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Introduction

LEARNING, LEISURE, AND HAPPINESS

Some say that a host of horsemen,
others a host of foot-soldiers,
others a host of ships
is the most beautiful thing on the black earth.
But I say it is that thing,
whatever it is,
that one loves.

—SAPPHO, FRAGMENT 16

The Love of Learning

Certain forms of work wear their value on their sleeve. Ironically, these are often those we reward the least: looking after children or the elderly, providing water or electricity, cleaning public bathrooms, collecting garbage, preparing or serving food. Other forms of work may have evident rewards in salary and status, but over the years can leave the stench of pretended usefulness.¹ Which of the forms of work available to us meet or fail to meet real human needs? How do the rewards and visible results of our work connect with their ultimate value? Is there a hidden work that we do, underneath or behind our visible work? How does one become entranced by the rewards of one's work to the point of neglecting its ultimate purpose?

These questions apply to any of us who work, but the work I know is the work of the mind. What does it mean to pursue learning for its own sake? Is it even possible? Is the joy of learning itself selfish? If not, how could the strands of selfishness in it, the rush for achievement, the thrill of competition, be unwound from its heart?

And yet, without visible results, why should intellectual life matter, especially in a world so suffused with suffering? What role could it or should it play in repairing the broken fragments of our communities or in pushing back the darkness at their margins? These questions, along with a host of others that arise from them, shape the chapters that follow.

What does learning look like, stripped of its trappings of fame, prestige, fortune, and social use? In other words, how is it good for its own sake, because of its effect on the learner rather than because of its outward results?

I say “its effect on the learner,” but that phrase of course raises further questions. What sort of effect are we looking for? If learning is simply a pleasure, like a foot massage or a walk on the beach, would that suffice to account for its value? I think not, because a human being must be more than a vehicle of its own pleasure. Questions about what is valuable in itself for human beings have to do with *what a human being is* and what *our* ultimate value is. These are huge questions, to the point of being indigestible. They have to be nibbled around rather than gulped all at once. For now, it will be enough to try to isolate what is called the intrinsic value of learning, its value apart from the visible or outward results.

We all know examples of learning loved for itself. We see the love of learning in children collecting and cataloging dead bugs,

or in bookworms as they huddle in closets and corners, hiding from their public lives as shop owners, politicians, or housewives. A bird watcher with his binoculars and guidebook lives a life of learning, as does a hobbyist modeling historically accurate toy soldiers, carefully researching period costumes and hairstyles. So too does an artist who ponders the shape of a tree in order to capture its color and movement, or a novelist who soaks herself in an urban community in order to untangle and dramatize its elements. Hippies hunger to learn when they travel the world in search of the meaning of life. Distracted mathematicians exercise the love of learning as they manipulate strange symbols and disclose what lies under the surface of things; so does the philosophical teenager who suddenly wonders what numbers are.

I've mentioned characteristic forms of learning for its own sake: mathematical proofs or calculations; the study of the natural world; thoughtful reflection on experience; reading books, or, at least, reading good books. These activities are aimed at certain objects: mathematical objects, principles, and proofs; the behavior of animals, plants, and materials; and the ruminations on human life found in works of literature, philosophy, or history. But we desire to learn for as many reasons as there are things to desire. Consider the overzealous explainer, always anxious to correct us, saying "Actually, . . ." We suspect that he uses learning as a form of social domination, perhaps to compensate for status lost in athletic or erotic contests. More generally, a spy reads a work of literature to get inside the mind-set of her target; a quant on Wall Street fiercely calculates risks to maximize profits; a political activist pores over scientific literature seeking evidence that supports his cause; a mafia boss studies the chemistry of decomposition to get rid of a body. These are not exercises of the love of learning but are undertaken for different goals: military victory, wealth, political success, escaping the notice of

the law. So we call such uses of the intellect *instrumental*; they are motivated by results and outcomes, whatever the intensity of their pursuit. By contrast, the hidden life of learning involves some savoring of its natural objects—people, numbers, God, nature—for their own sake.

A person can do mathematics without doing it thoughtfully and reflectively, caught instead in a fear- and shame-driven race for achievement. Such is the life of learning offered by much or most of our educational system. On its own, it is not learning for its own sake any more than is the activity of spies, Wall Street quants, or political activists. On the other hand, a person can start out on a project as a mere means to an end and find herself appreciating the activity for itself. The outcome-driven math student can catch on to the beauty of math, the pleasure of proof and calculation, and so open up the inner activity of learning sought for its own sake. So too the teenager longing for the love and approval of his peers can read a book just to impress someone and find himself caught by something deeper. Consider comedian Steve Martin's description of how he became a philosophy major thanks to the influence of his girlfriend, Stormie:

If Stormie had said I would look good in a burgundy ball gown, I would have gone out and bought a burgundy ball gown. Instead, she suggested I read W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. *The Razor's Edge* is a book about a quest for knowledge. Universal, final, unquestionable knowledge. I was swept up in the book's glorification of learning and the idea that, like a stage magician, I could have secrets possessed only by a few.²

Martin starts out trying to please his girlfriend and ends up discovering a passion for learning that shapes his young life. But his interest in philosophy outlasts the relationship that inspired

it; it would be a mistake to see it as inauthentic, as a mere attempt to please someone else, because of the way it was discovered.

Jack London tells a similar story in his semiautobiographical novel *Martin Eden*. The working-class protagonist is invited to a wealthy stranger's house, where he examines a pile of alluring books and meets a beautiful young woman. He falls in love with both and undertakes a grueling self-directed course of reading for her sake. But as it turns out, the books unlock a highly critical and brilliant individual with whom the wealthy young woman is incompatible. Eden's development exposes a rift between the carefully policed gentility of the educated middle classes and the wild and open possibilities of intellectual development. His progress into a suicidal disillusionment also points to a danger of a life of learning: an alienation that breeds arrogance and contempt for others.

Save the dangers for later: for now, it is enough to notice from these two stories that we form ourselves—our talents, our interests, and our characteristic activities—from humble, nakedly instrumental beginnings: from getting what we want, avoiding humiliation, and seeking love, approval, and social advancement. They open up doorways in us, desires, concerns, sources of wonder that we did not know were there. Activities catch on in this way because they meet a natural need in us. Our natural needs often lie buried; something from the outside attracts us, or shatters or breaks through the obstacles, so that those needs are brought to the surface. Steve Martin's passion is to think philosophically about the world, while Martin Eden's is to capture life in words; neither could be described as primarily concerned with the instrumental uses of learning. Both are changed and re-oriented by what they discover in themselves.

Something in us, then, wants to learn for its own sake, even if we embark on that learning for the sake of some smaller end.

But the possibility of using mathematics or science or literature for the sake of money, grades, love, or murder means that the subjects alone don't define what intellectual life is. It is crucial that reading or calculating or learning be undertaken in a thoughtful or a contemplative spirit. Nor indeed is it necessary to focus on these typical objects. A person can learn, and relish his learning, while engaging in any activity whatsoever. Should we think of the guiding motivation, the thoughtful spirit, as more important than a typical set of objects? Perhaps we could say that the love of learning can be exercised in any activity—one's daily work, watching sports, taking out the trash, reading potboilers—so long as it is approached reflectively or thoughtfully, so long as one relishes learning from it.

This second approach also faces difficulties. Is it an exercise of the love of learning to go on a week-long drunken bender as a part of a journey of self-understanding? Can one play video games in a contemplative spirit? The answer, of course, is yes—but the activities are not quite fitting to their contemplative goal. The mismatch is shown by the kind of pressure they exert on the prospective inquirer, a pressure opposite to that felt by our status-driven math student. Mathematics draws the competitive student into appreciating it for its own sake. By contrast, our inquirer undertakes video games to understand better their appeal to human nature, but finds herself drawn into the compulsive pursuit of distraction, to cascading, increasingly joyless victories in pixels. Likewise, it would take an unusual discipline to maintain contemplative distance from one's own drunken bender. The FBI agent investigating illegal pornography looks at the images differently than an avid consumer would. But it is evident that the force of those images, despite the agent's investigatory commitment, makes the work difficult.

We tend to think of the objects of our desires as items in a restaurant buffet—perhaps some of this, perhaps some of that. But our desires and their objects are more like rivers. They have a force and pressure all their own. Once we set out on them, they pull us along in a particular direction, opening up possibilities to us that we did not expect or choose. This simple psychological fact is the reason why there is such a thing as education—why using our minds, or learning to paint, or losing weight requires not only discipline and social incentives but also the guidance of wise elders who know what lies along certain pathways, and who are willing to expose their own ignorance and uncertainty when guiding the young.

Ends, Means, and Ultimate Goals

How ought we describe this human need, the appetite for learning and understanding, in a way that illuminates its typical forms and deviations? I follow a tradition originating with Plato and Aristotle that distinguishes types of desire by their *final end*.³ We do many things instrumentally, for the sake of something else: eat breakfast to calm hunger pains, exercise to stay healthy, work for money, have children to placate a spouse or fit in with the Joneses. Other things we do for their own sake: play cards, or go for hikes; read, or build model airplanes. Some things evidently are both instrumental and for their own sake: we have children also for their own sake; we work for money, but sometimes also for the love of our work activities themselves; we fish to eat, but also for the sport of it.

Our actions and activities are affected by our goal in pursuing them. There is a difference in character between a targeted trip to the grocery store to get a bottle of milk and a more contemplative shopping trip in which one explores unusual

products on the shelves and talks to neighbors in the aisles. A hiking expedition with friends differs from one with an important business client. A marriage of convenience differs from a marriage for love. Thus each action or activity has an end goal that gives it a certain character.

To some extent, we choose the goals we pursue and how to pursue them. But there are natural tensions and natural affinities between certain goals and certain means of pursuit. Hence the discomfort of the marriage of convenience, the difficulty of enjoying a long commute by car for its own sake; or, by contrast, the ease of pausing to enjoy a beautiful landscape, the naturalness of putting a child's good ahead of one's own. Plato and Aristotle and many after them sought something they called the highest good—the best human activity, pursued for its own sake—for which we have a natural affinity above all others. Such a good would be something in which one's whole life would culminate, a form of secure happiness built into who we are and what we want.

Why would we think we have a highest good or an ultimate end at which our activities aim? We have many end goals, often at the same time, but certain goals have a structuring or ordering effect on others. We choose our career to permit leisure time with our family, or we choose a less demanding family to allow free upward growth in our careers. Our ultimate end—family in the first case, success in the second—frames and structures our other pursuits. We trade a freer schedule for more money, or sacrifice a higher salary for more time to pursue our heart's desire. The structuring effect of some goals over others suggests that we have a *basic orientation* that is determined by our ultimate end, the goal (assuming there is one) that structures all of our other choices. Such a goal is our highest good, whether we have chosen it as such or it has grown higgledy-piggledy out of personal

or social pressures. That highest good or ultimate end might be wealth, status, or family life; serving our community or the enjoyment of the natural world; knowledge of God, or pleasure and partying, or writing novels, or the pursuit of mathematical truth. Like any smaller end, our ultimate end might be better or worse suited to satisfy us.

If we do not believe that we have a single basic orientation, it is very difficult to understand common stories about how our lives change. We turn from a life of crime to a life of penance. We quit drinking and become a faithful neighborhood volunteer. We have children and we abandon pursuits we once found all-absorbing, perhaps working less, perhaps withdrawing from our hard-partying friends; perhaps we draw closer to family members or put down roots in our community. Orientations do not, of course, always change for the better. Sometimes we take a turn fundamentally for the worse. Disillusionment with love or with work can drive us to drink, or to work compulsively, or to seek one restless thrill after another. The political worker begins in the hope of building a just society on earth, and ends up a functionary or an apparatchik.

The change in orientation need not be dramatic; our values can slowly corrode in the wrong environment, or a seed of joy can take root under our radar, blossoming unexpectedly years later. Some life changes may be only superficially dramatic. Certain status seekers find their way to the top no matter what the outward value structure of their institution: they succeed in the fascist dictatorship and the new democracy, the traditional church and the church in reform. But conversions, reversions, corruption, and disillusionment are widespread phenomena. It is hard to believe that they are not real possibilities for all of us, and hard to make sense of those possibilities if we do not have a basic orientation to begin with.

We may resist the idea that we have a single ultimate end. Surely, we think, although some goals structure others, we can have more than one that matters most to us. We prize family *and* work above all, or philosophy *and* social justice. No single end dominates. At best, such a life will be rare if it is not impossible. There is a fact about how our lives are ordered: not what we want our final end to be, nor what we think it is, but which end is at bottom structuring the other ends. Even if we feel that we have achieved a rare and fine balance, there is a fact about what we would choose if our most basic priorities came into conflict. It is a matter of what we are disciplined or not disciplined to choose, a matter of an embodied excellence or a lack of one. We see our ultimate end only when wishful thinking dissolves in the face of a real choice.

I can of course make mistakes about which activities are compatible with my ultimate end. I may choose to have children thinking that I will be able to maintain the inner space to pursue my mathematical interest, and I might be wrong. Since children generate moral duties, I may not be able to recover my original mathematical focus without wronging my children. Likewise, I may choose not to have children with the thought that I will be better able to write poetry without distraction, but I may find that in domestic isolation my life experience becomes narrow, shallow, and impoverished, and my well of creativity dries up. Our ultimate ends are often fragile in unpredictable ways; hence our youthful anxiety about the future, our midlife crises, and our regrets in old age.

We may not have any idea of what our basic orientation consists in, or what ultimate end may be structuring our life unbeknownst to us. Our motives are always mixed and our ultimate goals are often obscure. Often we cannot admit to ourselves that, say, status, or money, or drinking matters most to us. But even

apart from conversions or breakdowns, certain conflicts or crises suggest that we have such an end and what it is. My choice of one thing over another reveals yet more ultimate goals. Say I skip my child's piano recital for an afternoon at the bar, or to finish a work project that feels necessary. Or the business client cancels our hike—do I go on the hike anyway? If I don't, perhaps I was less interested in nature than in the deal I was planning to cut. I choose a high-status job and do it with a commitment to high moral principle. I discover immoral behavior there whose exposure will lose me everything. Do I keep my morals, or the job and the status?

Our ultimate end can be displayed by our choices as the thing to which we are most fundamentally committed, something for which, when the chips are down, we will sacrifice anything else. It may be only at points of conflict or times of trial where we discover what in the soup of our conflicting desires and pursuits matters most to us. We promise “till death do us part” when our love is young and good-looking and when life is full of promise, but it is in failure or decrepitude or at the hospital bed that we learn what we meant and why.

Leisure

In our pursuit of the basic forms and deviations of intellectual life, we have distinguished instrumental pursuits—things we do as means to ends—from ends, or pursuits worthy in themselves. We have also begun to look at ways in which a particular pursuit can shape and structure a life, so that some activity is our ultimate end and shapes our basic orientation. What would happen if we tried to organize our lives around merely instrumental pursuits, such as earning money or promoting justice? Aristotle argued that our ultimate end had to be sought for its own sake,

or our actions would turn out to be empty and vain. It's clear enough that my actions are vain when I don't achieve my small-scale goal. If I pack my swim bag, put on shoes, get my keys, and drive my car to the pool only to find it closed, my end goal of swimming is frustrated, and my string of actions is in vain. Likewise, if my ultimate goal is not sought for its own sake, it seems that many or most of my actions are in vain. Suppose the pool is open and I get to swim: Why do I do it? I swim for the sake of health. I want to be healthy so I can work. I work for the sake of money. And the money is for the sake of the food, drink, housing, recreation, and exercise—all of which make it possible for me to work.

I have described a life of utter futility. If I work for the sake of money, spend money on basic necessities for life, and organize my life around working, then my life is a pointless spiral of work for the sake of work. It is like buying ice cream, immediately selling it for cash, and then spending the proceeds on ice cream (which one once again sells, . . . and so on). It is no less tragic than working for money and getting crushed by a falling anvil on the way to cash the paycheck. Activities are not worthwhile unless they culminate in something satisfying. For that reason, Aristotle argued that there must be something beyond work—the use of leisure, for the sake of which we work and without which our work is in vain. Leisure is not merely recreation, which we might undertake for the sake of work—to relax or rest before beginning to labor anew. Rather, leisure is an inward space whose use could count as the culmination of all our endeavors. For Aristotle, only contemplation—the activity of seeing and understanding and savoring the world as it is—could be the ultimately satisfying use of leisure.

Despite a long tradition of thinking that Aristotle helped to inspire, the kind of leisure that functions as an ultimate goal of

living does not require vast estates and the life of a country gentleman. It can be taken in a moment, or in a long pause; it can fruitfully coexist with certain kinds of manual labor. The great books movement that for a time shaped American intellectual culture began among working people, in workmen's institutes where people who toiled with their hands sought to develop themselves as human beings with rich inner lives.⁴

In his classic handbook for amateur intellectuals, *The Intellectual Life*, the Dominican priest A. G. Sertillanges claimed that an intellectual vocation could be lived on two hours of free time a day—and so is compatible with both work and family life.⁵ His secular contemporary, Arnold Bennett, claimed in *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* that it would suffice to take a daily half hour of focused thinking, combined with three evening sessions a week during which one read seriously for ninety minutes.⁶ I think that Bennett and Sertillanges are right—and even beyond what they imagined, one can aim at leisure and use it fruitfully without the full undertaking of an intellectual vocation. Leisure can be savored in a moment, or in a long pause, or in a restful chewing over of the events of the day. A weekend in the woods can allow the insight that was gathering, hidden in our daily busyness, to blossom. Despite ancient prejudice against it, manual labor leaves the mind free to ruminate and consider in a way that other forms of labor do not. This is why carpentry, or gardening, or housecleaning can be satisfying in a way that ticking boxes, pushing paper, or thinking through complex but trivial problems is not.

That said, under certain circumstances leisure does not exist, and so its use is impossible. Pursuing the necessities of life can be utterly overwhelming. This is particularly true if one has to work at an exploitative job. In *Martin Eden*, Jack London describes his protagonist Martin studying fervently to educate

himself, both for his own sake and to make him worthy of the woman he loves. Gradually he runs out of money. He takes up a job in a laundry that requires fourteen hours of solid, concentrated work six days a week. Having previously lived on only five hours of sleep, he is confident upon taking the job that he can continue to read after work. After one day in the laundry, the powers of concentration necessary for him to read evaporate. After one week, he no longer has the energy even to think: "There was no room in his brain for the universe and its mighty problems. All the broad and spacious corridors of his soul were closed and hermetically sealed."⁷ After three weeks of this routine, Martin returns to drinking after a long abstinence, and he finds in drunkenness the imagination, warmth, wonder, and beauty that the laundry work has driven out of him.

London's account is fictional or semifictional, but it closely matches the real-life experiences of others. For example, George Orwell writes of his stint in the kitchen of a Paris hotel, where employees at his level work eighty to one hundred hours a week, leaving no time to think, and no money to save up for a family or for a change of career. Their lives are wasted in exhausting work from which drink and sleep are the only refuge.⁸ Barbara Ehrenreich describes her experience at the end of two shifts of waitressing: "I am not tired at all, I assure myself, though it may be that there is simply no more 'I' left to do the tiredness monitoring."⁹ Or consider the journalist James Bloodworth's recent account of working as a "picker" in an Amazon warehouse.¹⁰ After days of walking or running for many miles over long hours, under constant electronic surveillance, penalized for bathroom breaks and illness, and on a schedule made unpredictable by the prospects of canceled shifts or compulsory overtime, Bloodworth finds himself mentally and physically exhausted. Quick thrills that he and his coworkers might have otherwise limited or

shunned become extremely attractive. As one of his coworkers put it, “This work makes you want to drink.”¹¹

Leisure can be destroyed in appalling working conditions designed by others. Leisure can also be destroyed by anxieties imposed, through no fault of our own, in the crush of life. It can be destroyed by compulsive behaviors that consume all of our thought and awareness. Leisure can also be destroyed by our own choices. Aristotle’s teacher Plato, through the mouth of Socrates, describes philosophical leisure by contrast to the experience of someone immersed in lawcourts and in various forms of social striving. To a philosopher, a leisured person, it does not matter:

whether they talk for a day or for a year, if only they may hit on that which is. But the other—the man of the law courts—is always in a hurry when he is talking; he has to speak with one eye on the clock. Besides, he can’t make speeches on any subject he likes; he has his adversary standing over him, armed with compulsory powers and with the sworn statement, which is read out point by point as he proceeds, and must be kept to by the speaker.¹²

The unleisurely life of the lawcourts, hurried and constrained by the demands of others, is evidently the product of education and choice, not of externally imposed economic circumstances.

We have contemporary parallels to the voluntary slavery of Plato’s lawcourts. Consider the world of urban tech workers described in Lauren Smiley’s 2015 essay “The Shut-In Economy.”¹³ Many such workers work from home and live by themselves. To save time, they use numerous apps for everyday tasks such as ordering meals, grocery shopping, and simple household organization. Today’s Martin Edens, the low-paid delivery workers, drivers, and cleaners, must stack job upon job just to meet the cost of necessities. But those they serve, the urban tech workers,

do not save time for the purpose of leisured contemplation or wholesome hobbies, but rather in order to work even more. Smiley describes one tech worker who has determined that for every hour that she saves by outsourcing her personal and household tasks, she can make \$1000 for her company. So she works eleven-hour days and uses app services to run her errands, do her hair, and straighten her home.

The “masters” of our current servant class have no leisure either. The slave is a slave of a slave, and these days at the top of heap of the slaves there is not even an exploitative gentleman farmer—writing essays, dissecting animals, and speculating on the nature of the political—but another slave at a higher social rank. The wealthier in the chain impose such burdens on themselves, just as many of us in positions of privilege willingly put ourselves under electronic surveillance as constant as the Amazon warehouse, posting to social media even our time at the gym or our obsessions with our pets.¹⁴

By contrast, the office job that was more common in previous decades may be deadly boring in itself, but it leaves clear an inward space for other routes of development. John Baker worked for many years pushing paper at the Automobile Association in Essex, and in his spare time looked at birds with systematic personal and contemplative intensity. He followed peregrine falcons by bicycle, carrying maps, eyeglasses, and voluminous notebooks. The result was the extraordinary poetic reflection published in his 1967 book, *The Peregrine*. The poets Wallace Stevens (an insurance agent) and Frank O’Hara (an art curator) squeezed their poetry into the spare moments permitted by ordinary, busy working life. Stevens claimed he wrote poems “just about anywhere,” and got his poetic ideas on walks. Nor, for Stevens at least, was the squeezing of poetry to the margins of his time a compromise. He told a journalist a few years before his

death, “It gives a man character as a poet to have this daily contact with a job.”¹⁵ His fellow poet John Ashbery described Frank O’Hara as “dashing the poems off at odd moments—in his office at the Museum of Modern Art, in the street at lunchtime or even in a room full of people—he would then put them away in drawers and cartons and half forget them.”¹⁶ O’Hara’s capacity for poetry seems to have been built into his life; he found pauses, moments of leisure, that were invisible to others.

The patron saint of overworked teachers, Alice Kober, taught five classes at a time at Brooklyn College in the 1940s.¹⁷ At any rate, she taught during the day. At night, she set about deciphering an ancient language, Linear B, that had been uncovered on clay tablets at the turn of the century and that stood as a Mount Everest for linguists, a seemingly impossible puzzle. A middle-aged spinster, the daughter of working-class immigrants, she collected the statistics for each sign of the dead language onto two hundred thousand paper slips. Because of paper shortages during and after the war these slips had to be repurposed from any spare paper she could find. The slips in turn were collected into old cigarette cartons. Her work was cut off by an untimely illness, but she laid the foundation for the dramatic decipherment that took place only a few years after her death.

Sometimes leisure appears as a disciplined, nearly impossible achievement. The twelfth-century Holy Roman emperor Frederick the Second took time out from amassing vast territory and influence to have a long discussion with Leonardo of Pisa, the mathematician known as Fibonacci, and he himself made long ornithological studies for a still-unrivaled treatise on falconry.¹⁸ Indeed, leisure can emerge for contemplation even in the worst circumstances imaginable. The psychologist Victor Frankl wrote of what he called “the intensification of inner life” as a prisoner in Auschwitz. He meant in part his feelings for loved ones and

remembered images of a life with dignity. He describes how vivid the beauty of trees and sunsets became to the prisoners, of the choices prisoners had to make to resist the overwhelming dehumanizing character of their surroundings.¹⁹

The robustness of the capacity of human beings to savor, contemplate, and enjoy indicates its natural depth in us. Like the right kind of hiking and the authentic love of learning, leisure can in principle be found and used anywhere, but it thrives only under certain conditions: free time, exposure to the outdoors, and a certain mental emptiness.

Leisure, Recreation, and Happiness

The leisure activities that count as a culminating end of life have a sort of timelessness. When we are at leisure, we stop counting the minutes toward the goal, because the goal is precisely what we are doing: hiking in the wilderness, engaging in thoughtful conversation with oneself or with others, sitting around the fire with those we love. Sometimes, leisure takes the form of an intense activity. Staying up all night talking, cataloging the weeds in the garden, John Baker's bird-watching—all may be undertaken with great energy. The freedom of a leisurely activity is the freedom from results or outcomes beyond it, not the freedom of rest or recreation.

Recreation, too, has its timelessness. There is no obvious point at which one has completed a beach holiday, where time stretches out in waves, sand, and sunshine. Time drops away in a night of fierce card playing, as it does at the afternoon cookout. What is the difference between a relaxing activity and the form of leisure that constitutes the end of one's life? The difference is simply that we would not judge a cookout or the beach holiday or card playing to be the pinnacle of life. These activities are lovely, human,

and necessary, but they do not draw on our highest capacities. Art, music, serious conversation, and loving service, by contrast, bring out the best in us. They are goals toward which we strive; they are engines for limitless personal growth. The difference between leisure and recreation will be subtle, but clear, in how we choose these different kinds of ends. Any minimally happy life must include recreation, but what really matters is far more demanding.

It is the highest goods that may require us to turn our lives upside down, to sacrifice not only time and money but friends, loved ones, social stature, and sometimes our own lives. Khaled Al-Asaad, director of antiquities at the ancient site of Palmyra in Syria for many years, was captured by members of ISIS and tortured in an attempt to make him reveal the locations of valuable artifacts. He refused, and was murdered. Al-Asaad died, it seems, for history, for knowledge, and for art.²⁰ By contrast, it is not in general reasonable to die for a good game of cards or for a birthday party at the beach. That said, one could imagine conditions so oppressive that the little human things are the only humanity one has, and so are worth dying for. In those cases, one dies not for the birthday party or the card game as such but for the full scope of humanity that they suggest, the dignity denied by one's circumstances.

Aristotle thought that our ultimate end constituted our conception of happiness. That is, we hold as our ultimate end whatever we believe a happy life to consist in. He also believed that human nature gave happiness definite contours: some ultimate ends will be satisfying, and others not. Our conception of happiness can be wrong. Contemplation, in his view, was the only thing that could structure other human desires so that a human life would be satisfying. All the same, if our nature is divided, as he thought it was (and as it obviously is), if our motives are various and conflicting, and if our desires generate perceptions of

reality and perceptions of value, real happiness will be very difficult both to discern and to achieve.

It is true that Aristotle conceived of contemplation too narrowly: sophisticated philosophy of the kind he practiced himself forms the core of his notion of happiness. But it is evident that contemplation can be the relishing of the beauty of one's family and its common life; the sophisticated calculations of the physicist; the admiration of the curve of the wood being shaped into furniture; the nun singing the Psalms five times a day; the therapist or teacher poring over their human examples.

Even so, it may seem too much to accept that contemplation is the one true good for human beings. It has been hard, after all, for many to accept; it is a countercultural and counterintuitive proposal, both now and at most times in the past. But while the proposal lies in the background of this book and haunts it, so to speak, you, my reader, need not accept it. You may think that happiness must consist in more than one good. You may judge that happiness is universally desirable, but that not everyone has a taste for learning in itself. Or you may think that "happiness" itself is a fantasy that we only torture ourselves trying to attain. But I do think it ought to be clear by the end of this book that contemplation in the form of learning is a robust human good, valuable for its own sake and worthy of time and resources. Its degree of centrality in a given human life I leave up in the air. I try to leave it so, at any rate. Sometimes my own enthusiasms will draw my thumb to the scale.

The Specter of Elitism

The praise of learning for its own sake as necessary for a flourishing life is often charged with displaying an aristocratic bias, as if aristocratic Aristotle's endorsement was the kiss of moral

death, as if a truth could not be tangled up with moral ugliness. But the accounts I alluded to of the destruction of leisure in the lives of modern workers, the diminishment of their humanity, ought to make us more alive to the value of leisure, not less. Hearing such stories, we ought to be motivated to promote sufficient time for all workers to think, to savor, to reflect, to pursue wholesome pastimes—not simply a lucky and special few. The philosopher Simone Weil, reflecting on a failed attempt to educate workers, wrote:

Is this a reason to condemn all work of this kind? On the contrary, the important thing is to distinguish, among the attempts at working-class culture, those that are conducted in such a way as to strengthen the ascendancy of the intellectuals over the workers, and those conducted in such a way as to free the workers from this domination.²¹

Weil makes a distinction that modern educators who seek to provide professional training for the disadvantaged would do well to keep this in mind. Do we seek to elevate those among the poor who are worthy of dominating others? Or do we seek to diminish the difference between the social classes altogether?

The idea that real and serious learning is something practiced only by a small elite is stubborn and hard to displace. But it is false. Consider Mendel Nun, a fisherman on a kibbutz in the Galilee, born just after the First World War. He found ancient stone anchors as he fished and collected them into what is now a small museum. Seeking to understand what he found, he studied the sources on fishing in antiquity and, since this was a rare interest, he became one of its foremost experts.²² I imagine that this intellectual project, discovered in the course of his daily work, changed how he lived. A simple fishing outing would be

seen in its breadth and depth, as a human enterprise grown out of its thousand-year past and built into his surroundings.

In my home country, the United States, perfectly ordinary people pack up their telescopes in summertime and head for star parties in dark rural areas, seeking out supernovas, double stars, and unusual planetary conjunctions. Travel to Gettysburg and you will find thousands upon thousands of supposed normals who suddenly want to know everything about a battle that took place 150 years ago: the human fighters and the human dead, their clothes, their weapons, their stratagems, victories, and failures. I spent a summer in Israel, and there it is archaeology that holds the popular imagination: crowds tolerate unbearable heat to hear this stone or that stone, this hill or that valley, tell stories that books alone don't tell. The charge that religion is anti-intellectual is widespread and ancient, and yet I've met few ordinary believers who weren't curious about why there are two creation stories in Genesis, or what kind of thing a "satan" is, or what the shewbreads in the Temple of Jerusalem were for.

Behind the sea of details in the pursuit of astronomy, history, archaeology, and religion lie fundamental questions: Where did the universe come from? Are the vast galaxies the product of chance or design? What makes war, the greatest of human evils, possible? What could make it seem morally necessary? In Israel, I asked an archaeologist what drove her to sift through dirt in hundred-degree heat and spend countless hours classifying shards of pottery. She told me: "I'm interested in ancient economy. What I want to understand is this: Money makes people and their communities great. But it also is the source of evil and destruction. How is it possible? How do good and evil mix in a human being?"

The love of learning is general among human beings and pursued in a variety of ways and degrees. Unlike the love of the

outdoors, however, we do not always recognize it. We miss it in its lowlier forms, and misidentify it in its higher ones. We do so because we have various desires and goals, in various invisible hierarchies. We have ultimate ends that may or may not be transparent to us. Thus we can love learning for its own sake, or we can use it for the sake of a political agenda; it can be a means to wealth and status, or a stepping-stone to a sense of achievement; learning can accrue under idle social habits, following the crowds. We may not know whether we are driven by the real thing or by something else until we are put to the test. But to limit learning to the professionals would be like considering sponsored mountain climbers to be the only true appreciators of the outdoors.

This philosophical introduction to the intrinsic value of learning and its nearby companions leisure and contemplation is meant to help the reader navigate the examples of learning for its own sake that follow. What does an authentic exercise of the love of learning look like in real life? How might that exercise shape a person's life? How might the love of learning, well exercised, itself be a tonic to alleviate futile ways of life or unavoidable forms of suffering? How could its exercise count as the culmination of a person's entire endeavor?

But the examples that I present will only raise more questions. How does it happen that the love of learning gets corrupted by the pursuit of wealth or power? Does intellectual activity lie in a natural tension with ordinary human communities? In the second chapter of this book, I attempt a diagnosis of the corruption of learning by the love of money and status. I then tell two stories of the conversion or redemption of intellectual life, one through the famous story of Saint Augustine, the other through the modern secular account of the origins of the work of art in Ferrante's Neapolitan novels.

Last, I will turn to a third set of questions. What haunts modern people with intellectual inclinations most is the sense that the pursuit of learning for its own sake is useless and thus unjustified in the face of the enormous demands that human suffering and injustice place on us. I distinguish a superficial sense of “making a difference” from forms of person-to-person service, suggesting that intellectual life is useful when it sees itself and orders itself as the latter.

Professional academics are the natural stewards of the activities focused on books and ideas. And many academics these days find themselves discouraged and restless as I was. I am convinced that the ailment is largely a matter of affect and with it a failure of imagination. Our marriage to intellectual work has grown stale and lifeless. Our eyes wander restlessly to other prospects. We wonder whether we missed a turn somewhere. Surely farming would be more fulfilling, or singing in a nightclub; surely our talents would be better used in the vast global machinery of human rights work. Under the circumstances, a brilliant philosophical argument—even if I could make one—would be useless. Likewise, a thorough historical diagnosis—an account of the twists and turns of cultural and economic life that brought us to our sad pass—might make us wiser, but it will not restore our lost spark. It is images and models that we need: attractive fantasies to set us in a certain direction and to draw us on, reminders of who we once were and who or what we might be. Only then will the romance return.

Learning and intellectual life are not the exclusive province of professional academics, but academics are their official guardians; and so a good place to begin renewal from. But I hope also

that this book will fall into the hands of nonprofessionals with intellectual interests, and that they will recognize themselves in it. Perhaps we will be even better off if intellectual life is renewed from the grassroots.

My concern for images and stories in what follows is indifferent regarding whether they are historical or fictional. That is in part because I have become unsure as to the essential difference between them. Good fiction resonates in truth; good history tells affecting stories. So, too, literary images inspire real-life models, and vice versa. Our lives are responsive to books; books in turn reflect our lives.

I will leave my life story behind in the book that follows. A wider cast of characters will accompany you, as they have me, on my inquiry into what intellectual life is and what role it plays in a happy human life and in a flourishing human community.

I choose the word “inquiry” carefully, since it is my hope that you, my reader, will inquire with me. After all, each person lives his or her own life, especially in the use of the mind. I may find myself at an impasse where you see a way through. Where I find clarity, you may find an obstacle. Many of my thoughts will be only half-baked. Their batter may not be even quite mixed. Finish baking them your own way—or cook up something else.

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