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America Needs an Education in Leisure

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Classical K–12 schools, colleges, and universities introduce their students to the intrinsic joys of exploring "nature and humanity's place in the cosmos," not only through the written word, but through forms of leisure. At several independent academic institutes throughout the country, students frequently gather for ballroom dance lessons, art museum visits, and opera outings. At the Catherine Project, participants exercise their leisure in small reading groups of great books ranging from Homer's Iliad *to Henry Adams's* Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. *These institutions are taking up the challenging but eminently worthwhile task of teaching participants how to be at leisure, reclaiming a long-forgotten purpose of education. In doing so, they are decidedly countercultural, resisting Americans' utilitarian impulse and slide into decadence.*

In October 2022, the U.S. Department of Education released data from the Nation's Report Card, a nationally representative assessment of student achievement at various age levels. The latest results—the first since 2019—demonstrate serious and widespread learning losses since before the pandemic.[1] Test score analyses of fourth- and eighth-graders revealed the largest-ever decline in math competency, prompting Daniel McGrath, the acting associate commissioner for assessments at the National Center for Education Statistics, to forecast long-term consequences. "If left unaddressed," McGrath warned, "this could alter the trajectories and life

opportunities of a whole cohort of young people, potentially reducing their abilities to pursue rewarding and productive careers in mathematics, science, and technology."[2] Add to that the similarly alarming declines in reading proficiency for both grade levels, and the future of the U.S. labor force looks grim. Students lacking in basic reading and math skills are not prepared for work.

Nor are they prepared for leisure, an often misunderstood and overlooked measure of the vitality of a society. The need for a strong workforce faces us daily. Without good doctors and nurses, engineers and construction workers, policemen and firefighters, people die, infrastructure crumbles, and businesses shutter. But once health, safety, and comfort are met, what is man to do? Put differently, what are material goods like health, safety, and comfort for? Man works so that he may have leisure. So said Aristotle, echoed by many other thinkers and texts of the Western tradition.

But by leisure, they did not mean passive entertainment. Founding mother Abigail Adams captured its meaning eloquently when she wrote, "What, indeed, is life, or its enjoyments, without settled principles, laudable purposes, mental exertions, and internal comfort, that sunshine of the soul; and how are these to be acquired in the hurry and tumult of the world?"[3] People work so that, once having satisfied the needs of the body, they can rise above them and turn to more permanent things, nourishing the inner lives of their souls in the pursuit of principle, purpose, and peace. This capacity is what distinguishes humans. When it is allowed to atrophy, man becomes no different than beast.

Considering the growing labor shortage U.S. employers face, exacerbated by the so-called Great Resignation, the U.S. may be especially tempted to disregard, and, if anything, to discourage leisure, reasserting preparation for the workforce as the primary purpose of education.[4] But, as important as it is to equip students with the basic skills they need to become self-supporting members of society, it is critical to revisit leisure as an equally, if not more, important purpose of education.

The increasing unpreparedness for work among American students and adults alike accompanies an even more pervasive incapacity for leisure among both workers and nonworkers, a serious problem for any society that intends to remain free. For a free society cannot last without citizens capable of occupying their leisure, or "free" time, and thereby exercising their freedom in its fullest sense. This requires education—leisure always has—and the need grows especially dire as American mores become increasingly opposed to it.

This *First Principles* report begins with a brief assessment of the state of leisure in America today, before turning to the traditional understanding of the concept. In reconsidering the classical notion that leisure requires education, or, more radically, that the purpose of education is leisure, the report will focus especially on the American Founders and their understanding of education, liberty, and leisure as the culmination of both. How did the Founders' vision for education prepare students to exercise leisure, and can that vision still inspire Americans today?

American Idleness

In an updated edition of his wonderfully instructive book on the U.S. labor force, *Men Without Work*, Nicholas Eberstadt, a scholar in political economy at the American Enterprise Institute, presents the attributes of those leaving—or failing to enter—the workforce.[5] The "flight from work," as Eberstadt calls it, began decades before the pandemic, primarily among prime-age men, but lockdowns and massive pandemic relief spending further incentivized departure, extending it to encompass a substantial number of prime-age women (with *and without* children at home) and, increasingly, Americans over 55.[6]

Eberstadt is concerned with the economic implications of this trend—and rightly so—but he also broaches its social and moral implications. America's "men without work" tend to spend their ample free time watching television, playing video games, surfing the Internet, gambling, smoking, and drinking, and the childless women and early retirees joining their non-working ranks seem to be following these time-use patterns as well.[7] As Eberstadt warned in a recent op-ed on these trends, these are "habits that heighten the risk of 'deaths of despair.'"[8]

Bringing those outside the labor force back in would undoubtedly curb these idle habits and thereby improve the lives of those entrapped by them. But the data suggests a return to work is not enough. Persons not in the labor force (NILFs) are not the only ones "sitting before screens as if that were a full-time [or part-time] job."[9] Next to sleeping and (for those employed) working, the next "activity" Americans spend the most accumulated time doing per day is watching television, whether on YouTube, TikTok, or Netflix. According to the latest American Time Use Survey, conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American watches about three hours of television a day—more time than that spent on all other leisure activities combined.[10] And TV time tends only to increase as one gains more free time. Once time spent recreationally browsing the web, scrolling social

media platforms, online shopping, and playing video games is factored in, the picture becomes crystal clear: Free time means screen time.

Screen Time. This should give us pause. Eberstadt warned of a link between digital dependence and despair, and there are scientific explanations to support this.[11] As Anna Lembke, a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine, explains in her book *Dopamine Nation*, the digital products Americans spend so much time with are, by and large, engineered to trigger "unnaturally high levels of dopamine."[12] Over time, the brain responds as it does to addictive substances, by raising the "set-point for pleasure," meaning that "[n]ow we need to keep playing [video] games, not to feel pleasure but just to feel normal."[13] When the user stops, he experiences anxiety, depression, apathy, and craving—for more screen time. But addiction is not the only way digital devices are making Americans less free; they are also shrinking our capacity for genuine leisure.

More than 35 years ago, Allan Bloom, an American political philosopher who taught at some of the nation's most prestigious universities for nearly four decades, noticed worrisome changes among his undergraduate students, whose addiction to their Walkmans was, he argued, stunting their souls, artificially quenching longings that in the natural course of things require great thought, virtue, and love to address. For centuries, Americans had worked tirelessly to accumulate property and develop technology that one day their progeny would enjoy. But by the time the luxury of leisure finally became possible even for middle-class America, "any notion of the serious life of leisure, as well as men's taste and capacity to live it, had disappeared," Bloom observed. "Leisure became entertainment."[14]

Yet, despite this 20th-century diagnosis of Americans' incapacity for leisure, the 21st-century proliferation of readily available entertainment seems to have exacerbated this incapacity. Sitting in front of a screen has always been a passive pastime, but the explosion of content available to access instantly has made scrolling, streaming, and skimming a particularly thoughtless activity, what *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat describes as "comfortably numbing" in his 2020 book *The Decadent Society*:

> To the extent that the medium of online determines the cultural messages it carries, it pressures creators to make things clickable, browsable, capable of holding attention briefly, but always with the understanding that the reader or watcher will swiftly move on to the next hyperlink, the next video, the next tweet or status update or Instagram pic. It is not impossible for genius to flourish under such constraints, but depth becomes a near impossibility.... If the hit single has survived Napster and then iTunes, the old-fashioned album

> emphatically has not, and there's an argument—infuriating to novelists, but possibly true—that the novel ceased to matter to mass culture on June 29, 2007, the day Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone. The philosophical treatise, the hard poem—to the extent that form follows function, these belong to print rather than to screens, and it's not remotely surprising that the decline of the fine arts has accelerated under the dominion of the Internet.[15]

The implication underlying Bloom's and Douthat's critiques of Americans' substitution of entertainment for leisure is that, while entertainment is mind-numbing, leisure requires thought—and not just any kind of thought, but deep thought. To better understand the distinction between entertainment and leisure, the next section explores the classical understanding of leisure, and how it differs from contemporary conceptions.

What Is Leisure?

Modern man tends to understand leisure as the absence of work. It is the spare time man has once work is over, when he can escape the "real world" in which necessity obligates him and dictates how he spends his time. At leisure, one can sit back, relax, and answer to no one. From this perspective, it would seem silly to critique the way in which Americans opt to spend their free time. Whether one goes for a hike or watches three episodes of *Game of Thrones* after work is simply a matter of preference. There is no right or wrong way to unwind or escape from the demands of the day.

But once one recalls what the concept of leisure originally meant, this picture starts to look strange. Far from understanding leisure negatively, as the absence of work, the ancient Greeks and Romans—and the medieval Christian recipients of their philosophic inheritance—defined occupation or employment negatively (*a-scholia* in Greek, *neg-otium* in Latin), as the absence of leisure (*scholē* in Greek, *otium* in Latin). In the Western tradition, leisure is not an escape from the demands of the real world, but an entry into the essence of reality, the experience and awareness of which most day jobs necessarily obscure by narrowing the focus to the task at hand.

Contemplation. Hence, Aristotle identifies leisure with contemplation, the activity of seeing with the intellect, and with philosophy, the loving pursuit of wisdom. It is marked not by sleepiness or stupor, but by the gaze of what Aristotle calls the "eye of the soul."[16] As 20th-century German philosopher Josef Pieper explains, this means that leisure is first and foremost a form of silence, which prepares and allows the soul to apprehend or "hear" reality.[17]

Such a contemplative attitude is impossible to attain when one is busy tackling a to-do list, whether at work or at home. It is also impossible to attain when one is subject to the overstimulation that attends most modern media consumption. Leisure requires receptivity to the reality of the world. When one's senses are plugged—by earbuds or a stream of images—it is quite difficult to remain open to anything else.

Of course, there are reasons people are so easily tempted to overwhelm their senses with lights and sounds that drown out everything else. One perennial source of the appeal of distraction stems from an unease both with oneself and with the surrounding world, what Tocqueville called "restlessness."[18] Who am I? Who should I be? How should I relate to those around me? And are there even answers to any of those questions? In the midst of uncertainty about oneself and one's place in the cosmos, virtual "likes" and TV "families" can offer at least temporary reassurance or escape.[19] Updating a curated presentation of one's life online might superficially boost self-esteem and immersing oneself in a show of familiar characters whose lives seem more exciting—or pretending to be one of those characters in a video game—can distract from feelings of loneliness and despair. The relief such pastimes offer may be fleeting, but in the short term they often appear more attractive than any alternative that would demand sitting with oneself and submitting to an external, objective reality that cannot be manipulated by photo-editing or rewinding.

Celebration. Leisure, on the other hand, is only available "to a man at one with himself, but who is also at one with the world," as Pieper puts it.[20] Hence, he characterizes leisure in the second place as a form of affirmation. A readiness to see and hear the world around us presupposes a confidence that, to put it simply, it is good to be here. Existence, however complex and mysterious it may be, is good—a gift, even. Leisure, therefore, involves a disposition of gratitude and celebration of a life and a world that man did not create, and this is why, traditionally, the exercise of leisure took the form of a religious feast.[21]

The first time Aristotle mentions leisure in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, it is as an occasion for festivity, when a political community exercises its leisure to offer sacrifices to the gods in thanksgiving for the harvest.[22] And in the Judeo–Christian tradition, the Sabbath is a sacred day of leisure in which all are to rest from work and rejoice in God's goodness, taking special care to ensure that the poor are also free to observe and enjoy the Lord's Day.[23] While means of escape, whether through entertainment or self-medication, presuppose an aversion to and rejection of reality, genuine feasts and festivals are occasions to contemplate and celebrate life's fundamental goodness.

Liberation. Last, and perhaps oddest to modern ears, Pieper insists that leisure exists and can only be experienced for its own sake, echoing Aristotle's observation that man does not have leisure so that he may work but, rather, he works so that he may be at leisure.[24] That is, leisure cannot be reduced to its utility or productivity, as useful and productive as it may be. As soon as it is measured in terms of its service to work, so to speak, leisure becomes no different from work. It becomes, as many view it today, a "break" from work and for work and thus a part of work. The approach to leisure must, rather, transcend timebound and utilitarian calculations of value and remain open to the possibility of eternal and intrinsic value. In this way, leisure's silent receptivity to a reality beyond one's own creation and curation opens, as Pieper puts it, the "gate to freedom."[25] Until man can orient himself toward a reality that is not contingent, Pieper contends, he cannot call himself free.

School as Leisure

A return to the traditional understanding of leisure brings a whole new meaning to the phrase "free time." It also reveals a paradox. Though leisure implies ease—letting go of any pretenses of control over reality—it is not easy. On the contrary, it takes quite a lot of practice and virtue to properly prepare one's soul for leisure's humble receptivity. This is perhaps why, for the ancients, it was not work so much as leisure that called for education, and education, in turn, was understood in terms of leisure, as a preparation for and practice of it. Indeed, the English word for "school" reflects this relationship, since it comes from the Greek word for leisure, *scholē*.

Hence, Plutarch's account of the Spartan education prescribes educating children not in a classroom, but at the dinner table, where they would learn how to exercise freedom and nobility in the midst of fulfilling a bodily necessity. "They used to send their children to these tables as to schools of temperance," Plutarch remarks, where "they learned to converse with pleasantry, to make jests without scurrility and take them without ill humor."[26] Aristotle, for his part, criticizes the Spartan education for failing to properly prepare its citizens for leisure, teaching them to view virtues like temperance as good only for war, rather than intrinsically good for the soul.[27]

Aristotle's education, in contrast, aims to make students virtuous and "capable of being at leisure."[28] His curriculum therefore includes—as does Plato's—a central place for music. Cultivating a capacity for music—to play, understand, and appreciate it—requires the same ingredients Pieper deems necessary for leisure: a sensitive ear, keen perception of order in nature, and appreciation for beauty, which cannot be reduced to utility.

As Aristotle makes explicit in his *Politics,* music holds an important place in a citizen's education "because nature itself seeks, as has been said repeatedly, not only to be occupied in correct fashion but also to be capable of being at leisure in noble fashion."[29] Nature seeks a final end, its *telos* or purpose, and human nature is no different. For humans, that end is happiness, or flourishing—one seeks it and only it for its own sake. But happiness, Aristotle says, "seems to reside in leisure."[30] In teaching a man how to be at leisure, one teaches him how to be happy.

The Founders' Educational Vision

At first blush, the concept of educating in and for leisure may seem both foreign and irrelevant to 21st-century American educators and students. Americans live in a large, liberal, commercial society, after all. The limited U.S. Constitution was framed so as to prohibit the government from dictating the private lives of its citizens, and the regime's early prohibitions of titles of nobility, entails, and privileges of primogeniture helped to ensure that every citizen would have to work, as Tocqueville later observed when he visited America.[31] Would not the natural education for Americans, then, be a pragmatic one that focuses on preparing them for work, training them in skills suited to productive participation in a modern economy?

Leading thinkers of the Founding generation considered, deliberated, and disagreed over exactly what kind of education would be best for the American regime, as political scientists Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas Pangle detail in their book *The Learning of Liberty*, indispensable for better understanding the Founders' reflections on education.[32] Should education be collectivized or kept in the hands of families and local communities?[33] Should it be classical, grounded in the ancient Greek and Latin languages, or more modern, focused on honing a uniform spelling and pronunciation of English?[34] Should it introduce students to the life of the mind, prepare them for the public square, or attempt some sort of balance between the two?[35]

The Founders' answers to these questions varied, but on two basic matters they agreed. In the first place, education in America should prepare its citizens for liberty. They knew that government of, by, and for the people would not last long if the capacity to self-govern were not itself cultivated and nourished. And this meant, in the second place, that an adequate education could not afford to ignore or be indifferent as to how citizens might occupy their leisure. Precisely because of the limited reach of the Constitution and laws, teaching citizens to spend their time wisely belongs under the purview of education, whether transmitted formally or informally,

directly or indirectly. The second half of this report considers the various ways in which the educational traditions of the Founding era sought to form enriching leisure habits.

An Education for Eternity

The first American laws explicitly addressing education justified it in terms of the soul's liberation and salvation. From 1642 to 1648, the Massachusetts Bay Colony legislature enacted a series of laws mandating the education of children in the colony. While the first obligated parents to provide for their children's education, emphasizing the importance of cultivating "their ability to read and understand the principles of religion," the second highlighted the primary reason for these laws.

Inconspicuously referred to as the Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647, it began by stating the obstacle the law sought to surmount:

> It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these later times by persuading from the use of Tongues, that so at least the true sense and meaning of the Originall might be clowded with false glosses of Saint-seeming deceivers; and that Learning may not be buried in the graves of our fore-fathers in Church and Commonwealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors: it is therefore ordered...that everie Township in this Jurisdiction...shall...appoint one within their Town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read.[36]

The purpose of the education envisioned by this law is twofold. Parents and townships have a primary duty to lead children toward eternal salvation, but this end in turn obligates them to liberate children from the shackles of ignorance. Illiterate citizens are left dependent on others' presentations of texts, including sacred texts revealing attributes of God and the universe. They are thus vulnerable to misrepresentations and manipulations of texts and the reasons and arguments they communicate. The purpose of education, according to these laws, is to liberate students from such dependence so that they may in turn seek to know and live by an unchanging reason (or Word or *Logos*, to use biblical terms) that is beyond the creation and manipulation of man.

The Puritans' Pursuit. Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, credits these prescriptions with revealing "in the full light of day the original character of American civilization."[37] Well-educated and relatively well-off

families, the Puritans left their birthplace and came to America not out of material necessity, but out of "a purely intellectual need."[38] That is, their pursuit of learning was not utilitarian or mercenary—an efficient means to achieve wealth, health, or safety. Rather, they crossed the Atlantic in pursuit of truth for its own sake, even at the expense of material comfort, that they might live and worship according to it.

As John Adams depicts in his 1765 *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, this people, who had been thwarted and penalized in England "for no other crime than their knowledge and their freedom of inquiry and examination," sought to exercise their "right, from the frame of their nature, to knowledge, as their great Creator, who does nothing in vain, has given them understandings, and a desire to know."[39]

The Puritans' approach to learning as something inherently worthwhile, enabling the soul to transcend the limits of time and necessity, continued to influence generations of colonists, including renowned mothers of the Founding generation. In a couple of 1773 letters concerning childrearing, Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren write of educating their children with a view to the realms of "everlasting day," as Adams poetically puts it.[40] This requires, as Warren counsels Adams, preparing their children's "immortal minds" to be "introduced into more enlarged and glorious scenes," by impressing on their minds an "invariable attachment to truth."[41] In attuning their children to an eternal reality and teaching them to hear and heed truth above all else, Adams and Warren cultivate the contemplative openness and love of wisdom and beauty that Aristotle and Pieper deem essential for leisure.

Beyond Utility. An education grounded in religious principles such as that prescribed by the Puritans, Adamses, and Warrens teaches its pupils how to make themselves "useful" to their fellow man, but it also teaches them what utility is ultimately for.[42] Man seeks to be of use to his family and community so that when the day's work is done and material needs met, he can finally be at leisure, occupying his soul with praise and worship, wonder and awe, and the pursuit of wisdom and understanding. Founding-era preacher Nathanael Emmons captures well the dignity and nobility of the soul that such an education both shapes and presupposes. Exhorting parents to tend carefully to their children's education, Emmons reminds them of the soul's value:

> When a young prince is born, all the kingdom feel the importance of his education, and are anxiously concerned to have the ablest instructors employed, to form him for great and noble actions. But you have more than princes,

> even young immortals, committed to your care, whose powers and capacities, whose dignity and importance, will astonish you, at the great day, if not before.[43]

How can the education of an American child be more important than that of a future king? Emmons can make this audacious claim because of the different ends for which he understands each to be raised. While the importance of the latter's education lies in his potential for great and noble actions, the importance of the former's lies in his capacity not only for great and noble action, but for eternal contemplation.

An Education for Friendship

Emmons delivered his 1787 sermon on the dignity of man to his congregation in Franklin, Massachusetts, in honor of the town's namesake, Benjamin Franklin, who had donated 116 of his own books to jumpstart the town's first public library. Unlike Emmons, however, Franklin did not belong to any church, sect, or congregation, leaving the Puritan church of his parents once he left their care. Though he praised religion's moral teachings and general influence on the nation's character and financially supported churches of all sects, Franklin eschewed religious dogmatism, and in early writings openly questioned certain religious doctrines such as that of original sin.

Benjamin Franklin. Unsurprisingly, then, the educational vision he lays out in his *Autobiography* is not religiously oriented as was the Puritans'. Though Franklin's parents initially sent him to study with clergymen, hoping he might become one himself, the parents of 17 children could not long afford an education that promised such a "mean Living" afterwards.[44] They soon pulled him out of school, instead sending him to apprentice at his brother's printing house. There, Franklin continued to educate himself, reading and writing "at Night, after Work or before Work began in the Morning; or on Sundays, when [he] contrived to be in the Printing House alone, evading as much as [he] could the common Attendance on publick Worship, which [his] Father used to exact of [him] when [he] was under his Care."[45] While Franklin downplays the place public worship ought to take in one's education, he certainly does not downplay the importance of how one spends one's leisure time.

In fact, for Franklin, leisure and education are integrally related. Leisure is for thinking and learning—engaging in inquiry, the study of nature, and philosophic discourse—as Franklin's own way of life models. He even frames

his autobiographical reflections for his son as leisure's fruit, "the enjoyment of a week's uninterrupted leisure in my present country retirement."[46] By the same token, his *Autobiography* also suggests that education, in turn, is for leisure. That is, a proper education must teach pupils how to be at leisure. Franklin's *Autobiography* is such an education, not just for his son, but for all American sons and daughters. By reading Franklin's stories of how he integrated leisure into a life of hard work and public service, despite his "low Beginning," Americans of all backgrounds and means can find inspiration for how to carve out free time and spend it well.[47]

The Junto. One of Franklin's most remarkable examples of this is his creation of the Junto, a club of fellow businessmen sharing a "sincere Spirit of Enquiry after Truth."[48] The members met every Friday evening, when each would raise and discuss "Queries on any Point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy" and take turns delivering "an Essay of his own Writing on any Subject he pleased."[49] The "best School of Philosophy, Morals & Politics that then existed in the Province," as Franklin called it, the Junto nourished and deepened some of his dearest and longest-lasting friendships, and its Friday evening tradition offered a model for those who might otherwise occupy their leisure with "publick Amusements to divert their attention."[50]

Public Libraries. Moreover, the Junto inspired another of Franklin's lasting influences on American education and leisure: his institution of the first American subscription library. Not only did this project facilitate the self-education of subscribers like the Junto members, but it further shaped citizens' leisure practices. While "few were the Readers at that time in Philadelphia" when Franklin conceived of the public library, once established, it spurred imitations in other towns, and before long, "[r]eading became fashionable" in America.[51] Americans' increase in reading time enriched their leisure occupied in other ways, as well, leading Franklin to credit the libraries with "improv[ing] the general Conversation of the Americans."[52]

To be sure, Franklin does present his Junto, library, and numerous other innovations and associations as useful and productive for both individuals and the community. In urging the reader to spend his time profitably, does Franklin thereby reduce leisure to an opportunity for more work? The love that characterizes his literary, philosophic, and civic associations suggests that, for Franklin, time spent learning with (and teaching) others consists more in leisure than in work.[53] That is, as good as its fruits may be, it is good for its own sake. He frequently casts his intellectual companions as "lovers" of reading, poetry, or punning, for example, and depicts vividly the joy he takes in their characters, marked by liveliness, wittiness, and clarity

of head and heart.[54] And he dedicates his pages to the "[c]ity [he] love[s], having lived many Years in it very happily."[55] One thus glimpses, even in the thought of this very modern Founding Father, the effortlessness Pieper calls characteristic of leisure "because it springs from love."[56]

An Education for Retirement

While work is inherently subordinated to temporal and material ends, leisure is marked by its transcendence of time and utility. (So, for example, Franklin recalls the way in which the thoughtful discourse his father took care to initiate at the dinner table raised his children's minds above noticing the quality of "the Victuals on the Table."[57]) Labor's necessity does not prevent it from being respectable, of course, as Americans have always recognized. But the dignity of the worker stems from his willingness to do what it takes to meet his basic needs *so that he can rise above them*.

When the worker cannot (or will not) transcend the realm of work and utility, he confuses the means—work—for the end—being. As Pieper explains, this happens when one mistakes leisure for a "pick-me-up" or "restorative" for more work, rather than as the end, or purpose, of work.[58] This also happens when man mistakes leisure for idleness, shrinking from both work and leisure alike. The non-worker who spends his days in front of the television is not so different from the workaholic, for Pieper, since each "prefers to forgo the rights, or if you prefer the claims, that belong to his nature."[59]

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. The Founding Fathers modeled how to exercise leisure for its own sake perhaps most clearly in their approaches to retirement. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson each embraced his return home from Washington as an opportunity to dive into the kind of intrinsically worthwhile activities that urgent concerns of governance make difficult. As Benjamin Rush describes, once Adams retired to Quincy, "he spent the evening of his life in literary and philosophical pursuits surrounded by an amiable family and a few old and affectionate friends," pursuits which presumed the very studies he years earlier urged his son to direct his "principal attention" to—rather than the "useful sciences" that John Quincy would later inevitably learn.[60]

As for Jefferson, he wrote to Adams that in retirement he had "given up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier," an exchange Adams, in turn, playfully characterized as "[r]ising from the lower deep of the lowest deep of Dulness and Bathos to the Contemplation of the Heavens and the heavens of Heavens."[61] In addition to time for contemplating philosophy and history,

retirement also gave Adams and Jefferson time to rekindle and deepen their friendship, which had been fractured by political differences. Their lengthy correspondence, which Rush facilitated, further demonstrates the freedom and transcendence leisure makes possible.

George Washington. Reading the works of Sir Isaac Newton may not be for everyone, but time spent engaging in activities that are good in themselves should be, and George Washington's account of his capacity for leisure at Mount Vernon offers a perhaps more accessible depiction. Washington famously looked forward to retirement to Mount Vernon, the 8,000-acre estate he often referred to as his "vine and fig tree," a biblical phrase that captures the flourishing that God promises his people.[62] (Of course, the leisure available to both Washington and Jefferson was due in large part to their dependence on the shameful institution of slavery, which both hoped to set on the path to extinction by founding a nation dedicated to liberty.[63])

In a letter to his friend the Marquis de Lafayette following his return to Mount Vernon after the Revolutionary War, Washington describes the character of the leisure available to him now that, "under the shadow of my own Vine and my own Fig-tree, free from the bustle of a camp and the busy scenes of public life, I am solacing myself with those tranquil enjoyments" that only those capable of contemplation can enjoy.[64] "I am not only retired from all public employments," Washington elaborates, "but I am retiring within myself; and shall be able to view the solitary walk, and tread the paths of private life with heartfelt satisfaction."

Washington's fondness for reading no doubt contributed to his rich inner life, but so, too, did his openhanded hospitality toward invited and spontaneous guests alike.[65] Welcoming friends like Lafayette to "come with Madame la Fayette" to accompany him "in [his] domestic walks," Washington also occupied his leisure with the festivity that Aristotle and Pieper describe.[66]

The Classical Education Movement

Washington, Adams, and Jefferson offer in their own lives examples of the kind of genuine leisure available to those whose souls have been formed for it. The capacity for leisure that they were able to enjoy, though natural, is not spontaneous, but must be cultivated. Hence, Jefferson, after detailing the "sublime" enjoyment of reading the classics in Greek and Latin, is moved to profound gratitude: "I thank on my knees him who directed my early education for having put into my possession this rich source of delight: and I would not exchange it for any thing which I could then have acquired & have not since acquired."[67]

Americans today have reason to give thanks not only for the examples set by the Founders' personal lives, but also for the educational traditions initiated by their practices and reflections, the remnants of which one can still spot in some educational institutions today. The classical school movement, which has continued to gain traction at all levels of schooling, maintains that "[w]hile job skills and civic participation are surely desirable ends, they are not the primary ends" of education.[68] Rather, its primary end is human flourishing.

Classical schools seek to "elevate the minds of our children" and exalt their souls, to borrow the words of John Adams, by introducing them to the best that has been thought and said.[69] This entails focusing on primary documents rather than textbook summaries and privileging the written and spoken word over screens. "The single most important technology continues to be the book," as the Chief Academic Officer of the classical charter school network Great Hearts recently quipped.[70]

Classical K–12 schools, colleges, and universities introduce their students to the intrinsic joys of exploring "nature and humanity's place in the cosmos" not only through the written word, but through other forms of leisure.[71] At Wyoming Catholic College, for example, where "the curriculum looks outward to perennial shared realities, both in nature and in the riches of culture," students go on class wilderness expeditions in the mountains in which they "grow in humility and wonder through immersion in nature, God's 'first book.'"[72]

At several independent academic institutes throughout the country, nearby university students frequently gather for ballroom dance lessons, art museum visits, and outings to the opera.[73] And at the Catherine Project, adults of all ages and backgrounds exercise their leisure in small reading groups of great books ranging from Homer's *Iliad* to Henry Adams's *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*.[74]

These institutions are taking up the challenging but eminently worthwhile task of teaching their participants how to be at leisure, reclaiming a long-forgotten purpose of education. In doing so, they are decidedly countercultural, resisting both Americans' utilitarian impulse and what Ross Douthat calls America's late slide into decadence. The U.S. should join in heeding Abigail Adams's exhortation that "the foundation stone, the pillar on which [we] erect the fabric of [our] felicity, must be in [our] own hearts, otherwise the winds of dissipation will shake it, and the floods of pleasure overwhelm it in ruins."[75]

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Endnotes

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3. "Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, January 20, 1787," in *The Letters of John and Abigail Adams*, Frank Shuffleton, ed. (Westvaco Corporation, 2001), p. 91.
4. Stephanie Ferguson, "Understanding America's Labor Shortage," U.S. Chamber of Commerce, January 19, 2023, https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding-americas-labor-shortage (accessed October 31, 2022).
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6. Ibid., p. 24.
7. Ibid., pp. 116–117 and 29.
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11. See, for example, Vaishnavi S. Nakshine et al., "Increased Screen Time as a Cause of Declining Physical, Psychological Health, and Sleep Patterns: A Literary Review," *Cureus*, Vol. 14, No. 10 (October 8, 2022), https://www.cureus.com/articles/112862-increased-screen-time-as-a-cause-of-declining-physical-psychological-health-and-sleep-patterns-a-literary-review#:~:text=Constant%20exposure%20to%20devices%20like,children%20as%20well%20as%20adults (accessed January 12, 2023).
12. Anna Lembke, "The Smartphone Has Become the Modern-Day Hypodermic Needle," *The Journal*, October 14, 2021, https://www.thejournal.ie/prev/5569503/dv6GLpo.A7QNY/ (accessed November 11, 2022).
13. Anna Lembke, "Digital Addictions Are Drowning Us in Dopamine," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 13, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/digital-addictions-are-drowning-us-in-dopamine-11628861572 (accessed November 11, 2022).
14. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1987), p. 77. Bloom here seems to echo Tocqueville's observation that "[i]n America most of the rich have begun by being poor; almost all the idle were, in their youth, employed; the result is that when one could have the taste for study, one does not have the time to engage in it; and when one has acquired the time to engage in it, one no longer has the taste for it." Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 51.
15. Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), p. 107.
16. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins, trans. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 132.
17. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), p. 27.
18. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 511–514.
19. Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979).
20. Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, p. 29.
21. Ibid., p. 30.
22. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 178.
23. "God's action is the model for human action. If God 'rested and was refreshed' on the seventh day, man too ought to 'rest' and should let others, especially the poor, 'be refreshed.'" U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), para. 2172.
24. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 224.
25. Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, p. 32.
26. Plutarch, "Lycurgus," John Dryden, trans., 1994, http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/lycurgus.html (accessed August 26, 2020).
27. Aristotle, *Politics*, Carnes Lord, trans. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 214–216.
28. Ibid., p. 214.

29. Ibid., p. 225.
30. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 224.
31. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 47–52.
32. Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993).
33. While thinkers like Samuel Harrison Smith, for example, advocated for public boarding academies, others, like Benjamin Rush, preferred "school[s] that would be local, administered at least in part by parents and the community." See Pangle and Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty*, pp. 92–93.
34. There are limits to the helpfulness of this dichotomy, as many of the Founders' reflections on education envision a hybrid between classical and modern conceptions. John Adams, for example, wrote of the importance of education in modern terms of enlightenment, liberation, and progress, while the curriculum he prescribed for his son, at least, was classical. See "John Adams to John Quincy Adams, March 17, 1780," in *The Letters of John and Abigail Adams*, pp. 104–106. The Pangles note a similar ambiguity in Thomas Jefferson's educational plans: "Despite his love of progress and his constant concern with utility in education, Jefferson expected the core of the curriculum at the academies to remain Latin and Greek." Pangle and Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty*, p. 121. Noah Webster, on the other hand, opposed the traditional focus on dead languages: "What advantage does a merchant, a mechanic, a farmer, derive from an acquaintance with the Greek and Roman tongues?" See *The Founders' Constitution, Vol. I*, Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner, eds. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2000), pp. 679–680.
35. Consider the difference in focus between Webster, for example, whose educational prescriptions the Pangles call "strictly vocational," and Samuel Knox, who prescribes the inclusion of "that refined and sublime knowledge on which the improvement of genius, science, and taste, rather than worldly circumstances, chiefly depends." Pangle and Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty*, pp. 129–130, and Knox, *An Essay on the Best System of Liberal Education* (Baltimore: Warner & Hanna, Harrison-Street, 1799), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/590be125ff7c502a07752a5b/t/5ccac4863e755700010ee354/1556792463473/Knox%2C+Samuel%2C+An+Essay+on+the+Best+System+of+Education.pdf (accessed December 2, 2022).
36. "Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647," in *The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts, Reprinted from the Copy of the 1648 Edition in the Henry E. Huntington Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), https://www.mass.gov/doc/old-deluder-satan-law/download (accessed September 26, 2022).
37. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 41.
38. Ibid., p. 32.
39. John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law, 1765," in *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, C. Bradley Thompson, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2001), pp. 24 and 28.
40. "Abigail Adams to Mercy Warren, July 6, 1773," in *The Letters of John and Abigail Adams*, pp. 50–51.
41. "Mercy Warren to Abigail Adams, July 25, 1773," in ibid., pp. 51–52.
42. "I shall Esteem it a happiness indeed if I can acquit myself of the important Charge (by providence devolved on Every Mother), to the approbation of the judicious Observer of Life, but a much more noble pleasure is the conscious satisfaction of having Exerted our utmost Efforts to rear the tender plant and Early impress the youthful mind, with such sentiments that if properly Cultivated when they go out of our hands they may become *useful* in their several departments on the present theatre of action, and happy forever when the immortal mind shall be introduced into more Enlarged and Glorious scenes." Ibid. (emphasis added).
43. Nathanael Emmons, "The Dignity of Man," in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805, Volume I*, Ellis Sandoz, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1998), p. 905.
44. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Norwalk, CT: The Easton Press, 2004), p. 10.
45. Ibid., p. 21.
46. Ibid., p. 3.
47. Ibid., p. 160.
48. Ibid., p. 82.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., p. 102.
51. Ibid., pp. 101–102.
52. Ibid., p. 97.
53. For further analysis of Franklin's impressive blend of work, leisure, and philanthropy, see the Pangles' excellent chapter on "Benjamin Franklin and the Art of Virtue" in *The Learning of Liberty*, pp. 265–284.
54. Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, p. 84.
55. Ibid., p. 174.
56. Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, p. 15.

57. Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, p. 14.
58. Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, p. 30.
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60. "Benjamin Rush to John Adams, October 16, 1809," and "John Adams to John Quincy Adams, March 17, 1780," in *The Letters of John and Abigail Adams*, pp. 104–106 and 75–76.
61. "Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, January 21, 1812," in *The Letters of John and Abigail Adams*, pp. 113–115, and "John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 3 February 1812," Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-04-02-0361#D27067ID10-ptr (accessed November 9, 2022).
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64. "From George Washington to Lafayette, 1 February 1784," Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-01-02-0064 (accessed November 9, 2022).
65. For further depiction of how Washington spent his Mount Vernon days, see Hafera, "A Tale of Three Presidential Houses."
66. "From George Washington to Lafayette, 1 February 1784."
67. "From Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, 27 January 1800," Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-31-02-0289 (accessed December 6, 2022).
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69. "John Adams to Abigail Adams, October 29, 1775," in *The Letters of John and Abigail Adams*, p. 62.
70. "Classical Education in a Cyber Monday World," Great Hearts Academies, November 28, 2022, https://www.greatheartsamerica.org/classical-education-in-a-cyber-monday-world/ (accessed December 21, 2022).
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73. For examples of such institutes, see the featured grantees listed on the website of the Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education. At the Austin Institute near the University of Texas, for example, undergraduates gather to learn the waltz, fox trot, and quickstep; at the Morningside Institute near Columbia University, undergraduates frequently gather for outings to operas, symphonies, and art museums. See Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education, "Strengthening the University," https://excellenceinhighered.org (accessed December 21, 2022); Austin Institute, "The Good Life," https://www.austin-institute.org/the-good-life (accessed December 21, 2022); and The Morningside Institute, "Cultural Outings," https://www.morningsideinstitute.org/cultural-outings (accessed December 21, 2022).
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