the comment had clearly been made in jest. Nevertheless, UCF suspended Jung from all university duties and demanded that he obtain written certification from a mental-health professional that he was “not a threat to [himself] or to the university community” before he would be allowed to return to campus.

All of these actions teach a common lesson: smart people do, in fact, overreact to innocuous speech, make mountains out of molehills, and seek punishment for anyone whose words make anyone else feel uncomfortable.

MENTAL FILTERING AND DISINVITATION SEASON

As Burns defines it, mental filtering is “pick[ing] out a negative detail in any situation and dwell[ing] on it exclusively, thus perceiving that the whole situation is negative.” Leahy, Holland, and McGinn refer to this as “negative filtering,” which they define as “focus[ing] almost exclusively on the negatives and seldom notic[ing] the positives.” When applied to campus life, mental filtering allows for simplminded demonization.

Students and faculty members in large numbers modeled this cognitive distortion during 2014’s “disinvitation season.” That’s the time of year—usually early spring—when commencement speakers are announced and when students and professors demand that some of those speakers be disinvited because of things they have said or done. According to data compiled by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, since 2000, at least 240 campaigns have been launched at U.S. universities to prevent public figures from appearing at campus events; most of them have occurred since 2009.

Consider two of the most prominent disinvitation targets of 2014: former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the International Monetary Fund’s managing director, Christine Lagarde. Rice was the first black female secretary of state; Lagarde was the first woman to become finance minister of a G8 country and the first female head of the IMF. Both speakers could have been seen as highly successful role models for female students, and Rice for minority students as well. But the critics, in effect, discounted any possibility of something positive coming from those speeches.

Members of an academic community should of course be free to raise questions about Rice’s role in the Iraq War or to look skeptically at the IMF’s policies. But should dislike of part of a person’s record disqualify her altogether from sharing her perspectives?

If campus culture conveys the idea that visitors must be pure, with résumés that never offend generally left-leaning campus sensibilities, then higher education will have taken a further step toward intellectual homogeneity and the creation of an environment in which students rarely encounter diverse viewpoints. And universities will have reinforced the belief that it’s okay to filter out the positive. If students graduate believing that they can learn nothing from people they dislike or from those with whom they disagree, we will have done them a great intellectual disservice.
WHAT CAN WE DO NOW?

Attempts to shield students from words, ideas, and people that might cause them emotional discomfort are bad for the students. They are bad for the workplace, which will be mired in unending litigation if student expectations of safety are carried forward. And they are bad for American democracy, which is already paralyzed by worsening partisanship. When the ideas, values, and speech of the other side are seen not just as wrong but as willfully aggressive toward innocent victims, it is hard to imagine the kind of mutual respect, negotiation, and compromise that are needed to make politics a positive-sum game.

Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, colleges should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control. One of the great truths taught by Buddhism (and Stoicism, Hinduism, and many other traditions) is that you can never achieve happiness by making the world conform to your desires. But you can master your desires and habits of thought. This, of course, is the goal of cognitive behavioral therapy. With this in mind, here are some steps that might help reverse the tide of bad thinking on campus.

The biggest single step in the right direction does not involve faculty or university administrators, but rather the federal government, which should release universities from their fear of unreasonable investigation and sanctions by the Department of Education. Congress should define peer-on-peer harassment according to the Supreme Court’s definition in the 1999 case *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*. The *Davis* standard holds that a single comment or thoughtless remark by a student does not equal harassment; harassment requires a pattern of objectively offensive behavior by one student that interferes with another student’s access to education. Establishing the *Davis* standard would help eliminate universities’ impulse to police their students’ speech so carefully.

Universities themselves should try to raise consciousness about the need to balance freedom of speech with the need to make all students feel welcome. Talking openly about such conflicting but important values is just the sort of challenging exercise that any diverse but tolerant community must learn to do. Restrictive speech codes should be abandoned.

Universities should also officially and strongly discourage trigger warnings. They should endorse the American Association of University Professors’ report on these warnings, which notes, “The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual.” Professors should be free to use trigger warnings if they choose to do so, but by explicitly discouraging the practice, universities would help fortify the faculty against student requests for such warnings.

Finally, universities should rethink the skills and values they most want to impart to their incoming students. At present, many freshman-orientation programs try to raise student sensitivity to a nearly impossible level. Teaching students to avoid giving unintentional offense is a worthy goal, especially when the students come from many different cultural backgrounds. But students should also be taught how to live in a world full of potential offenses. Why not teach incoming students how to practice cognitive behavioral therapy? Given high and rising rates of mental illness, this simple step would be among the most humane and supportive things a university could do. The cost and time commitment could be kept low: a few group training sessions could be supplemented by Web sites or apps. But the outcome could pay dividends in many ways. For example, a shared vocabulary about reasoning, common distortions, and the appropriate use of evidence to draw conclusions would facilitate critical thinking and real debate. It would also tone down the perpetual state of outrage that seems to engulf some colleges these days, allowing
students’ minds to open more widely to new ideas and new people. A greater commitment to formal, public debate on campus—and to the assembly of a more politically diverse faculty—would further serve that goal.

Thomas Jefferson, upon founding the University of Virginia, said:

This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.

We believe that this is still—and will always be—the best attitude for American universities. Faculty, administrators, students, and the federal government all have a role to play in restoring universities to their historic mission

**Common Cognitive Distortions**


1. **Mind reading.** You assume that you know what people think without having sufficient evidence of their thoughts. “He thinks I’m a loser.”

2. **Fortune-telling.** You predict the future negatively: things will get worse, or there is danger ahead. “I’ll fail that exam,” or “I won’t get the job.”

3. **Catastrophizing.** You believe that what has happened or will happen will be so awful and unbearable that you won’t be able to stand it. “It would be terrible if I failed.”

4. **Labeling.** You assign global negative traits to yourself and others. “I’m undesirable,” or “He’s a rotten person.”

5. **Discounting positives.** You claim that the positive things you or others do are trivial. “That’s what wives are supposed to do—so it doesn’t count when she’s nice to me,” or “Those successes were easy, so they don’t matter.”

6. **Negative filtering.** You focus almost exclusively on the negatives and seldom notice the positives. “Look at all of the people who don’t like me.”

7. **Overgeneralizing.** You perceive a global pattern of negatives on the basis of a single incident. “This generally happens to me. I seem to fail at a lot of things.”

8. **Dichotomous thinking.** You view events or people in all-or-nothing terms. “I get rejected by everyone,” or “It was a complete waste of time.”

9. **Blaming.** You focus on the other person as the source of your negative feelings, and you refuse to take responsibility for changing yourself. “She’s to blame for the way I feel now,” or “My parents caused all my problems.”
10. **What if?** You keep asking a series of questions about “what if” something happens, and you fail to be satisfied with any of the answers. “Yeah, but what if I get anxious?,” or “What if I can’t catch my breath?”

11. **Emotional reasoning.** You let your feelings guide your interpretation of reality. “I feel depressed; therefore, my marriage is not working out.”

12. **Inability to disconfirm.** You reject any evidence or arguments that might contradict your negative thoughts. For example, when you have the thought *I’m unlovable*, you reject as irrelevant any evidence that people like you. Consequently, your thought cannot be refuted. “That’s not the real issue. There are deeper problems. There are other factors.”
The American Scholar

Ralph Waldo Emerson

An Oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was one of 19th century America’s most influential thinkers. The leader of the American school of thought known as Transcendentalism, Emerson was best known as a poet, essayist and orator at a time in American history when public speaking was a great pastime among the literate classes. Never a systematic thinker, Emerson also cared little for formal institutions, writing directly for the individual with uncommon ardor and even fiery passion. (The philosopher George Santayana wondered of him once “why so hot, little sir?”) He is perhaps best known for his essay on “Self-Reliance” and various musings on a wide variety of subjects, among others “Nature,” “The Oversoul,” and “Experience.” This essay “The American Scholar” (1837) was given for the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Mr. President and Gentlemen,

I greet you on the re-commencement of our literary year. Our anniversary is one of hope, and, perhaps, not enough of labor. We do not meet for games of strength or skill, for the recitation of histories, tragedies, and odes, like the ancient Greeks; for parliaments of love and poesy, like the Troubadours; nor for the advancement of science, like our contemporaries in the British and European capitals. Thus far, our holiday has been simply a friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give to letters any more. As such, it is precious as the sign of an indestructible instinct. Perhaps the time is already come, when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt, that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years?

In this hope, I accept the topic which not only usage, but the nature of our association, seem to prescribe to this day, — the AMERICAN SCHOLAR. Year by year, we come up hither to read one more chapter of his biography. Let us inquire what light new days and events have thrown on his character, and his hopes.

It is one of those fables, which, out of an unknown antiquity, convey an unlooked-for wisdom, that the gods, in the beginning, divided Man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself; just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end.

The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man, — present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man. Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the divided or social state, these functions are parceled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each
other performs his. The fable implies, that the individual, to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers. But unfortunately, this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered. The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, — a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.

Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship.

In this distribution of functions, the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state, he is, Man Thinking. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking.

In this view of him, as Man Thinking, the theory of his office is contained. Him nature solicits with all her placid, all her monitory pictures; him the past instructs; him the future invites. Is not, indeed, every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student's behoof? And, finally, is not the true scholar the only true master? But the old oracle said, “All things have two handles: beware of the wrong one.” In life, too often, the scholar errs with mankind and forfeits his privilege. Let us see him in his school, and consider him in reference to the main influences he receives.

I. The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing, beholding and beholden. The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he never can find, — so entire, so boundless. Far, too, as her splendors shine, system on system shooting like rays, upward, downward, without centre, without circumference, — in the mass and in the particle, nature hastens to render account of herself to the mind. Classification begins. To the young mind, every thing is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things, and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand; and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running under ground, whereby contrary and remote things cohere, and flower out from one stem. It presently learns, that, since the dawn of history, there has been a constant accumulation and classifying of facts. But what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind? The astronomer discovers that geometry, a pure abstraction of the human mind, is the measure of planetary motion. The chemist finds proportions and intelligible method throughout matter; and science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts. The ambitious soul sits down before each refractory fact; one after another, reduces all strange constitutions, all new powers, to their class and their law, and goes on for ever to animate the last fibre of organization, the outskirts of nature, by insight.

Thus to him, to this school-boy under the bending dome of day, is suggested, that he and it proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein.
And what is that Root? Is not that the soul of his soul? — A thought too bold, — a dream too wild. Yet when this spiritual light shall have revealed the law of more earthly natures, — when he has learned to worship the soul, and to see that the natural philosophy that now is, is only the first gropings of its gigantic hand, he shall look forward to an ever expanding knowledge as to a becoming creator. He shall see, that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, "Know thyself," and the modern precept, "Study nature," become at last one maxim.

II. The next great influence into the spirit of the scholar, is, the mind of the Past, — in whatever form, whether of literature, of art, of institutions, that mind is inscribed. Books are the best type of the influence of the past, and perhaps we shall get at the truth, — learn the amount of this influence more conveniently, — by considering their value alone.

The theory of books is noble. The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him, life; it went out from him, truth. It came to him, short-lived actions; it went out from him, immortal thoughts. It came to him, business; it went from him, poetry. It was dead fact; now, it is quick though. It can stand, and it can go. It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires. Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing.

Or, I might say, it depends on how far the process had gone, of transmuting life into truth. In proportion to the completeness of the distillation, so will the purity and imperishableness of the product be. But none is quite perfect. As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought, that shall be as efficient, in all respects, to a remote posterity, as to cotemporaries, or rather to the second age. Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.

Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, — the act of thought, — is transferred to the record. The poet chanting, was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled, the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly, the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant. The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry, if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles. Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books.

Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm. Hence, the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul. Hence, the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees.

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is
entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. In its essence, it is progressive. The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they, — let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. But genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates. Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his; — cinders and smoke there may be, but not yet flame. There are creative manners, there are creative actions, and creative words; manners, actions, words, that is, indicative of no custom or authority, but springing spontaneous from the mind's own sense of good and fair.

On the other part, instead of being its own seer, let it receive from another mind its truth, though it were in torrents of light, without periods of solitude, inquest, and self-recovery, and a fatal disservice is done. Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence. The literature of every nation bear me witness. The English dramatic poets have Shakspearized now for two hundred years.

Undoubtedly there is a right way of reading, so it be sternly subordinated. Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings. But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must, — when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining, — we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is. We hear, that we may speak. The Arabian proverb says, "A fig tree, looking on a fig tree, becometh fruitful."

It is remarkable, the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books. They impress us with the conviction, that one nature wrote and the same reads. We read the verses of one of the great English poets, of Chaucer, of Marvell, of Dryden, with the most modern joy, — with a pleasure, I mean, which is in great part caused by the abstraction of all time from their verses. There is some awe mixed with the joy of our surprise, when this poet, who lived in some past world, two or three hundred years ago, says that which lies close to my own soul, that which I also had wellnigh thought and said. But for the evidence thence afforded to the philosophical doctrine of the identity of all minds, we should suppose some preestablished harmony, some foresight of souls that were to be, and some preparation of stores for their future wants, like the fact observed in insects, who lay up food before death for the young grub they shall never see.

I would not be hurried by any love of system, by any exaggeration of instincts, to underrate the Book. We all know, that, as the human body can be nourished on any food, though it were boiled grass and the broth of shoes, so the human mind can be fed by any knowledge. And great and heroic men have existed, who had almost no other information than by the printed page. I only would say, that it needs a strong head to bear that diet. One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world. We then see, what is always true, that, as the seer's hour of vision is short and rare among heavy days and months, so is its record, perchance, the least part of his volume. The discerning will read, in his Plato or Shakespeare, only that least part, — only the authentic utterances of the oracle; — all the rest he rejects, were it never so many times Plato's and Shakespeare's.
Of course, there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office, — to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame. Thought and knowledge are natures in which apparatus and pretension avail nothing. Gowns, and pecuniary foundations, though of towns of gold, can never countervail the least sentence or syllable of wit. Forget this, and our American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year.

III. There goes in the world a notion, that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian, — as unfit for any handiwork or public labor, as a penknife for an axe. The so-called “practical men” sneer at speculative men, as if, because they speculate or see, they could do nothing. I have heard it said that the clergy, — who are always, more universally than any other class, the scholars of their day, — are addressed as women; that the rough, spontaneous conversation of men they do not hear, but only a mincing and diluted speech. They are often virtually disfranchised; and, indeed, there are advocates for their celibacy. As far as this is true of the studious classes, it is not just and wise. Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth. Whilst the world hangs before the eye as a cloud of beauty, we cannot even see its beauty. Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not.

The world, — this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I run eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct, that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech. I pierce its order; I dissipate its fear; I dispose of it within the circuit of my expanding life. So much only of life as I know by experience, so much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or so far have I extended my being, my dominion. I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake. It is pearls and rubies to his discourse. Drudgery, calamity, exasperation, want, are instructors in eloquence and wisdom. The true scholar grudges every opportunity of action past by, as a loss of power.

It is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products. A strange process too, this, by which experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin. The manufacture goes forward at all hours.

The actions and events of our childhood and youth, are now matters of calmest observation. They lie like fair pictures in the air. Not so with our recent actions, — with the business which we now have in hand. On this we are quite unable to speculate. Our affections as yet circulate through it. We no more feel or know it, than we feel the feet, or the hand, or the brain of our body. The new deed is yet a part of life, — remains for a time immersed in our unconscious life. In some contemplative hour, it detaches itself from the life like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind. Instantly, it is raised, transfigured; the corruptible has put on incorruption. Henceforth it is an object of beauty, however base its origin and neighborhood. Observe, too, the impossibility of antedating this act. In its grub state, it cannot fly, it cannot shine, it is a dull grub. But suddenly, without observation, the selfsame thing unfurls beautiful wings, and is an angel of wisdom. So is there no fact, no event, in our private history, which shall not, sooner or later, lose its adhesive, inert form, and astonish us by soaring from our body into the empyrean. Cradle and infancy, school
and playground, the fear of boys, and dogs, and ferules, the love of little maids and berries, and many another fact that once filled the whole sky, are gone already; friend and relative, profession and party, town and country, nation and world, must also soar and sing.

Of course, he who has put forth his total strength in fit actions, has the richest return of wisdom. I will not shut myself out of this globe of action, and transplant an oak into a flower-pot, there to hunger and pine; nor trust the revenue of some single faculty, and exhaust one vein of thought, much like those Savoyards, who, getting their livelihood by carving shepherds, shepherdesses, and smoking Dutchmen, for all Europe, went out one day to the mountain to find stock, and discovered that they had whittled up the last of their pine-trees. Authors we have, in numbers, who have written out their vein, and who, moved by a commendable prudence, sail for Greece or Palestine, follow the trapper into the prairie, or ramble round Algiers, to replenish their merchantable stock.

If it were only for a vocabulary, the scholar would be covetous of action. Life is our dictionary. Years are well spent in country labors; in town,—in the insight into trades and manufactures; in frank intercourse with many men and women; in science; in art; to the one end of mastering in all their facts a language by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions. I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech. Life lies behind us as the quarry from whence we get tiles and copestones for the masonry of today. This is the way to learn grammar. Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made.

But the final value of action, like that of books, and better than books, is, that it is a resource. That great principle of Undulation in nature, that shows itself in the inspiring and expiring of the breath; in desire and satiety; in the ebb and flow of the sea; in day and night; in heat and cold; and as yet more deeply ingrained in every atom and every fluid, is known to us under the name of Polarity,—these "fits of easy transmission and reflection," as Newton called them, are the law of nature because they are the law of spirit.

The mind now thinks; now acts; and each fit reproduces the other. When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended, and books are a weariness,—he has always the resource to live. Character is higher than intellect. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. The stream retreats to its source. A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think. Does he lack organ or medium to impart his truths? He can still fall back on this elemental force of living them. This is a total act. Thinking is a partial act. Let the grandeur of justice shine in his affairs. Let the beauty of affection cheer his lowly roof. Those "far from fame," who dwell and act with him, will feel the force of his constitution in the doings and passages of the day better than it can be measured by any public and designed display. Time shall teach him, that the scholar loses no hour which the man lives. Herein he unfolds the sacred germ of his instinct, screened from influence. What is lost in seemliness is gained in strength. Not out of those, on whom systems of education have exhausted their culture, comes the helpful giant to destroy the old or to build the new, but out of unhandselled savage nature, out of terrible Druids and Berserkirs, come at last Alfred and Shakespeare.

I hear therefore with joy whatever is beginning to be said of the dignity and necessity of labor to every citizen. There is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade, for learned as well as for unlearned hands. And labor is everywhere welcome; always we are invited to work; only be this limitation observed, that a man shall not for the sake of wider activity sacrifice any opinion to the popular judgments and modes of action.

I have now spoken of the education of the scholar by nature, by books, and by action. It remains to say somewhat of his duties.
They are such as become Man Thinking. They may all be comprised in self-trust. The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances. He plies the slow, unhonored, and unpaid task of observation. Flamsteed and Herschel, in their glazed observatories, may catalogue the stars with the praise of all men, and, the results being splendid and useful, honor is sure. But he, in his private observatory, cataloguing obscure and nebulous stars of the human mind, which as yet no man has thought of as such,—watching days and months, sometimes, for a few facts; correcting still his old records;—must relinquish display and immediate fame. In the long period of his preparation, he must betray often an ignorance and shiftlessness in popular arts, incurring the disdain of the able who shoulder him aside. Long he must stammer in his speech; often forego the living for the dead. Worse yet, he must accept,—how often! poverty and solitude. For the ease and pleasure of treading the old road, accepting the fashions, the education, the religion of society, he takes the cross of making his own, and, of course, the self-accusation, the faint heart, the frequent uncertainty and loss of time, which are the nettles and tangling vines in the way of the self-relying and self-directed; and the state of virtual hostility in which he seems to stand to society, and especially to educated society. For all this loss and scorn, what offset? He is to find consolation in exercising the highest functions of human nature. He is one, who raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts. He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart. He is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism, by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history. Whatsoever oracles the human heart, in all emergencies, in all solemn hours, has uttered as its commentary on the world of actions,—these he shall receive and impart. And whatsoever new verdict Reason from her inviolable seat pronounces on the passing men and events of to-day,—this he shall hear and promulgate.

These being his functions, it becomes him to feel all confidence in himself, and to defer never to the popular cry. He and he only knows the world. The world of any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down. The odds are that the whole question is not worth the poorest thought which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy. Let him not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom. In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach; and bide his own time,—happy enough, if he can satisfy himself alone, that this day he has seen something truly. Success treads on every right step. For the instinct is sure, that prompts him to tell his brother what he thinks. He then learns, that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds. He learns that he who has mastered any law in his private thoughts, is master to that extent of all men whose language he speaks, and of all into whose language his own can be translated. The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that, which men in crowded cities find true for them also. The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confessions,—his want of knowledge of the persons he addresses,—until he finds that he is the complement of his hearers;—that they drink his words because he fulfils for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. The people delight in it; the better part of every man feels, This is my music; this is myself.

In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be,—free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom, "without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own
"Brave; for fear is a thing, which a scholar by his very function puts behind him. Fear always springs from ignorance. It is a shame to him if his tranquility, amid dangerous times, arise from the presumption, that, like children and women, his is a protected class; or if he seek a temporary peace by the diversion of his thoughts from politics or vexed questions, hiding his head like an ostrich in the flowering bushes, peeping into microscopes, and turning rhymes, as a boy whistles to keep his courage up. So is the danger a danger still; so is the fear worse. Manlike let him turn and face it. Let him look into its eye and search its nature, inspect its origin, — see the whelping of this lion, — which lies no great way back; he will then find in himself a perfect comprehension of its nature and extent; he will have made his hands meet on the other side, and can henceforth defy it, and pass on superior. The world is his, who can see through its pretension. What deafness, what stone-blind custom, what overgrown error you behold, is there only by sufferance, — by your sufferance. See it to be a lie, and you have already dealt it its mortal blow.

Yes, we are the cowed, — we the trustless. It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago. As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it. To ignorance and sin, it is flint. They adapt themselves to it as they may; but in proportion as a man has any thing in him divine, the firmament flows before him and takes his signet and form. Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind. They are the kings of the world who give the color of their present thought to all nature and all art, and persuade men by the cheerful serenity of their carrying the matter, that this thing which they do, is the apple which the ages have desired to pluck, now at last ripe, and inviting nations to the harvest. The great man makes the great thing. Wherever Macdonald sits, there is the head of the table. Linnaeus makes botany the most alluring of studies, and wins it from the farmer and the herb-woman; Davy, chemistry; and Cuvier, fossils. The day is always his, who works in it with serenity and great aims. The unstable estimates of men crowd to him whose mind is filled with a truth, as the heaped waves of the Atlantic follow the moon.

For this self-trust, the reason is deeper than can be fathomed, — darker than can be enlightened. I might not carry with me the feeling of my audience in stating my own belief. But I have already shown the ground of my hope, in adverting to the doctrine that man is one. I believe man has been wronged; he has wronged himself. He has almost lost the light, that can lead him back to his prerogatives. Men are become of no account. Men in history, men in the world of to-day are bugs, are spawn, and are called “the mass” and “the herd.” In a century, in a millennium, one or two men; that is to say, — one or two approximations to the right state of every man. All the rest behold in the hero or the poet their own green and crude being, — ripened; yes, and are content to be less, so that may attain to its full stature. What a testimony, — full of grandeur, full of pity, is borne to the demands of his own nature, by the poor clansman, the poor partisan, who rejoices in the glory of his chief. The poor and the low find some amends to their immense moral capacity, for their acquiescence in a political and social inferiority. They are content to be brushed like flies from the path of a great person, so that justice shall be done by him to that common nature which it is the dearest desire of all to see enlarged and glorified. They sun themselves in the great man's light, and feel it to be their own element. They cast the dignity of man from their downtrod selves upon the shoulders of a hero, and will perish to add one drop of blood to make that great heart beat, those giant sinews combat and conquer. He lives for us, and we live in him.

Men such as they are, very naturally seek money or power; and power because it is as good as money, — the "spoil," so called, "of office." And why not? for they aspire to the highest, and this, in their sleep-walking, they dream is highest. Wake them, and they shall quit the false good, and leap to the true, and leave governments to clerks and desks. This revolution is to be wrought by
the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man. Here are the materials strown along the ground. The private life of one man shall be a more illustrious monarchy, — more formidable to its enemy, more sweet and serene in its influence to its friend, than any kingdom in history. For a man, rightly viewed, comprehendeth the particular natures of all men. Each philosopher, each bard, each actor, has only done for me, as by a delegate, what one day I can do for myself. The books which once we valued more than the apple of the eye, we have quite exhausted. What is that but saying, that we have come up with the point of view which the universal mind took through the eyes of one scribe; we have been that man, and have passed on. First, one; then, another; we drain all cisterns, and, waxing greater by all these supplies, we crave a better and more abundant food. The man has never lived that can feed us ever. The human mind cannot be enshrined in a person, who shall set a barrier on any one side to this unbounded, unboundable empire. It is one central fire, which, flaming now out of the lips of Etna, lightens the capes of Sicily; and, now out of the throat of Vesuvius, illuminates the towers and vineyards of Naples. It is one light which beams out of a thousand stars. It is one soul which animates all men.

But I have dwelt perhaps tediously upon this abstraction of the Scholar. I ought not to delay longer to add what I have to say, of nearer reference to the time and to this country.

Historically, there is thought to be a difference in the ideas which predominate over successive epochs, and there are data for marking the genius of the Classic, of the Romantic, and now of the Reflective or Philosophical age. With the views I have intimated of the oneness or the identity of the mind through all individuals, I do not much dwell on these differences. In fact, I believe each individual passes through all three. The boy is a Greek; the youth, romantic; the adult, reflective. I deny not, however, that a revolution in the leading idea may be distinctly enough traced.

Our age is bewailed as the age of Introversion. Must that needs be evil? We, it seems, are critical; we are embarrassed with second thoughts; we cannot enjoy any thing for hankering to know whereof the pleasure consists; we are lined with eyes; we see with our feet; the time is infected with Hamlet's unhappiness, — "Sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

Is it so bad then? Sight is the last thing to be pitied. Would we be blind? Do we fear lest we should outsee nature and God, and drink truth dry? I look upon the discontent of the literary class, as a mere announcement of the fact, that they find themselves not in the state of mind of their fathers, and regret the coming state as untired; as a boy dreads the water before he has learned that he can swim. If there is any period one would desire to be born in, — is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old, can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.

I read with joy some of the auspicious signs of the coming days, as they glimmer already through poetry and art, through philosophy and science, through church and state.

One of these signs is the fact, that the same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state, assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect. Instead of the sublime and beautiful; the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized. That, which had been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts. The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign, — is it not?
of new vigor, when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet. I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body; — show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law; and the shop, the plough, and the leger, referred to the like cause by which light undulates and poets sing; — and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle; there is no puzzle; but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench.

This idea has inspired the genius of Goldsmith, Burns, Cowper, and, in a newer time, of Goethe, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. This idea they have differently followed and with various success. In contrast with their writing, the style of Pope, of Johnson, of Gibbon, looks cold and pedantic. This writing is blood-warm. Man is surprised to find that things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote. The near explains the far. The drop is a small ocean. A man is related to all nature. This perception of the worth of the vulgar is fruitful in discoveries. Goethe, in this very thing the most modern of the moderns, has shown us, as none ever did, the genius of the ancients.

There is one man of genius, who has done much for this philosophy of life, whose literary value has never yet been rightly estimated; — I mean Emanuel Swedenborg. The most imaginative of men, yet writing with the precision of a mathematician, he endeavored to engrat the purely philosophical Ethics on the popular Christianity of his time. Such an attempt, of course, must have difficulty, which no genius could surmount. But he saw and showed the connection between nature and the affections of the soul. He pierced the emblematic or spiritual character of the visible, audible, tangible world. Especially did his shade-loving muse hover over and interpret the lower parts of nature; he showed the mysterious bond that allies moral evil to the foul material forms, and has given in epical parables a theory of insanity, of beasts, of unclean and fearful things.

Another sign of our times, also marked by an analogous political movement, is, the new importance given to the single person. Every thing that tends to insulate the individual, — to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state; — tends to true union as well as greatness. "I learned," said the melancholy Pestalozzi, "that no man in God's wide earth is either willing or able to help any other man." Help must come from the bosom alone. The scholar is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future. He must be an university of knowledges. If there be one lesson more than another, which should pierce his ear, it is, The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all, it is for you to dare all. Mr. President and Gentlemen, this confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar. We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for any but the decorous and the complaisant.
fairest promise, who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find the earth below not in unison with these, — but are hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust, — some of them suicides. What is the remedy? They did not yet see, and thousands of young men as hopeful now crowding to the barriers for the career, do not yet see, that, if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him. Patience, — patience; — with the shades of all the good and great for company; and for solace, the perspective of your own infinite life; and for work, the study and the communication of principles, the making those instincts prevalent, the conversion of the world. Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be an unit; — not to be reckoned one character; — not to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong; and our opinion predicted geographically, as the north, or the south? Not so, brothers and friends, — please God, ours shall not be so. We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defense and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.
The Solitude of Self

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

In The Woman’s Column, January 1882, pp. 2–3.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) was an American suffragist, abolitionist, and writer who devoted her life to the idea that men and women should have equal rights. In particular, she believed that women should have the right to vote and that women should have rights related to owning property, being parents, claiming an education, and making decisions about their own health. “The Solitude of Self” is the speech she gave in 1892 when she stepped down as the first president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and it summarizes many of her beliefs about equality. This poetic and eloquent speech makes a fascinating argument that women should have equal rights simply because, like men, they are knowers. Stanton claims that men may believe women are dependent on them, but “in the supreme moments of her life,” no man can bear her pain or fear or feel her joy for her; no man can serve as her conscience. As you read this speech (or even better, read it out loud to yourself or to others), pay attention not only to her eloquence and content, but to the way she makes her clever argument about knowledge.

The point I wish plainly to bring before you on this occasion is the individuality of each human soul; our Protestant idea, the right of individual conscience and judgment; our republican idea, individual citizenship. In discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny, an imaginary Robinson Crusoe, with her woman, Friday, on a solitary island. Her rights under such circumstances are to use all her faculties for her own safety and happiness.

Secondly, if we consider her as a citizen, as a member of a great nation, she must have the same rights as all other members, according to the fundamental principles of our Government.

Thirdly, viewed as a woman, an equal factor in civilization, her rights and duties are still the same—individual happiness and development.

Fourthly, it is only the incidental relations of life, such as mother, wife, sister, daughter, which may involve some special duties and training.

The strongest reason for giving woman all the opportunities for higher education, for the full development of her faculties, her forces of mind and body; for giving her the most enlarged freedom of thought and action; a complete emancipation from all forms of bondage, of custom, dependence, superstition; from all the crippling influences of fear—is the solitude and personal responsibility of her own individual life. The strongest reason why we ask for woman a voice in the government under which she lives; in the religion she is asked to believe; equality in social life, where she is the chief factor; a place in the trades and professions, where she may earn her bread, is because of her birthright to self-sovereignty; because, as an individual, she must rely on herself. No matter how much women prefer to lean, to be protected and supported, nor how much men desire to have them do so, they must make the voyage of life alone, and for safety in an emergency, they must know something of the laws of navigation. To guide our own craft, we must be captain, pilot, engineer; with chart and compass to stand at the wheel; to watch the winds and waves, and know when to take in the sail, and to read the signs in the firmament over all. It matters not whether the solitary voyager is man or woman; nature, having endowed them equally, leaves them to their own skill and judgment in the hour of danger, and, if not equal to the occasion, alike they perish.
To appreciate the importance of fitting every human soul for independent action, think for a moment of the immeasurable solitude of self. We come into the world alone, unlike all who have gone before us, we leave it alone, under circumstances peculiar to ourselves. No mortal ever has been, no mortal ever will be like the soul just launched on the sea of life. There can never again be just such a combination of prenatal influences; never again just such environments as make up the infancy, youth and manhood of this one. Nature never repeats herself, and the possibilities of one human soul will never be found in another. No one has ever found two blades of ribbon grass alike, and no one will ever find two human beings alike. Seeing, then, what must be the infinite diversity in human character, we can in a measure appreciate the loss to a nation when any class of the people is uneducated and unrepresented in the government.

We ask for the complete development of every individual, first, for his own benefit and happiness. In fitting out an army, we give each soldier his own knapsack, arms, powder, his blanket, cup, knife, fork and spoon. We provide alike for all their individual necessities; then each man bears his own burden.

Again, we ask complete individual development for the general good; for the consensus of the competent on the whole round of human interests, on all questions of national life; and here each man must bear his share of the general burden. It is sad to see how soon friendless children are left to bear their own burdens, before they can analyze their feelings; before they can even tell their joys and sorrows, they are thrown on their own resources. The great lesson that nature seems to teach us at all ages in self-dependence, self-protection, self-support.

In youth our most bitter disappointments, our brightest hopes and ambitions, are known only to ourselves. Even our friendship and love we never fully share with another; there is something of every passion, in every situation, we conceal. Even so in our triumphs and our defeats.

We ask no sympathy from others in the anxiety and agony of a broken friendship or shattered love. When death sunders our nearest ties, alone we sit in the shadow of our affliction. Alike amid the greatest triumphs and darkest tragedies of life, we walk alone. On the divine heights of human attainment, eulogized and worshipped as a hero or saint, we stand alone. In ignorance, poverty and vice, as a pauper or criminal, alone we starve or steal; alone we suffer the sneers and rebuffs of our fellows; alone we are hunted and hounded through dark courts and alleys, in by-ways and highways; alone we stand in the judgment seat; alone in the prison cell we lament our crimes and misfortunes; alone we expiate them on the gallows. In hours like these we realize the awful solitude of individual life, its pains, its penalties, its responsibilities, hours in which the youngest and most helpless are thrown on their own resources for guidance and consolation. Seeing, then, that life must ever be a march and a battle that each soldier must be equipped for his own protection, it is the height of cruelty to rob the individual of a single natural right.

To throw obstacles in the way of a complete education is like putting out the eyes; to deny the rights of property is like cutting off the hands. To refuse political equality is to rob the ostracized of all self-respect; of credit in the market place; of recompense in the world of work, of a voice in choosing those who make and administer the law, a choice in the jury before whom they are tried, and in the judge who decides their punishment. Think of . . . woman’s position! Robbed of her natural rights, handicapped by law and custom at every turn, yet compelled to fight her own battles, and in the emergencies of life to fall back on herself for protection.

The young wife and mother, at the head of some establishment, with a kind husband to shield her from the adverse winds of life, with wealth, fortune and position, has a certain harbor of safety, secure against the ordinary ills of life. But to manage a household, have a desirable influence in society, keep her friends and the affections of her husband, train her children and servants well,
she must have rare common sense, wisdom, diplomacy, and a knowledge of human nature. To do all this, she needs the cardinal virtues and the strong points of character that the most successful statesman possesses. An uneducated woman trained to dependence, with no resources in herself, must make a failure of any position in life. But society says women do not need a knowledge of the world, the liberal training that experience in public life must give, all the advantages of collegiate education; but when for the lack of all this, the woman’s happiness is wrecked, alone she bears her humiliation; and the solitude of the weak and the ignorant is indeed pitiable. In the wild chase for the prizes of life, they are ground to powder.

In age, when the pleasures of youth are passed, children grown up, married and gone, the hurry and bustle of life in a measure over, when the hands are weary of active service, when the old arm chair and the fireside are the chosen resorts, then men and women alike must fall back on their own resources. If they cannot find companionship in books, if they have no interest in the vital questions of the hour, no interest in watching the consummation of reforms with which they might have been identified, they soon pass into their dotage. The more fully the faculties of the mind are developed and kept in use, the longer the period of vigor and active interest in all around us continues. If, from a life-long participation in public affairs, a woman feels responsible for the laws regulating our system of education, the discipline of our jails and prisons, the sanitary condition of our private homes, public buildings and thoroughfares, an interest in commerce, finance, our foreign relations, in any or all these questions, her solitude will at least be respectable, and she will not be driven to gossip or scandal for entertainment.

The chief reason for opening to every soul the doors to the whole round of human duties and pleasures is the individual development thus attained, the resources thus provided under all circumstances to mitigate the solitude that at times must come to everyone.

Inasmuch, then, as woman shares equally the joys and sorrows of time and eternity, is it not the height of presumption in man to propose to represent her at the ballot box and the throne of grace, to do her voting in the state, her praying in the church, and to assume the position of high priest at the family altar?

Nothing strengthens the judgment and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility. Nothing adds such dignity to character as the recognition of one’s self-sovereignty; the right to an equal place, everywhere conceded—a place earned by personal merit, not an artificial attainment by inheritance, wealth, family and position. Conceding, then, that the responsibilities of life rest equally on man and woman, that their destiny is the same, they need the same preparation for time and eternity. The talk of sheltering woman from the fierce storms of life is the sheerest mockery, for they beat on her from every point of the compass, just as they do on man, and with more fatal results, for he has been trained to protect himself, to resist, and to conquer. Such are the facts in human experience, the responsibilities of individual sovereignty. Rich and poor, intelligent and ignorant, wise and foolish, virtuous and vicious, man and woman; it is ever the same, each soul must depend wholly on itself.

Whatever the theories may be of woman’s dependence on man, in the supreme moments of her life, he cannot bear her burdens. Alone she goes to the gates of death to give life to every man that is born into the world; no one can share her fears, no one can mitigate her pangs; and if her sorrow is greater than she can bear, alone she passes beyond the gates into the vast unknown.

From the mountain-tops of Judea long ago, a heavenly voice bade his disciples, “Bear ye one another’s burdens”; but humanity has not yet risen to that point of self-sacrifice; and if ever so willing, how few the burdens are that one soul can bear for another!
So it ever must be in the conflicting scenes of life, in the long, weary march, each one walks alone. We may have many friends, love, kindness, sympathy and charity, to smooth our pathway in everyday life, but in the tragedies and triumphs of human experience, each mortal stands alone.

But when all artificial trammels are removed, and women are recognized as individuals, responsible for their own environments, thoroughly educated for all positions in life they may be called to fill; with all the resources in themselves that liberal thought and broad culture can give; guided by their own conscience and judgment, trained to self-protection, by a healthy development of the muscular system, and skill in the use of weapons and defence; and stimulated to self-support by a knowledge of the business world and the pleasure that pecuniary independence must ever give; when women are trained in this way, they will in a measure be fitted for those hours of solitude that come alike to all, whether prepared or otherwise. As in our extremity we must depend on ourselves, the dictates of wisdom point to complete individual development.

In talking of education, how shallow the argument that each class must be educated for the special work it proposes to do, and that all those faculties not needed in this special work must lie dormant and utterly wither for want of use, when, perhaps, these will be the very faculties needed in life’s greatest emergencies! Some say, “Where is the use of drilling girls in the languages, the sciences, in law, medicine, theology. As wives, mothers, housekeepers, cooks, they need a different curriculum from boys who are to fill all positions. The chief cooks in our great hotels and ocean steamers are men. In our large cities, men run the bakeries; they make our bread, cake and pies. They manage the laundries; they are now considered our best milliners and dressmakers. Because some men fill these departments of usefulness, shall we regulate the curriculum in Harvard and Yale to their present necessities? If not, why this talk in our best colleges of a curriculum for girls who are crowding into the trades and professions, teachers in all our public schools, rapidly filling many lucrative and honorable positions in life?”

Women are already the equals of men in the whole realm of thought, in art, science, literature and government. The poetry and novels of the century are theirs, and they have touched the keynote of reform, in religion, politics and social life. They fill the editor’s and professor’s chair, plead at the bar of justice, walk the wards of the hospital, speak from the pulpit and the platform. Such is the type of womanhood that an enlightened public sentiment welcomes to-day, and such the triumph of the facts of life over the false theories of the past.

Is it, then, consistent to hold the developed woman of this day within the same narrow political limits as the dame with the spinning wheel and knitting needle occupied in the past? No, no! Machinery has taken the labors of woman as well as man on its tireless shoulders; the loom and the spinning wheel are but dreams of the past; the pen, the brush, the easel, the chisel, have taken their places, while the hopes and ambitions of women are essentially changed.

We see reason sufficient in the outer conditions of human beings for individual liberty and development, but when we consider the self-dependence of every human soul, we see the need of courage, judgment and the exercise of every faculty of mind and body, strengthened and developed by use, in woman as well as man.

Whatever may be said of man’s protecting power in ordinary conditions, amid all the terrible disasters by land and sea, in the supreme moments of danger, alone woman must ever meet the horrors of the situation. The Angel of Death even makes no royal pathway for her. Man’s love and sympathy enter only into the sunshine of our lives. In that solemn solitude of self, that links us with the immeasurable and the eternal, each soul lives alone forever. A recent writer says: “I remember once, in crossing the Atlantic, to have gone upon the deck of the ship at midnight, when a dense black cloud enveloped the sky, and the great deep was roaring madly under the lashes of
demonic winds. My feeling was not of danger or fear (which is a base surrender of the immortal soul) but of utter desolation and loneliness; a little speck of life shut in by a tremendous darkness.”

And yet, there is a solitude which each and every one of us has always carried with him, more inaccessible than the ice-cold mountains, more profound than the midnight sea; the solitude of self. Our inner being which we call ourself, no eye nor touch of man or angel has ever pierced. It is more hidden than the caves of the gnome; the sacred adytum of the oracle; the hidden chamber of Eleusinian mystery, for to it only omniscience is permitted to enter.

Such is individual life. Who, I ask you, can take, dare take on himself the rights, the duties, the responsibilities of another human soul?
What is College For?
Andrew Delbanco


Andrew Delbanco (1952- ) is the Alexander Hamilton Professor of American Studies at Columbia University in New York. Author of many books, winner of many awards, Delbanco is an expert in American literature. This entry in the anthology is the opening chapter from his 2012 book, College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be. Covering a range of arguments in favor of liberal education, Delbanco argues that the historical institution of a college liberal arts education is economically prudent, essential to a properly functioning democracy, and a direct source of joy and meaning. Rooted in the longer story told over the course of his book, Delbanco draws from a rich understanding of the history of higher education in America. The epigraph to Delbanco’s book, a quote from W.E.B. DuBois, is fitting: “The true college will ever have one goal - not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.”

One of the peculiarities of the teaching life is that every year the teacher gets older while the students stay the same age. Each fall when classes resume, I am reminded of the ancient Greek story of a kindly old couple who invite two strangers into their modest home for a meal. No matter how much the hosts drink, by some mysterious trick their goblets remain full even though no one pours more wine. Eventually, the guests reveal themselves as gods who have performed a little miracle to express their thanks. So it goes in college—every fall the teacher has aged by a year, but the class is replenished with students who stay forever young.¹

For this and many other reasons, the relation between teacher and student is a delicate one, perhaps not as fraught as that between parent and child, or between spouses or siblings, but sometimes as decisive. Henry James captured it beautifully in a story called “The Pupil,” which is not about a college teacher but about a private tutor who has come to love the child whom he is trying to save from his parents:

When he tried to figure to himself the morning twilight of childhood, so as to deal with it safely, he perceived that it was never fixed, never arrested, that ignorance, at the instant one touched it, was already flushing faintly into knowledge, that there was nothing that at a given moment you could say a clever child didn’t know. It seemed to him that he both knew too much to imagine [the child’s] simplicity and too little to disembroil his tangle.

Embedded in this passage is the romantic idea that the student possesses latent knowledge of ultimate things, and the teacher’s task is to probe for the lever that releases knowledge into consciousness.

In trying to make it happen, even—perhaps especially—a good teacher can sometimes seem brutal. The famously demanding Joseph Schwab, for example, who taught for years in the “Biological Sequence” course at the University of Chicago, was known for “putting one student in the hot seat for a while ... working that person as thoroughly and creatively as possible before moving on to another.” One Chicago alumnus, Lee Shulman, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, recalls that sitting in Schwab’s class “fostered clammy hands, damp foreheads” and, to put it mildly, “an ever-attentive demeanor.”² This figure of the “tough love” teacher—think of Annie Sullivan in The Miracle Worker or Professor Kingsfield in The Paper Chase—has become a cliché of our culture, and like all clichés, it contains
some truth, though doubtless simplified and unduly generalized. It also seems less and less pertinent to the present. At most colleges today, a student experiencing such anxiety would likely drop the class for fear of a poor grade (compulsory courses of the sort that Schwab taught have become rare), and the teacher would risk a poor score on the end-of-semester evaluations.3

Whatever the style or technique, teaching at its best can be a generative act, one of the ways by which human beings try to cheat death—by giving witness to the next generation so that what we have learned in our own lives won’t die with us. Consider what today we would call the original “mission statement” of America’s oldest college. The first fund-raising appeal in our history, it was a frank request by the founders of Harvard for financial help from fellow Puritans who had stayed home in England rather than make the journey to New England. Despite their mercenary purpose, the words are still moving almost four hundred years after they were written:

> After God had carried us safe to new England, and we had built our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God’s worship, and settled the civil government, one of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.4

These mixed sentiments of faith and dread have always been at the heart of the college idea. They are evident at every college commencement in the eyes of parents who watch, through a screen of memories of their own receding youth, as their children advance into life. College is our American pastoral. We imagine it as a verdant world where the harshest sounds are the reciprocal thump of tennis balls or the clatter of cleats as young bodies trot up and down the fieldhouse steps. Yet bright with hope as it may be, every college is shadowed by the specter of mortality—a place where, in that uniquely American season of “fall and football weather and the new term,” the air is redolent with the “Octoberish smell of cured leaves.”5

But what, exactly, is supposed to happen in this bittersweet place—beyond sunbathing and body-toning and the competitive exertions, athletic and otherwise, for which these are just the preliminaries? First of all, it should be said that the pastoral image of college has little to do with what most college students experience today. A few years ago, Michael S. McPherson, president of the Spencer Foundation and former president of Macalester College, and Morton O. Schapiro, former president of Williams College (now of Northwestern University), pointed out that “the nation’s liberal arts college students would almost certainly fit easily inside a Big Ten football stadium: fewer than one hundred thousand students out of more than fourteen million.”6

Since then, the number of undergraduates has grown by nearly a third, to around eighteen million, while the number in liberal arts colleges—by which McPherson and Schapiro meant a four-year residential college that is not part of a big university, and where most students study subjects that are not narrowly vocational such as nursing or computer programming—remains about the same. Many college students today, of whom a growing number are older than traditional college age, attend commuter or online institutions focused mainly on vocational training. Often, they work and go to school at the same time, and take more than four years to complete their degree, if they complete it at all. Five years from now, undergraduate students in the United States are projected to exceed twenty million, and President Obama wants to accelerate the growth. But only a small fraction will attend college in anything like the traditional sense of the word.7

Whatever the context, the question remains: what’s the point? My colleague Mark Lilia put the matter well not long ago when he spoke to the freshmen of Columbia College near the end of their first college year. He was talking, of course, to students in a college commonly described as
“elite.” Divided roughly equally between young men and women, these students were more racially diverse than would have been the case even a few years ago. About one in ten was born abroad or has some other claim, such as a parent with a foreign passport, to be an “international” student; and, though it’s hard to tell the financial means of the students from their universal uniform of tee shirts and jeans, roughly one in seven (a somewhat higher rate than at other Ivy League colleges) is eligible for a Pell grant, a form of federal financial aid that goes to children of low-income families.

As they filed into the lecture room, they gave each other the public hugs that signify new friendships, or, in some cases, the mutually averted eyes that tell of recent breakups. They seemed simultaneously fatigued and at ease. Once they had settled into their seats, out came the iPhones and laptops, some of which stayed aglow for the whole hour, though mostly they listened, rapt. And when Lilia made the following surmise about how and why they had come to college, they reacted with the kind of quiet laughter that meant they knew he was telling the truth:

You figured, correctly, that to be admitted you had to exude confidence about what Americans, and only Americans, call their “life goals”; and you had to demonstrate that you have a precise plan for achieving them. It was all bullshit; you know that, and I know that. The real reason you were excited about college was because you had questions, buckets of questions, not life plans and PowerPoint presentations. My students have convinced me that they are far less interested in getting what they want than in figuring out just what it is that’s worth wanting.8

No college teacher should presume to answer this question on behalf of the students, though, too often, he or she will try. (Requiring discipleship has always been a hazard of the teaching profession.) Instead, the job of the teacher and, collectively, of the college, is to help students in the arduous work of answering it for themselves.

To be sure, students at a college like mine have many advantages. Elite institutions confer on their students enormous benefits in the competition for positions of leadership in business, government, and higher education itself. As soon as they are admitted, even those without the prior advantage of money have already gotten a boost toward getting what they want—though not necessarily toward figuring out what’s worth wanting. In fact, for some, the difficulty of that question rises in proportion to the number of choices they have. Many college students are away from their parents for the first time, although in our age of Facebook and Skype and Google Chat and the like, they are never really away. Their choices may seem limitless, but powerful forces constrain them, including what their parents want them to want. Students under financial pressure face special problems, but students from privileged families have problems too.9

College is supposed to be a time when such differences recede if not vanish. The notion of shared self-discovery for all students is, of course, a staple of exhortations to freshmen just coming in and valedictions to seniors about to go out—an idea invoked so often that it, too, has become a cliché. In other cultures, however, it would be an oddity. The American college has always differed fundamentally from the European university, where students are expected to know what they want (and what they are capable of) before they arrive. That is true even at the ancient English colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, to which students apply around age seventeen to “read” this or that subject, and once arrived, rarely venture outside their chosen field of formal study. By contrast, in America—in part because of our prosperity, which still exceeds that of most of the rest of the world—we try to extend the time for second chances and to defer the day when determinative choices must be made. In 1850, when Herman Melville, whose formal schooling ended at age
seventeen, wrote that “a whaleship was my Yale College and my Harvard,” he used the word “college” as the name of the place where (to use our modern formulation) he “found himself.”

A few years ago, I came across a manuscript diary—also, as it happens, from 1850—kept by a student at a small Methodist college, Emory and Henry, in southwest Virginia. One spring evening, after attending a sermon by the college president that left him troubled and apprehensive, he made the following entry in his journal: “Oh that the Lord would show me how to think and how to choose.” That sentence, poised somewhere between a wish and a plea, sounds archaic today. For many if not most students, God is no longer the object of the plea; or if he is, they probably do not attend a college where everyone worships the same god in the same way. Many American colleges began as denominational institutions; but today religion is so much a matter of private conscience, and the number of punishable infractions so small (even rules against the academic sin of plagiarism are only loosely enforced), that few college presidents would presume to intervene in the private lives of students for purposes of doctrinal or moral correction. The era of spiritual authority belonging to college is long gone. And yet I have never encountered a better formulation—“show me how to think and how to choose”—of what a college should strive to be: an aid to reflection, a place and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others.

Many objections can be lodged against what I have just said. For one thing, all colleges, whatever their past or present religious orientation, now exist in a context of secular pluralism that properly puts incultication at odds with education. Then there is the fact that students arrive in college already largely formed in their habits and attitudes, or, in the case of the increasing number of “nontraditional” (that is, older) students, preoccupied with the struggles of adulthood—finding or keeping a job, making or saving a marriage, doing right by one’s children. Many college women, who now outnumber men, are already mothers, often single. And regardless of age or gender or social class, students experience college—in the limited sense of attending lectures, writing papers, taking exams—as a smaller part of daily life than did my generation, which came of age in the 1960s and 70s. They live now in an ocean of digital noise, logged on, online, booted up, as the phrase goes, 24/7, linked to one another through an arsenal of gadgets that are never “powered down.”

Having just survived the travails of getting in, students in selective colleges find themselves under instant and constant pressure to prepare for competing with graduates of comparable colleges once they get out. Those in open-admissions colleges, many of whom must cope with deficits in their previous schooling, may not be able to compete at what we call the “same level,” but they are likely to feel even more pressure to justify the cost of earning a credential in the hope that it will give them a fighting chance in post-college life. In other words, college is less and less a respite from what my campus newspaper used to call “the real world.” This is true of colleges of all types and ranks.

It may also be objected that there is nothing new about any of this—an objection with a good deal of merit. When the first administrators at Stanford (founded in 1891) wanted to know why the new freshman class had chosen to enroll, they heard mainly about the California climate, the prestige of the new university, and the (at that time) low living expenses. Twenty years later, the president of Western Reserve University, a clergyman with the wonderfully donnish name Charles Thwing, found that students were less interested in “hard reading and high thinking” than in acquiring the “‘touch’ of college life” in order to impress prospective employers. Around the same
time, at Penn State, an English professor complained of being pestered with a recurrent question about the value of what he was teaching: “Lissun, Prof, how is this dope going to help a guy get a job and pull down a good salary?” And fifty years after that, the eminent critic Lionel Trilling (who taught all his life at Columbia, except for visiting stints at Harvard and Oxford) had come to feel that his students regarded college “merely as a process of accreditation, with an economic-social end in view.”

So it’s an old and familiar story. If we look through the eyes of fiction writers who set their stories and novels on a college campus, most of what we see in the past looks a lot like the present. In Mark Twain’s novel *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), a young man goes up from small-town Missouri to Yale, and comes back with nothing to show except two new habits: drinking and gambling. In Edgar Allan Poe’s story “William Wilson” (1839), we get a picture of the University of Virginia as a place where besotted boys indulge in round-the-clock gambling and whoring. Pretty much the same scene is described 165 years later in Tom Wolfe’s novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), in which students have their mouths fastened perpetually to the spigot of a beer keg except when taking a break to have sex—though some seem capable of doing both simultaneously. And in a still more recent novel, *The Ask* (2010), by Sam Lipsyte, the narrator recalls college in the 1970s as a time when he and his housemates “drank local beer, smoked homegrown and shake”:

Senior year I moved into the House of Drinking and Smoking, took the cheap room ... screwed a blue bulb in the ceiling and slept there, mostly alone ... drank in the living room with ... a crew that included ... a guy... who may or may not have been a student, though by dint of his meth addiction could have counted as an apprentice chemist.

Such fictions tend to be borne out by recollections of fact. In a recent oral history, the distinguished physician Spencer Foreman, who became the transformative leader of New York’s Montefiore Hospital, described the small liberal arts college he attended in the 1950s as a place where “the difference between the pre-meds and the non-pre-meds” was that “the pre-meds began drinking Thursday night. Everybody else drank every night.” One should always be wary of accounts of college life that posit some golden age when students went to bed early and rose early, using the night to refresh themselves with sleep (solo, of course) for the lofty labors of the day to come. It has never been so.

In fact, for much of its history, college was a quasi-penal institution where boys were “sentenced” by their parents to “temporary custody.” Only because they could not afford to replicate the quadrangle system at Oxford and Cambridge, with its stone walls and guarded gates, did the founders of Harvard build a high fence around the yard—not so much to keep the cows and goats out as to keep the students in. Today we expect the opposite: that going to college means to be released into a playground of unregulated freedom.

The most obvious instance of the expanded freedom is, of course, sex, which has come a long way from the days when it was a furtive extracurricular activity, as described in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald or J. P. Marquand, in which Princeton or Harvard boys, waiting to be matched with some designated debutante, find relief with prostitutes or serving-girls; or, as Philip Roth described it two generations later, when “co-eds” were “thrust up against the trunks of trees in the dark” by boys desperate in those last minutes before their dates had to return, alone, to their dorms. In most colleges, this is ancient history. A couple of years ago, the Office of Residential Life and Learning at one well-regarded northeastern college felt compelled to institute a rule banning “any sex act in a dorm room while one’s roommate is present.” Presumably, exemption is granted to the roommate who wants to be part of the action.
Over the past half century or so, this expansion of freedom has been the most obvious change in college life—not just sexual freedom, but what might be called freedom of demeanor and deportment, freedom of choice as fields and courses have vastly multiplied, and, perhaps most important, freedom of judgment as the role of the college as arbiter of values has all but disappeared. Relatively few colleges require any particular course for graduation, and the course catalogue is likely to be somewhere between an encyclopedia and the proverbial Chinese menu—from which students choose a little of this and a little of that, unless they are majoring in one of the “hard” sciences, in which case their range of choice is much narrower.

This situation makes for certain ironies. Old institutions invoke their own antiquity in their promotional materials (“reassuring printed matter,” as Thorstein Veblen described it long ago, by which “marketable illusions” are sold to the public), while within the institution, the past is denounced as a dark age of meddling trustees, autocratic presidents, and a faculty of “old boys” with benighted views of just about everything. Traces of the reviled old college survived till not all that long ago. I can remember when a full-time employee of the college library patrolled the reading room tapping the shoes of students sprawled back in their chairs with their feet on the table until they sat up (or, more likely, woke up) and planted them back on the floor.

All that sort of thing has been thrown out with a hearty good riddance—and yet, as one college chaplain wrote not long ago, today’s students seem to “want to retain their hard-won autonomy, while at the same time insisting that institutions assume a moral responsibility for protecting them from the consequences of that autonomy.” College authorities have given up their role of acting in loco parentis, but when trouble breaks out over, say, some incendiary “hate speech,” they still tend to get blamed for not parentally stepping in. If and when they do so, they are likely to be indulgent. Except in the “hard” sciences, academic failure, especially in elite colleges, is rare; and cheating, except in the military academies, tends to be treated as a minor lapse.

So college culture has undergone many deep changes—some slow to establish themselves, such as the advent of elective courses and the end of compulsory chapel in the late nineteenth century, others sudden, such as the abandonment of parietal rules in the late 1960s. There have been deep changes, too, in what some call the “learning style” of college students. The cultural critic Carlin Romano, who has taught in several colleges, reports that for many undergraduates today, being asked to read “a whole book, from A to Z, feels like a marathon unfairly imposed on a jogger”—a problem that some faculty are trying to solve by gathering students outside of class to read long works such as Paradise Lost or Ulysses aloud. The sociologist Tim Clydesdale, who teaches at the College of New Jersey, speaks of a “new epistemology,” by which he means that students no longer “arrive in awe of the institution and its faculty, content to receive their education via lecture and happy to let the faculty decide what was worth knowing.” Now they show up knowing “full well that authorities can be found for every position and any knowledge claim, and consequently . . . [they are] dubious (privately, that is) about anything we claim to be true or important.” The Harvard English professor Louis Menand thinks that college teachers have yet to adapt the old “linear model for transmitting knowledge—the lecture monologue in which a single line of thought leads to an intellectual climax after fifty minutes—to a generation of students who are accustomed to dealing with multiple information streams in short bursts.” The fact is there is always a lag between what’s happening in the mental world of students and that of the faculty, and by the time the latter catches up with the former, new students have arrived with new attitudes, so the cycle begins again. In the 1960s, students tended to be to the left of faculty on social and political issues. In the 2010s, it is likely to be the other way around.
Former Princeton president William Bowen keeps on his desk an alabaster calendar inscribed with a comment by the naturalist John Burroughs: “New times always! Old time we cannot keep.”

It’s good advice. And yet, in some essentials, it is also true that colleges change very little. New college presidents find out fast that they have landed in the slowest-changing institutions in American life—slower, even, than the post office. The Ohio University economist Richard Vedder gets reliable laughs when he tells corporate audiences that “with the possible exception of prostitution, teaching is the only profession that has had absolutely no productivity advance in the 2400 years since Socrates.” Shortly before the economic debacle of 2008, former president of Johns Hopkins William Brody remarked that “if you went to a [college] class circa 1900, and you went today, it would look exactly the same, while if you went to an automobile plant in 1900 and today, you wouldn’t recognize the place.”

It may well be true that the strongest force in academia is inertia. But, contrary to his intention, Vedder’s joke could be construed to mean that neither prostitution nor teaching can be improved through economies of scale; and Brody’s invidious comparison was badly timed, since a few months later the auto companies (except for Ford) came within a whisker of going belly up, while our colleges more or less weathered the storm. His comment also wasn’t exactly accurate, since in the college classroom of 1900 you would have seen no women unless you were visiting one of the new women’s colleges; nor would you have seen any persons of color, unless you were visiting, say, Tuskegee or Howard or Morehouse. What is true is that the method of teaching in 1900 was pretty much the same as it is now: no PowerPoint, different dress code—but otherwise recognizable. And so, I think, are the students. They have always been searching for purpose. They have always been unsure of their gifts and goals, and susceptible to the demands—overt and covert—of their parents and of the abstraction we call “the market.” There is much talk today, as well there should be, about students resorting to cheating or binge drinking in response to these pressures, while others fall into chronic anxiety and depression. It is probably true that these problems have grown in recent years, along with our awareness of them. But lest we think that something altogether new is happening, consider this passage from an 1871 novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, written in the voice of a man thinking back to his senior year:

During my last year, the question, “What are you good for?” had often borne down like a nightmare upon me. When I entered college all was distant, golden, indefinite, and I was sure that I was good for almost anything that could be named. Nothing that had ever been attained by man looked to me impossible. Riches, honor, fame, anything that any other man unassisted had wrought out for himself with his own right arm, I could work out also.

But as I measured myself with real tasks, and as I rubbed and grated against other minds and whirled round and round in the various experiences of college life, I grew smaller and smaller in my own esteem, and oftener and oftener in my lonely hours it seemed as if some evil genius delighted to lord it over me and sitting at my bed-side or fire-side to say “What are you good for, to what purpose all the pains and money that have been thrown away on you? You’ll never be anything; you’ll only mortify your poor mother that has set her heart on you, and make your Uncle Job ashamed of you.” Can any anguish equal the depths of those blues in which a man’s whole self hangs in suspense before his own eyes, and he doubts whether he himself, with his entire outfit and apparatus, body, soul, and spirit, isn’t to be, after all, a complete failure? Better, he thinks never to have been born, than to be born to no purpose. . . .

23
With a few small changes in diction, these sentences could have been written today. Now, as then, most students have no clear conception of why or to what end they are in college. Some students have always been aimless, bored, or confused; others self-possessed, with their eyes on the prize. Most are somewhere in between, looking for something to care about.

What does all this mean for those (students, faculty, administrators, alumni, donors, legislators, trustees) who have something to say about what happens in Americas colleges? Surely it means that every college has an obligation to make itself a place not just for networking and credentialing but for learning in the broad and deep meaning of that word. It means that all students deserve something more from college than semi-supervised fun or the services of an employment agency. Good colleges can still be transformative in the sense of the title of a best-selling book, Colleges that Change Lives, which has become a welcome alternative to the usual guides (Barron’s, Princeton Review, U.S. News & World Report), which simply list colleges in a hierarchy of prestige that conforms almost exactly to the relative size of their endowments.

For all these reasons, it is particularly painful when those colleges at the top of the usual lists, the ones with the most resources and (as they like to claim) the most talent, fail to confront their obligations—when, as the former dean of Harvard College, Harry Lewis, puts it, they “affect horror” that “students attend college in the hope of becoming financially successful, but . . . offer students neither a coherent view of the point of a college education nor any guidance on how they might discover for themselves some larger purpose in life.” Lewis’s critique of “the service-station conception” of college is more than a gripe at his home institution. It is a call for every college to do what every true teacher, at least since Socrates, has asked every student to do: engage in some serious self-examination.

4

What, then, are today’s prevailing answers to the question, what is college for? There are basically three. The most common answer is an economic one, though it is really two linked answers: first, that providing more people with a college education is good for the economic health of the nation; and, second, that going to college is good for the economic competitiveness of the individuals who constitute the nation.

Politicians tend to emphasize the first point, as when Richard Riley, secretary of education under President Clinton, said in a much-quoted comment that we must educate our workers for an increasingly unpredictable future: “We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist using technologies that haven’t been invented in order to solve problems that we don’t even know are problems yet.” President Obama makes the same point more briefly: “countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow.”

As for the second economic rationale—the competitiveness of individuals—it’s clear that a college degree long ago supplanted the high school diploma as the minimum qualification for entry into the skilled labor market, and there is abundant evidence that people with a college degree earn more money over the course of their lives than people without one. One authority claims that those who hold a BA degree earn roughly 60 percent more, on average, over their lifetime than those who do not. Some estimates put the worth of a BA degree at about a million dollars in incremental lifetime earnings. More conservative analysts, taking account of the cost of obtaining the degree, arrive at a more modest number, but there is little dispute that one reason to go to college is to increase one’s earning power.

For such economic reasons alone, it is alarming that the United States has been slipping relative to other developed nations as measured by the percentage of its younger population with at least some postsecondary education. There are differences of opinion about how much we have
slipped, but there is general agreement that American leadership in higher education is in jeopardy and can no longer be taken for granted. For the first time in our history, we face the prospect that the coming generation of adult Americans will be less educated than their elders.  

Within this gloomy general picture are some especially disturbing particulars. For one thing, flat or declining college attainment rates (relative to other nations) apply disproportionately to minorities, who are a growing portion of the American population. And financial means has a shockingly large bearing on educational opportunity, which, according to one authority, looks like this in today’s America: if you are the child of a family making more than $90,000 per year, your odds of getting a BA by age twenty-four are roughly one in two; if your family’s income is between $60,000 and $90,000, your odds are roughly one in four; if your parents make less than $35,000, your odds are one in seventeen.  

Moreover, among those who do get to college, high-achieving students from affluent families are four times more likely to attend a selective college than students from poor families with comparable grades and test scores. And since prestigious colleges (prestige correlates almost exactly with selectivity) serve as funnels into leadership positions in business, law, and government, this means that our “best” colleges are doing more to sustain than to retard the growth of inequality in our society. Yet colleges are still looked to as engines of social mobility in American life, and it would be shameful if they became, even more than they already are, a system for replicating inherited wealth.  

Not surprisingly, as in any discussion of economic matters, one finds dissenters from the predominant view. Some on the right say that pouring more public investment into higher education, in the form of enhanced subsidies for individuals or institutions, is a bad idea. They say that the easy availability of government funds is one reason for inflation in the price of tuition. They argue against the goal of universal college education as a fond fantasy and, instead, for a sorting system such as one finds in European countries, where children are directed according to test results early in life toward the kind of schooling deemed suitable for them: vocational training for the low-scoring students, who will be the semiskilled laborers and functionaries; advanced education for the high-scoring students, who will be the diplomats and doctors, and so on.  

Others, on the left, question whether the aspiration to go to college really makes sense for “low-income students who can least afford to spend money and years” on such a risky venture, given their low graduation rates and high debt. Such skeptics point out, too, that most new jobs likely to be created over the next decade will probably not require a college degree. From this point of view, the “education gospel” seems a cruel distraction from “what really provides security to families and children: good jobs at fair wages, robust unions, affordable access to health care and transportation.”  

One can be on either side of these questions, or somewhere in the middle, and still believe in the goal of achieving universal college education. Consider an analogy from another sphere of public debate: health care. One sometimes hears that eliminating smoking would save untold billions because of the immense cost of caring for patients who develop lung cancer, emphysema, heart disease, or diabetes—among the many diseases caused or exacerbated by smoking. It turns out, however, that reducing the incidence of disease by curtailing smoking (one of the major public-health successes of recent decades) may actually end up costing us more, since people who don’t smoke live longer, and eventually require expensive therapies for chronic diseases and the inevitable infirmities of old age. Yet who does not think it a good thing when a person stops smoking and thereby improves his or her chances of living a longer and healthier life? In other words, measuring the benefit as a social cost or social gain does not quite get the point—or at least
not the whole point. The best reason to end smoking is that people who don’t smoke have a better chance to lead better lives.\textsuperscript{33} The best reason to care about college—who goes, and what happens to them when they get there—is not what it does for society in economic terms but what it can do for individuals, in both calculable and incalculable ways.

5

The second argument for the importance of college is a political one, though one rarely hears it from politicians. This is the argument on behalf of democracy. “The basis of our government,” as Thomas Jefferson put the matter near the end of the eighteenth century, is “the opinion of the people.” And so if the new republic was to flourish and endure, it required, above all, an educated citizenry—a conviction in which Jefferson was joined by John Adams, who disagreed with him on just about everything else, but who concurred that “the whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expense of it.”\textsuperscript{34}

This is more true than ever. All of us are bombarded every day with pleadings and persuasions, of which many are distortions and deceptions—advertisements, political appeals, punditry of all sorts—designed to capture our loyalty, money, or, more narrowly, our vote. Some say health-care reform will bankrupt the country, others that it is an overdue act of justice; some believe that abortion is the work of Satan, others think that to deny a woman the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy is a form of abuse; some assure us that charter schools are the salvation of a broken school system, others are equally sure that they violate the public trust; some regard nuclear energy as our best chance to break free from fossil fuels, others describe it, especially in the wake of the tsunami in Japan, as Armageddon waiting to happen. Any such list could be extended indefinitely with conflicting claims between which citizens must choose or somehow mediate, so it should be obvious that the best chance we have to maintain a functioning democracy is a citizenry that can tell the difference between demagoguery and responsible arguments.

About a hundred years ago, a professor of moral philosophy at Oxford, John Alexander Smith, got to the nub of the matter. “Gentleman,” he said to the incoming class (the students were all men in those days), “Nothing that you will learn in the course of your studies will be of the slightest possible use to you in after life—save only this—that if you work hard and intelligently you should be able to detect when a man is talking rot, and that, in my view, is the main, if not the sole, purpose of education.”\textsuperscript{35} Americans tend to prefer a two-syllable synonym, bullshit, for the one-syllable Anglicism, rot—and so we might say that the most important thing one can acquire in college is a well-functioning bullshit meter.\textsuperscript{36} It’s a technology that will never become obsolete.

Putting it this way may sound flippant, but a serious point is at stake: education for democracy not only requires extending educational opportunity but also implies something about what kind of education democratic citizens need. A very good case for college in this sense has been made recently by former Yale Law School dean Anthony Kronman, who now teaches in a Great Books program for Yale undergraduates. In a book with the double-entendre title, \textit{Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life}, Kronman argues for a course of study (at Yale it is voluntary; at my college, Columbia, it is compulsory) that introduces students to the constitutive ideas of Western culture. At Yale, relatively few students, about 10 percent of the entering class, are admitted to this program, which is called “Directed Studies.” At Columbia, the “Core Curriculum” is required of all students, which has the advantage, since they are randomly assigned to sections (currently capped at twenty-two), of countering their tendency to associate mainly with classmates from the same socioeconomic or ethnic background, or in their own major or club or fraternity house. The Core also counters the provincialism of the faculty. Senior and junior professors, along with graduate student instructors, gather weekly to discuss the
assigned texts—a rare opportunity for faculty from different fields, and at different stages of their careers, to consider substantive questions. And, not least among its benefits, it links all students in the college to one another through a body of common knowledge: once they have gone through the Core, no student is a complete stranger to any other.

Whether such a curriculum is an option or an obligation, its value is vividly evident in Kronman’s enumeration of the ideas it raises for discussion and debate:

The ideals of individual freedom and toleration; of democratic government; of respect for the rights of minorities and for human rights generally; a reliance on markets as a mechanism for the organization of economic life and a recognition of the need for markets to be regulated by a supervenient political authority; a reliance, in the political realm, on the methods of bureaucratic administration, with its formal division of functions and legal separation of office from officeholder; an acceptance of the truths of modern science and the ubiquitous employment of its technological products: all these provide, in many parts of the world, the existing foundations of political, social, and economic life, and where they do not, they are viewed as aspirational goals toward which everyone has the strongest moral and material reasons to strive.  

Anyone who earns a BA from a reputable college ought to understand something about the genealogy of these ideas and practices, about the historical processes from which they have emerged, the tragic cost when societies fail to defend them, and about alternative ideas both within the Western tradition and outside it. That’s a tall order for anyone to satisfy on his or her own—and one of the marks of an educated person is the recognition that it can never be adequately done and is therefore all the more worth doing.

Both of these cases for college—the argument for national and individual competitiveness, and the argument for inclusive democratic citizenship—are serious and compelling. But there is a third case, more rarely heard, perhaps because it is harder to articulate without sounding platitudinous and vague. I first heard it stated in a plain and passionate way after I had spoken to an alumni group from the college in which I teach. I had been commending Columbia’s core curriculum—which, in addition to two yearlong courses in literary and philosophical classics, also requires the study of art and music for one semester each. Recently, a new course called “Frontiers of Science,” designed to ensure that students leave college with some basic understanding of contemporary scientific developments, has been added. The emphasis in my talk was on the Jeffersonian argument—education for citizenship. When I had finished, an elderly alumnus stood up and said more or less the following: “That’s all very nice, professor, but you’ve missed the main point.” With some trepidation, I asked him what that point might be. “Columbia,” he said, “taught me how to enjoy life.”

What he meant was that college had opened his senses as well as his mind to experiences that would otherwise be foreclosed for him. Not only his capacity to read demanding works of literature and to grasp fundamental political ideas, but also his alertness to color and form, melody and harmony, had been heightened and deepened—and now, in the late years of his life, he was grateful. Such an education is a hedge against utilitarian values. It has no room for dogma—only for debate about the meaning, or meanings, of truth. It slakes the human craving for contact with works of art that somehow register one’s own longings and yet exceed what one has been able to articulate by and for oneself. As the gentleman reminded me, it is among the invaluable
experiences of the fulfilled life, and surely our colleges have an obligation to coax and prod students toward it.

If all that seems too pious or earnest, I think of a comparably personal comment I once heard my colleague Judith Shapiro, former provost of Bryn Mawr and then president of Barnard, make to a group of young people about what they should expect from college: “You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life.” What both Judith and the Columbia alum were talking about is sometimes called “liberal education”—a hazardous term today since it has nothing necessarily to do with liberal politics in the modern sense of the word. (Former Beloit College president Victor Ferrall suggests scrapping that troublesome adjective and replacing it with something bland like “broad, open, inclusive,” or simply “general.”) The phrase liberal education derives from the classical tradition of artes liberales, which was reserved in Greece and Rome—where women were considered inferior and slavery was an accepted feature of civilized society—for “those free men or gentlemen possessed of the requisite leisure for study.” Conserved by medieval scholastics, renewed in the scholarly resurgence we call the Renaissance, and again in the Enlightenment, the tradition of liberal learning survived and thrived in Europe, but remained largely the possession of ruling elites.

Seen in this long view, the distinctive American contribution has been the attempt to democratize it, to deploy it on behalf of the cardinal American principle that all persons, regardless of origin, have the right to pursue happiness—and that “getting to know,” in Matthew Arnold’s much-quoted phrase, “the best which has been thought and said in the world” is helpful to that pursuit. This view of what it means to be educated is often caricatured as snobbish and narrow, beholden to the old and wary of the new; but in fact it is neither, as Arnold makes clear by the (seldom quoted) phrase with which he completes his point: “and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits.” In other words, knowledge of the past helps us to think critically about the present.

Arguably the most eloquent defense of liberal education remains that of Arnold’s contemporary John Henry Newman in The Idea of a University (185a), where, in a definition that encompasses science as well as what is customarily called the “humanities,” he describes liberal knowledge as “knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be informed (as it is called) by any end, or absorbed into any art, in order duly to present itself to our contemplation.” In today’s America, at every kind of institution—from underfunded community colleges to the wealthiest Ivies—this kind of education is at risk. Students are pressured and programmed, trained to live from task to task, relentlessly rehearsed and tested until winners are culled from the rest. They scarcely have time for what Newman calls contemplation, and too many colleges do too little to save them from the debilitating frenzy that makes liberal education marginal or merely ornamental—if it is offered at all.

In this respect, notwithstanding the bigotries and prejudices of earlier generations, we might not be so quick to say that today’s colleges mark an advance over those of the past. Consider a once-popular college novel written a hundred years ago, Stover at Yale (1911), in which the young Yale declares, “I’m going to do the best thing a fellow can do at our age, I’m going to loaf.” Stover speaks from the immemorial past, and what he says is likely to sound to us today like a sneering boast from the idle rich. But there is a more dignified sense in which “loaf” is the colloquial equivalent of what Newman meant by contemplation, and has always been part of the promise of American life. “I loaf and invite my soul,” says Walt Whitman in that great democratic poem Song of Myself, “I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.”
Surely, every American college ought to defend this waning possibility, whatever we call it. And an American college is only true to itself when it opens its doors to all—rich, middling, and poor—who have the capacity to embrace the precious chance to think and reflect before life engulfs them. If we are serious about democracy, that means everyone.

Notes

1 This experience pertains mainly to colleges where most students are of “traditional” age. The number of “nontraditional” students, i.e., those who have come to college at a later stage of life, has been rapidly growing.
7 For a statistical portrait of undergraduate education, see the annual “Almanac of Higher Education,” published most recently by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 26, 2011.
15 *Spenser Forman, MD in First Person: An Oral History* (Chicago: American Hospital Association Center for Hospital Administration and Health Care Administration History and Health Research and Educational Trust, 2008), p. 6.
23 Donald McCabe, Rutgers University (academicintegrity.org/cai_research.asp); David Callahan, *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* (New York: Harcourt, 2004), p. 217; “Wasting the
Best and the Brightest: Substance Abuse at America’s Colleges and Universities,” National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, March 2007 (http://www.casacolumbia.org/templates/Publications_Reports.aspx#r11). [Note edited]


³¹See, for example, Charles Murray, “Are Too Many People Going to College?” The American (Journal of the American Enterprise Institute) 2, no. 5 (September-October 2008): 40-49.


³⁵Smith made this statement at Oxford in 1914.


⁴³Owen Johnson, Stover at Yale (1912; Boston: Little, Brown, 1926), p. 234
“Authenticity,” or the Lesson of Little Tree

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.


Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1950- ), is the Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University, where he is also a professor. Gates grew up in Keyser, West Virginia, and completed his undergraduate degree in history at Yale in 1973. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge in 1979. He is a prolific writer and cultural critic, and he is also known for his Emmy-Award winning documentary films. His most recent film series is PBS’s Finding Your Roots.

It’s a perennial question: Can you really tell? The great black trumpeter Roy Eldridge once made a wager with the critic Leonard Feather that he could distinguish white musicians from black ones—blindfolded. Mr. Feather duly dropped the needle onto a variety of record albums whose titles and soloists were concealed from the trumpeter. More than half the time, Eldridge guessed wrong.

Mr. Feather’s blindfold test is one that literary critics would do well to ponder, for the belief that we can “read” a person’s racial or ethnic identity from his or her writing runs surprisingly deep. There is an assumption that we could fill a room with the world’s great literature, train a Martian to analyze these books, and then expect that Martian to categorize each by the citizenship or ethnicity or gender of its author. “Passing” and “impersonation” may sound like quaint terms of a bygone era, but they continue to inform the way we read. Our literary judgments, in short, remain hostage to the ideology of authenticity.

And while black Americans have long boasted of their ability to spot “one of our own,” no matter how fair the skin, straight the hair, or aquiline the nose—and while the nineteenth-century legal system in this county went to absurd lengths to demarcate even octoroons and demioctoroons from their white sisters and brothers—authentic racial and ethnic differences have always been difficult to define. It’s not just a black thing, either.

The very idea of a literary tradition is itself bound up in suppositions—dating back at least to an eighteenth-century theorist of nationalism, Johann Gottfried Herder—that ethnic or national identity finds unique expression in literary forms. Such assumptions hold sway even after we have discarded them. After the much ballyhooed “death of the author” pronounced by two decades of literary theory, the author is very much back in the saddle. As the literary historian John Guillory observes, today’s “battle of the books” is really not so much about books as it is about authors, authors who can be categorized according to race, gender, ethnicity, and so on, standing in as delegates of a social constituency.

And the assumption that the works they create transparently convey the authentic, unmediated experience of their social identities—though officially renounced—has crept quietly through the back door. Like any dispensation, it raises some works and buries others. Thus Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God has prospered, while her Seraph on the Suwanee, a novel whose main characters are white, remains in limbo. Our Nig, recently identified as the work of a black woman, almost immediately went from obscurity to required reading in black and women’s literature courses.
The case of Forrest Carter, the author of the best-selling *The Education of Little Tree*, provided yet another occasion to reflect on the troublesome role of authenticity. Billed as a true story, Carter’s book was written as the autobiography of Little Tree, orphaned at the age of ten, who learns the ways of Indians from his Cherokee grandparents in Tennessee. *The Education of Little Tree*, which has sold more than 600,000 copies, received an award from the American Booksellers Association as the title booksellers most enjoyed selling. It was sold on the gift tables of Indian reservations and assigned as supplementary reading for courses on Native American literature. Major studios vied for movie rights.

And the critics loved it. *Booklist* praised its “natural approach to life.” A reviewer for the *Chattanooga Times* pronounced it “deeply felt.” One poet and storyteller of Abenaki descent hailed it as a masterpiece—“one of the finest American autobiographies ever written”—that captured the unique vision of Native American culture. It was, he wrote blissfully, “like a Cherokee basket, woven out of the materials given by nature, simple and strong in its design, capable of carrying a great deal.” A critic in *The (Santa Fe) New Mexican* told his readers: “I have come on something that is good, so good I want to shout ‘Read this! It’s beautiful. It’s real.’”

Or was it?

To the embarrassment of the book’s admirers, Dan T. Carter, a history professor at Emory University, unmasked “Forrest Carter” as a pseudonym for the late Asa Earl Carter, whom he described as “a Ku Klux Klan terrorist, right wing radio announcer, home grown American fascist and anti-Semite, rabble-rousing demagogue and secret author of the famous 1963 speech by Gov. George Wallace of Alabama: ‘Segregation now . . . Segregation tomorrow . . . Segregation forever.’” Forget Pee-wee Herman—try explaining this one to the kids.

This is only the latest embarrassment to beset the literary ideologues of authenticity, and its political stakes are relatively trivial. It was not always such. The authorship of slave narratives published between 1760 and 1865 was also fraught with controversy. To give credence to their claims about the horrors of slavery, American abolitionists urgently needed a cadre of ex-slaves who could compellingly indict their masters with first-person accounts of their bondage. For this tactic to succeed, the ex-slaves had to be authentic, their narratives full of convincing, painstaking verisimilitude.

So popular did these become, however, that two forms of imitators soon arose: white writers, adopting a first-person black narrative persona, gave birth to the pseudoslave narrative; and black authors, some of whom had never even seen the South, a plantation or a whipping post, became literary lions virtually overnight.

Generic confusion was rife in those days. The 1836 slave narrative of Archy Moore turned out to have been a novel written by a white historian, Richard Hildreth; and the gripping *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (1857) was also a novel, written by a white woman, Mattie Griffith. Perhaps the most embarrassing of these publishing events, however, involved one James Williams, an American slave—the subtitle of his narrative asserts—“who was for several years a driver on a cotton plantation in Alabama.” Having escaped to the North (or so he claimed), Williams sought out members of the Anti-Slavery Society, and told a remarkably well-structured story about the brutal treatment of the slaves in the South and of his own miraculous escape, using the literacy he had secretly acquired to forge the necessary documents.

So compelling, so gripping, so *useful* was his tale that the abolitionists decided to publish it immediately. Williams arrived in New York on New Year’s Day, 1838. By January 24, he had dictated his complete narrative to John Greenleaf Whittier. By February 15, it was in print, and was also being serialized in the abolitionist newspaper *The Anti-Slavery Examiner*. Even before
Williams’s book was published, rumors spread in New York that slave catchers were on his heels, and so his new friends shipped him off to Liverpool—where, it seems, he was never heard from again. Once the book was published, the abolitionists distributed it widely, sending copies to every state and to every Congressman.

Alas, Williams’s stirring narrative was not authentic at all, as outraged Southern slaveholders were quick to charge and as his abolitionist friends reluctantly had to concede. It was a work of fiction, the production, one commentator put it, “purely of the Negro imagination”—as, no doubt, were the slave catchers who were in hot pursuit, and whose purported existence earned Williams a free trip to England and a new life.

Ersatz slave narratives had an even rougher time of it a century later, and one has to wonder how William Styron’s _The Confessions of Nat Turner—a_ novel that aroused the strenuous ire of much of the black intelligentsia when it was published in 1976—might have been received had it been published by James Baldwin. “Hands off our history,” we roared at Mr. Styron, the white Southern interloper, as we shopped around our list of literary demands. It was the real thing we wanted, and we wouldn’t be taken in by imitators.

The real black writer, accordingly, could claim the full authority of experience denied Mr. Styron. Indeed, the late 1960s and early ’70s were a time in which the notion of ethnic literature began to be consolidated and, in some measure, institutionalized. That meant policing the boundaries, telling true from false. But it was hard to play this game without a cheat sheet. When Dan McCall published _The Man Says Yes_ in 1969, a novel about a young black teacher who comes up against the eccentric president of a black college, many critics assumed the author was black, too. The reviewer for _The Amsterdam News_, for example, referred to him throughout as “Brother McCall.” Similar assumptions were occasionally made about Shane Stevens when he published the gritty bildungsroman _Way Uptown in Another World_ in 1971, which detailed the brutal misadventures of its hero from Harlem, Marcus Garvey Black. In this case, the new voice from the ghetto belonged to a white graduate student at Columbia.

But the ethnic claim to its own experience cut two ways. For if many of their readers imagined a black face behind the prose, many avid readers of Frank Yerby’s historical romances or Samuel R. Delany’s science fiction novels are taken aback when they learn that these authors are black. And James Baldwin’s _Giovanni’s Room_, arguably his most accomplished novel, is seldom taught in black literature courses because its characters are white and gay.

Cultural commentators have talked about the “cult of ethnicity” in post-war America. You could dismiss it as a version of what Freud called “the narcissism of small differences.” But you also see it as a salutary reaction to a regional Anglo-American culture that has declared itself as universal. For too long, “race” was something that blacks had, “ethnicity” was what “ethnics” had. In mid-century America, Norman Podhoretz reflected in _Making It_, his literary memoirs, “to write fiction out of the experience of big-city immigrant Jewish life was to feel oneself, and to be felt by others, to be writing exotica at best; nor did there exist a respectably certified narrative style in English which was anything but facsimile-WASP. Writing was hard enough but to have to write with only that part of one’s being which had been formed by the acculturation-minded public schools and by the blindly ethnicizing English departments of the colleges was like being asked to compete in a race with a leg cut off at the thigh.”

All this changed with the novelistic triumphs of Saul Bellow and Philip Roth—and yet a correlative disability was entered in the ledger, too. In the same year that Mr. Styron published _The Confessions of Nat Turner_, Philip Roth published _When She Was Good_, a novel set in the rural heartland of gentile middle America and infused with the chilly humorlessness of its small-town
inhabitants. This was, to say the least, a departure. Would critics who admired Mr. Roth as the author of *Goodbye, Columbus* accept him as a chronicler of the Protestant Corn Belt?

Richard Gilman, in *The New Republic*, compared Mr. Roth to a “naturalist on safari to a region unfamiliar to him” and declared himself unable to “account for the novel’s existence, so lacking is it in any true literary interest.” Maureen Howard in *Partisan Review* said she felt “the presence of a persona rather than a personal voice.” To Jonathan Baumbach, writing in *Commonweal*, the book suggested “Zero Mostel doing an extended imitation of Jimmy Stewart.” “He captures the rhythms of his characters’ speech,” Mr. Baumbach says of Mr. Roth, “but not, I feel, what makes them human.” If the book was written partly in defiance of the strictures of ethnic literature, those very strictures were undoubtedly what made the book anathema to so many reviewers.

And what if *When She Was Good* had been published under the name Philip McGrath? Would the same reviewers still have denounced it as an artistic imposture? Does anyone imagine that Zero Mostel would have come to mind? Yet there is a twist in the tale. Even a counterfeit can be praised for its craft. For some, the novel’s worth was enhanced precisely because of its “inauthenticity”—because it was seen as an act of imagination unassisted by memory.

Under any name, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day*—a novel narrated by an aging and veddy English butler—would be a tour de force; but wasn’t the acclaim that greeted it heightened by a kind of critical double take at the youthful Japanese face on the dust jacket? To take another example, no one is surprised that admirers of Norman Rush’s novel *Mating* would commend the author on the voice of its female narrator. Subtract from the reality column, add to the art column. Thus Doris Grumbach, who commended Mr. Roth’s novel for its careful observation, concludes her own review with an assessment of technique: “To bring off this verisimilitude is, to my mind, an enormous accomplishment.” Would she have been so impressed with the virtuosity of a Philip McGrath?

Sometimes, however, a writer’s identity is in fact integral to a work’s artifice. Such is the case with John Updike’s *Beck: A Book*, the first of two collections of short stories featuring Mr. Updike’s Jewish novelist, Henry Bech. The 1970 book opens with a letter from the protagonist, Henry, to his creator, John, fussing about the literary components from which he was apparently jury-rigged. At first blush (Bech muses), he sounds like “some gentlemanly Norman Mailer; then that London glimpse of silver hair glints more of gallant, glamorous Bellow... My childhood seems out of Alex Portnoy and my ancestral past out of I. B. Singer. I get a whiff of Malamud in your city breezes, and am I paranoid to feel my ‘block’ an ignoble version of the more or less noble renunciations of H. Roth, D. Fuchs and J. Salinger? Withal, something Waspish, theological, scared and insultingly ironical that derives, my wild surmise is, from you.”

What is clear is that part of the point of John Updike’s *Bech* is that he is John Updike’s *Bech*: an act Cynthia Ozick has described as “cultural impersonation.” The contrast between Bech and Updike, then, far from being irrelevant, is itself staged within the fictional edifice. You could publish *Bech* under a pseudonym, but, I maintain, it would be a different book.

Conversely—but for similar reasons—one might argue that exposing the true author of *Famous All Over Town*, a colorful picaresque novel set in a Los Angeles barrio, was a form of violence against the book itself. Published in 1983 under the nom de plume Danny Santiago, the book was hailed by Latino critics for its vibrancy and authenticity, and received the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for an outstanding work of fiction. But Santiago, assumed to be a young Chicano talent, turned out to be Daniel L. James, a septuagenarian WASP educated at Andover and Yale, a playwright, screenwriter and, in his later years, a social worker. And yet Danny Santiago was much more than
a literary conceit to his creator, who had for twenty years lost faith in his own ability to write; Danny was the only voice available to him. Judging from the testimony of his confidant, John Gregory Dunne, Mr. James may well have felt that the attribution was the only just one; that *Famous All Over Town* belonged to Danny Santiago before it quite belonged to Daniel James.

Death-of-the-author types cannot come to grips with the fact that a book is a cultural event; authorial identity, mystified or not, can be part of that event. What the ideologues of authenticity cannot quite come to grips with is that fact and fiction have always exerted a reciprocal effect on each other. However truthful you set out to be, your autobiography is never unmediated by literary structures of expression. Many authentic slave narratives were influenced by Harriet Beecher Stowe; on the other hand, authentic slave narratives were among Stowe’s primary sources for her own imaginative work, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. By the same token, to recognize the slave narrative as a genre is to recognize that, for example, Frederick Douglass’s mode of expression was informed by the conventions of antecedent narratives, some of which were (like James Williams’s) whole-cloth inventions.

So it is not just a matter of the outsider boning up while the genuine article just writes what he or she knows. If Shane Stevens was deeply influenced by Richard Wright, so too were black protest novelists like John O. Killens and John A. Williams. And if John Updike can manipulate the tonalities of writers like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth, must we assume that a Bruce Jay Friedman, say, is wholly unaffected by such models?

The distasteful truth is that like it or not, all writers are “cultural impersonators.”

Even real people, moreover, are never quite real. My own favorite (fictional) commentary on the incursion of fiction upon a so-called real life is provided by Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert as he reflects upon the bothersome task of swapping life stories with a new and unwanted wife. Her confessions were marked by “sincerity and artlessness,” his were “glib compositions”; and yet, he muses, “technically the two sets were congeneric since both were affected by the same stuff (soap operas, psychoanalysis, and cheap novelettes) upon which I drew for my characters and she for her mode of expression.”

Start interrogating the notion of cultural authenticity and our most trusted critical categories come into question. Maybe Danny Santiago’s *Famous All Over Town* can usefully be considered a work of Chicano literature; maybe Shane Stevens’s *Way Uptown in Another World* can usefully be considered within the genre of black protest novels. In his own version of the blindfold test, the mathematician Alan Turing famously proposed that we credit a computer with intelligence if we can conduct a dialogue with it and not know whether a person or machine has been composing the responses. Should we allow ethnic literatures a similar procedure for claiming this title?

At this point, it is important to go slow. Consider the interviewer’s chestnut: are you a woman writer or a writer who happens to be a woman? A black writer or a writer who happens to be a black? Alas, these are deadly disjunctions. After struggling to gain the recognition that a woman or a black (or, exemplarily, a black woman) writer is, in the first instance, a writer, many authors yet find themselves uneasy with the supposedly universalizing description. How can ethnic or sexual identity be reduced to a mere contingency when it is so profoundly a part of who a writer is?

And yet if, for example, black critics claim special authority as interpreters of black literature, and black writers claim special authority as interpreters of black reality, are we not obliged to cede an equivalent dollop of authority to our white counterparts?

We easily become entrapped by what the feminist critic Nancy K. Miller has called “as a” criticism: where we always speak “as a” white middle-class woman, a person of color, a gay man,
and so on. And that, too, is a confinement—in the republic of letters as in the larger policy. “Segregation today . . . Segregation tomorrow . . . Segregation forever”: that line, which Asa Earl Carter wrote for George Wallace’s inauguration speech as Governor, may still prove his true passport to immortality. And yet segregation—as Carter himself would demonstrate—is as difficult to maintain in the literary realm as it is in the civic one.

The lesson of the literary blindfold test is not that our social identities don’t matter. They do matter. And our histories, individual and collective, do affect what we wish to write and what we are able to write. But that relation is never one of fixed determinism. No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Danny Santiago. And—if you like that sort of thing—there is a Little Tree, too, just as treacly now as he ever was. And as long as there are writers who combine some measure of imagination and curiosity, there will continue to be such interlopers of the literary imagination. What, then, of the vexed concept of authenticity? To borrow from Samuel Goldwyn’s theory of sincerity, authenticity remains essential: once you can fake that, you’ve got it made.
How We Listen
Aaron Copland


Aaron Copland (1900-1990), was an American composer and conductor who was known for writing music for orchestras that was considered to be for the average American rather than for the upper class. He had formal education in music in Paris and Rome, but he also was a student of many styles of music around the world. Appalachian Spring and Rodeo are among his most well-known works. Besides orchestral music, Copland also wrote chamber music, ballets, operas and film scores.

We all listen to music according to our separate capacities. But, for the sake of analysis, the whole listening process may become clearer if we break it up into its component parts, so to speak. In a certain sense we all listen to music on three separate planes. For lack of a better terminology, one might name these: (1) the sensuous plane, (2) the expressive plane, (3) the sheerly musical plane.

The only advantage to be gained from mechanically splitting up the listening process into these hypothetical planes is the clearer view to be had of the way in which we listen.

The simplest way of listening to music is to listen for the sheer pleasure of the musical sound itself. That is the sensuous plane. It is the plane on which we hear music without thinking, without considering it in any way. One turns on the radio while doing something else and absent-mindedly bathes in the sound. A kind of brainless but attractive state of mind is engendered by the mere sound appeal of the music. You may be sitting in a room reading this book. Imagine one note struck on the piano. Immediately that one note is enough to change the atmosphere of the room—providing that the sound element in music is a powerful and mysterious agent, which it would be foolish to deride or belittle.

The surprising thing is that many people who consider themselves qualified music lovers abuse that plane in listening. They go to concerts in order to lose themselves. They use music as a consolation or an escape. They enter an ideal world where one doesn’t have to think of the realities of everyday life. Of course they aren’t thinking about the music either. Music allows them to leave it, and they go off to a place to dream, dreaming because of and apropos of the music yet never quite listening to it.

Yes, the sound appeal of music is a potent and primitive force, but you must not allow it to usurp a disproportionate share of your interest. The sensuous plane is an important one in music, a very important one, but it does not constitute the whole story.

There is no need to digress further on the sensuous plane. Its appeal to every normal human being is self-evident. There is, however, such a thing as becoming more sensitive to the different kinds of sound stuff as used by various composers. For all composers do not use that sound stuff in the same way. Don’t get the idea that the value of music is commensurate with its sensuous appeal or that the loveliest sounding music is made by the greatest composer. If that were so, Ravel would be a greater creator than Beethoven. The point is that the sound element varies with each composer, that his usage of sound forms an integral part of his style and must be taken into account when listening. The reader can see, therefore, that a more conscious approach is valuable even on this primary plane of music listening.

The second plane on which music exists is what I have called the expressive one. Here, immediately, we tread on controversial ground. Composers have a way of shying away from any
discussion of music’s expressive side. Did not Stravinsky himself proclaim that his music was an “object,” a “thing,” with a life of its own, and with no other meaning than its own purely musical existence? This intransigent attitude of Stravinsky’s may be due to the fact that so many people have tried to read different meanings into so many pieces. Heaven knows it is difficult enough to say precisely what it is that a piece of music means, to say it definitely, to say it finally so that everyone is satisfied with your explanation. But that should not lead one to the other extreme of denying to music the right to be “expressive.”

My own belief is that all music has an expressive power, some more and some less, but that all music has a certain meaning behind the notes and that the meaning behind the notes constitutes, after all, what the piece is saying, what the piece is about. The whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking, “Is there a meaning to music?” My answer to that would be, “Yes.” And “Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?” My answer to that would be, “No.” Therein lies the difficulty.

Simple-minded souls will never be satisfied with the answer to the second of these questions. They always want music to have a meaning, and the more concrete it is the better they like it. The more the music reminds them of a train, a storm, a funeral, or any other familiar conception the more expressive it appears to be to them. This popular idea of music’s meaning—stimulated and abetted by the usual run of musical commentator—should be discouraged wherever and whenever it is met. One timid lady once confessed to me that she suspected something seriously lacking in her appreciation of music because of her inability to connect it with anything definite. That is getting the whole thing backward, of course.

Still, the question remains, How close should the intelligent music lover wish to come to pinning a definite meaning to any particular work? No closer than a general concept, I should say. Music expresses, at different moments, serenity or exuberance, regrets or triumph, fury or delight. It expresses each of these moods, and many others, in a numberless variety of subtle shadings and differences. It may even express a state of meaning for which there exists no adequate word in any language. In that case, musicians often like to say that it has only a purely musical meaning. They sometimes go further and say that all music has only a purely musical meaning. What they really mean is that no appropriate word can be found to express the music’s meaning and that, even if it could, they do not feel the need of finding it.

But whatever the professional musician may hold, most musical novices still search for specific words with which to pin down their musical reactions. That is why they always find Tschaikovsky easier to “understand” than Beethoven. In the first place, it is easier to pin a meaning-word on a Tschaikovsky piece than on a Beethoven one. Much easier. Moreover, with the Russian composer, every time you come back to a piece of his it almost always says the same thing to you, whereas with Beethoven it is often quite difficult to put your finger right on what he is saying. And any musician will tell you that that is why Beethoven is the greater composer. Because music which always says the same thing to you will necessarily soon become dull music, but music whose meaning is slightly different with each hearing has a greater chance of remaining alive.

Listen, if you can, to the forty-eight fugue themes of Bach’s Well Tempered Clavichord. Listen to each theme, one after another. You will soon realize that each theme mirrors a different world of feeling. You will also soon realize that the more beautiful a theme seems to you the harder it is to find any word that will describe it to your complete satisfaction. Yes, you will certainly know whether it is a gay theme or a sad one. You will be able, in other words, in your own mind, to draw a frame of emotional feeling around your theme. Now study the sad one a little closer. Try to pin
down the exact quality of its sadness. Is it pessimistically sad or resignedly sad; is it fatefully sad or smilingly sad?

Let us suppose that you are fortunate and can describe to your own satisfaction in so many words the exact meaning of your chosen theme. There is still no guarantee that anyone else will be satisfied. Nor need they be. The important thing is that each one feel for himself the specific expressive quality of a theme or, similarly, an entire piece of music. And if it is a great work of art, don’t expect it to mean exactly the same thing to you each time you return to it.

Themes or pieces need not express only one emotion, of course. Take such a theme as the first main one of the Ninth Symphony, for example. It is clearly made up of different elements. It does not say only one thing. Yet anyone hearing it immediately gets a feeling of strength, a feeling of power. It isn’t a power that comes simply because the theme is played loudly. It is a power inherent in the theme itself. The extraordinary strength and vigor of the theme results in the listener’s receiving an impression that a forceful statement has been made. But one should never try to boil it down to “the fateful hammer of life,” etc. That is where the trouble begins. The musician, in his exasperation, says it means nothing but the notes themselves, whereas the nonprofessional is only too anxious to hang on to any explanation that gives him the illusion of getting closer to the music’s meaning. Now, perhaps, the reader will know better what I mean when I say that music does have an expressive meaning but that we cannot say in so many words what that meaning is.

The third plane on which music exists is the sheerly musical plane. Besides the pleasurable sound of music and the expressive feeling that it gives off, music does exist in terms of the notes themselves and of their manipulation. Most listeners are not sufficiently conscious of this third plane....

Professional musicians, on the other hand, are, if anything, too conscious of the mere notes themselves. They often fall into the error of becoming so engrossed with their arpeggios and staccatos that they forget the deeper aspects of the music they are performing. But from the layman’s standpoint, it is not so much a matter of getting over bad habits on the sheerly musical plane as of increasing one’s awareness of what is going on, in so far as the notes are concerned.

When the man in the street listens to the “notes themselves” with any degree of concentration, he is most likely to make some mention of the melody. Either he hears a pretty melody or he does not, and he generally lets it go at that. Rhythm is likely to gain his attention next, particularly if it seems exciting. But harmony and tone color are generally taken for granted, if they are thought of consciously at all. As for music’s having a definite form of some kind, that idea seems never to have occurred to him.

It is very important for all of us to become more alive to music on its sheerly musical plane. After all, an actual musical material is being used. The intelligent listener must be prepared to increase his awareness of the musical material and what happens to it. He must hear the melodies, the rhythms, the harmonies, the tone colors in a more conscious fashion. But above all he must, in order to follow the line of the composer’s thought, know something of the principles of musical form. Listening to all of these elements is listening on the sheerly musical plane.

Let me repeat that I have split up mechanically the three separate planes on which we listen merely for the sake of greater clarity. Actually, we never listen on one or the other of these planes. What we do is to correlate them—listening in all three ways at the same time. It takes no mental effort, for we do it instinctively. Perhaps an analogy with what happens to us when we visit the theater will make this instinctive correlation clearer. In the theater, you are aware of the actors and actresses, costumes and sets, sounds and movements. All these give one the sense that the theater is a pleasant place to be in. They constitute the sensuous plane in our theatrical reactions.
The expressive plane in the theater would be derived from the feeling that you get from what is happening on the stage. You are moved to pity, excitement, or gayety. It is this general feeling, generated aside from the particular words being spoken, a certain emotional something which exists on the stage, that is analogous to the expressive quality in music.

The plot and plot development is equivalent to our sheerly musical plane. The playwright creates and develops a character in just the same way that a composer creates and develops a theme. According to the degree of your awareness of the way in which the artist in either field handles his material you will become a more intelligent listener. It is easy enough to see that the theatergoer never is conscious of any of these elements separately. He is aware of them all at the same time. The same is true of music listening. We simultaneously and without thinking listen on all three planes.

In a sense, the ideal listener is both inside and outside the music at the same moment, judging it and enjoying it, wishing it would go one way and watching it go another—almost like the composer at the moment he composes it; because in order to write his music, the composer must also be inside and outside his music, carried away by it and yet coldly critical of it. A subjective and objective attitude is implied in both creating and listening to music.

What the reader should strive for, then, is a more active kind of listening. Whether you listen to Mozart or Duke Ellington, you can deepen your understanding of music only by being a more conscious and aware listener—not someone who is just listening, but someone who is listening for something.
Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet is Doing to our Brains
Nicholas Carr

In The Atlantic, July/August 2008.

Nicholas Carr (1959– ) is an author, perhaps the leading voice raising concerns about the impact the Internet is having on cognition. These concerns are explored not only in this widely read essay, but also in his books The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains (2011) and The Glass Cage: Automation and Us (2014). He is also author of a popular blog titled “Rough Type” He holds a B.A. from Dartmouth and an M.A. from Harvard, both in English.

“Dave, stop. Stop, will you? Stop, Dave. Will you stop, Dave?” So the supercomputer HAL pleads with the implacable astronaut Dave Bowman in a famous and weirdly poignant scene toward the end of Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey. Bowman, having nearly been sent to a deep-space death by the malfunctioning machine, is calmly, coldly disconnecting the memory circuits that control its artificial brain. “Dave, my mind is going,” HAL says, forlornly. “I can feel it. I can feel it.”

I can feel it, too. Over the past few years I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn’t going – so far as I can tell – but it’s changing. I’m not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I’m reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

I think I know what’s going on. For more than a decade now, I’ve been spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing and sometimes adding to the great databases of the Internet. The Web has been a godsend to me as a writer. Research that once required days in the stacks or periodical rooms of libraries can now be done in minutes. A few Google searches, some quick clicks on hyperlinks, and I’ve got the telltale fact or pithy quote I was after. Even when I’m not working, I’m as likely as not to be foraging in the Web’s info-thickets – reading and writing e-mails, scanning headlines and blog posts, watching videos and listening to podcasts, or just tripping from link to link to link. (Unlike footnotes, to which they’re sometimes likened, hyperlinks don’t merely point to related works; they propel you toward them.)

For me, as for others, the Net is becoming a universal medium, the conduit for most of the information that flows through my eyes and ears and into my mind. The advantages of having immediate access to such an incredibly rich store of information are many, and they’ve been widely described and duly applauded. “The perfect recall of silicon memory,” Wired’s Clive Thompson has written, “can be an enormous boon to thinking.” But that boon comes at a price. As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s, media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving
stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.

I’m not the only one. When I mention my troubles with reading to friends and acquaintances – literary types, most of them – many say they’re having similar experiences. The more they use the Web, the more they have to fight to stay focused on long pieces of writing. Some of the bloggers I follow have also begun mentioning the phenomenon. Scott Karp, who writes a blog about online media, recently confessed that he has stopped reading books altogether. “I was a lit major in college, and used to be [a] voracious book reader,” he wrote. “What happened?” He speculates on the answer: “What if I do all my reading on the web not so much because the way I read has changed, i.e. I’m just seeking convenience, but because the way I THINK has changed?”

Bruce Friedman, who blogs regularly about the use of computers in medicine, also has described how the Internet has altered his mental habits. “I now have almost totally lost the ability to read and absorb a longish article on the web or in print,” he wrote earlier this year. A pathologist who has long been on the faculty of the University of Michigan Medical School, Friedman elaborated on his comment in a telephone conversation with me. His thinking, he said, has taken on a “staccato” quality, reflecting the way he quickly scans short passages of text from many sources online. “I can’t read War and Peace anymore,” he admitted. “I’ve lost the ability to do that. Even a blog post of more than three or four paragraphs is too much to absorb. I skim it.”

Anecdotes alone don’t prove much. And we still await the long-term neurological and psychological experiments that will provide a definitive picture of how Internet use affects cognition. But a recently published study of online research habits, conducted by scholars from University College London, suggests that we may well be in the midst of a sea change in the way we read and think. As part of the five-year research program, the scholars examined computer logs documenting the behavior of visitors to two popular research sites, one operated by the British Library and one by a U.K. educational consortium, that provide access to journal articles, e-books, and other sources of written information. They found that people using the sites exhibited “a form of skimming activity,” hopping from one source to another and rarely returning to any source they’d already visited. They typically read no more than one or two pages of an article or book before they would “bounce” out to another site. Sometimes they’d save a long article, but there’s no evidence that they ever went back and actually read it. The authors of the study report:

It is clear that users are not reading online in the traditional sense; indeed there are signs that new forms of “reading” are emerging as users “power browse” horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins. It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense.

Thanks to the ubiquity of text on the Internet, not to mention the popularity of text-messaging on cell phones, we may well be reading more today than we did in the 1970s or 1980s, when television was our medium of choice. But it’s a different kind of reading, and behind it lies a different kind of thinking – perhaps even a new sense of the self. “We are not only what we read,” says Maryanne Wolf, a developmental psychologist at Tufts University and the author of Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain. “We are how we read.” Wolf worries that the style of reading promoted by the Net, a style that puts “efficiency” and “immediacy” above all else, may be weakening our capacity for the kind of deep reading that emerged when an earlier technology, the printing press, made long and complex works of prose commonplace. When we read online, she says, we tend to become “mere decoders of information.” Our ability to interpret
text, to make the rich mental connections that form when we read deeply and without distraction, remains largely disengaged.

Reading, explains Wolf, is not an instinctive skill for human beings. It’s not etched into our genes the way speech is. We have to teach our minds how to translate the symbolic characters we see into the language we understand. And the media or other technologies we use in learning and practicing the craft of reading play an important part in shaping the neural circuits inside our brains. Experiments demonstrate that readers of ideograms, such as the Chinese, develop a mental circuitry for reading that is very different from the circuitry found in those of us whose written language employs an alphabet. The variations extend across many regions of the brain, including those that govern such essential cognitive functions as memory and the interpretation of visual and auditory stimuli. We can expect as well that the circuits woven by our use of the Net will be different from those woven by our reading of books and other printed works.

Sometime in 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche bought a typewriter – a Malling-Hansen Writing Ball, to be precise. His vision was failing, and keeping his eyes focused on a page had become exhausting and painful, often bringing on crushing headaches. He had been forced to curtail his writing, and he feared that he would soon have to give it up. The typewriter rescued him, at least for a time. Once he had mastered touch-typing, he was able to write with his eyes closed, using only the tips of his fingers. Words could once again flow from his mind to the page.

But the machine had a subtler effect on his work. One of Nietzsche’s friends, a composer, noticed a change in the style of his writing. His already terse prose had become even tighter, more telegraphic. “Perhaps you will through this instrument even take to a new idiom,” the friend wrote in a letter, noting that, in his own work, his “‘thoughts’ in music and language often depend on the quality of pen and paper.”

“You are right,” Nietzsche replied, “our writing equipment takes part in the forming of our thoughts.” Under the sway of the machine, writes the German media scholar Friedrich A. Kittler, Nietzsche’s prose “changed from arguments to aphorisms, from thoughts to puns, from rhetoric to telegram style.”

The human brain is almost infinitely malleable. People used to think that our mental meshwork, the dense connections formed among the 100 billion or so neurons inside our skulls, was largely fixed by the time we reached adulthood. But brain researchers have discovered that that’s not the case. James Olds, a professor of neuroscience who directs the Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study at George Mason University, says that even the adult mind “is very plastic.” Nerve cells routinely break old connections and form new ones. “The brain,” according to Olds, “has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions.”

As we use what the sociologist Daniel Bell has called our “intellectual technologies” – the tools that extend our mental rather than our physical capacities – we inevitably begin to take on the qualities of those technologies. The mechanical clock, which came into common use in the 14th century, provides a compelling example. In Technics and Civilization, the historian and cultural critic Lewis Mumford described how the clock “disassociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences.” The “abstract framework of divided time” became “the point of reference for both action and thought.”

The clock’s methodical ticking helped bring into being the scientific mind and the scientific man. But it also took something away. As the late MIT computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum observed in his 1976 book, Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation, the conception of the world that emerged from the widespread use of timekeeping instruments
“remains an impoverished version of the older one, for it rests on a rejection of those direct experiences that formed the basis for, and indeed constituted, the old reality.” In deciding when to eat, to work, to sleep, to rise, we stopped listening to our senses and started obeying the clock.

The process of adapting to new intellectual technologies is reflected in the changing metaphors we use to explain ourselves to ourselves. When the mechanical clock arrived, people began thinking of their brains as operating “like clockwork.” Today, in the age of software, we have come to think of them as operating “like computers.” But the changes, neuroscience tells us, go much deeper than metaphor. Thanks to our brain’s plasticity, the adaptation occurs also at a biological level.

The Internet promises to have particularly far-reaching effects on cognition. In a paper published in 1936, the British mathematician Alan Turing proved that a digital computer, which at the time existed only as a theoretical machine, could be programmed to perform the function of any other information-processing device. And that’s what we’re seeing today. The Internet, an immeasurably powerful computing system, is subsuming most of our other intellectual technologies. It’s becoming our map and our clock, our printing press and our typewriter, our calculator and our telephone, and our radio and TV.

When the Net absorbs a medium, that medium is re-created in the Net’s image. It injects the medium’s content with hyperlinks, blinking ads, and other digital gewgaws, and it surrounds the content with the content of all the other media it has absorbed. A new e-mail message, for instance, may announce its arrival as we’re glancing over the latest headlines at a newspaper’s site. The result is to scatter our attention and diffuse our concentration.

The Net’s influence doesn’t end at the edges of a computer screen, either. As people’s minds become attuned to the crazy quilt of Internet media, traditional media have to adapt to the audience’s new expectations. Television programs add text crawls and pop-up ads, and magazines and newspapers shorten their articles, introduce capsule summaries, and crowd their pages with easy-to-browse info-snippets. When, in March of this year, The New York Times decided to devote the second and third pages of every edition to article abstracts, its design director, Tom Bodkin, explained that the “shortcuts” would give harried readers a quick “taste” of the day’s news, sparing them the “less efficient” method of actually turning the pages and reading the articles. Old media have little choice but to play by the new-media rules.

Never has a communications system played so many roles in our lives – or exerted such broad influence over our thoughts – as the Internet does today. Yet, for all that’s been written about the Net, there’s been little consideration of how, exactly, it’s reprogramming us. The Net’s intellectual ethic remains obscure.

About the same time that Nietzsche started using his typewriter, an earnest young man named Frederick Winslow Taylor carried a stopwatch into the Midvale Steel plant in Philadelphia and began a historic series of experiments aimed at improving the efficiency of the plant’s machinists. With the approval of Midvale’s owners, he recruited a group of factory hands, set them to work on various metalworking machines, and recorded and timed their every movement as well as the operations of the machines. By breaking down every job into a sequence of small, discrete steps and then testing different ways of performing each one, Taylor created a set of precise instructions – an “algorithm,” we might say today – for how each worker should work. Midvale’s employees grumbled about the strict new regime, claiming that it turned them into little more than automatons, but the factory’s productivity soared.

More than a hundred years after the invention of the steam engine, the Industrial Revolution had at last found its philosophy and its philosopher. Taylor’s tight industrial choreography –
“system,” as he liked to call it – was embraced by manufacturers throughout the country and, in
time, around the world. Seeking maximum speed, maximum efficiency, and maximum output,
factory owners used time-and-motion studies to organize their work and configure the jobs of their
workers. The goal, as Taylor defined it in his celebrated 1911 treatise, *The Principles of Scientific
Management*, was to identify and adopt, for every job, the “one best method” of work and thereby
effect “the gradual substitution of science for rule of thumb throughout the mechanic arts.” Once
his system was applied to all acts of manual labor, Taylor assured his followers, it would bring
about a restructuring not only of industry but of society, creating a utopia of perfect efficiency. “In
the past the man has been first,” he declared; “in the future the system must be first.”

Taylor’s system is still very much with us; it remains the ethic of industrial manufacturing.
And now, thanks to the growing power that computer engineers and software coders wield over
our intellectual lives, Taylor’s ethic is beginning to govern the realm of the mind as well. The
Internet is a machine designed for the efficient and automated collection, transmission, and
manipulation of information, and its legions of programmers are intent on finding the “one best
method” – the perfect algorithm – to carry out every mental movement of what we’ve come to
describe as “knowledge work.”

Google’s headquarters, in Mountain View, California – the Googleplex – is the Internet’s high
church, and the religion practiced inside its walls is Taylorism. Google, says its chief executive,
Eric Schmidt, is “a company that’s founded around the science of measurement,” and it is striving
to “systematize everything” it does. Drawing on the terabytes of behavioral data it collects through
its search engine and other sites, it carries out thousands of experiments a day, according to the
*Harvard Business Review*, and it uses the results to refine the algorithms that increasingly control
how people find information and extract meaning from it. What Taylor did for the work of the
hand, Google is doing for the work of the mind.

The company has declared that its mission is “to organize the world’s information and make it
universally accessible and useful.” It seeks to develop “the perfect search engine,” which it defines
as something that “understands exactly what you mean and gives you back exactly what you want.”
In Google’s view, information is a kind of commodity, a utilitarian resource that can be mined and
processed with industrial efficiency. The more pieces of information we can “access” and the faster
we can extract their gist, the more productive we become as thinkers.

Where does it end? Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the gifted young men who founded Google
while pursuing doctoral degrees in computer science at Stanford, speak frequently of their desire
to turn their search engine into an artificial intelligence, a HAL-like machine that might be
connected directly to our brains. “The ultimate search engine is something as smart as people – or
smarter,” Page said in a speech a few years back. “For us, working on search is a way to work on
artificial intelligence.” In a 2004 interview with *Newsweek*, Brin said, “Certainly if you had all the
world’s information directly attached to your brain, or an artificial brain that was smarter than your
brain, you’d be better off.” Last year, Page told a convention of scientists that Google is “really
trying to build artificial intelligence and to do it on a large scale.”

Such an ambition is a natural one, even an admirable one, for a pair of math whizzes with vast
quantities of cash at their disposal and a small army of computer scientists in their employ. A
fundamentally scientific enterprise, Google is motivated by a desire to use technology, in Eric
Schmidt’s words, “to solve problems that have never been solved before,” and artificial
intelligence is the hardest problem out there. Why wouldn’t Brin and Page want to be the ones to
crack it?
Still, their easy assumption that we’d all “be better off” if our brains were supplemented, or even replaced, by an artificial intelligence is unsettling. It suggests a belief that intelligence is the output of a mechanical process, a series of discrete steps that can be isolated, measured, and optimized. In Google’s world, the world we enter when we go online, there’s little place for the fuzziness of contemplation. Ambiguity is not an opening for insight but a bug to be fixed. The human brain is just an outdated computer that needs a faster processor and a bigger hard drive.

The idea that our minds should operate as high-speed data-processing machines is not only built into the workings of the Internet, it is the network’s reigning business model as well. The faster we surf across the Web – the more links we click and pages we view – the more opportunities Google and other companies gain to collect information about us and to feed us advertisements. Most of the proprietors of the commercial Internet have a financial stake in collecting the crumbs of data we leave behind as we flit from link to link – the more crumbs, the better. The last thing these companies want is to encourage leisurely reading or slow, concentrated thought. It’s in their economic interest to drive us to distraction.

Maybe I’m just a worrywart. Just as there’s a tendency to glorify technological progress, there’s a countertendency to expect the worst of every new tool or machine. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates bemoaned the development of writing. He feared that, as people came to rely on the written word as a substitute for the knowledge they used to carry inside their heads, they would, in the words of one of the dialogue’s characters, “cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful.” And because they would be able to “receive a quantity of information without proper instruction,” they would “be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant.” They would be “filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom.” Socrates wasn’t wrong – the new technology did often have the effects he feared – but he was shortsighted. He couldn’t foresee the many ways that writing and reading would serve to spread information, spur fresh ideas, and expand human knowledge (if not wisdom).

The arrival of Gutenberg’s printing press, in the 15th century, set off another round of teeth gnashing. The Italian humanist Hieronimo Squarciafico worried that the easy availability of books would lead to intellectual laziness, making men “less studious” and weakening their minds. Others argued that cheaply printed books and broadsheets would undermine religious authority, demean the work of scholars and scribes, and spread sedition and debauchery. As New York University professor Clay Shirky notes, “Most of the arguments made against the printing press were correct, even prescient.” But, again, the doomsayers were unable to imagine the myriad blessings that the printed word would deliver.

So, yes, you should be skeptical of my skepticism. Perhaps those who dismiss critics of the Internet as Luddites or nostalgists will be proved correct, and from our hyperactive, data-stoked minds will spring a golden age of intellectual discovery and universal wisdom. Then again, the Net isn’t the alphabet, and although it may replace the printing press, it produces something altogether different. The kind of deep reading that a sequence of printed pages promotes is valuable not just for the knowledge we acquire from the author’s words but for the intellectual vibrations those words set off within our own minds. In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book, or by any other act of contemplation, for that matter, we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas. Deep reading, as Maryanne Wolf argues, is indistinguishable from deep thinking.

If we lose those quiet spaces, or fill them up with “content,” we will sacrifice something important not only in our selves but in our culture. In a recent essay, the playwright Richard Foreman eloquently described what’s at stake:
I come from a tradition of Western culture, in which the ideal (my ideal) was the complex, dense and “cathedral-like” structure of the highly educated and articulate personality – a man or woman who carried inside themselves a personally constructed and unique version of the entire heritage of the West. [But now] I see within us all (myself included) the replacement of complex inner density with a new kind of self – evolving under the pressure of information overload and the technology of the “instantly available.”

As we are drained of our “inner repertory of dense cultural inheritance,” Foreman concluded, we risk turning into “‘pancake people’ – spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button.”

I’m haunted by that scene in 2001. What makes it so poignant, and so weird, is the computer’s emotional response to the disassembly of its mind: its despair as one circuit after another goes dark, its childlike pleading with the astronaut – “I can feel it. I can feel it. I’m afraid” – and its final reversion to what can only be called a state of innocence. HAL’s outpouring of feeling contrasts with the emotionlessness that characterizes the human figures in the film, who go about their business with an almost robotic efficiency. Their thoughts and actions feel scripted, as if they’re following the steps of an algorithm. In the world of 2001, people have become so machinelike that the most human character turns out to be a machine. That’s the essence of Kubrick’s dark prophecy: as we come to rely on computers to mediate our understanding of the world, it is our own intelligence that flattens into artificial intelligence.
Phillip Levine (1928-2015) was a poet who frequently focused his poetry on his native city of Detroit. He published over twenty volumes of poetry, and in 1995 was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In 2011, he was appointed United States Poet Laureate. This poem, published in 1991, crystalizes Levine’s lifelong themes of work, family, and love. Drawing on his experiences as a working class teenager in Detroit, Levine uses that specific place and time to address the broad question of work. Though his poetic language is colloquial, his poetic voice is intense and direct, and he often obliquely draws the reader into his poems—as here, with the casual expression “you know” morphing into an address to us—you mean me? If you’re old enough to read this, yes.

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you’re
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.
Forget you. This is about waiting,
shifting from one foot to another.
Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.
You rub your glasses with your fingers,
and of course it’s someone else’s brother,
narrower across the shoulders than
yours but with the same sad slouch, the grin
that does not hide the stubbornness,
the sad refusal to give in to
rain, to the hours of wasted waiting,
to the knowledge that somewhere ahead
a man is waiting who will say, “No,
we’re not hiring today,” for any
reason he wants. You love your brother,
now suddenly you can hardly stand
the love flooding you for your brother,
who’s not beside you or behind or
ahead because he’s home trying to
sleep off a miserable night shift.
at Cadillac so he can get up
before noon to study his German.
Works eight hours a night so he can sing
Wagner, the opera you hate most,
the worst music ever invented.
How long has it been since you told him
you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
opened your eyes wide and said those words,
and maybe kissed his cheek? You’ve never
done something so simple, so obvious,
not because you’re too young or too dumb,
not because you’re jealous or even mean
or incapable of crying in
the presence of another man, no,
just because you don’t know what work is.
**A Sword In A Cloud Of Light**

*Kenneth Rexroth*


*Kenneth Rexroth* (1905-1982) was an American modernist poet, critical essayist, and translator of poetry into English from Japanese and Chinese. He is considered to be the founder of the 1950s avant-garde cultural movement known as the San Francisco Renaissance, which paved the way for the city's centrality to the counter-culture of the 1960s. Politically an anarchist, anti-capitalist, and pacifist – he had been a conscientious objector during the Second World War – Rexroth developed the notion of the “social lie,” not in the sense of the little white lie, but the big lies told by governments and elites to keep the rest of the population in line. His poetry and essays often display the language and notions of his day, even as it reaches towards the universal and the eternal.

Your hand in mine, we walk out
To watch the Christmas Eve crowds
On Fillmore Street, the Negro
District. The night is thick with
Frost. The people hurry, wreathed
In their smoky breaths. Before
The shop windows the children
Jump up and down with spangled
Eyes. Santa Clauses ring bells.
Cars stall and honk. Street cars clang.
Loud speakers on the lampposts
Sing carols, on juke boxes
In the bars Louis Armstrong
Plays White Christmas. In the joints
The girls strip and grind and bump
To Jingle Bells. Overhead
The neon signs scribble and
Erase and scribble again
Messages of avarice,
Joy, fear, hygiene, and the proud
Names of the middle classes.
The moon beams like a pudding.
We stop at the main corner
And look up, diagonally
Across, at the rising moon,
And the solemn, orderly
Vast winter constellations.
You say, "There's Orion!"
The most beautiful object
Either of us will ever
Know in the world or in life
Stands in the moonlit empty
Heavens, over the swarming
Men, women, and children, black
And white, joyous and greedy,
Evil and good, buyer and
Seller, master and victim,
Like some immense theorem,
Which, if once solved would forever
Solve the mystery and pain
Under the bells and spangles.
There he is, the man of the
Night Before Christmas, spread out
On the sky like a true god
In whom it would only be
Necessary to believe
A little. I am fifty
And you are five. It would do
No good to say this and it
May do no good to write it.
Believe in Orion. Believe
In the night, the moon, the crowded
Earth. Believe in Christmas and
Birthdays and Easter rabbits.
Believe in all those fugitive
Compounds of nature, all doomed
To waste away and go out.
Always be true to these things.
They are all there is. Never
Give up this savage religion
For the blood-drenched civilized
Abstractions of the rascals
Who live by killing you and me.
Forty-one years ago, my uncle Hector said he was hitchhiking to Spokane, walked out the door, and disappeared. I was only seven years old and he was my favorite relative. He’d be seventy-two now. He left as a randomly employed blue-collar reservation alcoholic, but, if he hadn’t vanished, he probably would have sobered up and become a tribal elder. Indian men live wild-horse lives, running beautiful and dangerous, until some outside force—some metaphorical cowboy—breaks them. I imagine that Hector, in his senior years, would be the Head Man Traditional Dancer at every third powwow. He’d probably be as fat as I’ve become. Indian dudes come in two sizes: the slender, androgynous boys who make the girls go crazy and the aging men who, with their big bellies, skinny legs, and fossilized feet, look like overfed chickens.

Over the years, I’ve lost two other uncles and three aunts, to cancer, heart disease, and car wrecks. One uncle survives, in Seattle, but I rarely see him. My father died, from diabetes, seven years ago. I’ve got three cousins in prison, three living in poverty on our reservation, and a beautiful and distant cousin who married a Lakota and moved to South Dakota. When we were twelve, we made out in a tree house. I still think she’s the most beautiful woman who’s ever lived. And I loved her so much, romantically and inappropriately, that I’ve never bothered to kiss any other woman.

Best thing my gorgeous cousin said to me: “If we lived in Old England, then we could get married. If we were royalty, then we could have a dozen babies.”

I still live with my mother. The rest of the world would call me a failure, I suppose, but Indians don’t judge adult Indians for remaining in the family home. Everything—our worst losses and our greatest beauty—is deemed sacred and necessary.

Best thing my mother ever said to me: “You know what’s inside an Indian self-help book? Pictures of other self-help books.”

Anyway, four decades after my uncle Hector walked into nothingness, I decided that we needed to bury him.

“But there’s no body,” my mother said.

“Don’t need one,” I said. “We can bury the memory of him.”

“I think he might still be alive,” she said.

“If he were still alive he would have come back. Or written a letter. Or called. Something. Hector was too good to leave us hanging.”

“He was a good man.”

“Yes,” I said. “A great man.”
Actually, Hector was only sometimes great. But we need to make the dead better people than they were, because it makes us look better for loving them. Mostly, Hector was a temperamental asshole. He drank, did drugs, and got into fistfights like he thought every white man was a cavalry soldier. I knew that, as he hitchhiked toward Spokane, he’d picked a fight with the wrong guy, or a group of toughs, and had been beaten to death. I was no visionary, but whenever I closed my eyes I could see his bones scattered and scoured by wind and wild animals. I could see the holes pounded into his skull. With a tire iron. I can hear that metal striking bone. That was Hector’s destiny. Violent men die violently. Warriors get murdered.

Because my mother was good at funerals (she cooked, cleaned, sang, drummed, and held the hand of whichever mourner was hurting the most at any particular time), she decided that, yes, it was time to hold Hector’s wake. Most of the tribe came to mourn Hector. We sang the correct songs, gave the proper eulogies, and stayed awake for two days.

Best part of the funeral: We had an open and empty casket.

Best joke about the open and empty casket: “Hector was such a showoff that I’m surprised he hasn’t come back from the dead to lie in his coffin and die again.”

Best sad thing said about Hector: “He wasn’t afraid of any white man. But white men weren’t afraid of him, either.”

We put the empty coffin in a truck bed and hauled it over to the Catholic cemetery.

Yeah, we Coeur d’Alene Indians are the best Catholics you’re ever going to meet. When we eat the bread and drink the wine we’re eating and drinking Jesus, Mary, and all twelve of the Apostles, even that traitor Judas.

We lowered Hector’s coffin into the ground and, after everybody had thrown a handful of dirt into the grave, we buried him completely. Then everybody went away.

Best thing said in parting: “A hundred years from now, white archeologists are going to open that coffin, find it empty, and wonder what it all means.”

Then, at the graveside, as the starlings pulled down the sun and the mosquitoes raised the moon, it was just my mother and me. She whisper-sang an old mourning song. I didn’t know it, so I couldn’t sing with her. My mother could be stingy like that. Keeping the old traditions locked inside her rib cage. She’d rather let them die than have them corrupted by a cell-phone Indian like me.

Anyway, as she sang, I stared at Hector’s wooden grave marker, carved with his name, date of birth and date of disappearance, and a few random tribal glyphs. I wondered if it was possible for an Indian to die peacefully. I’ve got a photograph of Hector, as a baby, being held by his grandmother Agnes. She was born before the Civil War, so, yes, my favorite uncle was only one degree removed from slavery. Agnes was a teen-ager, living on the newly created Coeur d’Alene Indian Reservation, when Custer and his soldiers were righteously killed at Little Bighorn, in Montana. Hector was only one degree removed from the Indian Wars. And Agnes was the mother of three kids, the first generation of our tribe to be born and live in a house with four walls, when the U.S. Army got its revenge by massacring hundreds of unarmed old people, women, and children at the so-called Battle of Wounded Knee, in South Dakota. Hector was only one degree removed from genocide. How could he have become anything other than a violent man who died violently?

Yes, crime begets crime begets crime begets crime begets an Indian man who probably hitched a ride with some drunken, seemingly friendly white boys who killed him. Or wait, no. Here’s the thing that I don’t want to admit. Here’s the thing that no Indian wants to admit. Hector wouldn’t have fallen
prey to any carnivorous white men. He wouldn’t have got into a car with white strangers. Or gone to some party where only white men would be present.

On that last day we saw him, setting off for Spokane, Hector would have accepted a ride only from other Indians—and only from Indians he knew. So Hector was almost certainly murdered and disappeared by another Coeur d’Alene Indian or by a war party of his own tribal members. I imagine it was mostly an accident. They were probably drinking too hard, as they were always drinking too hard. And, drunk, Hector probably insulted somebody. Or admitted that he’d fucked somebody’s wife or girlfriend or daughter. And then they’d probably parked the car on a back road so that Hector and his opponent could fight it out. Half-assed warrior against half-assed warrior. And I imagine that a lucky punch shattered Hector’s skull. Or maybe Hector challenged everybody to a fight. Maybe he decided he was tough enough to kick the shit out of every Indian at the same time. Maybe he thought he could kill the world and instead learned that the world is undefeated.

As I sat at my uncle’s empty grave, I hoped that the Indians who killed Hector had sung him an honor song when they buried his body deep in the woods. I wished that one of those killers would send me an anonymous letter and tell me where the body was buried. So I could disinter my uncle, carry him to the cemetery, and fill the empty space in his coffin with his bones.

I imagined that all my aunts, uncles, and cousins were buried in Hector’s empty coffin. I knew my late father was also in that grave.

Best thing my father ever said to me: “All my kids were accidents. But you’re the best accident. You’re a car wreck with eagle feathers.”

Standing in that cemetery, I felt like the only Indian that mattered and the only Indian that didn’t. I was alive, damn it, and I planned to live longer than every other Indian in the world.
Diving into the Wreck

Adrienne Rich


Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) was one of America’s foremost feminist intellectuals. An essayist, activist, and poet, Rich’s career expanded seven productive decades; her work explores issues of identity, sexuality, and politics in a never-ending search for social justice and radical change. Utilizing speech cadences and irregular line and stanza length, Rich’s poems employ non-poetic language and politically engaged verse. The following poem, often regarded as a protest against the Vietnam war, was originally published in her collection of the same title, Diving Into the Wreck, which won the National Book Award; she accepted the award alongside the other nominees, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, in the name of “all women.” Rich made headlines in 1997 when she refused to accept The National Medal of the Arts from President Bill Clinton, stating that art “means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage. The radical disparities of wealth and power in America are widening at a devastating rate. A President cannot meaningfully honor certain token artists while the people at large are so dishonored.” Rich’s dedication to the belief that art and equality are not incompatible is portrayed in the intensity of her life and in the enduring power of her poetry.

First having read the book of myths,  
and loaded the camera,  
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,  
I put on  
the body-armor of black rubber  
the absurd flippers  
the grave and awkward mask.  
I am having to do this  
not like Cousteau with his  
assiduous team  
aboard the sun-flooded schooner  
but here alone.  

There is a ladder.  
The ladder is always there  
hanging innocently  
close to the side of the schooner.  
We know what it is for,  
we who have used it.  

Otherwise  
it is a piece of maritime floss  
some sundry equipment.  

I go down.  
Rung after rung and still  
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.
Two Poems

Dana Gioia

Dana Gioia (1950- ) is an American poet and author of five collections of poetry, several volumes of essays, and editor of multiple anthologies. He holds a graduate degree in Comparative Literature from Harvard and an M.B.A. from Stanford University. Before becoming a full-time poet in 1992, he worked for General Foods, where he rose to the level of Vice President of Marketing. From 2003 to 2009, he was chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. As chair, he is widely credited with expanding federal funding for the arts (garnering bipartisan congressional support) by establishing a number of initiatives, including “The Big Read,” “Shakespeare in American Communities,” “Poetry Out Loud,” and “Operation Homecoming,” which paired leading writers with troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to craft literary works about their experiences. Under his leadership the NEA also established a number of music programs, including “Jazz Masters” and “American Voices.” He has a musical background and has authored opera librettos. He is currently a Professor of Poetry and Public Culture at the University of Southern California and serves as the Poet Laureate of California.

Unsaid


So much of what we live goes on inside –
The diaries of grief, the tongue-tied aches
Of unacknowledged love are no less real
For having passed unsaid. What we conceal
Is always more than what we dare confide.
Think of the letters that we write our dead.
I can imagine someone who found these fields unbearable, who climbed the hillside in the heat, cursing the dust, cracking the brittle weeds underfoot, wishing a few more trees for shade.

An Easterner especially, who would scorn the meagerness of summer, the dry twisted shapes of black elm, scrub oak, and chaparral, a landscape August has already drained of green.

One who would hurry over the clinging thistle, foxtail, golden poppy, knowing everything was just a weed, unable to conceive that these trees and sparse brown bushes were alive.

And hate the bright stillness of the noon without wind, without motion, the only other living thing a hawk, hungry for prey, suspended in the blinding, sunlit blue.

And yet how gentle it seems to someone raised in a landscape short of rain – the skyline of a hill broken by no more trees than one can count, the grass, the empty sky, the wish for water.
Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was an insurance lawyer who wrote novels and short stories in his spare time, hoping for literary success that never came. After his death, his friend Max Brod collected and gradually published the main body of his work. His thirty short stories and three novels, including The Trial and The Metamorphosis, are deeply disturbing works that anticipate the existentialist movement of the mid-20th century.

“It’s a peculiar apparatus,” said the Officer to the Traveler, gazing with a certain admiration at the device, with which he was, of course, thoroughly familiar. It appeared that the Traveler had responded to the invitation of the Commandant only out of politeness, when he had been invited to attend the execution of a soldier condemned for disobeying and insulting his superior. Of course, interest in the execution was not very high, not even in the penal colony itself. At least, here in the small, deep, sandy valley, closed in on all sides by barren slopes, apart from the Officer and the Traveler there were present only the Condemned, a vacant-looking man with a broad mouth and dilapidated hair and face, and the Soldier, who held the heavy chain to which were connected the small chains which bound the Condemned Man by his feet and wrist bones, as well as by his neck, and which were also linked to each other by connecting chains. The Condemned Man had an expression of such dog-like resignation that it looked as if one could set him free to roam around the slopes and would only have to whistle at the start of the execution for him to return.

The Traveler had little interest in the apparatus and walked back and forth behind the Condemned Man, almost visibly indifferent, while the Officer took care of the final preparations. Sometimes he crawled under the apparatus, which was built deep into the earth, and sometimes he climbed up a ladder to inspect the upper parts. These were really jobs which could have been left to a mechanic, but the Officer carried them out with great enthusiasm, maybe because he was particularly fond of this apparatus or maybe because there was some other reason why one could not trust the work to anyone else. “It’s all ready now!” he finally cried and climbed back down the ladder. He was unusually tired, breathing with his mouth wide open, and he had pushed two fine lady’s handkerchiefs under the collar of his uniform.

“These uniforms are really too heavy for the tropics,” the Traveler said, instead of asking some questions about the apparatus, as the Officer had expected. “That’s true,” said the Officer. He washed the oil and grease from his dirty hands in a bucket of water standing ready, “but they mean home, and we don’t want to lose our homeland.” “Now, have a look at this apparatus,” he added immediately, drying his hands with a towel and pointing to the device. “Up to this point I had to do some work by hand, but from now on the apparatus should work entirely on its own.” The Traveler nodded and followed the Officer. The latter tried to protect himself against all eventualities by saying, “Of course, breakdowns do happen. I really hope none will occur today, but we must be prepared for it. The apparatus is supposed to keep going for twelve hours without interruption. But if any breakdowns do occur, they’ll only be very minor, and we’ll deal with them right away.”

“Don’t you want to sit down?” he asked finally, as he pulled out a chair from a pile of cane chairs and offered it to the Traveler. The latter could not refuse. He sat on the edge of the pit, into which he cast a fleeting glance. It was not very deep. On one side of the hole the piled earth was
heaped up into a wall; on the other side stood the apparatus. “I don’t know,” the officer said, “whether the Commandant has already explained the apparatus to you.” The Traveler made a vague gesture with his hand. That was good enough for the Officer, for now he could explain the apparatus himself.

“This apparatus,” he said, grasping a connecting rod and leaning against it, “is our previous Commandant’s invention. I also worked with him on the very first tests and took part in all the work right up to its completion. However, the credit for the invention belongs to him alone. Have you heard of our previous Commandant? No? Well, I’m not claiming too much when I say that the organization of the entire penal colony is his work. We, his friends, already knew at the time of his death that the administration of the colony was so self-contained that even if his successor had a thousand new plans in mind, he would not be able to alter anything of the old plan, at least not for several years. And our prediction has held. The New Commandant has had to recognize that. It’s a shame that you didn’t know the previous Commandant!”

“However,” the Officer said, interrupting himself, “I’m chattering, and his apparatus stands here in front of us. As you see, it consists of three parts. With the passage of time certain popular names have been developed for each of these parts. The one underneath is called the bed, the upper one is called the inscriber, and here in the middle, this moving part is called the harrow.” “The harrow?” the Traveler asked. He had not been listening with full attention. The sun was excessively strong, trapped in the shadowless valley, and one could hardly collect one’s thoughts. So the Officer appeared to him all the more admirable in his tight tunic weighed down with epaulettes and festooned with braid, ready to go on parade, as he explained the matter so eagerly and, while he was talking, adjusted screws here and there with a screwdriver.

The Soldier appeared to be in a state similar to the Traveler. He had wound the Condemned Man’s chain around both his wrists and was supporting himself with his hand on his weapon, letting his head hang backward, not bothering about anything. The Traveler was not surprised at that, for the Officer spoke French, and clearly neither the Soldier nor the Condemned Man understood the language. So it was all the more striking that the Condemned Man, in spite of that, did what he could to follow the Officer’s explanation. With a sort of sleepy persistence he kept directing his gaze to the place where the Officer had just pointed, and when the question from the Traveler interrupted the Officer, the Condemned Man looked at the Traveler, too, just as the Officer was doing.

“Yes,” the Officer said. “The name fits. The needles are arranged as in a harrow, and the whole thing is driven like a harrow, although it stays in one place and is, in principle, much more artistic. You’ll understand in a moment. The condemned is laid out here on the bed. First, I’ll describe the apparatus and only then let the procedure go to work. That way you’ll be able to follow it better. Also a sprocket in the inscriber is excessively worn. It really squeaks. When it’s in motion one can hardly make oneself understood. Unfortunately replacement parts are difficult to come by in this place. So, here is the bed, as I said. The whole thing is completely covered with a layer of cotton wool, the purpose of which you’ll find out in a moment. The condemned man is laid out on his stomach on the cotton wool – naked, of course. There are straps for the hands here, for the feet here, and for the throat here, to tie him in securely. At the head of the bed here, where the man, as I have mentioned, first lies face down, is this small protruding lump of felt, which can easily be adjusted so that it presses right into the man’s mouth. Its purpose is to prevent him screaming and biting his tongue to pieces. Of course, the man has to let the felt in his mouth – otherwise the straps around his throat would break his neck.” “That’s cotton wool?” asked the Traveler and bent down. “Yes, it is,” said the Officer smiling, “feel it for yourself.”
He took the Traveler’s hand and led him over to the bed. “It’s a specially prepared cotton wool. That’s why it looks so unrecognizable. I’ll get around to mentioning its purpose in a moment.” The Traveler was already being won over a little to the apparatus. With his hand over his eyes to protect them from the sun, he looked at the apparatus in the hole. It was a massive construction. The bed and the inscriber were the same size and looked like two dark chests. The inscriber was set about two metres above the bed, and the two were joined together at the corners by four brass rods, which almost reflected the sun. The harrow hung between the chests on a band of steel.

The Officer had hardly noticed the earlier indifference of the Traveler, but he did have a sense now of how the latter’s interest was being aroused for the first time. So he paused in his explanation in order to allow the Traveler time to observe the apparatus undisturbed. The Condemned Man imitated the Traveler, but since he could not put his hand over his eyes, he blinked upward with his eyes uncovered.

“So now the man is lying down,” said the Traveler. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

“Yes,” said the Officer, pushing his cap back a little and running his hand over his hot face. “Now, listen. Both the bed and the inscriber have their own electric batteries. The bed needs them for itself, and the inscriber for the harrow. As soon as the man is strapped in securely, the bed is set in motion. It quivers with tiny, very rapid oscillations from side to side and up and down simultaneously. You will have seen similar devices in mental hospitals. Only with our bed all movements are precisely calibrated, for they must be meticulously coordinated with the movements of the harrow. But it’s the harrow which has the job of actually carrying out the sentence.”

“What is the sentence?” the Traveler asked. “You don’t even know that?” asked the Officer in astonishment and bit his lip. “Forgive me if my explanations are perhaps confused. I really do beg your pardon. Previously it was the Commandant’s habit to provide such explanations. But the New Commandant has excused himself from this honourable duty. The fact that with such an eminent visitor – the traveler tried to deflect the honour with both hands, but the officer insisted on the expression – “that with such an eminent visitor he didn’t even once make him aware of the form of our sentencing is yet again something new, which …” He had a curse on his lips, but controlled himself and said merely: “I was not informed about it. It’s not my fault. In any case, I am certainly the person best able to explain our style of sentencing, for here I am carrying” – he patted his breast pocket – “the relevant diagrams drawn by the previous Commandant.”

“Diagrams made by the Commandant himself?” asked the Traveler. “Then was he in his own person a combination of everything? Was he soldier, judge, engineer, chemist, and draftsman?”

“He was indeed,” said the Officer, nodding his head with a fixed and thoughtful expression. Then he looked at his hands, examining them. They didn’t seem to him clean enough to handle the diagrams. So he went to the bucket and washed them again. Then he pulled out a small leather folder and said, “Our sentence does not sound severe. The law which a condemned man has violated is inscribed on his body with the harrow. This Condemned Man, for example,” and the Officer pointed to the man, “will have inscribed on his body, ‘Honour your superiors.’”

The Traveler had a quick look at the man. When the Officer was pointing at him, the man kept his head down and appeared to be directing all his energy into listening in order to learn something. But the movements of his thick pouting lips showed clearly that he was incapable of understanding anything. The Traveler wanted to raise various questions, but after looking at the Condemned Man he merely asked, “Does he know his sentence?” “No,” said the Officer. He wished to get on with his explanation right away, but the Traveler interrupted him: “He doesn’t know his own sentence?”
“No,” said the Officer once more. He then paused for a moment, as if he was asking the Traveler for a more detailed reason for his question, and said, “It would be useless to give him that information. He experiences it on his own body.” The Traveler really wanted to keep quiet at this point, but he felt how the Condemned Man was gazing at him – he seemed to be asking whether he could approve of the process the Officer had described. So the Traveler, who had up to this point been leaning back, bent forward again and kept up his questions, “But does he nonetheless have some general idea that he’s been condemned?” “Not that either,” said the Officer, and he smiled at the traveler, as if he was still waiting for some strange revelations from him. “No?” said the Traveler, wiping his forehead, “then does the man also not yet know how his defence was received?” “He has had no opportunity to defend himself,” said the Officer and looked away, as if he was talking to himself and wished not to embarrass the Traveler with an explanation of matters so self-evident to him. “But he must have had a chance to defend himself,” said the Traveler and stood up from his chair.

The Officer recognized that he was in danger of having his explanation of the apparatus held up for a long time. So he went to the Traveler, took him by the arm, pointed with his hand at the Condemned Man, who stood there stiffly now that the attention was so clearly directed at him – the Soldier was also pulling on his chain – and said, “The matter stands like this. Here in the penal colony I have been appointed judge. In spite of my youth. For I stood at the side of our Old Commandant in all matters of punishment, and I also know the most about the apparatus. The basic principle I use for my decisions is this: Guilt is always beyond a doubt. Other courts could not follow this principle, for they are made up of many heads and, in addition, have even higher courts above them. But that is not the case here, or at least it was not that way with the previous Commandant. It’s true the New Commandant has already shown a desire to get mixed up in my court, but I’ve succeeded so far in fending him off. And I’ll continue to be successful. You want this case explained. It’s simple – just like all of them. This morning a captain laid a charge that this man, who is assigned to him as a servant and who sleeps before his door, had been sleeping on duty. For his task is to stand up every time the clock strikes the hour and salute in front of the captain’s door. That’s certainly not a difficult duty – and it’s necessary, since he is supposed to remain fresh both for guarding and for service. Yesterday night the captain wanted to check whether his servant was fulfilling his duty. He opened the door on the stroke of two and found him curled up asleep. He got his horsetail and hit him across the face. Now, instead of standing up and begging for forgiveness, the man grabbed his master by the legs, shook him, and cried out, ‘Throw away that whip or I’ll eat you up.’ Those are the facts. The captain came to me an hour ago. I wrote up his statement and right after that the sentence. Then I had the man chained up. It was all very simple. If I had first summoned the man and interrogated him, the result would have been confusion. He would have lied, and if I had been successful in refuting his lies, he would have replaced them with new lies, and so forth. But now I have him, and I won’t release him again. Now, does that clarify everything? But time is passing. We should be starting the execution, and I haven’t finished explaining the apparatus yet.”

He urged the traveler to sit down in his chair, moved to the apparatus again, and started, “As you see, the shape of the harrow corresponds to the shape of a man. This is the harrow for the upper body, and here are the harrows for the legs. This small cutter is the only one designated for the head. Is that clear to you?” He leaned forward to the Traveler in a friendly way, ready to give the most comprehensive explanation.

The Traveler looked at the harrow with a wrinkled frown. The information about the judicial procedures had not satisfied him. However, he had to tell himself that here it was a matter of a
penal colony, that in this place special regulations were necessary, and that one had to give precedence to military measures right down to the last detail. Beyond that, however, he had some hopes in the New Commandant, who obviously, although slowly, was intending to introduce a new procedure which the limited understanding of this Officer could not cope with.

Following this train of thought, the Traveler asked, “Will the Commandant be present at the execution?” “That is not certain,” said the Officer, embarrassingly affected by the sudden question, and his friendly expression made a grimace. “That’s why we need to hurry up. As much as I regret the fact, I’ll have to make my explanation even shorter. But tomorrow, once the apparatus is clean again – the fact that it gets so very dirty is its only fault – I could add a detailed explanation. So now, only the most important things. When the man is lying on the bed and it starts quivering, the harrow sinks onto the body. It positions itself automatically in such a way that it touches the body only lightly with the needle tips. Once the machine is set in this position, this steel cable tightens up into a rod. And now the performance begins. Someone who is not an initiate sees no external difference among the punishments. The harrow seems to do its work uniformly. As it quivers, it sticks the tips of its needles into the body, which is also vibrating from the movement of the bed. Now, to enable someone to check on how the sentence is being carried out, the harrow is made of glass. That gave rise to certain technical difficulties with fastening the needles securely, but after several attempts we were successful. We didn’t spare any efforts. And now, as the inscription is made on the body, everyone can see through the glass. Don’t you want to come closer and see the needles for yourself.”

The Traveler stood slowly, moved up, and bent over the harrow. “You see,” the Officer said, “two sorts of needles in a multiple arrangement. Each long needle has a short one next to it. The long one inscribes, and the short one squirts water out to wash away the blood and keep the inscription always clear. The bloody water is then channeled here in small grooves and finally flows into these main gutters, and the outlet pipe takes it to the pit.” The officer pointed with his finger to the exact path which the bloody water had to take. As he began to demonstrate with both hands at the mouth of the outlet pipe, in order to make his account as clear as possible, the Traveler raised his head and, feeling behind him with his hand, wanted to return to his chair. Then he saw to his horror that the Condemned Man had also, like him, accepted the Officer’s invitation to inspect the arrangement of the harrow up close. He had pulled the sleeping Soldier holding the chain a little forward and was also bending over the glass. One could see how with a confused gaze he also was looking for what the two gentlemen had just observed, but how he didn’t succeed because he lacked the explanation. He leaned forward this way and that. He kept running his eyes over the glass again and again. The Traveler wanted to push him back, for what he was doing was probably punishable. But the Officer held the Traveler firmly with one hand, and with the other he took a lump of earth from the wall and threw it at the Soldier. The latter opened his eyes with a start, saw what the Condemned Man had dared to do, let his weapon fall, braced his heels in the earth, and pulled the Condemned Man back, so that he immediately collapsed. The Soldier looked down at him, as he writhed around, making his chain clink. “Stand him up,” cried the Officer. Then he noticed that the Condemned Man was distracting the Traveler too much. The latter was even leaning out away from the harrow, without paying any attention to it, wanting to find out what was happening to the Condemned Man. “Handle him carefully,” the Officer yelled again. He ran around the apparatus, personally grabbed the Condemned Man under the armpits and, with the help of the Soldier, stood the man, whose feet kept slipping, upright.

“Now I know all about it,” said the Traveler, as the Officer turned back to him again. “Except the most important thing,” said the latter, grabbing the Traveler by the arm and pointing up high.
“There in the inscriber is the mechanism which determines the movement of the harrow, and this mechanism is arranged according to the diagram on which the sentence is set down. I still use the diagrams of the previous Commandant. Here they are.” He pulled some pages out of the leather folder. “Unfortunately I can’t hand them to you. They are the most cherished thing I possess. Sit down, and I’ll show you them from this distance. Then you’ll be able to see it all well.” He showed the first sheet. The Traveler would have been happy to say something appreciative, but all he saw was a labyrinthine series of lines, criss-crossing each other in all sort of ways. These covered the paper so thickly that only with difficulty could one make out the white spaces in between. “Read it,” said the Officer. “I can’t,” said the Traveler. “But it’s clear,” said the Officer. “It’s very elaborate,” said the Traveler evasively, “but I can’t decipher it.”

“Yes,” said the Officer, smiling and putting the folder back again, “it’s not calligraphy for school children. One has to read it a long time. You too will finally understand it clearly. Of course, it has to be a script that isn’t simple. You see, it’s not supposed to kill right away, but on average over a period of twelve hours. The turning point is set for the sixth hour. There must also be many, many embellishments surrounding the basic script. The essential script moves around the body only in a narrow belt. The rest of the body is reserved for decoration. Can you now appreciate the work of the harrow and the whole apparatus? Just look at it!” He jumped up the ladder, turned a wheel, and called down, “Watch out – move to the side!” Everything started moving. If the wheel had not squeaked, it would have been marvelous. The officer threatened the wheel with his fist, as if he was surprised by the disturbance it created. Then he spread his arms, apologizing to the traveler, and quickly clambered down, in order to observe the operation of the apparatus from below.

Something was still not working properly, something only he noticed. He clambered up again and reached with both hands into the inside of the inscriber. Then, in order to descend more quickly, instead of using the ladder, he slid down on one of the poles and, to make himself understandable through the noise, strained his voice to the limit as he yelled in the traveler’s ear, “Do you understand the process? The harrow is starting to write. When it’s finished with the first part of the script on the man’s back, the layer of cotton wool rolls and turns the body slowly onto its side to give the harrow a new area. Meanwhile those parts lacerated by the inscription are lying on the cotton wool which, because it has been specially treated, immediately stops the bleeding and prepares the script for a further deepening. Here, as the body continues to rotate, prongs on the edge of the harrow then pull the cotton wool from the wounds, throw it into the pit, and the harrow goes to work again. In this way it keeps making the inscription deeper for twelve hours. For the first six hours the condemned man goes on living almost as before. He suffers nothing but pain. After two hours, the felt is removed, for at that point the man has no more energy for screaming. Here at the head of the bed warm rice pudding is put in this electrically heated bowl. From this the man, if he feels like it, can help himself to what he can lap up with his tongue. No one passes up this opportunity. I don’t know of a single one, and I have had a lot of experience. He first loses his pleasure in eating around the sixth hour. I usually kneel down at this point and observe the phenomenon. The man rarely swallows the last bit. He turns it around in his mouth and spits it into the pit. When he does that, I have to lean aside or else he’ll get me in the face. But how quiet the man becomes around the sixth hour! The most stupid of them begin to understand. It starts around the eyes and spreads out from there. A look that could tempt one to lie down under the harrow. Nothing else happens. The man simply begins to decipher the inscription. He pursues his lips, as if he is listening. You’ve seen that it’s not easy to figure out the inscription with your eyes, but our man deciphers it with his wounds. True, it takes a lot of work. It requires six hours
to complete. But then the harrow spits him right out and throws him into the pit, where he splashes down into the bloody water and cotton wool. Then the judgment is over, and we, the soldier and I, quickly bury him.”

The Traveler had leaned his ear towards the Officer and, with his hands in his coat pockets, was observing the machine at work. The Condemned Man was also watching, but without understanding. He bent forward a little and followed the moving needles, as the Soldier, after a signal from the Officer, cut through his shirt and trousers with a knife from the back, so that they fell off the Condemned Man. He wanted to grab the falling garments to cover his bare flesh, but the Soldier held him up and shook the last rags from him. The Officer turned the machine off, and in the silence which then ensued the Condemned Man was laid out under the harrow. The chains were taken off and the straps fastened in their place. For the Condemned Man it seemed at first glance to signify almost a relief. And now the harrow sunk down a stage lower, for the Condemned was a thin man. As the needle tips touched him, a shudder went over his skin. While the Soldier was busy with the right hand, the Condemned Man stretched out his left, with no sense of its direction. But it was pointing to where the Traveler was standing. The Officer kept looking at the Traveler from the side, without taking his eyes off him, as if he was trying to read from his face the impression he was getting of the execution, which he had now explained to him, at least superficially.

The strap meant to hold the wrist ripped off. The Soldier probably had pulled on it too hard. The Soldier showed the Officer the torn-off piece of strap, wanting him to help. So the Officer went over to him and said, with his face turned towards the Traveler, “The machine is very complicated. Now and then something has to tear or break. One shouldn’t let that detract from one’s overall opinion. Anyway, we have an immediate replacement for the strap. I’ll use a chain – even though that will affect the sensitivity of the movements for the right arm.” And while he put the chain in place, he kept talking, “Our resources for maintaining the machine are very limited at the moment. Under the previous Commandant, I had free access to a cash box specially set aside for this purpose. There was a store room here in which all possible replacement parts were kept. I admit I made almost extravagant use of it. I mean earlier, not now, as the New Commandant claims. For him everything serves only as a pretext to fight against the old arrangements. Now he keeps the cash box for machinery under his own control, and if I ask him for a new strap, he demands the torn one as a piece of evidence, the new one doesn’t arrive for ten days, and it’s an inferior brand, of not much use to me. But how I am supposed to get the machine to work in the meantime without a strap – no one’s concerned about that.”

The Traveler was thinking: it’s always questionable to intervene decisively in strange circumstances. He was neither a citizen of the penal colony nor a citizen of the state to which it belonged. If he wanted to condemn the execution or even hinder it, people could say to him: You’re a foreigner – keep quiet. He would have nothing in response to that, but could only add that he did not understand what he was doing on this occasion, for the purpose of his traveling was merely to observe and not to alter other people’s judicial systems in any way. True, at this point the way things were turning out it was very tempting. The injustice of the process and the inhumanity of the execution were beyond doubt. No one could assume that the Traveler was acting out of any sense of his own self-interest, for the Condemned Man was a stranger to him, not a countryman and not someone who invited sympathy in any way. The Traveler himself had letters of reference from high officials and had been welcomed here with great courtesy. The fact that he had been invited to this execution even seemed to indicate that people were asking for his judgment of this
trial. This was all the more likely since the Commandant, as he had now heard only too clearly, was no supporter of this process and maintained an almost hostile relationship with the Officer.

Then the Traveler heard a cry of rage from the Officer. He had just shoved the stub of felt in the Condemned Man's mouth, not without difficulty, when the Condemned Man, overcome by an irresistible nausea, shut his eyes and threw up. The Officer quickly yanked him up off the stump and wanted to turn his head aside toward the pit. But it was too late. The vomit was already flowing down onto the machine. "This is all the Commandant’s fault!" cried the officer and mindlessly ratted the brass rods at the front. "My machine’s as filthy as a pigsty." With trembling hands he showed the Traveler what had happened. "Haven’t I spent hours trying to make the Commandant understand that a day before the execution there should be no more food served. But the new lenient administration has a different opinion. Before the man is led away, the Commandant’s women cram sugary things down his throat. His whole life he’s fed himself on stinking fish, and now he has to eat sweets! But that would be all right – I’d have no objections – but why don’t they get a new felt, the way I’ve been asking him for three months now? How can anyone take this felt into his mouth without feeling disgusted – something that a hundred man have sucked and bitten on it as they were dying?"

The Condemned Man had laid his head down and appeared peaceful. The Soldier was busy cleaning up the machine with the Condemned Man’s shirt. The Officer went up to the Traveler, who, feeling some premonition, took a step backwards. But the Officer grasped him by the hand and pulled him aside. "I want to speak a few words to you in confidence,” he said. “May I do that?” “Of course,” said the Traveler and listened with his eyes lowered.

"This process and execution, which you now have an opportunity to admire, have no more open supporters in our colony. I am its only defender, just as I am the single advocate for the legacy of the Old Commandant. I can no longer think about a more extensive organization of the process – I’m using all my powers to maintain what there is at present. When the Old Commandant was alive, the colony was full of his supporters. I have something of the Old Commandant’s power of persuasion, but I completely lack his power, and as a result the supporters have gone into hiding. There are still a lot of them, but no one admits to it. If you go into a tea house today – that is to say, on a day of execution – and keep your ears open, perhaps you’ll hear nothing but ambiguous remarks. They are all supporters, but under the present Commandant, considering his present views, they are totally useless to me. And now I’m asking you: Should such a life’s work,” he pointed to the machine, “come to nothing because of this Commandant and the women influencing him? Should people let that happen? Even if one is a foreigner and only on our island for a couple of days? But there’s no time to lose. People are already preparing something against my judicial proceedings. Discussions are already taking place in the Commandant’s headquarters, to which I am not invited. Even your visit today seems to me typical of the whole situation. People are cowards and send you out – a foreigner. You should have seen the executions in earlier days! The entire valley was overflowing with people, even a day before the execution. They all came merely to watch. Early in the morning the Commandant appeared with his women. Fanfares woke up the entire campsite. I delivered the news that everything was ready. The whole society – and every high official had to attend – arranged itself around the machine. This pile of cane chairs is a sorry left over from that time. The machine was freshly cleaned and glowed. For almost every execution I had new replacement parts. In front of hundreds of eyes – all the spectators stood on tip toe right up to the hills there – the condemned man was laid down under the harrow by the Commandant himself. What nowadays is done by a common soldier was then my work as the senior judge, and it was a honour for me. And then the execution began! No discordant note disturbed the work of
the machine. Many people did not look any more at all, but lay down with closed eyes in the sand. They all knew: now justice was being carried out. In silence people listened to nothing but the groans of the condemned man, muffled by the felt. These days the machine no longer manages to squeeze a strong groan out of the condemned man – something the felt is not capable of smothering. But back then the needles which made the inscription dripped a caustic liquid which we are not permitted to use any more today. Well, then came the sixth hour. It was impossible to grant all the requests people made to be allowed to watch from up close. The Commandant, in his wisdom, arranged that the children should be taken care of before all the rest. Naturally, I was always allowed to stand close by, because of my official position. Often I crouched down there with two small children in my arms, on my right and left. How we all took in the expression of transfiguration on the martyred face! How we held our cheeks in the glow of this justice, finally attained and already passing away! What times we had, my friend!”

The Officer had obviously forgotten who was standing in front of him. He had put his arm around the Traveler and laid his head on his shoulder. The Traveler was extremely embarrassed. Impatiently he looked away over the Officer’s head. The Soldier had ended his task of cleaning and had just shaken some rice pudding into the bowl from a tin. No sooner had the Condemned Man, who seemed to have fully recovered already, noticed this than his tongue began to lick at the pudding. The Soldier kept pushing him away, for the pudding was probably meant for a later time, but in any case it was not proper for the Soldier to reach in and grab some food with his dirty hands and eat it in front of the famished Condemned Man.

The Officer quickly collected himself. “I didn’t want to upset you in any way,” he said. “I know it is impossible to make someone understand those days now. Besides, the machine still works and operates on its own. It operates on its own even when it is standing alone in this valley. And at the end, the body still keeps falling in that incredibly soft flight into the pit, even if hundreds of people are not gathered like flies around the hole the way they used to be. Back then we had to erect a strong railing around the pit. It was pulled out long ago.”

The Traveler wanted to turn his face away from the Officer and looked aimlessly around him. The Officer thought he was looking at the wasteland of the valley. So he grabbed his hands, turned him around in order to catch his gaze, and asked, “Do you see the shame of it?”

But the Traveler said nothing. The Officer left him alone for a while. With his legs apart and his hands on his hips, the Officer stood still and looked at the ground. Then he smiled at the Traveler cheerfully and said, “Yesterday I was nearby when the Commandant invited you. I heard the invitation. I know the Commandant. I understood right away what he intended with his invitation. Although his power might be sufficiently great to take action against me, he doesn’t yet dare to. But my guess is that with you he is exposing me to the judgment of a respected foreigner. He calculates things with care. You are now in your second day on the island. You didn’t know the Old Commandant and his way of thinking. You are trapped in a European way of seeing things. Perhaps you are fundamentally opposed to the death penalty in general and to this kind of mechanical style of execution in particular. Moreover, you see how the execution is a sad procedure, without any public participation, using a partially damaged machine. Now, if we take all this together (so the Commandant thinks) surely one could easily imagine that that you would not consider my procedure proper? And if you didn’t consider it right, you wouldn’t keep quiet about it – I’m still speaking the mind of the Commandant – for you no doubt have faith that your tried-and-true convictions are correct. It’s true that you have seen many peculiar things among many peoples and have learned to respect them. Thus, you will probably not speak out against the procedure with your full power, as you would perhaps in your own homeland. But the
Commandant doesn’t really need that. A casual word, merely a careless remark, is enough. It doesn’t have to match your convictions at all, so long as it corresponds to his wishes. I’m certain he will use all his shrewdness to interrogate you. And his women will sit around in a circle and perk up their ears. You will say something like, ‘Among us the judicial procedures are different,’ or ‘With us the accused is questioned before the verdict,’ or ‘We had torture only in the Middle Ages.’ For you these observations appear as correct as they are self-evident – innocent remarks which do not impugn my procedure. But how will the Commandant take them? I see him, our excellent Commandant – the way he immediately pushes his stool aside and hurries out to the balcony – I see his women, how they stream after him. I hear his voice – the women call it a thunder voice. And now he’s speaking: ‘A great Western explorer who has been commissioned to inspect judicial procedures in all countries has just said that our process based on old customs is inhuman. After the verdict of such a personality it is, of course, no longer possible for me to tolerate this procedure. So from this day on I am ordering … and so forth.’ You want to intervene – you didn’t say what he is reporting – you didn’t call my procedure inhuman; by contrast, in keeping with your deep insight, you consider it most humane and most worthy of human beings. You also admire this machinery. But it is too late. You don’t even go onto the balcony, which is already filled with women. You want to attract attention. You want to cry out. But a lady’s hand is covering your mouth, and I and the Old Commandant’s work are lost.”

The Traveler had to suppress a smile. So the work which he had considered so difficult was easy. He said evasively, “You’re exaggerating my influence. The Commandant has read my letters of recommendation. He knows that I am no expert in judicial processes. If I were to express an opinion, it would be that of a lay person, no more significant than the opinion of anyone else, and in any case far less significant than the opinion of the Commandant, who, as I understand it, has very extensive powers in this penal colony. If his views of this procedure are as definite as you think they are, then I’m afraid the time has come for this procedure to end, without any need for my humble opinion.”

Did the Officer understand by now? No, he did not yet get it. He shook his head vigorously, briefly looked back at the Condemned Man and the Soldier, who both flinched and stopped eating the rice, went up really close up to the Traveler, without looking into his face, but gazing at parts of his jacket, and said more gently than before: “You don’t know the Commandant. Where he and all of us are concerned you are – forgive the expression – to a certain extent innocent. Your influence, believe me, cannot be overestimated. In fact, I was blissfully happy when I heard that you were to be present at the execution by yourself. This order of the Commandant was aimed at me, but now I’ll turn it to my advantage. Without being distracted by false insinuations and disparaging looks – which could not have been avoided with a greater number of participants at the execution – you have listened to my explanation, looked at the machine, and are now about to view the execution. Your verdict is no doubt already fixed. If some small uncertainties remain, witnessing the execution will remove them. And now I’m asking you – help me with the Commandant!”

The Traveler did not let him go on talking. “How can I do that,” he cried. “It’s totally impossible. I can help you as little as I can harm you.”

“You could do it,” said the Officer. With some apprehension the Traveler observed that the Officer was clenching his fists. “You could do it,” repeated the Officer, even more emphatically. “I have a plan which must succeed. You think your influence is insufficient. I know it will be enough. But assuming you’re right, doesn’t saving this whole procedure require one to try even those methods which may be inadequate? So listen to my plan. To carry it out, it’s necessary,
above all, for you to keep as quiet as possible today in the colony about your verdict on this procedure. Unless someone asks you directly, you should not express any view whatsoever. But what you do say must be short and vague. People should notice that it’s difficult for you to speak about the subject, that you feel bitter, that, if you were to speak openly, you’d have to burst out cursing on the spot. I’m not asking you to lie, not at all. You should only give brief answers – something like, ‘Yes, I’ve seen the execution’ or ‘Yes, I’ve heard the full explanation.’ That’s all – nothing further. For that will be enough of an indication for people to observe in you a certain bitterness, even if that’s not what the Commandant will think. Naturally, he will completely misunderstand the issue and interpret it in his own way. My plan is based on that. Tomorrow a large meeting of all the higher administrative officials takes place at headquarters under the chairmanship of the Commandant. He, of course, understands how to turn such a meeting into a spectacle. A gallery has been built, which is always full of spectators. I’m compelled to take part in the discussions, though they fill me with disgust. In any case, you will certainly be invited to the meeting. If you follow my plan today and behave accordingly, the invitation will become an emphatic request. But should you for some inexplicable reason still not be invited, you must make sure you request an invitation. Then you’ll receive one without question. Now, tomorrow you are sitting with the women in the commandant’s box. With frequent upward glances he reassures himself that you are there. After various trivial and ridiculous agenda items designed for the spectators – mostly harbour construction – always harbour construction – the judicial process comes up for discussion. If it’s not raised by the Commandant himself or does not occur soon enough, I’ll make sure that it comes up. I’ll stand up and report on today’s execution. Really briefly – just the report. Such a report is not really customary; however, I’ll do it, nonetheless. The Commandant thanks me, as always, with a friendly smile. And now he cannot restrain himself. He seizes this excellent opportunity. ‘The report of the execution,’ he’ll say, or something like that, ‘has just been given. I would like to add to this report only the fact that this particular execution was attended by the great explorer whose visit confers such extraordinary honour on our colony, as you all know. Even the significance of our meeting today has been increased by his presence. Should we not now ask this great explorer for his appraisal of the execution based on old customs and of the process which preceded it?’ Of course, there is the noise of applause everywhere, universal agreement. And I’m louder than anyone. The Commandant bows before you and says, ‘Then in everyone’s name, I’m putting the question to you.’ And now you step up to the railing. Place your hands where everyone can see them. Otherwise the ladies will grab them and play with your fingers. And now finally come your remarks. I don’t know how I’ll bear the tension up to then. In your speech you mustn’t hold back. Let truth resound. Lean over the railing and shout it out – yes, yes, roar your opinion at the Commandant, your unshakeable opinion. But perhaps you don’t want to do that. It doesn’t suit your character. Perhaps in your country people behave differently in such situations. That’s all right. That’s perfectly satisfactory. Don’t stand up at all. Just say a couple of words. Whisper them so that only the officials underneath you can just hear them. That’s enough. You don’t even have to say anything at all about the lack of attendance at the execution or about the squeaky wheel, the torn strap, the disgusting felt. No. I’ll take over all further details, and, believe me, if my speech doesn’t chase him out of the room, it will force him to his knees, so he’ll have to admit it: ‘Old Commandant, I bow down before you.’ That’s my plan. Do you want to help me carry it out? But, of course, you want to. More than that – you have to.”

And the officer gripped the traveler by both arms and looked at him, breathing heavily into his face. He had yelled the last sentences so loudly that even the Soldier and the Condemned Man
were paying attention. Although they couldn’t understand a thing, they stopped eating and looked over at the Traveler, still chewing.

From the start the Traveler had had no doubts about the answer he must give. He had experienced too much in his life to be able to waver here. Basically he was honest and unafraid. Still, with the Soldier and the Condemned Man looking at him, he hesitated a moment. But finally he said, as he had to, “No.” The Officer’s eyes blinked several times, but he did not take his eyes off the Traveler. “Would you like an explanation,” asked the Traveler. The Officer nodded dumbly. “I am opposed to this procedure,” said the Traveler. “Even before you took me into your confidence – and, of course, I will never abuse your confidence under any circumstances – I was already thinking about whether I was entitled to intervene against this procedure and whether my intervention could have the smallest chance of success. And if that was the case, it was clear to me whom I had to turn to first of all – naturally, to the Commandant. You clarified the issue for me even more, but without reinforcing my decision in any way – quite the reverse. I find your conviction genuinely moving, even if it cannot deter me.”

The Officer remained quiet, turned toward the machine, grabbed one of the brass rods, and then, leaning back a little, looked up at the inscriber, as if he was checking that everything was in order. The Soldier and the Condemned Man seemed to have made friends with each other. The Condemned Man was making signs to the Soldier, although, given the tight straps on him, this was difficult for him to do. The Soldier was leaning into him. The Condemned Man whispered something to him, and the Soldier nodded. The Traveler went over to the Officer and said, “You don’t yet know what I’ll do. Yes, I will tell the Commandant my opinion of the procedure – not in a meeting, but in private. In addition, I won’t stay here long enough to be able to get called in to some meeting or other. Early tomorrow morning I leave, or at least I go on board ship.” It didn’t look as if the Officer had been listening. “So the process has not convinced you,” he said to himself, smiling the way an old man smiles over the silliness of a child, concealing his own true thoughts behind that smile.

“Well then, it’s time,” he said finally and suddenly looked at the Traveler with bright eyes which contained some sort of demand, some appeal for participation. “Time for what?” asked the Traveler uneasily. But there was no answer.

“You are free,” the Officer told the Condemned Man in his own language. At first the man did not believe him. “You are free now,” said the Officer. For the first time the face of the Condemned Man showed signs of real life. Was it the truth? Was it only the Officer’s mood, which could change? Had the foreign Traveler brought him a reprieve? What was it? That’s what the man’s face seemed to be asking. But not for long. Whatever the case might be, if he could he wanted to be truly free, and he began to shake back and forth, as much as the harrow permitted.

“You’re tearing my straps,” cried the Officer. “Be still! We’ll undo them right away.” And, giving a signal to the Soldier, he set to work with him. The Condemned Man said nothing and smiled slightly to himself. He turned his face to the Officer and then to the Soldier and then back again, without ignoring the Traveler.

“Pull him out,” the Officer ordered the Soldier. This process required a certain amount of care because of the harrow. The Condemned Man already had a few small wounds on his back, thanks to his own impatience.

From this point on, however, the Officer paid him hardly any attention. He went up to the Traveler, pulled out the small leather folder once more, leafed through it, finally found the sheet he was looking for, and showed it to the Traveler. “Read that,” he said. “I can’t,” said the Traveler. “I’ve already told you I can’t read these pages.” “But take a close look at the page,” said the
Officer, and moved up right next to the Traveler in order to read with him. When that didn’t help, he raised his little finger high up over the paper, as if the page must not be touched under any circumstances, so that using this he might make the task of reading easier for the Traveler. The Traveler also made an effort so that at least he could satisfy the Officer, but it was impossible for him. Then the Officer began to spell out the inscription and then read out once again the joined up letters. “Be just!’ it states,” he said. “Now you can read it.” The Traveler bent so low over the paper that the Officer, afraid that he might touch it, moved it further away. The Traveler didn’t say anything more, but it was clear that he was still unable to read anything. “’Be just!’ it says,” the Officer remarked once again.

“That could be,” said the Traveler. “I do believe that’s written there.” “Good,” said the Officer, at least partially satisfied. He climbed up the ladder, holding the paper. With great care he set the page in the inscriber and appeared to rotate the gear mechanism completely around. This was very tiring work. It must have required him to deal with extremely small wheels. He had to inspect the gears so closely that sometimes his head disappeared completely into the inscriber.

The Traveler followed this work from below without looking away. His neck grew stiff, and his eyes found the sunlight pouring down from the sky painful. The Soldier and the Condemned Man were keeping each other busy. With the tip of his bayonet the Soldier pulled out the Condemned Man’s shirt and trousers which were lying in the hole. The shirt was horribly dirty, and the Condemned Man washed it in the bucket of water. When he was putting on his shirt and trousers, the Soldier and the Condemned Man had to laugh out loud, for the pieces of clothing were cut in two up the back. Perhaps the Condemned Man thought that it was his duty to amuse the Soldier. In his ripped-up clothes he circled around the Soldier, who crouched down on the ground, laughed, and slapped his knees. But they restrained themselves out of consideration for the two gentlemen present.

When the Officer was finally finished up on the machine, with a smile he looked over the whole thing and all its parts one more time, and this time closed the cover of the inscriber, which had been open up to this point. He climbed down, looked into the hole and then at the Condemned Man, observed with satisfaction that he had pulled out his clothes, then went to the bucket of water to wash his hands, recognized too late that it was disgustingly dirty, and was upset that now he couldn’t wash his hands. Finally he pushed them into the sand. This option didn’t satisfy him, but he had to do what he could in the circumstances. Then he stood up and began to unbutton the coat of his uniform. As he did this, the two lady’s handkerchiefs, which he had pushed into the back of his collar, fell into his hands. “Here you have your handkerchiefs,” he said and threw them over to the Condemned Man. And to the Traveler he said by way of an explanation, “Presents from the ladies.”

In spite of the obvious speed with which he took off the coat of his uniform and then undressed himself completely, he handled each piece of clothing very carefully, even running his fingers over the silver braids on his tunic with special care and shaking a tassel into place. But in great contrast to this care, as soon he was finished handling an article of clothing, he immediately flung it angrily into the hole. The last items he had left were his short sword and its harness. He pulled the sword out of its scabbard, broke it in pieces, gathered up everything – the pieces of the sword, the scabbard, and the harness – and threw them away so forcefully that they rattled against each other down in the pit.

Now he stood there naked. The Traveler bit his lip and said nothing. For he was aware what would happen, but he had no right to hinder the Officer in any way. If the judicial process to which the officer clung was really so close to the point of being cancelled – perhaps as a result of the
intervention of the Traveler, something to which he for his part felt duty-bound – then the Officer was now acting in a completely correct manner. In his place, the Traveler would not have acted any differently.

The Soldier and the Condemned Man at first didn’t understand a thing. To begin with they didn’t look, not even once. The Condemned Man was extremely happy to get the handkerchiefs back, but he couldn’t enjoy them very long, for the Soldier snatched them from him with a quick grab, which he had not anticipated. The Condemned Man then tried to pull the handkerchiefs out from the Soldier’s belt, where he had put them for safe keeping, but the Soldier was too wary. So they were fighting, half in jest. Only when the Officer was fully naked did they start to pay attention. The Condemned Man especially seemed to be struck by a premonition of some sort of significant transformation. What had happened to him was now taking place with the Officer. Perhaps this time the procedure would play itself out to its conclusion. The foreign Traveler had probably given the order. So that was revenge. Without having suffered all the way to the end himself, nonetheless he would be completely revenged. A wide, silent laugh now appeared on his face and did not go away.

The Officer, however, had turned towards the machine. If earlier on it had already become clear that he understood the machine thoroughly, one might well get alarmed now at the way he handled it and how it obeyed. He only had to bring his hand near the harrow for it to rise and sink several times, until it had reached the correct position to make room for him. He only had to grasp the bed by the edges, and it already began to quiver. The stump of felt moved up to his mouth. One could see how the Officer really didn’t want to accept it, but his hesitation was only momentary – he immediately submitted and took it in. Everything was ready, except that the straps still hung down on the sides. But they were clearly unnecessary. The Officer did not have to be strapped down. When the Condemned Man saw the loose straps, he thought the execution would be incomplete unless they were fastened. He waved eagerly to the Soldier, and they ran over to strap in the Officer. The latter had already stuck out his foot to kick the crank designed to set the inscriber in motion. Then he saw the two men coming. So he pulled his foot back and let himself be strapped in. But now he could no longer reach the crank. Neither the Soldier nor the Condemned Man would find it, and the Traveler was determined not to touch it. But that was unnecessary. Hardly were the straps attached when the machine already started working. The bed quivered, the needles danced on his skin, and the harrow swung up and down. The Traveler had already been staring for some time before he remembered that a wheel in the inscriber was supposed to squeak. But everything was quiet, without the slightest audible hum.

Because of its silent working, the machine did not really attract attention. The Traveler looked over at the Soldier and the Condemned Man. The Condemned Man was the livelier of the two. Everything in the machine interested him. At times he bent down – at other times he stretched up, all the time pointing with his forefinger in order to show something to the Soldier. For the Traveler it was embarrassing. He was determined to remain here until the end, but he could no longer endure the sight of the two men. “Go home,” he said. The Soldier might have been ready to do that, but the Condemned Man took the order as a direct punishment. With his hands folded he begged and pleaded to be allowed to stay there. And when the Traveler shook his head and was unwilling to give in, he even knelt down. Seeing that orders were of no help here, the Traveler wanted to go over and chase the two away.

Then he heard a noise from up in the inscriber. He looked up. So was the gear wheel going out of alignment? But it was something else. The lid on the inscriber was lifting up slowly. Then it fell completely open. The teeth of a cog wheel were exposed and lifted up. Soon the entire wheel
appeared. It was as if some huge force was compressing the inscriber, so that there was no longer sufficient room for this wheel. The wheel rolled all the way to the edge of the inscriber, fell down, rolled upright a bit in the sand, and then fell over and lay still. But already up on the inscriber another gear wheel was moving upwards. Several others followed – large ones, small ones, ones hard to distinguish. With each of them the same thing happened. One kept thinking that now the inscriber must surely be empty, but then a new cluster with lots of parts would move up, fall down, roll in the sand, and lie still. With all this going on, the Condemned Man totally forgot the Traveler’s order. The gear wheels completely delighted him. He kept wanting to grab one, and at the same time he was urging the Soldier to help him. But he kept pulling his hand back startled, for immediately another wheel followed, which, at least in its initial rolling, surprised him.

The Traveler, by contrast, was very upset. Obviously the machine was breaking up. Its quiet operation had been an illusion. He felt as if he had to look after the Officer, now that the latter could no longer look after himself. But while the falling gear wheels were claiming all his attention, he had neglected to look at the rest of the machine. However, when he now bent over the harrow, once the last gear wheel had left the inscriber, he had a new, even more unpleasant surprise. The harrow was not writing but only stabbing, and the bed was not rolling the body, but lifting it, quivering, up into the needles. The Traveler wanted to reach in to stop the whole thing, if possible. This was not the torture the Officer wished to attain. It was murder, pure and simple. He stretched out his hands. But at that point the harrow was already moving upwards and to the side, with the skewered body – just as it did in other cases, but only in the twelfth hour. Blood flowed out in hundreds of streams, not mixed with water – the water tubes had also failed to work this time. Then one last thing went wrong: the body would not come loose from the needles. Its blood streamed out, but it hung over the pit without falling. The harrow wanted to move back to its original position, but, as if it realized that it could not free itself of its load, it remained over the hole.

“Help,” the Traveler yelled out to the Soldier and the Condemned Man and grabbed the Officer’s feet. He wanted to push against the feet himself and have the two others grab the Officer’s head from the other side, so he could be slowly taken off the needles. But now the two men could not make up their mind whether to come or not. The Condemned Man turned away at once. The Traveler had to go over to him and drag him to the Officer’s head by force. At this point, almost against his will, he looked at the face of the corpse. It was as it had been in his life. He could discover no sign of the promised transfiguration. What all the others had found in the machine, the Officer had not. His lips were pressed firmly together, his eyes were open and looked as they had when he was alive, his gaze was calm and convinced. The tip of a large iron needle had gone through his forehead.

As the Traveler, with the Soldier and the Condemned Man behind him, came to the first houses in the colony, the Soldier pointed to one and said, “That’s the tea house.”

On the ground floor of one of the houses was a deep, low room, like a cave, with smoke-covered walls and ceiling. On the street side it was open along its full width. Although there was little difference between the tea house and the rest of the houses in the colony, which were all very dilapidated, except for the Commandant’s palatial structure, the Traveler was struck by the impression of historical memory, and he felt the power of earlier times. Followed by his companions, he walked closer, going between the unoccupied tables, which stood in the street in front of the tea house, and took a breath of the cool, stuffy air which came from inside. “The old man is buried here,” said the soldier; “a place in the cemetery was denied him by the chaplain. For a long time people were undecided where they should bury him. Finally they buried him here. Of
course, the Officer explained none of that to you, for naturally he was the one most ashamed about it. A few times he even tried to dig up the old man at night, but he was always chased off.” “Where is the grave?” asked the Traveler, who could not believe the Soldier. Instantly both men, the Soldier and the Condemned Man, ran in front of him and with hands outstretched pointed to the place where the grave was located. They led the Traveler to the back wall, where guests were sitting at a few tables. They were presumably dock workers, strong men with short, shiny, black beards. None of them wore coats, and their shirts were torn. They were poor, oppressed people. As the Traveler came closer, a few got up, leaned against the wall, and looked at him. A whisper went up around the Traveler – “It’s a foreigner. He wants to look at the grave.” They pushed one of the tables aside, under which there was a real grave stone. It was a simple stone, low enough for it to remain hidden under a table. It bore an inscription in very small letters. In order to read it the Traveler had to kneel down. It read, “Here rests the Old Commandant. His followers, who are now not permitted to have a name, buried him in this grave and erected this stone. There exists a prophecy that the Commandant will rise again after a certain number of years and from this house will lead his followers to a re-conquest of the colony. Have faith and wait!”

When the Traveler had read it and got up, he saw the men standing around him and smiling, as if they had read the inscription with him, found it ridiculous, and were asking him to share their opinion. The Traveler acted as if he hadn’t noticed, distributed some coins among them, waited until the table was pushed back over the grave, left the tea house, and went to the harbour.

In the tea house the Soldier and the Condemned Man had come across some people they knew who detained them. However, they must have broken free of them soon, because by the time the Traveler found himself in the middle of a long staircase which led to the boats, they were already running after him. They probably wanted to force the Traveler at the last minute to take them with him. While the Traveler was haggling at the bottom of the stairs with a sailor about his passage out to the steamer, the two men were racing down the steps in silence, for they didn’t dare cry out. But as they reached the bottom, the Traveler was already in the boat, and the sailor at once cast off from shore. They could still have jumped into the boat, but the Traveler picked up a heavy knotted rope from the boat bottom, threatened them with it, and thus prevented them from jumping in.