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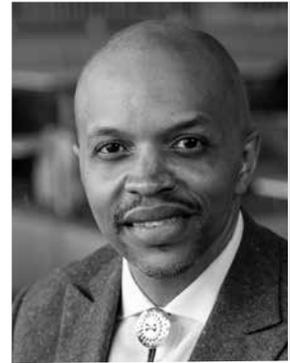
Work Works

Americans stand a chance of hearing about vocation when class-conscious twenty-year-olds commence with life as young adults. Commencement speeches frequently include explicit or implicit references about the worthiness of one or another professional pursuit. Graduates aspire to a class-status that likely delimited their options for a major and, upon beginning college, effectively predetermined their career path. In an economy with strident class-stratification, incoming freshmen are encouraged to “follow the money”. Commencement speeches rarely remind graduates about that pursuit. Invariably, commencement speech themes accent vocation. Professional pursuits are deemed worthy when graduates exercise transformative agency. Graduates are tasked with shouldering the burden of engaging in transformative heroic acts. It’s highly unlikely, however, that a profession, institution or industry will be transformed. In fact, there are no guarantees that either the profession or the person will be transformed. Graduates may experience the journey as worthy and transformative in retrospect. Journeys, to be sure, are replete with risks. Consistent heroic actions are worthy because transformation is possible and, perhaps, preferable. Who wouldn’t prefer to be transformed? Those who are unbothered and apathetic. In increasingly technocratic, career-conscious academic contexts, apathy abounds. Given the kind and quantity of America’s societal problems, the mismatch is confounding. Why such apathy when social pathologies abound? How can the worthiness

of pursuing unscripted journeys be redeemed? When worth emanates from consistent work. Work is worthy. Work translates. Work works.

Educators in humanities who profess to students a few times a week at small liberal arts colleges would likely agree that the number of the unbothered is growing. The number of the unbothered are increasing on both sides of the desk. Professors and students languish. What, of worthiness and work, remains?

Educators can cultivate classroom experiences that devalue heroic ideologies, eschew expressly religious heroes and embrace anti-heroines. By emphasizing just one option, professors alienate self and students. Educational endeavors should be fraught and forgiving. The joys of educational endeavors obtain when the complexity of a religious anti-heroine, like Toni Morrison’s Sethe, surfaces. Such joy is manifest when, in the context of a seminar, sojourners realize that humanist groups like the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists deideologize difference.



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The risk of being employed in quasi-elite academic institutions is acute, not least because apathy abounds. The journey may not justify the risks. Interest groups deploy decadent economic imperatives among what Wendy Brown calls the “ruins of neoliberalism.” Vocation is among the ruins. The ruins help explain apathy as well as the annual calls to render heroic pursuits vocational. In the academy, explanations are necessary but insufficient. Professors and students need more. Perennial commencement speeches, intentional though they may very well be, will not resuscitate vocation. Parishioners from wisdom traditions in prior American eras commend work. When embodied as a form of service to others, work is worthy.

Post-War and post-Civil Rights churches in impoverished communities often displayed admonitions prominently in vestibules that encouraged its members as follows: “Enter to Worship, Depart to Serve” and “God first, others second, me last.” How can such deference address apathy if vocation redounds to God-talk that warrants serving elites, be they students or professionals? Many activists, Afro-pessimists and post-Socratic scholars view such religiously inspired deference as self-abnegation. Colonized Christian God-talk is antiquated. Respectability politics disrespects the impoverished. These critics make valid points. The journeys of impoverished Christians from previous generations was a risk. Merely talking about God and vocation, though a necessity for some, will not suffice. The wisdom of elders commends the kind of work such that an educators walk matches their talk. If an educator’s work is consistent and co-creative, transformative moral agency will commence.

Professors embody such work when their teaching and research consistently exudes vulnerability, extemporaneity and contemporaneity. Professors must resist the urge to model the banking theory of knowledge. Graduate school is over. Impressing intellectual elders is no longer the goal, as if it ever was. Undoubtedly, professors are the smartest in the room. If, by chance, a professor is not the expert, students are blameless. Proving one’s intellectual bona-fides is counter-productive. Assuredly, in some courses, lectures are apropos. Make them interactive.

Over the course of a semester, professors should, both through in-class dialogue and paper feedback, convince students that their ideas and arguments matter. Centering student learning requires vulnerability.

Professors must also exhibit the joys of learning, in class. If proverbial light bulbs do not “go off” in class,

“Centering student learning requires vulnerability.”

during a session, America’s post-literature, algorithmic culture will not aid this process. This applies to professors, too. When this occurs, professors should state as much, in the moment. Learning, moreover, is a process. Students who seem to have more “light bulbs moments” need not be catered to. Attend to deliberate thinkers who might need several weeks to process ideas. Professors should structure classes so that students are encouraged to think “out loud” and explore arguments that lead to unjustifiable, even undesirable, conclusions. Over the course of a semester, professors should talk less. They should feel out-numbered. Such a state of affairs is far more likely to obtain when professors are extemporaneous.

Lastly, professors should be conversant with current events. Examples are most illustrative when students know the person or event being referenced. Professors need not necessarily be culture vultures. Pop culture is transient and, at times, distasteful. That is what makes recent examples so interesting. Positioning a fashionable contemporary cultural event or person against the backdrop of a wisdom, literary or philosophical tradition is generative. Traditions perdure because they are selective. Professors should not predetermine what could be selected. Such determinations are journeys that require the kind of co-creative—student-teacher—transformative work that occurs in the classroom for the purpose of empowering those who do not attend college, especially the impoverished.