

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 27
Issue 2 *June*

Article 4

June 1991

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Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 27, no.2, June 1991, p.71-81

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Living Right and Living Well

by ANTHONY CUNNINGHAM

THE OPPORTUNITY for a former student to give public thanks to an influential mentor is a special honor and a great pleasure. Having had the good fortune to count Bob Reuman as a colleague for the past two years makes this opportunity even more enjoyable. Students and faculty alike appreciate just how much he has enriched Colby and how his retirement will leave the college with an enormous void. Serving the college community with unparalleled grace and devotion, he has also valiantly personified the struggle to live right *and* live well.

Of course, anyone familiar with Bob Reuman knows only too well that he would be far more interested in my directing attention away from him and towards philosophical discourse. Thus, in his honor, I should like briefly to address the possible connections between living a morally good life and living a good life, plain and simple. As I see it, virtually all of us are intensely interested in the latter, and I think it is fair to say that a great many of us are also very concerned with the former. If this is so, then the relationship between these two concerns should matter a great deal to most of us.

1. First Thoughts: Disconnecting Moral Goodness and the Good Life

THOSE concerned with both living right and living well would find it comforting to know that there is an intimate connection between these two pursuits. To the person who desperately wants to flourish, but who also cherishes moral virtue, what could be better news than to learn that one cannot be had without the other, or that one tends to lead to the other? Yet, serious reflection is likely to raise significant doubts even in the mind of those who sincerely yearn to have both. Indeed, an honest appreciation of the obstacles to any marriage between moral virtue and human flourishing may seem to call for scaling down grand hopes and aspirations for a marriage made in heaven, so to speak. Perhaps the best that we can reasonably expect is *some* degree of compatibility. A number of considerations suggests contenting ourselves with this more modest hope.

(a) Conflicts at the upper reaches of moral goodness

There can be no denying that we live in a world replete with serious suffering and injustices. Though many of us try to alleviate or prevent some of these ills, very few of us devote our life to combatting them wholeheartedly. Figures like Albert

Schweitzer, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mother Teresa stand out precisely because they are so few and far between. If it is correct to hold them up as moral exemplars, as so many do, then it must also be correct to say that most of us forsake moral excellence in favor of pursuing lives we expect to find more satisfying. Unlike these zealots, we deliberately forsake moral crusades, electing instead to attend to less needy friends and loved ones, to read books and visit museums, to chase balls and pucks, to relax in front of a good film. In short, our lives tend to be structured around personal commitments which may carry extraordinary weight from a subjective point of view but which pale in significance from an impartial standpoint. Practically speaking, the actual lives we lead evince little confidence on our parts that a good life is to be had by traveling the narrow path in pursuit of unsullied and complete moral virtue.

Moreover, even if people like Schweitzer, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa find ultimate fulfillment by devoting themselves completely and tirelessly to their causes, no doubt everyday folk would be far less satisfied were they to try to take up the same crosses. More likely, the life of the professional do-gooder would leave us with a sense of profound estrangement from the things that provide our life with most of its personal meaning, structure, and value. Even were we terribly successful at championing the struggle against evil, no doubt this way of life would squeeze out or deform those personal relationships and commitments that we cling to as constitutive elements of what we see as a well-lived life. Hence, given our patently imperfect world, along with the assumption that it would always be morally better to improve it, a total commitment to moral excellence on our parts would seem to demand nothing short of sacrificing what provides us with our deepest reasons for living. Few people are ready, willing, or able to take this kind of plunge.

(b) Conflicts at the lower limits of moral goodness

Aside from conflicts in the lofty realm of the “supererogatory,” there seem to be innumerable opportunities for conflicts between moral goodness and good living in more ordinary, everyday moral contexts—in the sphere of what passes for moral decency rather than moral sainthood. It is fairly easy to imagine commonplace circumstances where *minimal* moral demands seem to stand in the way of a person’s happiness. For instance, moving ahead in one’s career may in some cases require the ruthless manipulation of others. Protecting and providing for loved ones may sometimes be possible only at the price of badly mistreating strangers. Avoiding estrangement from a beloved community may entail overlooking serious wrongdoings, thereby becoming a silent partner in crime. In these and innumerable other examples, decent people can find themselves torn between what they love most and what they themselves see as the right thing to do. Of course, with a modicum of luck, conscientious people will not run into these conflicts at *every* twist and turn in life. Moreover, imaginative people are often able to resolve these conflicts in such a way as to avoid sacrificing either virtue or happiness. Nonetheless, even the wiliest of moral agents can ultimately be backed into a corner from which a decisive choice must be made. For example,

try as he did to avoid this kind of tragic decision, a courageous and canny Thomas More could not escape the choice between a capitulation of conscience to Henry VIII or his own execution.

(c) *Flourishing rogues*

Our fervent hope that no person should profit through immorality can sometimes tempt us to paint a picture of the wicked person as some pathological shell of a human being—the sociopath bereft of friends and loved ones, bent on pursuing wickedness in a thoroughly neurotic fashion. Presented with this kind of example, we quite reasonably conclude that if *this* is what one gets by abandoning moral commitments, then we certainly live better by refusing to give them up. However, a fairer candidate for inspection in this regard might be some type of renaissance-man version of “the Godfather.” Consider a talented and sophisticated figure who is capable of prodigious warmth and love where family, friends, and colleagues are concerned but who can also order or personally carry out the execution of competitors with chilling equanimity. It requires no grand leap to imagine this person to be relatively content with what he considers a rich and full life. So long as fortune smiles on him and he is able to maintain his iron-like grip on power, he might even consider his life to be a blessed one.

In fact, it might be argued that *most* of us could probably purchase richer, better lives by at least occasionally abandoning our moral qualms when they get in the way of what we want. Unlike the Godfather, *we* might need to advert to rationalization or self-deception in order to hide our infidelity from ourselves, thereby avoiding unpleasant pangs of conscience. Yet, if the goal is a rich and subjectively satisfying life, a bit of self-deception hardly seems like an overwhelming or insurmountable price to pay. Furthermore, the important point here is simply that for those who lack any intrinsic interest in the rights and well-being of others and who have the power to live as they wish, there seems to be no necessary reason why they need to take others into account in order to live well by their own standards.

(d) *Conceptual constraints*

Raising the question of an intimate association between a moral life and a good life leaves the issue unacceptably vague. To begin even to address the issue, we need to know more about what sort of relationship is being sought. For instance, is a good life to be *defined* in terms of a moral life? If so, what can we say about figures like the Godfather? If the concept of a good life is to be truly informative and not merely stipulative, it is important to avoid defining the Godfather’s life as a “bad” one and the moral crusader’s life as a “good” one simply by fiat. After all, the Godfather may be absolutely thrilled with his life while the crusader may find life to be an insufferable, terrible burden. Even if enjoyment by itself is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for living well, surely there is something odd about casting the latter as a well-lived life.

On the other hand, if a moral life is to be defined in terms of a good life, doesn’t this threaten to eviscerate what we are trying to get at when we invoke the idea

of “moral demands”? Are we to conclude that it is morally appropriate to misuse or ignore others provided it serves one’s own purposes? Our reaction to those who rape, pillage, and kill the innocent is usually outrage, condemnation, and resentment rather than pity or remorse because they have somehow made their *own* soul or life worse. Even if we believe that they have harmed themselves by their own wickedness (*they* need not realize that they have done themselves harm), our usual concern behind invoking moral demands is to protect the victims rather than the victimizers.

Of course, even if the proper conclusion to draw is that we do best to keep moral goodness and good living conceptually distinct (i.e., define neither in terms of the other), there is always the possibility that there may be some reliable causal connection between them. However, even if this is so, perhaps we need to be extra careful about spelling out this connection. If one lives an upright life *in order* to live well, this raises the disturbing issue that concerned Kant so deeply—true virtue can be had if and only if it is sought for its own sake rather than for any extrinsic reason. In his own way, Butler anticipated this Kantian concern for the purity of moral motivation when he sought to link and yet distinguish benevolence (as a dictate of conscience) and “self-love” by describing them as “coincident.” As he saw things, a chief element of happiness was to be found by attending to the needs of others, but only if one’s own happiness was not the motivating force behind a life of beneficence. A more skeptical observer might insist that there is a reliable connection between virtue and happiness *only* for those who *happen* to be most interested in morality for its own sake, are successful in the pursuit thereof, and are fortunate enough to escape serious conflicts between moral concerns and other important nonmoral loves. And though it is difficult to judge the size of this class, there would seem to be plenty of candidates from everyday life who would fail to qualify for membership for want of one or more of these characteristics.

If one draws these considerations together, they do not decisively rule out some close connection between moral goodness and living a good life. Nevertheless, they suggest some compelling reasons to tread carefully in positing any such connection. Indeed, the preponderance of anecdotal evidence from everyday life portraying good people suffering badly and very bad people faring well seems enough just by itself to place the burden of proof on anyone who wishes to argue that virtue and happiness are close bedfellows. In fact, in light of the foregoing considerations, perhaps our most realistic hope is that living a tolerably decent life may still leave room for a moderately satisfying life. If this hope is in vain, then we are left with a lamentable choice between moral goodness and living well. Some would readily admit that this constitutes a genuine psychological dilemma for human beings but insist nonetheless that it reveals no problem so far as our conception of moral demands is concerned. The mere fact that a judgment about how we ought to live is unpalatable should not disqualify it, any more than a correct but undesirable diagnosis by a physician merits rejection. After all, nobody ever promised that moral goodness would be easy or that everything in life would go our way.

2. *Second Thoughts: The Aim of Ethics*

WHEN contemplating the connection between moral goodness and living well, it can be deceptively easy to overlook the importance of getting clear on the point behind “morality” and “moral philosophy.” Without a good idea of what we are after when we do moral philosophy, there can be no grounds for great confidence in anything we have to say about the connections between upright and good living. I think it is fair to say that many moral philosophers have something like the following in mind as an implicit working definition of “morality”:

“morality” = an attempt to adjudicate conflicts of interest in an impartial, fair fashion by specifying what we owe just anybody, and what we are owed by just anybody.

If this seems on the mark, it is important to realize that this conception of morality is a fairly recent arrival on the scene of human history. In earlier times questions about how to treat others would more likely have evoked parochial thoughts about how to treat one’s parents, siblings, kinfolk, friends, neighbors, or fellow citizens. The emergence of less personal and homogeneous forms of social organization and interaction in modern life drove philosophers away from the concrete and the particular, from stories and fables with a moral, and towards abstract decision procedures designed to yield clear and resolute conceptions of what we owe “just anybody.” In this shift of perspective, more parochial concerns were either subsumed within a comprehensive, impartial point of view (*the moral point of view*), or else they were relegated to a place outside of morality proper as nonmoral concerns.

Today we live in a thoroughly modern world where we often need to ask questions of ourselves from an impartial standpoint. Since there is no going back to any “golden age” (mythical or real) of nothing but intimate, face-to-face social interaction, we need some idea of what we can expect from each other as total strangers if we are to coexist successfully. Nevertheless, I believe that it is a crucial mistake to *start* with this as the foundational ethical issue and to conceive of the quest to resolve it as the essence of ethical deliberation. Socrates, our first notable Western moral philosopher, eschewed looking at the world from a separate, specialized “moral point of view” and instead conceived of ethics broadly by asking questions like “How should one live?” and “What sort of person should one be?” Many modern moral philosophers have pointed to the generality of these questions as proof of the primitiveness of the Greek conception of ethics. These questions are said to ignore the fundamental ambiguity between the “moral should” and the “should” of plain practical reasoning. Yet, I would argue that in this purported weakness rests the precise strength of the Greek approach.

Both Socrates and Aristotle sought an account of ethical considerations which would cast them as a genuine force in the life of any human being. As they saw it, a compelling ethical vision would have to demonstrate how those who ignore or fail to appreciate ethical concerns thereby make some significant mistake. This is not to say that either Socrates or Aristotle thought that those in error would

necessarily appreciate their mistakes. Indeed, unlike Socrates, Aristotle even had grave doubts about the power of philosophy to effect changes in people once their characters were fully formed since bad habits might not be completely correctable. Nevertheless, both Socrates and Aristotle thought that the absence of a broad array of virtues would constitute a serious blow to a person's life—not just in the sense of making someone a worse person from a specialized moral point of view but by making someone a worse person with a worse life, period.

While the Socratic and Aristotelian answers to “How should one live?” were essentially first personal ones, centered around the notion of a flourishing life for the person who asks the question, it would be a serious mistake to think of their answers as “egocentric” in the usual sense, and therefore no answer at all so far as *ethics* is concerned since it ignores what we owe *others*. The Greek ideal of “*philia*” entails the integration of an intrinsic care and concern for others within the self. Thus good parents, siblings, kinfolk, friends, neighbors, and citizens do not see the efforts they make on behalf of others as a struggle between self-interest and the well-being of others. In fact, where these relations are concerned, any simple dichotomy between self and others breaks down. Aristotle took great care to describe a true friend as “another self,” a description which underscores a very definite transcendence or expansion of the individual self. Indeed, from the Greek point of view, it is misleading even to consider Hobbesian individuals divorced from any particular social context. Aside from the obvious point that our biological nature condemns us at birth to a social existence, there is also a far deeper appeal to the idea that we can realize our full potential only within a community replete with social bonds and attachments prized for their own sake.

In this context, one of the most striking and revealing things about Greek ethical thought is its depiction of practical conflicts. While modern moral philosophy's temptation may be to cast Thomas More's dilemma in terms of a choice between happiness and moral integrity, between the good life and virtue, the Greeks would no doubt have portrayed this as a practical conflict *within* the good life. When Thomas More is ultimately forced to choose between his commitment to God and the family life he so deeply loves, the good life is inevitably wrested from him since both commitments are integral components of the good life for him. Thus, like Socrates, his life would not be better for abandoning his integrity. His situation is tragic precisely because he is condemned by circumstances beyond his control to lose something precious no matter what he chooses.

Hence, Greek ethical thought rejects a certain type of practical “schizophrenia”—a schizophrenia between what is regarded as most beautiful and worth wanting in a fully human life and what is regarded as a morally upright life. It does so by locating ethical commitments as constitutive elements within the larger context of a well-lived life. Yet, modern critics are likely to insist that the Greek ethical conception achieves this harmony only at the price of embracing the naive and faulty assumption of a substantive human telos and by ignoring impartial moral demands, the real backbone of any acceptable ethical vision. These two charges merit a closer look.

(a) Faulty assumption of a human telos

Any conceivable list of virtues and vices is likely to evoke a number of reactions from skeptics:

(1) *Counterexamples* — Not everybody lives this way or makes these same value judgments. Thus, any list of virtues and vices is a relative list at best.

(2) *Counterfactuals* — We cannot tell in advance whether it might be true that those who reject a particular list of virtues and vices would in fact live better lives were they ever to embrace this list. Moreover, to be more than a change of preferences, and therefore qualify this new way of life as *really* better, any such change would have to involve the acquisition or development of capacities that were previously lacking or ignored.

(3) *Contingency* — Even if counterfactuals of this sort are often true, there is no deeper philosophical explanation than the simple fact that we just *happen* to be this way. In particular, there can be no external point of view or standpoint of justification from which we can say that human beings *must* live this way.

At least to some people, it makes all the difference in the world whether this third reaction is well-founded. The worry here is that if there is no privileged, external perspective from which different sorts of lives can be compared and ultimately justified, then all comparisons and purported justifications are ultimately empty. Yet I am not convinced that this question should make all the difference to us. By comparison the revelation that human bodies might have taken a drastically different evolutionary turn millennia ago does little to alter or shake our convictions about what constitutes a well-functioning human body today. Analogously, I would argue that even if human beings did not *have* to develop into social creatures who usually require various sorts of relationships and commitments to invest their lives with meaning, structure, and value, this does not eliminate the possibility that most human beings actually need to do so, or the significance of this if it is the case.

In this light can we reach any significant, substantive generalizations about flourishing or impoverished human lives? For one thing, we can say with confidence that certain character traits are necessary if one is to be a free agent in a most fundamental sense. Self-regarding virtues like courage, temperance, prudence, and fortitude enable a person to resist very normal, powerful, and persistent desires, ones that we would not be better to be completely without (e.g., desires for safety, pleasure, immediate satisfaction, rest) in the service of what one sees as worthwhile. Without these traits one lacks the freedom to overcome what can often be one's most powerful inclinations in favor of those deemed more important. The ability to impose a hierarchy on desires in terms of importance rather than sheer intensity, and to silence desires considered base or less worthy, is a crucial part of what it means to take command of one's own character. Those who lack this kind of self-mastery must forsake even their most cherished ends whenever they happen to be assailed by formidable contrary inclinations.

We can also safely say that, besides the self-regarding virtues, a broad array of social virtues is necessary if one is to resist the sorts of inclinations which stand

in the way of experiencing bonds of human fellowship. Pervasively cruel, avaricious, ungrateful, vindictive, or self-absorbed people have little chance to forge or sustain loving, affectionate ties with others. In order truly to flourish as a parent, sibling, friend, neighbor, or compatriot, traits like justice, benevolence, generosity, honesty, civility, patience, and loyalty are sorely needed. Without the same, one is incapable of manifesting an effective care and concern for the well-being of others or for the well-being of a shared relationship.

Of course, even the fairly modest claim that human beings have good reasons to care deeply about their own character and the character of their relations with others can be questioned as purported elements of the good life for *any* and *every* human being. Perhaps thoroughgoing sybarites might be perfectly willing to adjust or jettison their character in a chameleon-like fashion whenever pleasure might be maximized by so doing. Sociopaths or, in some cases, entire cultures (e.g., Ruth Benedict's Dobuan tribespeople) show little interest in anything remotely like friendship as most of us know and cherish it. Nevertheless, to say that these people demonstrate no interest in ways of life most of us prize is not to prove decisively that they miss nothing of great importance. And while our cherished commitments can offer no decisive proof in the other direction, neither should we capriciously dismiss the fact that we often retrospectively admit our own failure to appreciate good things. Though appeals to superior wisdom may often be wrong or sometimes used pigheadedly, there seems to be no good reason to believe that everyone has an equal share of wisdom.

My modest hypothesis is that full-fledged sociopaths and misanthropes are rare, that the desire to confer and receive love runs deep and strong in most of us, and that only the richness of human goods and excellences, rather than the arbitrariness of the same, could in some cases provide human beings with sufficient reasons to forsake these relations and their requisite virtues. A figure like Gauguin may spring to mind as an example of someone who could not both be loyal to his family and also serve the artistic passion that in many respects defined him as a person. Yet I think that the most this sort of example need demonstrate is that often it is not possible to have all of life's greatest goods. This example need not be taken to suggest that the traits and characteristics we are used to thinking of as moral virtues are not vitally important parts of a well-lived human life. Even if Gauguin ultimately *had* to make the choice he did, this does not mean that he did not pay a profound price in so doing.

(b) *Exclusion of impartial moral demands*

Even assuming that Aristotle was right in thinking that no wise person "would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a5), this still leaves the question of what we owe "just anybody" unanswered. Though the Greeks ignored this question, surely *we* cannot. Again, at least one of the things we are after when we think about morality is an account of such demands. Yet, as soon as we begin to address this question, the Greek connection between upright and good living seems to be strained. After all, it is one thing to insist that one's life would be worse for betraying or abandoning

loved ones but quite another thing to suggest that this is so where strangers are concerned. Thus perhaps any close connection between living well and living right extends only so far as the bounds of our “natural” sympathies.

However, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that the Greek ideal of *philia* involves the seminal and, indeed, the most radical ethical leap—from an exclusive concern with the self to an intrinsic care and concern for the well-being of others. Once this gap is bridged, an expansion of concern to include those less intimately known and loved requires no radically new kind of ethical thought. The Greeks themselves reserved a place of honor for a fairly abstract form of fellowship in civic friendship.

Furthermore, if one avoids the mistake of cashing out moral excellence exclusively or even primarily in terms of fidelity to one or a small number of impartial ethical ideals (e.g., the maximization of happiness, impartial respect for equally worthy rational beings), then the temptation to pit concerns for the world at large (as *moral* concerns) against more parochial concerns for loved ones (as *nonmoral* concerns) in a zero-sum conflict can be dramatically diminished. The preoccupation with exhausting moral value and motivation by appeal to a single essence stems from the philosophical yearning for a grand unified theory that can collect and explain all of our disparate moral phenomena and intuitions. However, just as scientists must be careful about imposing an artificial simplicity on the physical world in their quest to explain it via theory, so too must philosophers exercise caution with respect to the moral realm.

Partial and impartial ethical commitments are best seen as disparate concerns that call for integration rather than a subsuming of one by the other. Most of us do just this in our everyday moral deliberations, though probably not in a self-conscious way, and certainly not by appealing to any algorithmic-like decision procedure. We struggle to articulate the bounds of proper concern for self and loved ones so as not to disadvantage others unfairly. For instance, few of us seriously believe that familial loyalty might compel us regularly to cheat, steal, lie, or kill, even if so doing might enable us to reap benefits for loved ones. Yet neither do we believe that a concern for justice or the common good compels us to abandon our family and loved ones to take up the life of the martyr. In fact, were we to look closely at such real-life martyrs, we might often conclude with good reason that they are morally flawed in ways that have little to do with fighting injustice or providing for the common good.

Moral philosophers have done well to emphasize impartial moral concerns since we are far more likely to ignore strangers in favor of loved ones than we are to abandon loved ones in order to “make the world a better place.” Yet were we ever to take some of these predominantly impartial ethical theories at face value and use them to structure *all* of the details of our life and character, we would end up forsaking or deforming the partial ethical commitments that play such an enormous role in making life worth living for us. Ironically, this seems to be one case where everyday people leading everyday lives in everyday moral contexts may actually evince more practical wisdom than professional “lovers of wisdom.”

3. *Final Thoughts: Modern Mistakes and Insights*

FEW would deny the claim that modernity has witnessed profound moral progress, often wrought through the prodigious sacrifices of those who struggled courageously against oppression and prejudice. No longer do we blithely assume that differences in gender, race, birth, or talent justify incredible differences in social privileges. Neither do we nonchalantly assume that we enjoy a mandate to force the good life on those too ignorant to appreciate it, thereby undermining their dignity. In many important respects, human beings today are freer and more equal than they have ever been in human history. Surely this is a good thing, and we have every reason to want more of the same. And though it would be putting things too strongly to say that philosophers deserve the lion's share of the credit for these changes, since philosophy sometimes merely reflects progress rather than inspiring it, surely philosophy has played a significant part in this progress.

Nonetheless, this progress has often come at an unnecessary, even if very understandable, price. The recognition that we need to embrace various impartial constraints if we are to provide for a community that takes each and every one of its citizens seriously has led many to exhaust the moral realm by appeal to these same constraints. Once cut adrift from any broader answer to "How should I live?" and "What sort of person should I be?" impartial moral demands have often loomed as little more than impersonal, alienating constraints on an individual's good.

Part of the grave difficulty in imagining impartial moral constraints as something else, as elements within a larger context of a flourishing human life, owes in large measure to the simplified, eviscerated conception of human flourishing that so often dominates modern discourse. So long as an individual's de facto preferences are taken to exhaust the good, the sheer fact that many people are not interested in others sentences us to a conceptual bifurcation between the notions of good and upright living. In practical terms this bifurcation has led many to conclude that living right and living well are reliably conjoined only for those select few whose de facto desires just happen to incline towards defining the latter in terms of the former.

Ultimately, might we not be far better served by taking seriously the idea that we are deeply social creatures who live richer and more complete lives by struggling to live true to a complex web of social relations that range in nature, size, and intimacy? And might we not do better to see moral philosophy as an attempt to articulate and sketch out complex and often conflicting commitments? So doing is unlikely to yield anything like a detailed decision procedure for answering the Socratic question, "How should one live?" But perhaps, as Aristotle believed, we have good reasons to content ourselves with something less than an exhaustive picture,

... it will be satisfactory if we can indicate the truth roughly and in outline; since we argue from and about what holds good usually, it will be satisfactory if we can draw conclusions of the same sort... the educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows.
(*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b20-25)

As we struggle together to articulate a shared ethical vision that does justice to the richness and complexity of our lives, one final thought should not be lost to us. Good moral philosophy should certainly ferret out the pitfalls and darker sides of our character but it should also celebrate what is most fascinating and beautiful about a human life and character. Indeed, hard-won moral insights, paid for through keen observation and reflection, should inspire not only change but also joy and wonder.