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Issues in Family, Culture & Science



Value Added



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In work, says John Paul II, “man participates in the activity of God himself.” He takes part in that “gospel of work” proclaimed by the One who was “a man of work, a craftsman like Joseph of Nazareth” (*Laborem Exercens*). It is by way of Christ that the human craftsman involves himself with created things, acknowledging their inner goodness, and transforming them to bring out of them a new fruitfulness.

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BOOK REVIEW

Is Your Job a Waste of Time?

MICHAEL GALDO

David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (Simon and Schuster, 2019).

In *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, anthropologist David Graeber proposes that there is a vast swath of jobs (anywhere from 30–60%) that should not exist and, should these all suddenly disappear, no one would care. In fact, the world would probably be a better place: “I am a corporate lawyer, I contribute absolutely nothing to this world and I am miserable all the time,” shares one such employee about his job. Graeber defines a “bullshit job” as “a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence, even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.” The healthcare industry, middle management, academic administration, banks, and large corporations, among others, are particular targets of Graeber’s criticism.

Graeber collected over 250 responses to an essay written in 2013 on the subject of bullshit jobs—an essay he submitted in reply to one publication’s query whether he had anything “on the edge” that others may not be willing to publish. Based on the responses to this “edgy” piece, Graeber came up with five categories of bullshit jobs:

1. Flunkies: underlings kept around to make a superior look important;
2. Goons: those that deceive or manipulate others;
3. Duct-tapers: those who fix problems that shouldn’t exist in the first place;
4. Box-tickers: paper-pushers who make it look like a company is doing something when they are actually doing nothing; and finally,
5. Taskmasters: middle management who just tell people what to do even though they don’t need to be told.

In response to Graeber’s theory, at least one follow-up study (“Alienation Is Not ‘Bullshit’: An Empirical Critique of Graeber’s Theory of BS Jobs”) found that his claims were far overstated.

Other reviewers lean towards the entertainment value of his work and dismiss his claims as exaggerated. His evidence is largely based on the responses he received (i.e., 250 seems well below a substantial sample size), and many of the anecdotes workers sent him border on complaint rather than constituting an objective evaluation of labor. This makes a good portion of his book difficult to digest if you don't find it entertaining.

When the worker views his work as meaningless and also dislikes it, it becomes bullshit, even if the job *could* be made meaningful and enjoyable.

And yet, Graeber's theory is much more than a compilation of complaints, and to dismiss his book because he may exaggerate or lack data is to miss the value in *his* work. As an anthropologist, Graeber is really making a claim about humanity. His work is full of insights regarding the historical developments of labor, the psychological implications of meaningless work, and the cultural value of labor and the crisis that results from a lack thereof. He explores some of the darker sides of humanity, from greed to apathy, and critiques both sides of the political spectrum.

Graeber also questions why meaningful jobs tend to be poorly paid. He cites school teachers, nurses, and artists as examples. He points out that people tend to be willing to do meaningful work for less money. This fact is compounded by what Graeber calls "moral envy": those trapped in bullshit jobs tend to resent those who have meaningful work. As an example, he cites the 2008 financial bailout and the sanctions placed on auto assembly line workers who had union contracts which "allowed them generous health and pension plans, vacation, and \$28 per-hour wages." The higher-ups in the companies and bankers, who, according to Graeber, had "actually caused the problems"—and presumably have bullshit jobs—were never sanctioned. Yet the lower income workers on the floor of the factory were. Why? "American autoworkers...played such an essential role in creating something their fellow citizens actually needed...this was precisely what others resented about them. They get to make cars!" Moral envy leads to the sentiment that you can either have meaningful work or you can be paid well, but you can't have both.

Graeber's analysis of bullshit jobs covers a wide range of topics. In a historical context he likens the structure of the modern corporate world of middle management to the feudal system and demonstrates how bullshit jobs may have proliferated because of the industrial revolution. From a political standpoint, he critiques government for its role in perpetuating and maintaining bullshit jobs. He analyzes how we value work for its social and economic impact, critiquing both capitalism and socialism for their inadequacies. He examines the role of religion, in particular the negative effects of the Puritan work ethic, and even argues that pointless employment is really a form of spiritual warfare.

However, Graeber's broad analyses fall short in a few key areas. There is an unresolved tension between the usefulness of labor and the enjoyment of labor. Graeber's whole premise is founded upon the fact that the worker himself is the only one apt to define his job as bullshit. There is no objective measure outside the worker. Unfortunately, with this standard, when the worker views his work as meaningless and also dislikes it, it becomes bullshit, even if the job *could* be made meaningful and enjoyable. For example, from Graeber's collection of stories, one employee complains about his job sitting at a desk in a dorm, doing nothing all day but greeting students as they come in and out. Contrast this "bullshit" mentality with the story

of Saint André Bessette, whose job greeting visitors at the door of the Collège Notre-Dame affected the lives of countless people to such a degree that a million mourners came to view his coffin at his burial.

Furthermore, in his critique of the role of religion, Graeber, perhaps unwittingly, lumps Catholic tradition with a broader Christian worldview, which is more accurately characterized as Puritan. In this worldview, “[t]he Judeo-Christian God created the universe out of nothing” and, by his labor, man is “cursed to imitate God in this regard” when he produces goods. Furthermore, work is suffering and it is transformative in that it instills virtue; it keeps young boys out of trouble. At this point in his theological discussion, Graeber includes a quote from the first paragraph of John Paul II’s encyclical *Laborem exercens*:

Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God Himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth...Only man is capable of work, and only man works, and at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth.

In what follows, Graeber never unpacks Catholic theology or clearly demonstrates how the concept of man’s “capacity for work” is a “curse to imitate God.” If Graeber were to read any further into the encyclical he would have found that God’s command to “subdue” and have “dominion” over the earth came *before* the fall of man. In this Catholic understanding of work, it is part of man’s very nature to labor. As John Paul II states later in *Laborem exercens*, “Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes more a human being.” John Paul II also makes a very important distinction between the “heavy toil” that accompanies work and the work itself, noting that the burden sometimes felt in work is the result of the fall, yet it does not alter the inherent goodness of labor. Graeber comes very close to assigning inherent dignity to work, but he can never quite articulate it. At the same time, he struggles with the frequent unpleasantness of work and puts the blame on Christianity. Furthermore, he gets caught up in equating the value of work with its utility and seems to forget that it is also possible to enjoy useful work.

Although leisure is never mentioned, the implications for it are to be found everywhere in the book. In 1930, Maynard Keynes predicted that technology would advance to such a point that the 40-hour work week would be reduced to 15 hours. This notion is always lingering in the background of Graeber’s theory, the idea that we all work too much, that those who have meaningful work should share it with those who don’t and rid ourselves of bullshit jobs. Then, we would have more time for leisure.

While Graeber falls short when he turns to broader definitions in his writing, his exploration into the world of “bullshit jobs” is a worthwhile read. His examination of the human condition and the value of labor is applicable to any work relationship, whether it be boss to employee, teacher to student, or parent to child. Graeber perhaps tries to do too much in the book for it to have completely coherent conclusions, but that may be what gives the book its charm. A reader unafraid to explore “bullshit jobs” alongside the unfettered mind of an anthropologist will have an interesting read and much to think about.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Law of the Land, the Sea and the Air

JOHN WATERS

Sebag, Roy, *The Natural Order of Money* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2023).

A graph of US debt-to-GDP since the mid-twentieth century shows an initial convergence until the mid-1960s, when the two lines indicate an escalation in both values but at different speeds: debt, in the early stages of the divergence, rising at about double the rate of GDP, until the gap is such that, approaching the present, it shows indebtedness at nearly four times the rate of national productivity. A similar graph could be prepared for virtually every Western country, some of which would tell a marginally better story, others of a greater calamity. But these graphs tell another story also, a story of the meaning of debt and the significance, in other than numerical terms, of the diverging relationship between human productivity and human aspiration: the story of the West's deviation from the law of the land.

Although its meaning has in modern times eclipsed the Greek, Kantian, and even Christian concepts of the “the good life,” I had not until recently truly grasped the precise resonance of the “good” part in the phrase as commonly used nowadays—the “Good Life,” as in “escaping the rat race,” seeking to create a worthwhile, honest, and meaningful existence in proximity to nature, generating the means of one's own subsistence, et cetera. But now I think I get it, after reading Roy Sebag's short (no more than 15,000 words) new book called *The Natural Order of Money*, which got me thinking anew about where we humans are now, after three years under assault on our spirits from the global elites and the “leaders” we naïvely trusted with our countries.

I thought I would try to write something about “The Good Life” that might help to rescue the concept from its ghetto of oddity and eccentricity, where it attracts only the nostalgia of the old and the condescension of those not yet old enough to know that nostalgia is the memory of stability and sense.

[W]hat has "gone awry: in our “modern” economies is that we have, first of all, reversed the hierarchy of the productive and service economies, placing “services”

at the center, then multiplying these far beyond the scope of our needs, and thereafter creating false moneys which have institutionalized these follies as something unexceptionable.

Perhaps because Sebag was born to third-generation farmers and has had wide experience of matters financial, he is able to write with an appreciation of both—stability and sense. His book is very taut and beautiful: his central thesis is to explain why gold became the “natural money” of humanity (its adaptability and usefulness as both a measure and a reward, plus the fact that it is itself literally rooted in the natural order). He succinctly explains why gold became, and remained—in efficiency and effectiveness and symbolism—irreplaceable as the natural money-substance of our species and its transactions. In presenting his argument, he constructs a model of reality that describes also the natural and stripped-down state of a functional economy, cutting through the verbiage and theorizing of the academic and bought economists that have bedeviled attempts at fundamental perception through modern times.

Sebag draws in words a circle subdivided by another, inscribing in the inner one the words “the real economy,” the entity that, at the center of human self-sustaining activity, produces the essential needs of mankind—food, fuel and primary materials, all in compliance with the laws of nature, i.e., operating in coherence with the natural world. This “real economy” comprises—is manned by—the likes of farmers, fishermen, hunters, lumberjacks, coalminers, oil drillers, turf cutters. The outer circle comprises the “service economy,” a secondary entity governed by the same rules. His purpose is to remind the modern reader that economic activity is governed, willy-nilly, by basic natural laws. Maintaining a “natural” money to anchor economic systems has been the default practice in most societies until the relatively recent past.

Nature, not man himself, he argues, makes the ultimate judgment on human behavior in this context. Food is the bone marrow of human cooperation. Without it, humanity perishes. Next, and similarly, comes fuel. After that, the roots in nature become weaker, yet they are there. Every economic actor along the chain to the outer circumference of the circle remains accountable to the source, via the farmer and the other primary producers. Central to this is the role of money. Gold has long been the optimal substance for use as what Sebag calls “natural money,” which, in mirroring nature’s limitations, acts as a brake and safeguard against attempts to cheat the system.

In telling this story, he strips down and makes visible a model of the functioning economy that places centrally the “productive” sector (farming, fishing, hunting, fuel-harvesting, and the recovery of base materials)—subject to the iron laws of nature and necessity, but incorporating also the secondary, outer-layer economy, also highly functional for as long as it adheres to and respects the same set of natural laws that the farmer and the fisherman must obey. For example, he writes, “a bad harvest may cause the farmer to fail to produce a crop, or geological scarcity of ore may prevent a miner from carrying out further operations.” These rules also govern the outer economy, which produces not essentials but secondary products and services.

What he calls “the chain of temporal and energetic succession in any economy” begins with the “primary cooperators,” the food producers, who act as the generators of the basics of survival and surplus. Next in this chain come the fuel producers, such as the lumberjack and coal miner, who work “to harvest non-nutritive energy sources from nature which provide heat and motion.” The tertiary members within this primary network are the elemental

producers such as the miners of metals: “The product of their activity is a tangible good which is employed as a necessary input in the preceding types of primary activity. In a simple or subsistence economy, it is conceivable that the three roles may be intertwined to such a degree that they can be carried out by one and the same person.”

All actors in an economy, either individuals or members of a cooperative system, are accountable to natural standards of measure and reward, a set of iron laws that must be respected on pain of disaster. “Ecological accountability,” i.e., direct answerability to the limits of nature and the natural standards of measure and reward, render the real economy and its custodians amenable to these laws. But the service economy is also answerable to these principles, albeit indirectly, because it is ultimately dependent on the harmonious operation of the real economy. Without food and fuel, the policeman becomes weak and dies; without fundamental elements, our electronic systems will not operate, and the computer programmer will be unable to function. “Ecological accountability,” Sebag explains,

expresses the fact that the cooperative system is always and everywhere tethered to the natural order and to our necessity of negotiating with it in order to produce the energy embodiments that we need. When we eat breakfast, when we start up our cars to drive to work, when we open our laptops and begin to type, we are implicitly involving ourselves in the natural order and its standard of measure and reward. We are taking in the maintenance of the land, the tilling of the soil, the sowing of the seeds, the days of rain and sun, and the long hours of harvest. The farmer is told by nature how and when his crops can be grown. We participate in this edict each time we partake of this harvest for our own purposes of activity. No service economy is self-sufficient, just as no man is an island. We cannot live without nature’s reward, just as our bodies cannot survive without breathing in the oxygen that surrounds us.

This, then, is “economics,” which becomes complicated in its theoretical forms by “virtue” of deviation from or corruption of this fundamental model by innovations created, more often than not, to cheat nature and usurp the means of human survival and action. These are always, Sebag insists—*always*—doomed to fail. And all this remains true, no matter how complex our human societies appear. Any deviation from economic accountability can only ever be temporary. Although it is often overlooked or forgotten within the remoter elements of the service economy, ecological accountability remains an iron law, as though written on the land.

“This forgetting of accountability,” he writes,

is only possible because the service economy possesses the ability to temporarily decouple itself from the natural order for the very reason that it lies at the periphery of its generative and degenerative cycles. The real economy, on the other hand, enjoys no such luxury, for it is dependent upon nature’s commandments. What follows from ignoring this reality is an unnatural view of prosperity as something which can be mastered, determined, and distributed according to the personal desires and subjective ideals of the service economy. It is then that the relationship between the real and service economies becomes parasitic.

In a parasitic system, he writes, the service economy demands energy embodiments (the products of human activity resulting from negotiation with the natural world) from the real

economy “irrespective of nature’s limits and cycles, thereby attempting to circumvent or transcend the natural standard which governs the success and failure of the real economy.” The result of such attempted divorcing from ecological accountability “threatens the sustainable relationship between humanity and nature, and the symbiotic relationship between the real and service economies.”

It is obvious that what has “gone awry” in our “modern” economies is that we have, first of all, reversed the hierarchy of the productive and service economies, placing “services” at the center, then multiplying these far beyond the scope of our needs, and thereafter creating false moneys which have institutionalized these follies as something unexceptionable, and from there enabled spurious notions of wealth to promulgate themselves, spawning all kinds of incoherencies and absurdities that cockeyed forms of economic thinking have fooled us into taking for normalcy. False moneys—the instrument of this hubris—enable mankind to sidestep the laws of nature, chiefly because, as Sebag shows, they

fail to meet the most basic requirements which the natural order of money exacts from us: that money itself be an energy embodiment. If our money fails to constantly remind us of the natural order and what it requires of us, then we simply forget about ecological accountability and our collective dependence upon the farmer and upon nature.

By reflecting the imperatives of ecological accountability at all points within the economic system, a true system of money becomes an earthing entity in a three-way process connecting it via the human to the land, and back again, and round and round. It is a carrier of the values that underpin the entire enterprise—the laws of land, sea, and air—extending the natural imperatives from the potato patch and the riverbank to the restaurant and the bank, imposing its logic on all those who handle it. “In this way,” Sebag explains,

money anchors notions and ideals of prosperity to the objective accountability of the real economy, to the natural pulse of energy embodiments, by ensuring that the whole society measures and rewards activity relative to these dynamic cycles of generation and degeneration. A money which reflects ecological accountability ensures that when the real economy does well by cooperating with nature, the greater economy also prospers; and when the real economy does poorly, so, too, does the greater economy suffer.

Gold, being the longest-lasting, the most energy efficient, and the rarest of the possible energy embodiments that nature bequeaths us, was through millennia the money of choice of human societies. Gold is sublimely capable of measuring and rewarding the production of energy embodiments without clashing or competing with them, enduring through time while maintaining the same weight and correspondence to larger reality. “Gold,” Sebag elaborates,

is a pure element that nature dispenses by weight in exchange for the more abundant, ephemeral, and even more necessary energy embodiments that we require for vitality and movement. The farmer and the gold miner thus share much in common, insofar as they must answer to the natural standard and to the brute facts of nature. While the gold miner is energetically dependent upon the farmer, in a society that has moved beyond subsistence, the gold which the miner harvests serves as the best measure and reward for the food which the farmer harvests.

The software engineer can assume that he will receive food from the farmer only if he is constantly reminded of the natural order by their shared money.

In the modern economy, contrived forms of money—paper money issued by fiat, generally as debt, promotes unsustainable forms of cooperation. The average modern economist fails to appreciate the dependence of human societies on the natural world, and on the farmers, miners, and other energy producers, seeing nature, as Sebag puts it, “as a machine to be tinkered with in order to obtain efficiencies and nominal growth.” When money becomes thus perverted, he says, the peripheral actors thrive, and the farmer is compensated as if he were an afterthought. “So farmers and shepherds are persuaded into leaving their familial land to attend university and work in the City; the new generation would rather work menial office jobs than get their hands dirty in nature.” The land, “which once was tilled and worked for the greater benefit of society” is rezoned for housing, i.e., maximized profitability in the “service” economy.

Back in the 1990s and 2000s, at the height of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger boom, I used to get myself into trouble with “progressives” and “modernists” by talking and writing (“nostalgically”) about my widowed grandmother’s farm in Cloonyquin, County Roscommon, in the West of Ireland, where she used to produce enough to satisfy about 80 per cent of her family’s needs—meat, vegetables, bread, milk, butter, jam, eggs—and then, when the travelling shop came around on Saturday evening, would carry out her two trays of surplus eggs and barter them for the things she couldn’t generate herself. This invariably sparked great hilarity among economists and other media pundits—provoked, they implied, by the quaintness of my reminiscence. Still, it seems to me that it did then and continues to offer a clear-cut model for a healthily functioning economy: meeting as much as possible of your own needs, with sufficient surplus to barter for whatever you lack. It has also seemed obvious to me that most of the problems of the modern world emanate from our deviation from this model. Essentially, Sebag’s thesis captures the logic behind my grandmother’s method, being based on the production of essentials, first for the producers, and then a surplus for those across the borders of the real economy, where the meaning of those eggs was never permitted to be lost.

Roy Sebag’s wonderful little book illuminates a central error that humanity has allowed to occur in its societies and communities, which is to permit money to slip from forms in which it maintained an intrinsic reflection of the limits of the natural world to one in which it provides merely a token representation of this former state. Thus, paper tokens and digital iterations of monetary amounts have rendered widespread the illusion that money has value of itself, and out of this has been generated whole global industries in the shifting and sifting of such tokens to the point where what are no more than glorified casinos have come to seem like the real economy.

The only true purpose of money remains: as a means of measure and reward, a convenient commodity/instrument to facilitate the exchange of products and services, which also offers an intrinsic reflection of the values being exchanged. Without the necessities of human existence—the foodstuffs and fuels and primary substances—gold would be an unexceptional and meaningless material. Its “value” derives from its “affinity” with other forms of “energy embodiments,” among which it is, you might say, first among equals. Once established as the natural money of man, of course, this purity of purpose stood to become corrupted, which indeed it was, with gold coins being “shaved” to multiply the transactional value of the gold. And this procedure has been mimicked and itself multiplied in fiat money systems since the abolition of the gold standard, to the extent that an “economy” today is primarily a poker table upon which what passes for “wealth” is generated or destroyed in a series of three-card-tricks. To believe that money itself is the valuable thing is not merely to lose the economic plot, but to

misunderstand human existence. To “trade” not in things that humans need and desire, but in the tokens by which they have arranged to exchange these quantities, is to make inevitable the enormous distortions that now cripple our nations and embolden the corrupt bodies now claiming to govern them.

John Waters is a Thinker, Talker, and Writer. From the real source of religion to the infinite reach of rock 'n' roll; from the puzzle of the human "I" to the true meaning of money, John Waters speaks and writes about his exhilarating, totally original reflections on the meaning of life in the modern world. He began part-time work as a journalist in 1981, with Hot Press, Ireland's leading rock 'n' roll magazine and went full-time in 1984, when he moved to Dublin. As a journalist, magazine editor and columnist, he has specialized in raising unpopular issues of public importance, including the repression of Famine memories and the denial of rights to fathers.

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BOOK REVIEW

Makers and Keepers: On the Goodness of Things

JESS SWEENEY

Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (Yale University Press, 2021).

My daughter stopped, crouched down, and took hold of something. A seedpod this time, with tiny silicone-like spikes all over it, green in color. She stuck it in her pocket and we continued on. This little habit started before she was walking. Sometimes she'd grab an object, look at it, and then throw it back to the earth. Other times she'd look up and show it to me. Undoubtedly, this was something I had cultivated in her, how pockets could be repositories for little wonders and how to collect things in her fanny pack during our walks. But when I think back on these past three years, I realize that there's something innate in her that is drawn to the things in this world, little pieces of beauty and curiosity. There's a little collector or curator inside of us, a maker with a desire to have and to keep and to hold.

Humans have a fascination with making things, shaping things, and collecting things. We are makers and keepers. In his book, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making*, Makoto Fujimura writes that “[t]he impulse toward Making seems embedded in us from ‘the beginning.’ Such an impulse imbeds our vision in actual earthly materials.” We can look to ancient examples like the cave paintings in Lascaux or the prehistoric city of Çatalhöyük in present-day Turkey. The homes of Çatalhöyük are filled with artful human activity, from painted walls and volcanic glass used as mirrors, to built-in nooks that kept special items. It is an emblem to human making, keeping, and collecting, a place where men, women and children prepared, consumed, and stored food, as well as slept, socialized, and hid away their treasures.

In his book, Fujimura develops a compelling approach to living that seeks to cultivate a core aspect of our human nature, that we, like our Creator, are makers. Our “desire and ability to make things,” mirrors God’s own creative outpouring. This mirroring importantly imparts significance on our making and on the things of this world, whether that’s making high art, designing an object for everyday use, or pouring creativity into a project at work. That creative impulse to craft, mold, and preserve is at the heart of how we live in this world. We are not machines or cogs in a factory line; our human touch and imagination matters. We are drawn to imitate our Creator. Fujimura develops an idea which he refers to as “Making into the New.” He seeks to push back against the limiting and false “binaries” we create as we stumble to try

to understand the impact of the Resurrection on existence. He says that we must push ourselves to “think outside of outmoded dichotomies we have created in our culture—false dichotomies that make it impossible for us to even speak of a transformation that leads to the transfiguration of the resurrection to come.” Fujimura believes that, “[w]hat we build, design, and depict on this side of eternity matters, because in some mysterious way, those creations will become part of the future city of God.” Moreover, he states that there is a “potential that each of us has, even in our ordinary days, to attain this New Newness.” This seems utterly true. And as an artist, the lines that follow this statement resonate deeply. And yet I worry that for those who don’t necessarily think of themselves as artists, that perhaps this point needs to be further unpacked or else it may fall flat, or at least leave the reader wondering what this New Newness could look like for them. Perhaps one possibility is that Fujimura leaves that up to us, to reflect on the ordinary of our days and see the beauty there, to see the small transformations taking place, to see God’s hand molding and shaping who we are becoming.

Beauty without mercy is a luxury. But perhaps mercy without beauty is mere survival.

One avenue towards discovering what this New Newness might look like, beyond the context of the “exiled voices of poets and artists,” could be in unpacking our own relationship to material “stuff,” how rethinking that relationship might shape us into the type of people whispering from the “margins of human experience.” Perhaps it may even lead us to turn outwards towards the “poor and oppressed,” to become the kind of people that Fujimura seems to believe are also real artists in this world, who can also dare to “seek the New” and perhaps even help “redefine what Newness is.”

In a lecture at the University of Pennsylvania, world-renowned designer Ilse Crawford mused on why beauty matters. “Beauty,” she said, “is often a dirty word . . . or seen as something only for rich people . . . But what if it was about creating dignity, bringing a humanity to the table.” She shared about a project that completely reshaped a church parish hall and soup kitchen. Like Fujimura, she critiques the survival mode, or the “utilitarian mode” that many operate under, particularly when it comes to social projects or helping “the least of these.” Quick, easy, and often ugly solutions that get the job done. Fujimura writes that “[b]eauty and mercy are two paths into the sacred work of Making into the New Creation. Neither one of these elements is essential for survival in a Darwinian sense.... From a Darwinian viewpoint, beauty and mercy are not only unnecessary, but even dangerous.” Particularly when it comes to spaces like soup kitchens, or even lower income daycares, or public transportation spaces, both agree that, as Fujimura puts it, “When that [survival of the fittest] is the framework for the choices we make, altruism does not make sense; it seems like wasting time to create beauty or to stop and pay attention to the ‘least of these’ in an act of mercy.” Crawford and her team chose a different approach and provide a kind of alternative model for how to put Fujimura’s ideas into action, a way of bringing about the New. If beauty matters, if the human soul is impacted by the things around us, if we can be healed by beauty, then that must shift our action in the world. In the lecture, Crawford shares about the process of transforming the space, but perhaps most powerfully she shares the reaction of one of the men who visited this space weekly. When asked about the transformation, he said: “I love that it looks like this, because it shows that someone cares.”

The spaces we inhabit, from our homes to classrooms, to airport gates and sacred spaces, are

alive, shifting, transforming. And these spaces are filled with things, the stuff that we carry about with us, objects that hold memories, reminders, and histories. And while we humans are the main actors on this stage of our daily lives, we too are formed by the spaces in which we dwell. At the end of the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde wrote a manifesto for the significance of the decorative arts, calling it the “art we live with.” This “art” that does, or could, fill our homes, offices, and classrooms, “can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways,” he writes, can “stir the imagination,” gives us rest, and trains us to see. And yet it seems that amidst the technologized and fast-paced spaces that we inhabit today, we can too easily forget to choose beauty and the human. Instead we opt to maximize other outcomes, whether that’s speed, profit, or efficiency, at the expense of the dignity and aesthetic conscience of the human person. This art that once worked on our souls is being lost.

Fujimura’s book and art helps us find this art again. As human beings, we have a proclivity to not only make beautiful things and engage in what Fujimura calls the “sacred art of creating,” but we are also drawn towards beauty and have a knack for finding it in unexpected places. From the childhood activity of keeping things in secret tree holes, to cabinets of curiosity, museums, and time capsules. The things of this life resonate deeply with us. Likewise, our interior spaces and our deep connection to them have filled the canvases and pages of many an artist or writer, from still lifes to images of the Annunciation, to children’s stories, or novels such as Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*. When we make space for this part of ourselves and of those around us, when we are open to choosing beauty over maximizing efforts to be efficient, we elevate the human. This humanness requires a slowing down, an attunement to the ordinary around us that is actually refining us for the Kingdom to come.

The impact of beauty is not just for those with the means to access particular objects. If the reality of the human need for beauty reaches far enough, then those on the margins will be touched too, because those who are shaping environments, those educating the young, those making decisions about what is worth spending money on, will choose beauty and pass on a formation in beauty. Those who visit soup kitchens and shelters, hospitals, and nursing homes won’t just be in sterile spaces of survival, but in spaces where their humanity has been accounted for. Before reading Fujimura’s book I hadn’t seen this connection between beauty and mercy, but this is why these two must be hinged; without each other it seems they cannot thrive. Beauty without mercy is a luxury. But perhaps mercy without beauty is mere survival.

When beauty and mercy meet and meld, we touch up with the divine; we experience an outpouring of healing transformation. And as Fujimura makes clear, this isn’t just accidental. We aren’t ephemeral, non-bodily beings. We were placed in a world filled with stuff, and that is important. In uniting beauty and mercy, as well as making and grace, Fujimura maintains this connection between heaven and earth. He insists that “there is a profound connection between this world and heavenly reality.” And if this is true, things—material stuff—matter. These things we hold on to are certainly not necessary for survival, and yet here they are. Gratuitous, but not accidental gifts. These things which we choose to place in our spaces, the things we humans make, will “in mysterious ways...[be] amplified and transfigured.” God’s Kingdom coming will not be a destruction of the world we have known, but, instead, Fujimura implores his readers to “think of God’s Kingdom coming as a heavenly invasion into the ordinary, an infinite abundance injected into our scarcity-marked world.”

Ultimately, Fujimura claims, when we choose beauty, when we choose to notice it, choose to let it shape us and surround us, these moments are in fact “the New Creation [breaking] in, gratuitously.” In these moments, we experience a radiant wholeness, we experience the “New Creation fill[ing] in the cracks and fissures of our broken, splintered lives, and a golden light shines through, even if only for a moment, reminding us of the abundance of the world that

God created, and that God is yet to create through us.” This new creation breaking in is a foretaste of the ultimate inbreaking of the second coming. And isn’t it then our responsibility to open our world up to more spaces for this golden light to shine through? We do this when we make for others, foster beauty for others, and most importantly when we notice it in the seeds on our path, in the overlooked ordinary.

And while we live in a world filled with machine-made things, a culture living in the allurements of plastic, when we encounter things made with the care of the human touch, or an awareness towards the aesthetic conscience, objects which show attention to beauty and good design, we notice them. These might be a handmade bowl, or an original painting, but it also could be a machine-made object using natural materials or intentionally beautiful design. When we touch real wood or stone or metal, glass or natural fiber, these materials connect with us on a deep level. There is warmth, there is a connection to the earth, to creation. The Christian story, from Creation itself to Christ’s Incarnation and the bodily resurrection to come, are not ethereal, non-bodily realities. They are made of the earth, of the dust. Bread and wine become the Body and the Blood. As Fujimura writes, “the greatest triumph, the bodily resurrection of Christ from the grave, is not the ‘happy ending’ of a fairy tale, but only the beginning of the New with the entry point being suffering and persecution. The greatest miracle is turning our ‘hearts of stone’ into ‘hearts of flesh.’”

The promise we are given by the Creator is not that we will become different beings, but that we will be more fully our bodily selves, more the creators that we are striving to be. And in this process, we are being repaired, Fujimura claims, healed, like the Japanese Kintsugi artists who repair broken pottery by filling up the cracks with gold. As this transformation slowly takes place, we can train our eyes, minds, hands, and hearts to seek after this gold, after this beauty, that has the power to heal us and others. We are made whole through God’s grace, through his sacraments, but also perhaps through the things of this world. Because of the Incarnation, because the Creator of the stars and moon and the sea became a baby, the things of this world can bear glory. They can be reminders of the beauty here and the beauty to come. They can help fill the wounds we bear with a kind of mysterious, heavenly gold, that will be made whole and new in the Kingdom that is coming.

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Issues in Family, Culture & Science

WITNESS

Restoring Not Rebuilding Notre Dame: On Learning Millennia-Old Building Techniques

PATRICK J. KEATING

"Posterity: All succeeding generations: future time"
—*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*,
unabridged (1981)

April 15, 2019 marked a pivotal event in the history of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris when a blazing fire burnt down its roof, spire, and caused intense damage throughout the structure. The destruction created a lively debate in academic, professional, and civic circles about the nature of the reconstruction. Would the Cathedral simply be rebuilt or *redesigned*?

In favor of the latter, some thought that the fire had provided an opportunity to make a new mark on the building, something expressive of the present age. Proposals for the new roof rolled out in quick succession. Some imagined it to become an urban farm, a glass spire, and even a swimming pool.

In addition to disregarding the actual purpose of the Cathedral, these proposals failed to heed the value of what had protected the Cathedral for almost 800 years. They were rooted in nothing but current architectural fads.

The original roof played a decisive role in the perception of the Cathedral throughout Paris. Supported by a series of timber trusses, composed of 1,300 White Oak logs, the roof was a testament to medieval craftsmanship and engineering. Through a process of notching, juggling, and hewing using a variety of axes, medieval carpenters had sized the logs according to their purpose, and then used mortise and tenon joinery to structurally bind the individual timbers into a truss.

For us beginners, we had the added challenge of not having hands callused from years of wielding an axe. Thus, our hands were battered by the end, covered in

blisters, tears, and blood.

Thankfully, in July of 2020, the French National Commission for Heritage and Architecture (CNPA) accepted plans to, “respect the previously existing structure of the Cathedral and to restore the monument to its last complete, coherent and known state.”

This decision presented architects and craftsmen with a novel opportunity: to re-discover the enduring appeal of Notre-Dame’s medieval features, the genius of those who built it and the stewardship of those who cared for it. Just as there were many people eager to redesign Notre-Dame, there were many eager to rebuild it. Scholars, architects, conservators, and craftsmen had gained an intricate understanding of the methods required to complete such an undertaking after years spent studying and documenting the Cathedral’s existing conditions in detailed drawings before the fire. They had a roadmap for bringing Notre-Dame back to her former self.

It may come as a surprise to many that the knowledge, skill, and resolve to rebuild Notre-Dame as it was before the fire still exists. Indeed, timber framing, which makes use of techniques that have been passed down and which have evolved over millennia, is one of many traditional crafts that is still thriving. It is, and has always been, used in the building of things that last. Those who would rebuild Notre-Dame, therefore, would not be reviving extinct or even outdated technologies. Rather, they would place themselves in a living tradition of construction technology, one that has been preserved and maintained since antiquity.

That living tradition was on display at The Catholic University of America in the summer of 2021 when its School of Architecture and Planning and [Handshouse Studio](#) collaborated to bring together professional timber framers from around the United States and Catholic University students to build a choir truss from Notre-Dame, using only 13th-century construction techniques.

I was privileged to participate in this project as a student in the School of Architecture. In preparation for the project my classmates and I took a six-week course on the history and architecture of Notre-Dame. We were given lectures on medieval engineering, the documentation of the Cathedral by conservators, the development and utilization of medieval timber framing, and on the historical context in which the Cathedral was built. We were then familiarized with woodworking and put through a series of model building exercises. Looking at drawings of Notre-Dame provided by French architects, we built individual models of the truss at a fiftieth of its size and then six as a class at a tenth of its size. In this way we became familiar with the types of joinery we would be using when we built the truss at full size.

The truss was to be about 40 feet wide by 30 feet tall. White Oak logs, felled in Virginia, were delivered by truck onto the lawn of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. Each log was identified to serve a specific purpose based on its length and width. We were then broken down into groups—students mixed with professionals. The professionals introduced the students to the different types of axes, their purposes, and the proper way to use them. We began to turn the logs into timbers. First, we marked the logs with chalk to indicate the final dimensions of the timbers. We then notched the logs, by standing on top of them and swinging a felling axe in a downward motion to cut a series of “V” shapes at evenly spaced intervals. Next, we juggled the logs, by standing on top of the log and swinging the axe parallel to its length, to remove material between the “V”-shaped cut outs, thus getting us one step closer to a flat surface and the required dimension of the timber. Finally, we *hewed* the logs. This was the

most time-consuming step because of the accuracy required. Using a broad axe, we straddled the log and swung from waist high to more accurately remove any remaining material. This was done along the entire length of the log until it was plumb with the chalk line.

The encouragement and confidence we were given by the professionals onsite allowed us to begin working independently on logs that still needed to be turned into timbers. So, a group of students marked out a log, notched, juggled, and hewed it until it was ready to be used. This allowed the framers to apply mortise and tenon joinery to the finished timbers in order to assemble the truss.

The project was physically taxing and time consuming, especially as it was done in the early August heat and humidity of Washington, D.C. We often started our days at 6:30 a.m. and worked until 6 p.m. For us beginners, we had the added challenge of not having hands callused from years of wielding an axe. Thus, our hands were battered by the end, covered in blisters, tears, and blood. But it was rewarding. The whole group started by meeting and recapping the previous day's progress and reviewing what work was left to do. Under the shadow of the Basilica, our days were filled with the rhythmic noise of axes striking wood and punctuated every 15 minutes by the bells of the Basilica tolling in the background.

There was an undeniable excitement on the work site, and it buzzed with activity. We were all working together to contribute a small piece to the larger picture of rebuilding Notre Dame. Besides the truss, we hoped our contribution showed that it was possible to rebuild the Cathedral as it was, that there were people excited to do so, and that traditional building crafts are accessible no matter a person's previous experience.

After 10 days the truss was assembled and raised into an upright position twice, once on the lawn of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception and another on the National Mall. Since the completion of the project in the summer of 2021, Handshouse has continued to promote the project and plans to release a documentary. A trailer can be seen [here](#). Additionally, in September of 2022 Philippe Villeneuve and Remi Fromont, the Chief Architects of the restoration of Notre-Dame, came to Catholic University to view a raising of the truss, followed by lectures and discussions at the university.

Meanwhile in France, in the time since the fire at Notre-Dame, work has continued nonstop. In 2021 the Cathedral went through a safety phase, ensuring that the building was stabilized, until the site was suitable for future work. During that time, 1,000 oak trees were felled to be used in the future spire and roof of Notre-Dame. Currently, those trees are in workshops around France being brought to the specified size for their designated use by timber framers for future work on the Cathedral.

To see Notre-Dame brought back to its former self is exciting for scholars, architects, and craftsmen around the world. They find themselves inserted in a living tradition. The Cathedral was built for posterity's sake. The builders who began the work of constructing it knew that they would never enjoy the fruits of their own labor. Their initiative, offered to the glory of God, was a gift to future generations. To have done anything but honor their gift would have been nothing but ingratitude towards those who have gone before us and impoverish those who will succeed us.

The rebuilding of Notre Dame speaks to the importance that beautiful, meaningful places maintain in our lives and the professionals that stand ready to dedicate their time and expertise when necessary. It is a reminder of why we have an affinity for buildings. Beholding them we are reminded that they were conceived by a human mind, crafted by human hands, and created for a human purpose. To deny the world the opportunity to look upon Notre Dame

as others have for centuries would be an injustice.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Why Start a Trade School?

MARC BARNES

It's a question bouncing around Steubenville, Ohio, a Rust Belt city that has become home to a new venture in Catholic education: The College of St. Joseph the Worker, a school designed to graduate students with no debt, a job in HVAC, electric, carpentry, masonry, or plumbing, and a BA in Catholic Studies. It's a venture that seems to require some justification.

There is much that could be said and is said, by unions and technical colleges nation-round, about the trades: they resist automation; they deal with essential needs that fashions won't sway; they're more fun than office work; they'll put you to work and free you from debt far faster than the usual post-college shuffle. All of this is true, but it is also true that God became a tradesman. Jesus, while he walked on the earth, honored a good number of occupations, likening his mighty work to their humble trades: he was called sower, gardener, shepherd, servant, and king. The early church called him everything from banker to builder. But he really was "the carpenter's son," skilled with a hand plane and heir to a useful profession.

This same Jesus told his followers, more than anything else in the Gospels, to "be not afraid." Anyone who has met a carpenter or a car mechanic (or any tradesman, really) knows that this heavenly message is not unrelated to our Lord's earthly vocation, but flows from it. For it is the chief glory of the tradesman that he is not afraid; that he has developed some mastery over some otherwise daunting material; that he wields some particular skill which enables him to hope where others despair; that he can take up the world into his own dominion and shape it, fix it, break it, and mend it. The tradesman has freedom in relation to the built world, a freedom he first received from someone who stood *in persona Iosephi* to him, guiding his wobbly hand and speaking into his ear: "Someone built this, and so you can too. Don't be afraid of the saw, but respect it. Follow the grain."

The tradesman's direct communion with the inner workings of the built world produces a skepticism of mechanical systems presented as inevitable, necessary, or even natural, that is, as going on apart from human freedom and responsibility.

The thing is best known by a contrast: we fear, and we do so quite a bit. Most people survive the misery of life by the careful activation of systems, from phones to cars to office workplaces and government outposts. Most people do not know these life-support systems from within, cannot take them up and consider them as the young Jesus considered the table, the chair, and the cross: with the knowledge of how it hangs together, of the intelligence that arranges the thing, of its weakness and strength and, most importantly, its contingency as an artifact, the fact that it might have been put together differently, or not at all. Rather, we wake, caffeinate ourselves, stumble out the door to make the money necessary for the whole business, get into the 2009 Honda Accord, and—nothing. A gurgle. A half-attempted turnover. No recourse, no mastery, no dominion, just the revelation of the servile self to itself.

The man stuck in his own driveway suddenly knows himself, not as a cause of things, but as given over to things. If he lingers too long in the driveway, he might get to thinking of his furnace (which room is it in again?), his boiler, his credit card, and the grocery system. He may get to thinking of the way in which his warmth, his shelter, and his very means of survival are only available as commodities, purchased from elsewhere, at the command of cash or credit. This alienation from the means of his own survival is a condition traditionally referred to as slavery; we may all at least admit that such a condition is *scary*.

Now it is the principle aim of our technocratic behemoth to maximize fear to the utmost (for reasons sundry, and all of ‘em bad), and almost every technological innovation of the past fifty years can be equally described as an invitation for man to give up some skill whereby he owns his own means of survival, his means of getting along, in exchange for a commodity whereby he pays some company or other to “get along” for him. Thus, we travel by instructions rented from Alphabet and Apple; thus, cars and tractors are built to be unfixable by anyone but a licensed dealer; thus, even the most basic forms of communication are mediated and made by possible by devices over which we have only a modicum of mastery; and everywhere a fog of fear surrounds even the most commonplace household objects: Isn’t it considered virtually criminal to do your own electric work? Don’t we shudder to imagine the plumbing job as being something we are responsible for? Shouldn’t we, after all, have some sort of certificate to open up the furnace?

Not being afraid is the prerequisite for any fruitful encounter with reality, and the first and final lesson of every trade. The trades allow you to enter into the sort of communion with the world whereby you perfect it, and it perfects you. This encounter with the world as genuinely belonging to my skill—even when my skill is specialized to stone or wood—spreads out into the whole of my life, affords me a recognizable, existential stance. Done right, *having* a skill is subordinated to the *being* of the one who has it: becoming capable of certain work is a means and a mode of becoming *someone*. Who, precisely, does the tradesman become?

Typically, the tradesman becomes someone with a “can-do” attitude, a cliché of American politics, but one worth saving: for the one who *can* do is one who can give. (And what he *gives* is survival, warmth, and shelter, where so many jobs can only give luxuries.) He becomes someone who knows artifice from within and, therefore, someone habituated to see through artifice, all the way down to the resplendent fact that “someone did this.” This knowledge produces freedom: it allows the tradesman to say, not just theoretically, but with his life: “then I can do it too.” Unlike the operation of interfaces that makes up most work today, the tradesman’s direct communion with the inner workings of the built world produces a skepticism of mechanical systems presented as inevitable, necessary, or even natural, that is, as going on apart from human freedom and responsibility. The Gospels record Jesus as a man in a dogged fight with lawyers, scribes, money-changers, and the like, and the mystery of the battle can cloud the mundane fact—that this is ideal tradesman behavior; that Joseph’s words

are on his lips; that, whenever we see a contractor enraged at the obfuscations of white-collar bureaucrats hungrily guarding the gap between his skill and the others' need, there—*sans* all the cursing—we see Christ.

Where the rich man can only walk away sad, because he is *determined* by his many possessions, Jesus sees through them, down into the freedom of the human heart which *can* cling or not cling to wealth. Where the Sabbath law is described as a fatalistic mechanism, Jesus makes it a gift of life: “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). This insight applies directly to all legal regimes and all technologies, all the way down to the 2009 Honda Accord: for “the car was made for man, not man for the car,” and so too the phone, the furnace, the building code—even money. It is an insight especially available to the tradesman who knows, most intimately, that all this artifice is for man; that wherever it enslaves him (wherever we end up serving the car or the money, and not the other way around), justice demands our liberation. For these things *are* given over to human reason, however alienated we may feel from the fact. “Someone built this,” from the American Constitution to the bathroom sink. It is easy for academics and corporate hustlers to throw up their hands, to equate technocratic slavery with some natural disease, to say of our inability to move and thrive in a world of devices—“that’s just the way the world works.” But the conscience of the tradesman rebels. He knows better. He knows artifice from its very beginning, knows the freedom and decision that brings it into being, knows that it all might not have been, and that it all might have been otherwise, and so bears the responsibility of reminding a world of coders, traders, lawyers, and those under them, so prone to mechanistic presumptions, that we really are responsible for our world.

Obviously, I speak in the ideal. The trades can be corrupted as anything else, can become afraid, especially through the vice of greed, which would make money into the true purpose of the skilled trades, and so open them up to the same illusion of necessity and mechanism as white-collar work: giving them over to “the market,” tending them towards automation, smothering them with intolerable blankets of bureaucracy, and infecting them through with plain, old-fashioned dishonesty. A school that desires Catholics to become tradesmen is only coherent if it desires, at the same time, that the trades become Catholic. America needs the independent and honest tradesman as a spiritual father and a light to the nation, one that reveals the living, beating heart of freedom that is the source of our increasingly impenetrable machinery. But the tradesman, for his part, needs Christ, the master carpenter, to carve him into shape; needs Christ, the mason, to chisel him into a living stone. If God wills it, this meeting of the Church and the trades will provide our Republic with a generation of workers who can fix, not just our teetering infrastructure, but our spiritual malaise; who can replace, not just our built-to-crash housing, but our alienation from the means of our survival; who can build, not just our cities, but the City of God.

Mark Barnes is editor of New Polity.

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Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

FEATURE ARTICLE

For Farm and Family: Reflections on Making

RORY GROVES

I was eight years old when I wrote my first computer program. It was a random number generator—a small but sure victory for a young child. Sevens, ones, fives, eighteens (and who knows which number next?) were appearing on the screen in all their monochrome glory. I was elated by the fact that I had turned my idea into a reality: I had *made* something.

It was the beginning of a long career in high tech that would lead me to the unlikeliest of places: farming in rural Minnesota.

After graduating college at the height of the dot-com mania, I was brimming with ambition and ready to make my “dent in the universe,” as Apple co-founder Steve Jobs put it. As a young tech entrepreneur, I assumed it was my birthright to become a “dot-com millionaire.” After all, that’s what the New Economy seemed to promise in 1999.

So I hung my shingle and waited for the venture capitalists to come knocking. But my dreams were dashed when, months later, the mania turned out to be a lot of *hot air* and I watched with bewilderment the implosion of the “dot-com bubble.” The New Economy still had to abide by the rules of the Old Economy, it turned out. And instead of becoming a dot-com millionaire, I found myself sans a job.

A Slowly Coming Tide

My experience was not unique; I was another casualty of the centuries-long march of Human Progress. Rather than spending decades mastering one’s own trade and passing that craftsmanship and skill down through the generations, the average person today will work seven careers in his lifetime. Indeed, someone working in my field who does not continuously retrain will become obsolete in about three years.

But the history of innovation is a record of upheaval, if nothing else—“creative destruction” as Joseph Schumpeter called it. And continual outmoding and obsolescence is the price we pay for our upwardly mobile, opportunistic society.

Starting around the close of the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution kicked off a half-

century of innovation that would upend thousands of years of custom in a single generation. Labor-saving devices like Eli Whitney's cotton gin and Samuel Slater's textile mills revolutionized the fiber industry and brought into centrally-situated factories what had historically been produced on the home farm.

As domestic functions were centralized into efficiently-run factories, the resulting material wealth surpassed anything pre-industrial families had known. No longer were families bound "to the land" for their subsistence: women and even children could work for wages with little or no prior skill due to the specialization of labor and standardization of parts.

As we were making a farm, our farm was making a family.

It should be noted that, historically, families always engaged in multiple occupations. Ben Franklin was an inventor, author, publisher and statesman. George Washington was a surveyor, military strategist, and orchardist before he served in the White House. Our forebears were, by and large, generalists rather than specialists. And the work was shared by, and in service to, the family.

But with the reorientation of society around more efficient means of production came consequences that took generations to understand—consequences that are still being sorted out today.

One historian records that, prior to the introduction of machinery,

The typical shoemaker had long been his own master. He worked in his little shop at home as he pleased, doing perhaps farm work or engaging in some other occupation a part of the year. He objected to serving any other master than himself, and believed that obedience to a foreman was a surrender of his personal rights and liberties. He was reluctant to submit to factory hours, from seven o'clock in the morning until six at night, and to exacting factory regulations. He opposed in the like manner the introduction of labor-saving machinery. The general industrial growth of communities was, however, an irresistible though a slowly coming tide. Progressive methods of employment and the introduction of machinery gradually broke down all opposition.⁽¹⁾

The Spirit of Making

One of the most enduring features of the Industrial Revolution was the way it "broke down" relationships. This is most visibly seen in human relationships: hands that once drove teams of horses now assemble parts on the factory floor; communities that once lived interdependently in rural farms and villages now live in cities of strangers; families who for millennia worked together towards a common end now participate in a "division of labor" wherein husband and wife pursue separate careers while their children are raised in age-segregated government schools.

But other kinds of relationships were severed as well.

Our modern theory of work—of dividing labor and standardizing parts—is predicated upon

separating *thinking* from *doing*, and theory from practice. In so doing we have created vast abundance of *things* but neglected the greater importance of *making*. The task of the craftsman, it has been said, is to “make well what needs making.” Today the emphasis is rather to make *cheap* what needs making.

Whether that is cheap petroleum-based substitutes imported from China or cramming 40,000 turkeys into a climate-controlled building and calling it “farming,” there is a spirit involved in making that doesn’t get apportioned when we stamp out parts in high capacity. It is imparted only through careful attention, through the union of our thoughts and actions.

What is the value of a dishtowel? Perhaps a few dollars at a discount store. But what is the value of a dish towel woven on a loom by your daughter, with colors and fabrics and patterns deliberately chosen to reflect the culture of your family? This is a form of making I observed at a friend’s homestead recently. You can see how a thing begins to take on deeper meaning when under the attention of an artisan who loves the thing she is making and loves the people for whom she is making it. Such a thing passes beyond mere utility—such as the dollar-dishtowel that will be thrown out and replaced by another cheap imported substitute. It now becomes a showpiece for the family, the fruit of a daughter’s dedication and skill. It is, in other words, no longer a commodity. It carries significance. It satisfies not only physical needs, but spiritual as well.

The same could be said for hand-crafted furniture made from lumber harvested from one’s own land, a fine woolen sweater made from fibers sheared from one’s own flock, or the several cords of firewood split and stacked for the long winter. Technology may be involved to lesser or greater degrees (a wood-burning stove is a fine piece of technology). But the intention behind the product has much to do with the significance it carries. And this is what is lost when we separate thinking from doing, when we make cheap rather than well.

A Terrible Thing to Waste

The Industrial Revolution, in truth, never ended. The high tech industry of which I was once a proponent represents, perhaps, the final stage of “breaking down of all opposition.” Where the revolution of the 18th century sought to leverage our hands, our geography, and our families for the benefit of industry, the revolution of the 21st century is intent on harvesting our minds.

In his best-selling business/self-help book, *Deep Work*, Cal Newport describes a theoretical office environment in which workers in the knowledge economy can maximize their personal productivity. It’s called a Eudaimonia Machine (from the Aristotelian concept of achieving the “highest human good”). “In an ideal world,” Newport suggests, “we’d all have access to something like the Eudaimonia Machine.”

This metaphysical superlative boils down to an office space with five rooms.

In the first room, The Gallery, workers become inspired by the accomplishments of their knowledge-working colleagues. Further in (the rooms are arranged in sequence), workers meet, debate, and collaborate over a cappuccino in The Salon. The Library provides access to research materials (presumably in hushed tones). The Office room boasts white boards and cubicles for “shallow work.” And finally, “the deep-work chamber”: six by ten-foot cells protected by thick, sound-proof walls where workers may achieve “total focus” and be liberated from the distracting demands of human relationships. (Just plug me into The Matrix already!)

“The goal of the machine,” the author explains, “is to create a setting where the users can get into a state of deep human flourishing—creating work that’s at the absolute extent of their personal abilities.”^[3]

So under the banner of personal achievement, Aristotle’s “highest human good” becomes a prison cell.

And yet, this is the logical conclusion of the Industrial Revolution, where all men are reduced to machines, and so thoroughly that even our thoughts become commodified. Historian Allan C. Carlson opines that “[i]n our time ... all of those new jobs—all!—are the very ones threatened by the culminating triumph of the machines, in artificial intelligence and robotics. The human enablers, it seems, are becoming ever less important . . . and may soon not be needed at all.”^[3]

A Coherent Life

Sensing the coming tide (and ships it would inevitably sink), I decided to move my family to a hobby farm several years ago in hopes of picking up a few lessons on self-sufficiency and escaping some of the more glaring “amenities” of the knowledge economy like cubicles, asphalt, and rush hour.

Initially I thought this arrangement would create a healthy work-life balance. I would work in the abstract world of algorithms by day and get my hands dirty in the tangible world of gardens and orchards and barns in the evenings and on weekends—a sort of professional therapy for the screen-bound knowledge worker. I certainly had no intention of slowing my high tech ambitions in order to become a farmer.

In *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford insightfully comments on this work-life imbalance that we have come to accept as normal and even healthy in the era of extreme specialization:

It is common today to locate one’s “true self” in one’s leisure choices. Accordingly, good work is taken to be work that maximizes one’s means for pursuing these other activities, where life becomes meaningful. The mortgage broker works hard all year, then he goes and climbs Mount Everest. The exaggerated psychic content of his summer vacation sustains him through the fall, winter, and spring. . . . There is a disconnect between his work life and his leisure life; in the one he accumulates money and in the other he accumulates psychic nourishment. Each part depends on and enables the other, but does so in the manner of a transaction between sub-selves, rather than as the intelligibly linked parts of a coherent life.^[4]

When that work inevitably ventures into the gray areas of modern business ethics, such as approving bad loans that will be sold to unsuspecting investors, the cognitive dissonance between work and leisure metastasizes into a spiritual dilemma—the unfettering of one’s conscience in favor of the “corporate good.” The mortgage broker finds himself making ethical concessions in order to maintain his “true self.” In time, his “making” becomes his undoing.

“The work cannot sustain him as a human being,” Crawford writes. “Rather, it damages the best part of him.”

In my own case, the contrast could not be ignored: every day I would leave the glowing LED

display of my computer screen and join with my family in tapping maple trees, planting seedlings, harvesting asparagus, and later, beets and potatoes and apples. We were eating chops and steaks from animals we had pastured, eggs from chickens we had hatched and raised.

The “hobby farm” was more real than my “real job”: it was the more coherent way to live and work. There was careful attention, and intention, in everything we did. More importantly, we were doing it together.

We weren’t only discovering the significance of making, we were also recovering the significance of relationship: as we were making a farm, our farm was making a family.

“It wasn’t so very long ago,” writes Blair Adams, “that parents taught homesteading skills and crafts to their children. The father, whose craft made provision for his family, imparted his abilities to his children, and so the craft was handed down from father to son and generation to generation. Likewise, master craftsmen trained apprentices in every aspect of fine workmanship. This extension of their craftsmanship would, then, benefit the entire community by passing on the skills indispensable to family and community living.”

The Road Less Traveled

“This is all well and good,” one might say, “but how are we to recover craftsmanship and the spiritual embodiment of things in the industrial age?”

I would like to offer historical trades as a guidepost. Like my experimental foray into farming, there are modes of work that can offer “safe passage” to a more meaningful, more coherent, more family-centered life.

At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, there were around 70 distinct occupations. Today, there are over 30,000. However, most of those preindustrial professions have survived to this day (over 60 of them). Professions like woodworker, innkeeper, brewer, tutor, midwife, and of course, farmer, shepherd, and carpenter have been around since the founding of our country and still remain viable careers today.

By comparison, of the tens of thousands of modern occupations, many won’t last the decade. The robotic revolution, for example, is predicted to displace 800 million workers by 2030. Meanwhile, jobs in the building trades are projected to *increase* by 30% over the same period.¹⁵

While not all trades are suited to all people, there exist stable vocations that resist automation and the isolating tendency of modern careers—reinforcing, rather than undermining, family relationships and a functional home economy.

Historical professions give us an opportunity to bring our things back into alignment with making again, and in the process recover something greater: families, communities, and faith.

What God Has Joined Together

“God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). It was good because it was *made* by God. In other words, the things derived their value from their maker, not the other way around. But what is the value of making in a throwaway economy, when the value of labor has been reduced to the productive output of a machine? More importantly, what are we communicating about the value of things over the value of making?

Farming taught us lessons that money couldn't buy. Namely, that there was more value in making a family than in making a buck. Whatever the cost, we were determined to pursue work together rather than paychecks apart.

We started growing food mostly for ourselves, to be more self-sufficient, and it is a whole family affair. This led to hosting workshops on our farm to teach homesteading skills. The workshops led to publishing a quarterly newsletter to share what we were learning with other families who are walking a similar path. It turns out there are a lot of families walking this path: our newsletter now goes out to two thousand families on four continents.

Out of the newsletter sprang a book—an inquiry into vocations that would unite our family rather than divide it. Since the publication of *Durable Trades*, we have received hundreds of letters from other families who are searching for another way forward. Many of them have made significant strides toward establishing their own family-centered economies.

And so, after twenty years in high tech, I shut my software business down this year. Our family economy now consists of farming, writing, and teaching. Like our forebears, we are engaged in multiple occupations and the work is shared by, and in service to, each other.

For the first time in my career I feel as though I am living a truly integrated life: where beliefs are not separated from actions, where theory is not separated from practice.

I am making things that are meaningful, with people who are meaningful to me.

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^[1] Frederick Allen, *The Shoe Industry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), 21.

^[2] Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 95–97.

^[3] Rory Groves, *Durable Trades: Family-Centered Economies That Have Stood the Test of Time* (Front Porch Republic Books, 2020), xii.

^[4] Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 181.

^[5] James Manyika et al, “Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained: Workforce Transitions in a Time of Automation,” *McKinsey Global Institute*, November 28, 2017.

