What Is Time For?

Everyone is too busy. How would we spend our time if we weren't?

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IN HIS *CONFESSIONS*, Saint Augustine describes a fascinating moment in his conversion to the Christian faith. At the time, he was a successful teacher of rhetoric in Milan, living with his longtime concubine and their son. He had a group of close friends and was breaking away from the Manichaeans, the gnostic cult he had spent many years with, studying and teaching. Overwhelmed by the limits of human knowledge, he was increasingly skeptical that anyone could come to know the truth about how to live. He oscillated back and forth between skepticism that anything certain could be known and his budding interest in the Christian faith, the latter nurtured by hearing the preaching of Ambrose, bishop of Milan. He describes his internal dialogue at the time:

> But where can truth be sought? *When* can it be sought? Ambrose has no time. There is no time for reading. Where should we look for the books that we need? Where and when can we obtain them? From whom can we borrow them? Fixed times must be kept free, hours appointed, for the health of the soul. Great hope has been aroused.... Why do we hesitate to knock at the door which opens the way to all the rest? Our pupils occupy the mornings; what should we do with the remaining hours? Why do we not investigate our problem? But then when should we go to pay respects to our more influential friends, whose patronage we need? When are we to prepare what our students are paying for? When are we to refresh ourselves by allowing the mind to relax from the tension of anxieties?[1]

Augustine's language can be lofty and remote. But here is one of his great human moments. He wants to know how to live. He is not worried about discovering a truth that might spoil his career or require

him to leave his concubine. Really! He doesn't have time, that's all – he's too busy, between his students and his patrons, oh, and Ambrose is too busy too. Everyone's too busy. He doesn't have time to read. Besides, he doesn't have time to get the books. Too bad for Augustine – he can't figure out the best way to live. He's too busy.

Brian Kershisnik, *Divine Intervention*, oil on canvas, 2016.

Earlier in the same section of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes how busy Ambrose is. Ambrose is busy. Bishops of that time were expected to adjudicate disputes between members of their flock, an endless and demanding task. The life of a bishop was so hectic, in fact, that later in life, after he had become Catholic, Augustine would do almost anything to avoid being appointed one. The historian Peter Brown describes him as going from town to town in Africa, carefully

avoiding any occasion in which he might be appointed bishop by acclamation. Alas, he was tricked: in Hippo he found himself at a liturgy that became his election as bishop. Tears poured down his face as he realized his life of philosophical leisure was over.

Yet Augustine describes with reverence what Ambrose does in the brief moments in which he does not have an appointment. He reads silently. He does not steal away to a quiet place. Ambrose just sits and reads in the midst of his busyness, passing his eyes over the page.

> I could not put the questions I wanted to put to him as I wished to do. I was excluded from his ear and from his mouth by crowds of men with arbitrations to submit to him, to whose frailties he ministered. When he was not with them, which was a very brief period of time, he restored either his body with necessary food or his mind by reading. When he was reading, his eyes ran over the page and his heart perceived the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. He did not restrict access to anyone coming in, nor was it customary even for a visitor to be announced. Very often when we were there, we saw him silently reading and never otherwise. After sitting for a long time in silence (for who would dare to burden him in such intent concentration?) we used to go away. We supposed that in the brief time he could find for his mind's refreshment, free from the hubbub of other people's troubles, he would not want to be invited to consider another problem. [2]

Ambrose has chosen to use his spare snatches of time to return within himself, to become an island of stillness. His reading, certainly, is an example of *leisure*.

WHAT IS LEISURE, and why is it necessary for human beings? The leisure that I am interested in is not the first thing you may imagine: bingeing Netflix on the couch, lounging at the beach, attending a festive party with friends, or launching yourself from the largest human catapult for the thrill of it. The leisure that is necessary for human beings is not just a break from real life, a place where we rest

and restore ourselves in order to go back to work. What we are after is a state that looks like the culmination of a life.

Let's pause and ask ourselves: What parts of our lives seem to be the culminating parts, the days or hours or minutes where we are living life most fully? When do you stop counting the time and become entirely present to what you are doing? What sorts of activities are you engaged in when this takes place?

We do many things instrumentally, for the sake of something else: eat breakfast to calm hunger pains, exercise to stay healthy, work for money. Other things we do for pleasure: play cards, go for hikes, read, or build model airplanes. Some things evidently both are instrumental and bring us delight: we work for money, but sometimes also for the love of our work; we fish to eat, but also for the sport of it.

We have many goals, but certain goals have an ordering effect on others. We either choose our career to permit leisure time with our family, or we choose to minimize familial obligations to allow free upward growth in our career. Our ultimate end – family in the first case, success in the second – frames and structures our other pursuits. We trade a freer schedule for more money or sacrifice a higher salary for more time to pursue our heart's desire. The structuring effect of some goals over others suggests that we have a basic orientation, determined by our ultimate end, the goal that structures all our other choices. Such a goal is our highest good, whether we have chosen it as such, or whether it has grown haphazardly out of inward or social pressures. That highest good or ultimate end might be wealth, status, family life, community service, enjoyment of the natural world, knowledge of God, writing novels, or even the pursuit of mathematical truth.

Brian Kershisnik, *Something About Young Trees*, oil on canvas, 2017.

We may not know what in the soup of our desires matters most to us. Often we discover it in times of trial or crisis: a difficult choice at work,

a family member in a hospital bed – in other words, when we face sickness, poverty, or moral compromise.

What would happen if we tried to organize our lives around merely instrumental pursuits? We are not likely to order our lives around grocery shopping or paying taxes. But what about earning money? If I pack my swim bag, put on shoes, get my keys, and drive my car to the pool, only to find it closed, my goal of swimming is frustrated, and my string of actions is in vain. Suppose the pool is open and I get to swim: Why do I do it? I swim for the sake of health. I want to be healthy so I can work. I work for the sake of money. And the money is for the sake of food, drink, housing, recreation, and exercise – all of which make it possible for me to work.

I have described a life of utter futility. If I work for the sake of money, spending money on basic necessities, and if my life is organized around working, my life is a pointless spiral of work for the sake of work. It is like buying ice cream, immediately selling it for cash, and then spending the proceeds on ice cream (which one sells once again, and so on). It is just as tragic as working for money and getting crushed by a falling anvil on the way to cash the paycheck. For this reason Aristotle argued that there must be some activity or activities beyond work – leisure, for the sake of which we work and without which our work is in vain. Leisure is not merely recreation, which we might undertake for the sake of work – to relax or rest before beginning to labor anew. It is an activity or set of activities that could count as the culmination of all our endeavors. For Aristotle, only contemplation could be ultimately satisfying in this way: the activity of seeing and understanding and savoring the world as it is.

WHAT DOES CONTEMPLATIVE LEISURE look like in real life? I've collected a few examples. Renée, heroine of the French art-house film *The Hedgehog*, is the concierge of a wealthy apartment building in Paris. Her work is humble – cleaning, taking mail, organizing the workmen. But her real life is elsewhere – in a hidden room behind her kitchen, where she reads philosophy, literature, and the classics.

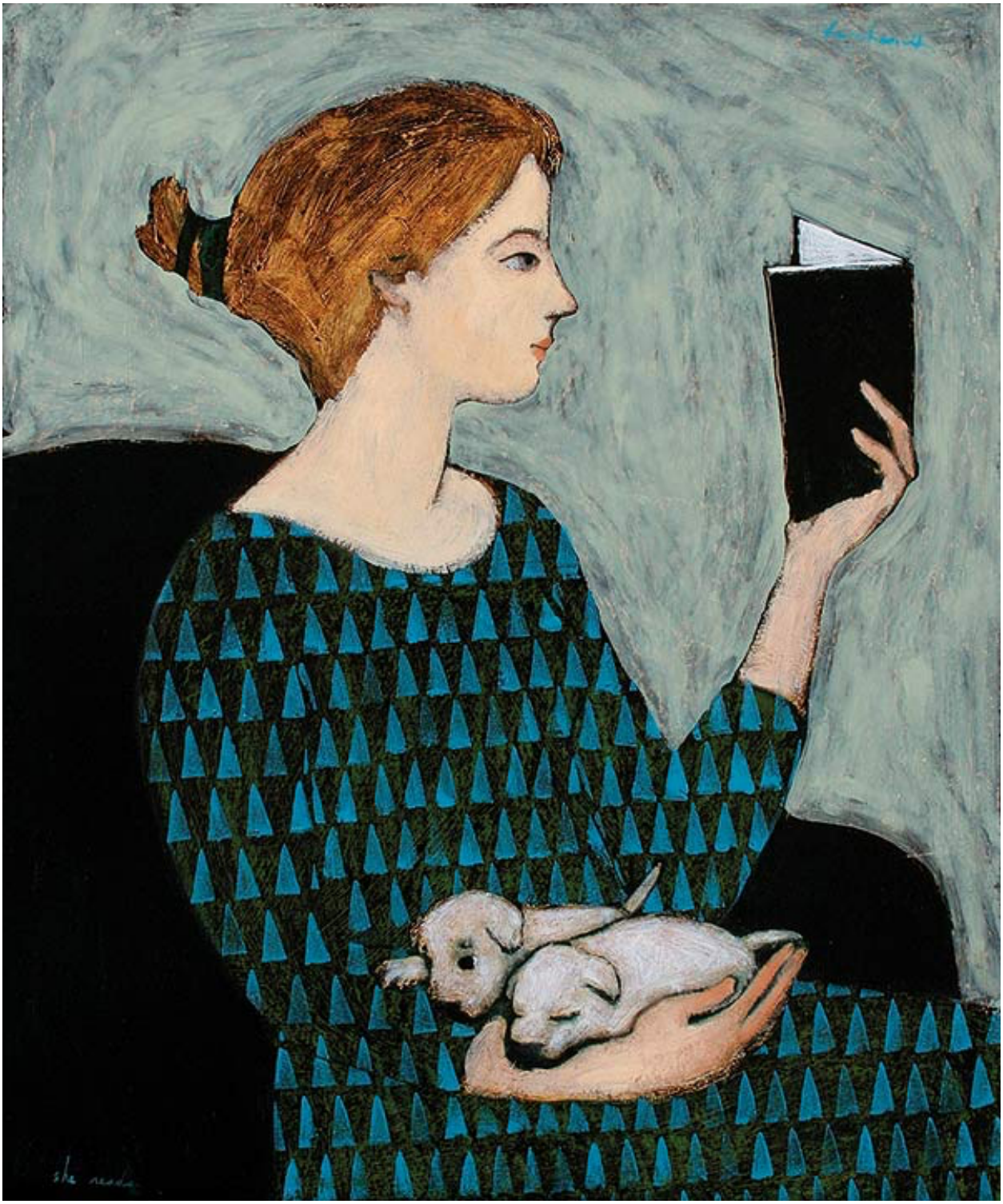
Renée echoes a similar figure in an earlier film, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, by the German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Emmi is a middle-aged cleaning lady at the bottom of the social barrel. To the horror of her xenophobic children and neighbors, she falls in love with a younger Moroccan guest worker. They make a strange couple, crossing age groups and races. But they find a refuge that two people sometimes find, a space away from demeaning judgments, where they contemplate in one another their simple, vulnerable humanity. In one scene, they sit alone at an outdoor café, surrounded by fallen autumn leaves, holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes. This film is more tragic than *The Hedgehog*, since the protagonists rely on each other for their refuge, and since they carry within themselves the expectations from their social world – expectations which destroy their relationship.

The leisured contemplation in loving relationships is worth mentioning, since it is the type most commonly recognized and valued today. But there is also the more traditional, intellectual form of leisure: Renée sequestered in her room reading, cat curled at her feet. Consider the medieval and Renaissance paintings of Mary at the Annunciation. These images, drawing on early Christian writers, often picture Mary reading a book. Here is Ambrose:

> She, when the angel entered, was found at home in privacy, without a companion, that no one might interrupt her attention or disturb her; and she did not desire any women as companions, who had the companionship of good thoughts. Moreover, she seemed to herself to be less alone when she was alone. For how should she be alone, who had with her so many books, so many archangels, so many prophets? [3]

Images of study and intellectual life as a leisured refuge are older than Christianity: Plato describes his teacher Socrates as lost in thought, standing all dressed up on the threshold of a dinner party, having forgotten where he is. The great mathematician Archimedes was by legend so lost in his theorems that he did not notice the Romans invading his city and was killed by a Roman soldier when he insisted on finishing his proof before going to the Roman official who had

summoned him. Later writers gave him last words: “Don’t disturb my circles.”



Brian Kershisnik, *She Reads*, oil on panel, 2006.

Nor are these images only in fiction or legend or ancient tradition. Albert Einstein was a failure as a graduate student in physics and could not get an academic job. He found work as a patent clerk; it was in the patent office, in his spare time, that he wrote the extraordinary papers on the photoelectric effect and Brownian movement that changed the face of the mathematical study of nature. He called the patent office "that worldly cloister where I hatched all my most beautiful ideas."

Prisoners have been among the most splendid exemplars of leisure. The Russian dissident Irina Ratushinskaya describes prisoners in transport passing poetry to one another, written on scraps of paper. Ratushinskaya herself, during her own imprisonment in Siberia, scratched poems onto soap bars with matchsticks. Once she had memorized them, she washed them away. Later she wrote them out on cigarette paper to be smuggled to the West. [4] Irina Dumitrescu writes of a Romanian officer imprisoned in Siberia who wrote out poems he had memorized in school with ink that he made out of blackberries. Other Romanian prisoners tapped poetry in Morse code through the walls of the prison, or taught each other languages in silence, with letters coded by knots on a piece of string.

What explains the power of these examples? I think it is because they show the dignity of human beings, the fact that a human being is not reducible to his or her social uses. The forcible diminishment of the prisoners is an attempt at thought control, to make them think or speak as authorities would like them to. Likewise, the commonplace diminishment of working people such as building supervisors or cleaning ladies does not suppress the splendor of a human being, or it does so only superficially. Mary, after all, is an unwed teenage mother. Her prayerful and studious solitude suggests a dignity beyond the social uses set for young women of her era: sexual pleasure, the extension of clans and bloodlines. We see all these people choosing forms of leisure – thinking, study, prayer, love – in the face of opposition, resistance, or outright hostility.

These are, however, exceptional human beings. Sometimes, hostile circumstances make leisure very difficult or even impossible. Jack

London tells the semiautobiographical tale of Martin Eden in his novel by that name. Martin is working class but is giving himself an intensive education through reading and study. However, he has to eat, and at some point he takes the only job he can find, working in a laundry for fifteen-hour days, six days a week. This type of work is so exhausting that after only a week, he is unable to read. After several weeks, he is unable to think and takes refuge in cheap pleasures.

Likewise, consider the situation of the Amazon warehouse worker, as described by journalist James Bloodworth. [5] Thanks to the choices of their company executives, the workers are hired by a temp company, which monitors their every move with surveillance bracelets, penalizes them for bathroom breaks or illness, holds out the promise of rewards that never materialize, changes schedules capriciously, docks their pay, sometimes by mistake, and in general makes workers so riven with anxiety and exhausted by overwork that cheap pleasures become enormously attractive, even to those to whom they had not been previously. So the capacity for leisure can be made more difficult, or even impossible, by circumstances.

NOW, HOWEVER, we face a puzzle. If leisure is what our lives aim at, how could we fail to achieve it – we, that is, who are not deprived by circumstances? What are the obstacles in us to attaining our highest good? How is it that we ourselves, through our own choices, diminish our dignity?

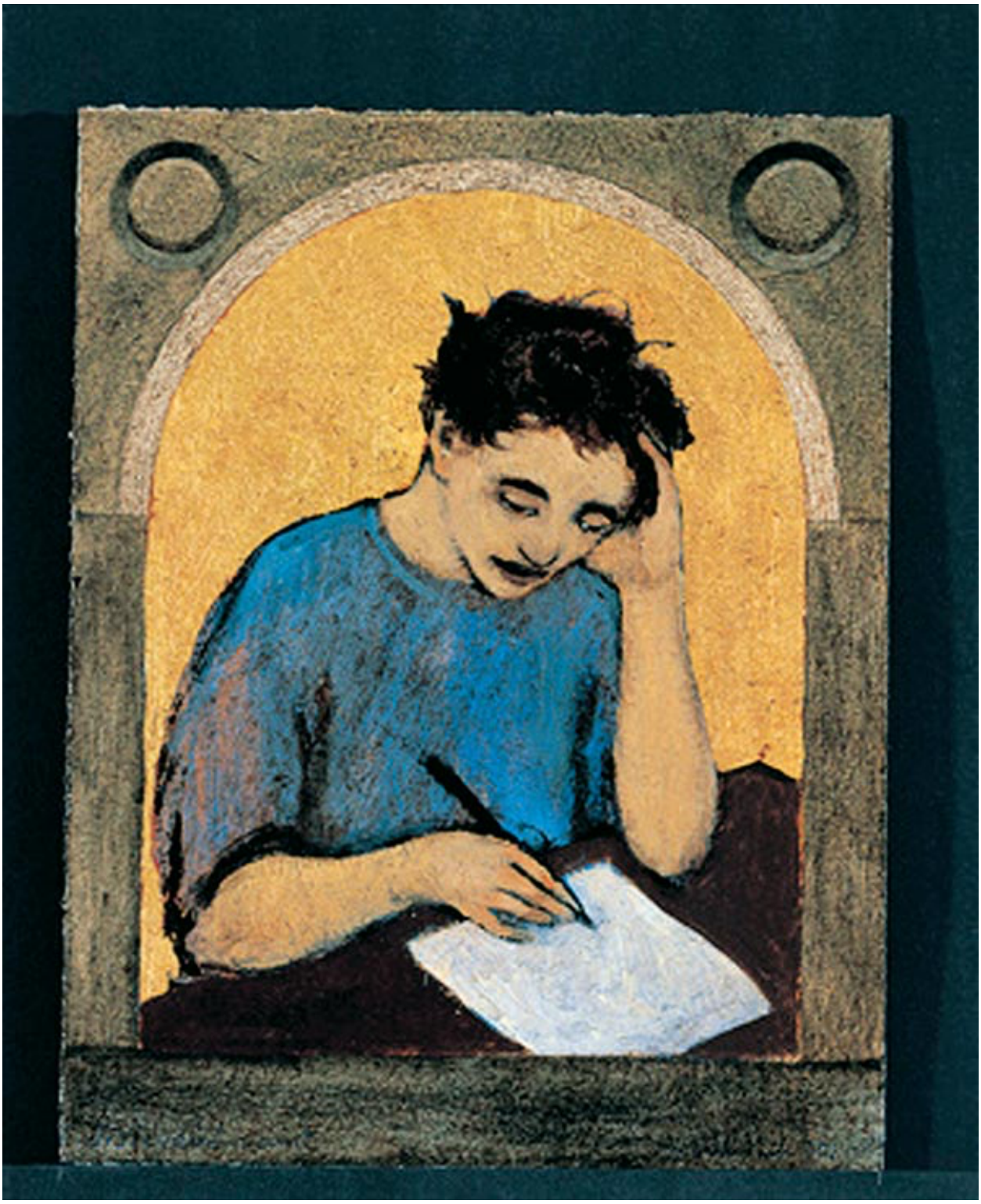
The example of restless, workaholic Augustine is important. It is not true that he doesn't have time. The fact is he, like us, is of two minds about leisure. He wants it and he doesn't want it. He's committed to other things: his job, his students, his patrons, his rest, and his social advancement above all. That is worth dwelling on for a moment. But there is a deeper problem: It's not just that he doesn't want to make sacrifices; he is actively avoiding leisure. He, like us, is afraid of it.

Work in itself, of course, can be a good thing. It is the way that we serve our communities. That is true if we work at a business that supplies something that people need to live; or if we work to raise our

children; or if we work as teachers, doctors, lawyers, electricians, garbage collectors, health care aides, and so on.

Yet good things, as we know from everyday experience, are not always good. Food is a good thing, until we overeat. Sex is a good thing, but we can use it in demeaning or dehumanizing or otherwise harmful ways. I think it may already be clear how we misuse work. After all, how many of us really think of it as service, rather than as a vehicle for money or status? How many of us are genuinely open to serving our communities however we are most needed, even if serving that need doesn't pay much or has a low social status – if, for instance, it will be scorned by people we talk to on airplanes?

Nowhere are our true feelings about work clearer than in the growth of jobs which pay well and offer high status, but which have little to no social value. Sociologist David Graeber calls them bullshit jobs. [6] (It is difficult to find a non-profane word that combines the pointlessness of these jobs with the necessary deception they involve.) Bullshit jobs are both pointless and require pretending that they are not pointless. One example: being a subcontractor to a subcontractor to the military, whose job it is to drive long distances to move furniture from one room to another. More poignant is the story of the man hired to patch a problem that the higher authorities in the company do not want fixed. He is literally paid – and paid well – to do nothing. He starts out reading novels, then starts drinking at work and taking phony work trips, trying to get himself fired. Finally, he tries to resign and gets offered a raise. His job is a necessary pretense for his superiors – they cannot let him go. What is fascinating about the stories Graeber collects is how deeply unhappy these workers are, people who have money and status without having to work for it. It seems that their hearts long for real work, for service, for connection with their communities.



Brian Kershisnik, *Disheveled Saint*, oil on paper, 2001.

We think of American culture – a culture shared with much of Western Europe – as a culture that values work. But it is not in fact

work that we value. What we value is money and status, no matter the cost in other human goods. It is its connection with money and with status that allows work to become addictive or compulsive. After all, remember Augustine, who finds himself plenty busy, always with an end of social advancement. But let's also remember Ambrose. He has more work than anybody, but he knows how to use his breaks. His leisure shows us what he cares about most; it shows both why his work matters and why it doesn't matter.

We are not only distracted from leisure by conflicting desires for social advancement. We also fear it and resist it from inside. Our resistance to it is both powerful and devious. We can see this in the deterioration of professions or vocations strictly dedicated to leisure. For example, one could join a monastery and live obsessed with high liturgical achievements such as the perfect performance of the best music. Or one could try to work one's way up whatever social hierarchy may exist there – to be choir director, cellarer, abbot. Or one could try to be a monk or nun for the world, dedicating one's time to winning new vocations or publicity for religious life. None of these objectives is bad in itself, but their pursuit can eat away at one's humanity. A person can live in a monastery, under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and still nurture the heart of a politician or social climber.

Likewise, any professor can tell you that despite ancient tradition, true leisure in academia is hard to come by. At the bottom end, hapless adjuncts manage large classes in which often virtually no learning takes place. Their grading burden is such that time for real thinking is rare. At the top end, we find a ruthless pursuit of arcane forms of status. The rush for prestige, for producing articles or books that make an impression, for networking, for climbing up the institutional ladder, makes much of academic life no more leisurely than the average Fortune 500 company.

Other examples of leisurely activity are no less fragile than monastic life or academic life. A life outdoors can be overtaken by advocacy or forms of competition; family life can be rotted through with a frenetic, soul-destroying race for achievement.

Leisure requires cultivation – cultivation of habits and of communities that help to form habits. The pursuit of leisure requires this effort because we resist it. Augustine does not only desire social advancement – he is also afraid of leisure itself. What is Augustine afraid of? What is it *in us* that flees from leisure? It is, simply speaking, our own emptiness. Saint John of the Cross describes the human soul as made up of great caverns, caverns constituted by our senses and their emptiness constituted by their necessary passivity, receptivity, susceptibility. We seek out distractions in order to hide from this terrifying emptiness that can only be filled with God. The emptiness is our dependence on what comes from the outside, our need to wait for God to act. This dependence and this need are objectively terrifying. What will come? An earthquake? Cancer? Joblessness? More to the point: What will we find in ourselves? That we love status and money more than we thought we did? That we don't know ourselves, or God, or what matters in our lives?

Leisure turns out to be an *interior discipline*. It is not enough to simply choose a central life activity that is intrinsically leisurely. One must recognize the good of leisure and seek it out. Moreover, leisure might require *sacrifice*. A less lucrative job might permit more time with one's family. A less prestigious academic post might permit a greater focus on studying and contemplative teaching. The examples of Ambrose, Renée, and Ratushinskaya show, I hope, that leisure is worth the cost, and that it is possible.

This is a chapter from *The Liberating Arts: Why We Need Liberal Arts Education* (Plough, September 2023).

Footnotes

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104 (6.11.18).
2. Augustine, *Confessions*, 92–3 (6.3.3).
3. Ambrose, *Concerning Virginity*, trans. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene*

Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1896)

4. Irina Ratushinskaya, *Grey Is the Color of Hope*, trans. Alyona Kojevnikov (New York: Knopf, 1988), 75.
5. James Bloodworth, *Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018).
6. David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018)