

Renewing the Wellsprings of Responsibility

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There has been something seriously out of whack with Americans' relationship to work—at least those with college educations who pursue professional and management positions. On the one hand, we are clearly working at a more furious pace. Among the top fifth of earners, long weeks have increased by eighty percent since 1980; and Blackberries and cell phones have further eroded social time, blurring the boundaries between work, home, and leisure. Judith Shelevitz has written about bringing back the Jewish observance of the Sabbath as one way to extricate herself from a society that pegs status to overachievement. How else, she asks, can we shut down the machinery of self-censorship about work, or still the murmur of self reproach about not getting enough done.¹

This culture of achievement can be all-pervasive. In his book about the American middle class, On Paradise Drive, David Brooks describes the quiet revolution in the way Americans are raising their children -- what he calls the professionalization of childhood. Even grade school children are pushed into a culture of competition, with great attention given to which school they should attend, what grades they should achieve, and how many activities they should pursue. "There exists," he says, "a massive organic apparatus for the production of children, a mighty Achievatron." The message is loud and clear: identity at any age is formed by what we do and accomplish. The family, what Christopher Lasch has called "a haven in a heartless world," a counterbalance to competition, is now constructed as one more means to try to get ahead.²

There is also a second problem with contemporary professional life, beyond the fact that work looms larger in our lives. It is that young people have been defining success and choosing careers with less attention to larger questions of meaning and purpose. The stratospheric salaries in investment banking, in consulting, in the premier law firms, and in specialized sectors of medicine have bedazzled a whole generation of our best students. Yet despite their financial success, there are signs of acute frustration by

many young professionals. Often, work does not satisfy or sustain. An astounding seventy-eight percent of new lawyers leave their firm by the end of their fifth year—up from sixty percent in 2000.³

The current economic turmoil is taking its toll on jobs and psyches on Wall Street and on Main Street. It will also slam shut the easy routes to fame and fortune that many students have enjoyed. But now we're left with the question: what happens when the rewards aren't there? When the applause stops and the checks shrivel?

Students will be forced to reassess what's at their core. What are their values? Have they found the deeper meaning in what they plan to do? I suspect that many career choices have been rooted in a paycheck and a craving for accolades and esteem, rather than a passion for a particular type of work. Can this crisis be a wake-up call for students to face the challenge posed by William James: "The great use of life is to spend it for something that outlasts it."

President Barack Obama has suggested that the dismal state of the American economy is due to "an era of profound irresponsibility" stretching from Wall Street executives, to Washington regulators, to banks and to borrowers. He calls for all of us to trade these old habits for "a new spirit of responsibility."

This is a most pressing question indeed for those of us in higher education. We seek to develop young professionals of real character, men and women who do the right thing because it springs from their own commitments and values, not because it is legislated or imposed.

How do we train leaders, Father Theodore Hesburgh often asked, not just to make a living, but how to live? What can colleges and universities do to form leaders who, to use a poignant example, might have a twinge of conscience about a system that sold mortgages without restraint to persons with little ability to make future payments? "We don't just need a financial bailout," Tom Friedman has suggested in his piece "The Great Unraveling," "we need an ethical bailout."

How can we as colleges and universities work to renew the wellsprings of responsibility? How can we offer to students formative vocational discernment? We must begin by admitting how difficult it is for colleges today to take on the task of character as well as intellectual formation. On this point there is a

healthy debate. Some, like Stanley Fish or Stanley Mearshimer, have argued that universities have no business trying to make people good. They should “aim low” and leave the task to churches, synagogues, and mosques.⁴

Many others, however, note ruefully the seeming inability of higher education to help students answer the question “What is living for?” In his book Education’s End: Why Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life, Anthony Kronman notes that he has “watched the question of life’s meaning lose its status as a subject of organized academic instruction and seen it pushed to the margins of professional respectability in the humanities, where it once occupied a central and honored place.” William Chace, the former President of Wesleyan and Emory, says that is “profoundly lamentable” that universities seem so incapable of addressing the issue of moral development.⁵ In a similar cry of the heart, Harry Lewis, the former dean of Harvard College, has written Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education. The excellence of the modern university is hollow he suggests, because it has forgotten Emerson’s conclusion that the honing of the mind is aimless without the development of character.⁶

The disjunction he sees between life and work has led psychologist Howard Gardner to launch a major collaborative project called "Good Work." The aim is to explore ways in which students and professionals in every field can do work that is both high-quality and imbued with an underlying sense of purpose and commitment to improving society. Dr. Gardner has developed a non-credit seminar for freshmen at Harvard, “Meaningful Work in a Meaningful Life.” Fundamental questions in these courses include “To whom are you responsible?” and “What makes you trustworthy?”⁷

The Teagle Foundation, led by W. Robert Connor, has also been engaged in an initiative to engage colleges and faculty in posing for students “the big questions” of meaning and value. The project is premised on the sharp divorce between student and faculty expectations. A broad-based survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA in 2005 found very high levels of religious practice and interest among students. But a relatively small proportion of students indicated satisfaction with how their college experience provided “opportunities for religious/spiritual development.” Sixty-two percent said their professors never encourage discussion of spiritual or religious issues.⁸

Robert Conner is clear about the reasons for these differing expectations. Faculty are hired and promoted for their “sectoral knowledge” and understandably resist any suggestion that they should be involved in the moral formation of students. In fact, many see it as dangerous to their professional identity and reputation, particularly since so much talk of morality has come from the far right. Harry Lewis agrees that this deep tension will exist as long as faculty are hired primarily on the basis of their scholarly distinction even as students come to college seeking, among other things, a framework for meaning and purpose.⁹

I know from personal experience how sensitive these issues can be. In our recent strategic planning process at Wake Forest, one of the most sensitive issues that arose involved suggestions about institutional responsibility for “moral formation” or shaping the “conscience.” These very words gave some faculty members pause. If a faculty is the heart of the university, some ask, how can the institution take on a role that faculty may not welcome and for which many feel unprepared?

How, then, does one get beyond this deep gulf between our aspirations and the reality on our campuses, what Dennis O’Brien has called “the disappearing moral curriculum.”? ¹⁰ How does one begin to address the reality behind David Brooks’ stark assessment that “on the whole, college students are articulate on every subject save morality”?¹¹

First, we must admit the nature and extent of the problem, beginning with student expectations and assumptions. We need to realize the extent to which students have become “practical credentialists” who do not necessarily look to a college curriculum to develop a philosophy of life.

At the same time, sociologist Christian Smith has argued in his book on the spiritual life of teenagers, Soul Searching, that the dominant belief among young people today is that everyone decides for himself or herself. “American youth, like American adults, are nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal norm and goal.” It is as if they took to heart the soft-drink commercial: “Obey your thirst: who you gonna listen to? how about yourself?” Too often students frame values from a convenient set of clichés from popular culture, but little else. Few have even the vocabulary, analytic skills, or basic grounding in the approaches of various philosophical and religious traditions.¹²

On a more hopeful note, students also yearn to connect with something larger. They want to do good, and do well, to lead an examined and purposeful life. College-age engagement in the presidential election

was unprecedented. And being on a campus, I can feel the excitement that students express about larger issues such as a sustainable environment, the development of alternative energy, and the potential of micro-finance in the developing world. How do we channel these nascent hopes and dreams; and relate them to powerful traditions of thought about the meaning of work and the changing state of the professions?

Second, we must expand the occasions, curricular and otherwise, that challenges students to define their own commitments and how they relate to life and work. How can we assist faculty to do this in ways that are inviting and appropriate? This is a delicate task for at least three reasons. First, such explorations do not fit into a conventional liberal arts curriculum. Second, most faculty are not accustomed to urging students to unpack their own values and commitments. Finally, faculty members are rightly skittish about pressing their own beliefs upon students.

Fortunately, there are splendid examples or models of faculty who have raised these issues in appropriate ways. Robert Coles has described what he learned from a student at Harvard who was leaving the university because of acute frustration with students whose thinking had little bearing on their lives. She asked Coles this unnerving question: “I’ve been taking all these philosophy courses, and we talk about what’s true, what’s important, what’s good. Well, how do you teach people to be good? What’s the point of knowing good, if you don’t keep trying to become a good person?” In response, Coles describes how he now makes an explicit issue of pushing students in courses to link formal reasoning and personal action.¹³

Similarly, Howard Gardner’s course “Meaningful Work in a Meaningful Life” takes up issues defining meaningful work, the nature of mentors and role models, the role of trust and trustworthiness, and the issue of responsibility. The final session asks students to prepare their own tool kit to address what is necessary for them to achieve meaningful work and meaningful life. In a similar vein, Paul Christesen of Dartmouth College decided to hold an extramural seminar for a dozen or so of his students who wanted to discuss a set of issues but couldn’t find the right setting. Each meeting starts with a student preparing in advance a “discourse on your life” about a question they are trying to answer or a crucial stage in their development. The other members of the group can respond only in the form of questions.¹⁴

The most formative resource in this area is Lilly Endowment’s Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation which maintains a superb website of texts, movies, and course syllabi. This Lilly

initiative has spawned scores of interesting courses available for examination. Will Willimon at Duke University, for instance, used fiction to explore “The Modern Self: Solitary or Summoned, and Paula Cooley at Macalister College offered “Work and Ethics Across Traditions,” comparing the ethic of work in the United States and Japan. These are marvelous resources, exploring the rich complexity of the modern world of work and important traditions of moral, religious, and spiritual wisdom. Two superb anthologies have also been produced by faculty at Valparaiso University: Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass, Leading Lives that Matter: Who We Should Do and Who We Should Be, and Gilbert C. Meilaender, Working: Its Meaning and Limits.

The most pressing question is whether institutions will have the will and the creativity to sponsor a substantive range of courses in this area. Except in distinctly religious colleges, such efforts will probably not spring naturally from the faculty and the current design of the liberal arts curriculum. It will take considerable institutional effort and resource, similar to initiatives to launch centers for teaching and learning. In all likelihood, such efforts will be welcomed by some faculty, opposed by others, and critically observed by a majority to see the fruits of the experiment. To allay suspicion and to build support, leaders will need to be academically savvy, student-oriented, and programmatically creative.

Programs for vocation discernment should also extend beyond the classroom. There is a great opportunity for campus chaplains to become more active in helping students chart their professional path, particularly given the resources made available from the Lilly Endowment’s Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation. Drawing on such resources, campus chaplains from a wide variety of religious traditions can challenge students to relate life and work.

Colleges should also encourage career development programs to go beyond mere job placement, as important as that is. What students today need — and many yearn for — is more fundamental advice about choosing a profession. What are my gifts and talents and my passions and commitments? How do they square with a full spectrum of professional opportunities?

An interesting model is a program developed by Andy Chan, the Director of the Career Management Center at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. His “Career and Life Vision” seminar is offered both as a course and as a non-credit one-day experience. It asks students to reflect on their own history, to define their own core values, passions, and goals and to map these against specific professional opportunities. The

force of the seminar is to ground professional choice in personal visions of what is most important and what gives deepest meaning.¹⁵

Our culture and our students are thirsty for reconnecting issues of meaning and purpose to vocational discernment, but colleges and universities today have a much harder time doing this than in the past. What is heartening is the number of experiments that are seeking to address the issue. To do this effectively on behalf of our students, will mean working against the gravitational forces of the modern academy. To broach the issue of shaping character, to suggest that there are religious and spiritual resources that might be useful in that effort, to delve into student's beliefs and commitments, and to take on a subject matter that falls outside normal disciplinary boundaries—all make for a complex if not precarious effort.

A final complication is that an academic approach to the issue is necessary but not sufficient. A robust program exploring vocational discernment should involve rigorous courses on everything from the history and sociology of the professions to the meaning of vocation in various religious traditions. But it should also engage those offices in our schools that deal with volunteer service, with spiritual formation, and with career planning. Few programs on our campuses cut across long-standing divisions in this way. It will take new energy and resolve and fresh initiatives if colleges are to recover their rightful place in helping students discover for themselves what living is for.

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- ¹ Judith Shulevitz, "Bring Back the Sabbath," The New York Times, March 2, 2003.
- ² See Christopher Lasch, Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged, Basic Books, 1977
- ³ http://www.jdblissblog.com/attorney_retention.html. See also Pauline W. Chen, "Medical Student Burnout and the Challenge to Patient Care," The New York Times, October 31, 2008.
- ⁴ Stanley Fish: Save the World on Your Own Time (Oxford, 2008); John Mearsheimer, "The Aims of Education Address," The University of Chicago Record, October 23, 1997. For a good synopsis of this debate, see Peter Stenfels, "Belief: the University's Role in Instilling a Moral Code Among Students? None Whatever, Some Argue," New York Times, June 19, 2004, p. A 13.
- ⁵ William M. Chace, 100 Semesters: My Adventures As Student, Professor, and University President, and What I Learned Along the Way (Princeton, 2006)
- ⁶ See also the Phi Beta Kappa Lecture by Dennis O'Brien, the former President of the University of Rochester, "The Disappearing Moral Curriculum," The Key Reporter, Volume 62, Number 4 (Summer 1997)
- ⁷ See Howard Gardner, Good Work: Where Excellence and Ethics Meet (Basic Books, 2001) and Howard Gardner, ed., Responsibility at Work: How Leading Professionals Act (or Don't Act) Responsibly (Jossey-Bass, 2007)
- ⁸ See W. Robert Connor, "The Right Time and Place for Big Questions," The Chronicle of Higher Education, June 9, 2006; and "Liberal Education and 'the Big Questions,'" Liberal Education, Spring, 2007.
- ⁹ Harry R. Lewis, Excellence Without a Soul, p. 17.
- ¹⁰ O'Brien, "The Disappearing Moral Curriculum," The Key Reporter, Volume 62, Number 4 (Summer 1997)
- ¹¹ David Brooks, On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have in the Future Tense), Simon and Shuster, 2004.
- ¹² Christian Smith, Soul Searching
- ¹³ Robert Coles, "The Disparity Between Intellect and Character," The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 22, 1995
- ¹⁴ W. Robert Connor, "Watching Charlotte Climb: Little Steps toward Big Questions," Liberal Education, Spring, 2007, pp. 6-13.
- ¹⁵ <http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/cmc/about/bio.html>