

COLLEGIUM INSTITUTE & SNF PAIDEIA PROGRAM *present:*

Wellness AND THE GOOD LIFE



Spring 2022
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

HARRISON
COLLEGE HOUSE



READER

Session 1

WELLNESS: EVOLUTIONS

In lieu of readings for the first session, seminar participants were asked to bring in a quote about wellness that they liked (or disliked, but felt was illustrative and worth discussing for any reason).

We will also be discussing the following two videos:

The Moral Bucket List (The Road to Character by David Brooks)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INpPg9eWkXU>

Yale Wellness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2twzhXjwA>

Session 2

INDIVIDUAL & COMMUNITY WELLNESS

**Excerpt from “Chapter 6: Relating Inside Out” in *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*
By Vivek H. Murthy, MD (2020)**

The moment Serena Bian arrived at her dorm room-empty but for the leftover scraps of paper and bedding from the previous year's occupants-something felt deeply unnerving about the transition that awaited her. She was beginning her freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania and was brand new to Philadelphia. She knew no one here and suddenly wondered if she ever would. As this thought crossed her mind, Serena felt like she was losing herself. The memory still made her shudder when she told me about it six years later.

What Serena was experiencing was the first tremor of loneliness, and her response fit the classic pattern that John Cacioppo identified two decades ago. Her body was flashing a warning signal, just as if she were a stranded hominid on the tundra. She was separated from her people. She was in unfamiliar territory, the tribe, she was about to meet, might contain enemies. She needed to put her guard up, stay hyper-vigilant and find her people soon. Unfortunately, people were hundreds of miles away, and she didn't know how to replace them.

Born and raised in Michigan, she was the child of immigrant parents who'd left China in search of opportunity in the 1970s. Five foot six inches with a radiant smile that frequently punctuates her pensive expression, Serena today is a picture of quiet intensity and joy. The first time I met her I realized that, while she speaks with a gentle voice and soft tones, this young woman brims with curiosity, idealism, and a fierce belief in humanity. She told me that early in life, “I learned how to deal with cultural isolation as one of the only Asian Americans in a predominantly Caucasian environment.” But that didn't mar her childhood. Far from it. She had lots of interests, and she felt “known” at her small, private school. As a teenager she developed a passion for sustainability and a fervent desire to protect the environment. “I became a beekeeper, made some fantastic friends, had mentors in school who believed in me.” She also fell in love for the first time.

Yet like many new freshmen, when Serena got to college, she was in a state of flux. Shortly before leaving home she'd broken up with her boyfriend, so she arrived on campus overwhelmed by heartache, homesickness, and shock at this abrupt and friendless transition. “How was I supposed to leave the life I had spent eighteen years slowly building, to start all over again, in this foreign territory?”

What she hadn't expected and didn't yet realize was that she'd left more than her life behind; she'd also left her sense of herself—her identity—at home. Like most of us, Serena's childhood identity was forged within the “tribe” of her family, friends, school, and neighborhood. She hadn't yet defined herself apart from those relationships or that sense of belonging, so when she entered the utterly different context of college alone, it was as if she'd lost all the markers that helped her see herself. Suddenly, she felt invisible not only to others but also to her own eyes. It didn't help when, during new student orientation, she was told that the first week at Penn was going to be “the best week of your life” because of the parties that throbbed across campus from sundown to sunup. For Serena, the “opportunity” to meet hundreds of new freshmen translated into a kind of ultimatum to lunge into this new college life.

Though naturally quite introverted, she tried to adapt. For two nights she braved the parties, only to wind up drunk among strangers. On the final night of orientation, which coincided with her eighteenth birthday, she found herself “walking with some random guy to inevitably hook up. As soon as I got to his room, it dawned on me how unlike me this was. I told him I wanted to go home, and luckily he was nice enough to walk me back to my dorm.”

While the encounter ended up involving nothing more than flirtation, Serena was shaken by self-doubt and a profound sense of anxiety. Had she chosen the wrong school, or was there something wrong with her? Should she try to change to fit in, or should she just keep to herself, remaining on guard and defensive? What made it all harder was the lack of anyone she could trust to talk to about her fears and uncertainties. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying this frenzy. The distortions of loneliness made her perceptions of others as suspect as her view of herself.

“No one tells you how hard the first year of college is,” she reflected when we spoke. “It's unrealistic to anticipate such a smooth transition when you're uprooted for the first time in your life.” The real problem, though, is not knowing who you are as an individual the first time you're expected to meet the wider world as an individual.

If only she'd realized how many college students feel the same way. More than 60 percent report that they've felt very lonely within the past year, nearly 30 percent within the past two weeks.¹ In a 2019 survey at the University of California, Davis, half of college freshmen said making friends was more difficult than they'd expected.

For Serena, the scale of her college posed an additional hurdle. Penn is like a city within the city of Philadelphia, and she felt like an insignificant face in the crowd. “The sheer quantity of students on campus who are going through the same experience can create a herd mentality. Keep your head down and stay a part of the herd. If you get left behind, oftentimes, no one sees. It's made doubly challenging when your class sizes are so big, it's difficult to develop personal relationships with your professors.”

Those first few weeks, Serena would duck into bathroom stalls between classes to cry. After class, when other students made lunch plans, she made no effort to tag along. “It seemed that whenever I didn’t make plans to spend time with people, I would feel lonely and left out. However, whenever I did make plans, there was something incredibly shallow about the interactions. We’d talk about Greek life, partying, getting anxious about school and grades.” She longed for the deep conversations she’d enjoyed with her high school friends. But they knew her—and she knew them—from the inside. She hadn’t yet established that kind of bond with any of her classmates in Philadelphia.

“It seemed like I was a total outsider. I would hear swaths of friends leaving for another party, while I stayed in bed and watched Netflix. I felt like a nobody.”

As the semester progressed, Serena’s experience of loneliness changed but without lessening in intensity. “I was busy all the time. If I wasn’t studying for classes, I was signing up for new clubs, attending various speaker panels or conferences, or in a library or coffee shop doing my homework. I was partly able to distract myself from my loneliness because of the sheer work and extracurricular activities. Busyness is almost like a disease!” she said, echoing Bryan Robinson’s description of work addiction.

But she still had no friends, and because the clubs at Penn are so competitive, few freshman applicants are accepted. Serena was no exception. Now college became a time of loneliness and rejection. “I felt so lost and just so deeply confused about everything in my life.”

Serena’s loneliness was often paired with self-blame and self-criticism: “I can’t find my place among these people, so it must be my fault or something wrong with me.” Again, she was far less alone than she realized. In the UC Davis survey, three-fourths of college students who found it difficult to make friends freshman year told researchers they thought that everyone else had an easier time making friends than they did. This is the cruel pattern of loneliness at work, intensifying isolation and distorting self-consciousness.

Back at home during winter break, Serena met up with one of her high school mentors, who immediately noticed the flatness of her voice, the lack of life in her eyes. She leaned forward and asked, “Serena, do you think you might be depressed?”

“I realized then that I certainly was. A depression caused mostly from an experience of loneliness.”

She no longer felt excited about sustainability and beekeeping. She no longer had any desire to meet new people. She’d lost sight of everything she loved, why she mattered, and what gave meaning to her life. It was as if she no longer belonged to herself—or anyone.

She sat down with her parents and considered transferring to a different school. Here, again, she had plenty of generational company. Loneliness and depression can be two important predictors of a college dropout. Forty-one percent of students who left or transferred out of

the University of Washington in 2014, for example, said “feeling socially alone” was a factor in their decision to leave.

But Serena ultimately decided instead to start therapy when she returned to Penn that spring. She got a bike and would ride to art museums and along the river, doing things that gave her pleasure and reminded her what she cared about. This helped her regain a sense of herself, but she still felt off-kilter and tentative when interacting with others. “I felt that if I left campus and never returned, there wouldn’t be anyone that I would miss, nor would I feel missed by others.”

That summer, however, everything changed. Back home, she got a job on an urban farm, where she could get her hands dirty with work she deeply loved, and she enrolled in a monthlong yoga teacher training that she described as “transformative.”

“It wasn’t so much the yoga that healed me, but rather the community.” This group of fifteen spanned all stages and backgrounds of life. There were grandmothers, new fathers, working mothers, graduate students, and a couple who flew to Michigan from Hawaii just for this training. They were strangers, and yet the terms on which they came together jump-started their connections with one another.

The culture of the training felt completely different from that of college, Serena said. It was safe, warm, patient, and welcoming. “Instead of making quick judgments about a person, we took time to understand one another’s stories. I learned from this community that at all moments in life, we are each going through our own struggles. I learned that while on the surface, it may seem like someone has it all together, that may not be the case at all.”

The training program united these participants around a common set of values, such as kindness and honesty, and interests, such as the practice of yoga, that mattered deeply to every individual. In this way, the group reflected Serena’s sense of herself and reinforced her sense of belonging. But these new relationships didn’t define her like the close friendships she’d spent her whole life building; she was as new and singular to these strangers as they were to her. Each person had to come to the group in their own way, leading with their own sense of self. And it was in this process of coming to the group and revealing her true self that Serena found the inner balance and conviction she’d been missing on campus.

She realized that the yoga community’s shared vulnerability was its primary source of strength. People weren’t just allowed to be open and honest; they were encouraged to share and come together around their truest feelings and fears. “I rediscovered the power of uncovering our common humanity.”

Serena learned, in the process, to appreciate her own humanity and to be more open, accepting, and forgiving with herself. She recovered not only a sense of her true values and core identity, but also the ability to project and honor that identity through her interactions

and relationships with others. She felt centered and grounded, which gave her the confidence she'd been missing freshman year.

“When I left for my sophomore year of college,” she said, “I was determined to make more connection on campus happen.”

At first, she took baby steps, like inviting individual classmates out to coffee. But instead of settling for the usual small talk, she was candid about her freshman-year loneliness. To her surprise, nearly everyone she told said they'd experienced some form of loneliness, too.

“Even the ones that seemed to have so many Facebook friends or thousands of followers on Instagram!”

Intrigued now by this discovery, Serena put together a brief anonymous survey on the college experience and gave it out randomly to seventy-two Penn students. “I was shocked by the number who reported the number one thing they wished they had at Penn was ‘deeper/more authentic conversations and friendships.’”

At the same time, Serena became interested in the effect of physical space and architecture on human interactions and cultural change. She noticed that all the spaces on campus seemed to have a predetermined culture. “Meaning, whenever you are on Penn’s campus, the predominant culture is that of competition, busyness, and social hierarchy.” She wondered if it would be possible to create a physical space that “optimizes for deeply human interactions.” In such a space, she imagined, people could interact as the participants of her yoga training had. They would feel free and safe to reveal their true selves, to share their personal passions and concerns—to “be real.” They would treat one another with genuine compassion and kindness, as they'd like to be treated themselves. They'd lead with deeply held thoughts and feelings, instead of surface appearances. In other words, they'd relate to one another from the inside out, rather than from the outside in.

As an experiment, Serena rented an Airbnb off campus and invited a group of Penn students who were all strangers to come together for an evening of personal conversation and storytelling. She called it a Space Gathering.

“I actually just approached people on the sidewalk and asked if they'd be interested in spending a few hours with a group of other students getting to know each other and having intentional conversations.” Most of the people she approached expressed the same yearning for human openness and honesty that Serena felt.

The first gathering brought together twenty students across various classes and social backgrounds. Because she wanted the experience to be free of small talk and distractions, Serena asked everyone to put their phones away upon entering and sit quietly until all had arrived. “We went through an exercise where we stared at each other’s eyes for three minutes before launching into a series of introductions that were less about your

stereotypical labels, and more about your story: What is one thing that is going really well in your life, and what is an area where you are struggling?” Then, for the next three hours, they shared their experiences and opinions of social life on campus, their passions and their fears. “The energy in that room at the end of the evening,” Serena remembers, “was one of inspiration and hope.”

How was it that, after only three hours, a group of strangers could feel so connected? Serena believes that the key lay in creating a space where people could put aside any preconceived social expectations and instead share candid stories without fear of criticism. “Each one of us has fears, aspirations, hopes. We go through more common experiences of things like loneliness, anxiety, depression, than we assume.”

The first Space Gathering was so successful that Serena began to host them with new people every few weeks. Her goal was not to turn each group into best friends but to awaken them to their common humanity and, perhaps, to inspire them to treat other students with more kindness and compassion upon returning to campus. She wanted to adjust the culture’s value system—one story at a time.

She also wanted to let go of her own judgments, which had so misled her freshman year. “I had to have the mind-set shift that people are good, and that everyone is going through some sort of battle. We’re all just trying to figure this stuff out together. I had to let go of the fact that I couldn’t clone my high school friends. I had to learn how to cherish each relationship for its uniqueness.”

This shift helped her appreciate something new about herself, too. “I became much more open and super curious about others!”

Serena began to find people who shared her desire for deeper and more genuine connections. She met some of her closest friends sophomore year, and by the beginning of junior year she felt true belonging in her circle of connections. A few close friendships emerged from Space Gatherings, she told me, but the process was indirect. “I could make lots of casual friends from the Gatherings and turn them into trusted confidantes, simply because I had gotten to know them in such a deep way over a matter of hours.” In other words, those honest conversations made it easier both to launch acquaintances and to build lasting friendships. Those skills extended to building and strengthening friendships apart from the gatherings, too.

For Serena, the lasting lesson is not that we all need to be best friends, but that we do need to develop cultures in which all are encouraged to express and share our true humanity. One way to do that is through the power of direct face-to-face conversation. So the culture Serena created took place mostly offline.

“After each gathering, I would ask each participant to recommend one friend—who was as different from them as possible—to attend the next gathering.” It turned out that the hunger for human connection was so strong, the gatherings were populated almost entirely through word of mouth. By the time Serena graduated, she’d hosted some forty-five Space Gatherings and created a playbook for peers who’d stepped up to facilitate their own.

Penn’s student wellness communications coordinator, Ben Bolnick, attended one evening, and he admitted to the *Daily Pennsylvanian* that Serena’s Space Gatherings were filling a vital gap. “Something that all people need,” he said, “is to reflect, to discuss, to flesh out ideas and concepts and struggles with other human beings. And sometimes we just don’t get that often enough.”

Befriending Ourselves

What was it that ultimately allowed Serena to take charge of her loneliness? Her supportive parents, hometown friends, and yoga community certainly played important roles. But the most important factor, I believe, was the connection with herself that she rekindled during that pivotal summer. This firmly centered inner connection gave her the foundation to establish new relationships, starting from the inside out.

Serena’s journey back to herself reminded me of a passage in the theologian Thomas Merton’s 1960 book *The Wisdom of the Desert*: “What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it all the rest are not only useless but disastrous.”

Merton’s insight resonates within Serena’s own comment, “I felt like a nobody.” When we feel socially disconnected, we often feel unknown. As Ami Rokach observed, it’s like being invisible to the world around us. But the problem isn’t only that others fail to see us accurately; the fog of loneliness also blurs our internal mirrors. It obscures our inner strengths, as well as the value that we have to offer, the meaning of our own lives, and the sources of joy and wonder that would normally make us feel connected to the universe around us. This blindness can allow us to drift off course, forgetting what we love about our lives and neglecting to accept and befriend ourselves with the compassion and understanding we deserve.

Sometimes, as in Serena’s case, the disconnect reflects an abrupt change in environment. In her positive experiences of high school, Serena felt known and appreciated as a quiet, curious, imaginative thinker and naturalist. It would take time before her fellow students at Penn could get to know her personal passions and concerns. Eventually, she would discover that the campus was filled with people who shared them, but her initial discomfort with unfamiliar people made those individuals as invisible to her as she felt to everyone else. Many of us experience a similar abyss when we start a new school or job or move to a region

or country where we're unknown and unmoored, especially if we're afraid of being judged for looking, sounding, or acting different from the surrounding culture. If we're so lonely and fearful that we fail to seek common ground with others in these new surroundings, the sense of culture shock can be profoundly alienating.

But we can get disconnected from our own instincts even without such dislocations. Our circumstances invariably change over time. We get older. We move in and out of professions and relationships. We have experiences and meet people that challenge our preconceived notions about ourselves and the world. At the same time, many of us are constantly seeking to "improve" or "reinvent" ourselves. Much of this change is natural, necessary, and healthy. We strive to learn, to grow, to expand our skills and deepen our knowledge—and self-knowledge. This is a vital and lifelong process. Along the way, however, external influences are constantly pressing us to change in ways that may not be natural or healthy. These external influences can infiltrate and distort our internal decision making.

Modern society bombards us with ideals, such as wealth, celebrity, and perfect fitness, that are seldom attainable and not necessarily desirable for most of us, yet are used commercially like lures. Claims are made for these lures that are rarely true. If we overvalue material ideals and superficial goals, then we risk losing sight of the goals that truly matter to us. We may also lose access to the friends and pursuits that give our lives depth and meaning, as my patient James, the lottery winner, found after becoming rich.

Some of the most pernicious ideals in today's media-driven world are social. Our social media feeds would have us all believe that our social lives depend on having hundreds of friends and followers online and a constant schedule of dates, trips, and parties. This pressure can make us feel out of step if we'd honestly rather watch a movie by ourselves or stay in on a Friday night.

Society also sets norms around ambition that suggest the more we criticize ourselves, the more motivated we'll be to do more and better. This self-criticism dovetails in a dangerous manner with the hypervigilance of loneliness. When lonely, we may feel compelled to beat ourselves up, castigating ourselves as Serena did, for our "failure" to be someone we're not. In the process, we tend to magnify our weaknesses, discount our strengths, and distrust our natural instincts.

This criticism can come out in judgmental, even damning, self-talk. Especially during moments of stress, we may say things to ourselves that we'd never say to a close friend. For example, after a disappointing date or meeting, do you console yourself with a pep talk, or are you more likely to curse yourself for falling short? If you gain a few unwanted pounds, do you promise to make better food choices and give yourself more time to exercise, or do you condemn your body and character?

Ingrained competition and mismatched value systems also can intensify negative self-talk, as I've witnessed in the trenches of medicine. One day during my internship, one of my fellow interns walked into our small group discussion and threw her papers on the table in frustration. "I feel like such a failure," she said, mostly addressing herself. "I'm never the first one to get the diagnosis in our morning case conferences, and I can't rattle off all the clinical trials the way some of our co-interns can. All I can do is sit with patients and make them feel better!" My friend was and is a gifted physician. But she was operating in a highly competitive culture that prized scientific and intellectual knowledge far above compassion. Medical school faculty in this program didn't get promoted because they were kind to patients and tended to their physical and emotional needs. More often than not, they gained recognition for publishing research papers or bringing in grant money to the university. Discoveries in the lab trumped human empathy and compassion, which left my friend feeling inadequate and dismissive of her considerable gifts as a healer. Because her profession seemed to disregard her talents, she began to lose sight of the aspects of medicine that she most loved. In the process, she started to undervalue herself.

Once we lose our internal compass, our emotional sense of grounding and identity can begin to slip. On a rational level, we may know we have worth, that we have light to bring to the lives of others, yet it's hard to ignore the messaging that insists we ought to be someone we're not.

Many of us then try to jump the gap, as Serena did at first, by posing as that other someone. We might fake being happy and busy as we mimic the behavior we observe around us. Or we might pretend to be above the fray, so confident and self-sufficient that we don't care or need to connect. The pose could be a full-time or a part-time performance. Perhaps we can be ourselves at home or with a few close friends, only to put on the act when we walk out the door. We might keep this up for months or even years. But such poses are exhausting, and the relationships that we form when pretending are inevitably disappointing. Even as we go through the motions of a "normal" social life, loneliness builds behind the façade, and the fog persists.

For Serena, the emotional tumult and distracting "busyness" of freshman year only served to estrange her from the personal qualities that, back home, had made her feel most true and valuable—her warmth, sense of humor, creativity, and generosity. In high school, her close relationships had given her a natural outlet for exercising these qualities and, in the process, strengthened her self-esteem and deepened her sense of herself. But she hadn't yet learned the importance of transferring that support from her friends internally to befriend herself.

In order to move independently through the world, we all need to learn to treat ourselves with the kindness, encouragement, and candor that we would offer a good friend. This is what we're doing when we give ourselves a pep talk on difficult days, when we treat ourselves to a calming walk to let off stress or tell ourselves to get to sleep early when we

feel a cold coming on. We incorporate all the soothing, supportive messages that we've absorbed from others who love us and relay those messages to ourselves. This constructive self-talk reminds us who we are, what we love and value, and why we need to keep going—just as a close friend would do. But it takes time alone and consistent practice to develop the habit of being compassionate toward oneself, and Serena had never needed this kind of internal support when her close friends were nearby. So, with no one at college to remind her why she mattered, she was floundering. Like weakened physical muscles, her emotional strength and motivation felt harder to summon. By the end of her first semester at Penn, loneliness had estranged her from herself.

That magical summer brought her back together by reengaging her solitary love of planting and beekeeping and by allowing her to slow down and reflect in the relative safety of her hometown and in her yoga group, where she learned to make new friends in a way that felt honest and meaningful. She was reminded how fulfilling it was to spend time with people who reflected back a view of her that felt true and whole. She may have felt antisocial and awkward during her freshman year, but that was the result of the pressure she felt on campus to act like someone she wasn't. Besides, a little self-doubt is normal during major transitions and by no means meant she was wrong or broken. But her yoga friends reminded her of the qualities that came most naturally to her and that she most valued in herself.

As Serena reclaimed the interests, passions, and values that gave her life direction and a sense of purpose, she began to feel grounded and confident again. She no longer depended on her family and childhood friends to show her who she was. To be sure, she remained deeply connected to them, but she also was able to see herself independently as a worthwhile individual apart from them. In the process, she reaffirmed that she was someone worth befriending, thus creating a positive feedback loop that allowed her to befriend herself.

Like a friend, she could see that her commitment to sustainability, her desire to form deep and significant human connections, her fascination with the interplay between environment and social behavior, all were part of what gave her value and showed that there was much more to her than she'd even discovered yet. Like all of us, she was a life in progress, destined to make and learn from as many mistakes as she achieved successes.

The shared vulnerability of people at her yoga training taught Serena that no one is perfect or perfectly attuned to everyone around them. Everyone has flaws and suffers failures. The key is to learn and gain deeper compassion, rather than anger or resentment, as a result of setbacks. This new wisdom, along with her deeper sense of herself, allowed Serena to treat herself and others more kindly, from a stance of friendship rather than fear. It gave her the courage to change aspects of her life back on campus that had contributed to her suffering, and it helped her feel grounded and centered even as she faced the inevitable changes and uncertainties of adult life that awaited her.

Session 3

WELLNESS, SERVICE, & CONTEMPLATION

“Paths Are Made By Walking”

By Nipun Mehta

Graduation Speech at University of Pennsylvania (2012)

***Offbeat Graduation Speech Gets Standing Ovation:** 2012's Baccalaureate speaker at the University of Pennsylvania was an unconventional choice for an Ivy League school. To address their newly-minted graduates, aspiring to dazzling careers, they picked a man who has never in his adult life, applied for a job. A man who hasn't worked for pay in nearly a decade, and whose self-stated mission is simply "to bring smiles to the world and stillness to my heart". This off-the-radar speaker launched his address with a startling piece of advice. Following up with four key insights gleaned from a radical 1000 km walking pilgrimage through the villages of India. As he closed his one-of-a-kind Graduation Day speech, the sea of cap and gowned students rose to their feet for a standing ovation. What follows is the full transcript of the talk by Nipun Mehta. –DailyGood Editors*

Thank you to my distinguished friends, President Amy Gutmann, Provost Vincent Price and Rev. Charles Howard for inviting me to share a few reflections on this joyous occasion. It is an honor and privilege to congratulate you—UPenn’s class of 2012.

Right now each one of you is sitting on the runway of life primed for takeoff. You are some of the world's most gifted, elite, and driven college graduates – and you are undeniably ready to fly. So what I’m about to say next may sound a bit crazy. I want to urge you, not to fly, but to – *walk*. Four years ago, you walked into this marvelous laboratory of higher learning. Today, heads held high, you walk to receive your diplomas. Tomorrow, you will walk into a world of infinite possibilities.

But walking, in our high-speed world, has unfortunately fallen out of favor. The word “pedestrian” itself is used to describe something ordinary and commonplace. Yet, walking with intention has deep roots. Australia's aboriginal youth go on walkabouts as a rite of passage; Native American tribes conduct vision quests in the wilderness; in Europe, for centuries, people have walked the Camino de Santiago, which spans the breadth of Spain. Such pilgrims place one foot firmly in front of the other, to fall in step with the rhythms of the universe and the cadence of their own hearts.

Back in 2005, six months into our marriage, my wife and I decided to “step it up” ourselves and go on a walking pilgrimage. At the peak of our efforts with ServiceSpace, we wondered if we had the capacity to put aside our worldly success and seek higher truths. Have you ever thought of something and then just known that it *had* to happen? It was one of those things. So we sold all our major belongings, and bought a one-way ticket to India. Our plan was to head to Mahatma Gandhi’s ashram, since he had always been an inspiration to us, and then walk South. Between the two of us, we budgeted a dollar a day, mostly for incidentals — which meant that for our survival we had to depend utterly on the kindness of strangers. We ate whatever food was offered and slept wherever place was offered.

Now, I do have to say, such ideas come with a warning: do *not* try this at home, because your partner might not exactly welcome this kind of honeymoon. :-)

For us, this walk was a pilgrimage — and our goal was simply to be in a space larger than our egos, and to allow that compassion to guide us in unscripted acts of service along the way. Stripped entirely of our comfort zone and accustomed identities, could we still “keep it real”? That was our challenge.

We ended up walking 1000 kilometers over three months. In that period, we encountered the very best and the very worst of human nature — not just in others, but also within ourselves.

Soon after we ended the pilgrimage, my uncle casually popped the million dollar question at the dinner table: "So, Nipun, what did you learn from this walk?" I didn't know where to begin. But quite spontaneously, an acronym — **W-A-L-K** — came to mind, which encompassed the key lessons we had learned, and continue to relearn, even to this day. As you start the next phase of your journey, I want to share those nuggets with the hope that it might illuminate your path in some small way too.

The W in WALK stands for Witness. When you walk, you quite literally see more. Your field of vision is nearly 180 degrees, compared to 40 degrees when you’re traveling at 62 mph. Higher speeds smudge our peripheral vision, whereas walking actually broadens your canvas and dramatically shifts the objects of your attention. For instance, on our pilgrimage, we would notice the sunrise everyday, and how, at sunset, the birds would congregate for a little party of their own. Instead of adding Facebook friends online, we were actually making friends in person, often over a cup of hot “chai”. Life around us came alive in a new way.

A walking pace is the speed of community. Where high speeds facilitate separation, a slower pace gifts us an opportunity to commune.

As we traversed rural India at the speed of a couple of miles per hour, it became clear how much we could learn simply by bearing witness to the villagers' way of life. Their entire mental model is different — the multiplication of wants is replaced by the basic fulfillment of human needs. When you are no longer preoccupied with asking for more and more stuff; then you just take what is given and give what is taken. Life is simple again. A farmer explained it to us this way: "You cannot make the clouds rain more, you cannot make the sun shine less. They are just nature's gifts — take it or leave it."

When the things around you are seen as gifts, they are no longer a means to an end; they are the means *and* the end. And thus, a cow-herder will tend to his animals with the compassion of a father, a village woman will wait 3 hours for a delayed bus without a trace of anger, a child will spend countless hours fascinated by stars in the galaxy, and finding his place in the vast cosmos.

So with today's modernized tools at your ready disposal, don't let yourself zoom obliviously from point A to point B on the highways of life; try walking the backroads of the world, where you will witness a profoundly inextricable connection with all living things.

The A in WALK stands for Accept. When walking in this way, you place yourself in the palm of the universe, and face its realities head on. We walked at the peak of summer, in merciless temperatures hovering above 120 degrees. Sometimes we were hungry, exhausted and even frustrated. Our bodies ached for just that extra drink of water, a few more moments in the shade, or just that little spark of human kindness. Many times we received that extra bit, and our hearts would overflow with gratitude. But sometimes we were abruptly refused, and we had to cultivate the capacity to accept the gifts hidden in even the most challenging of moments.

I remember one such day, when we approached a rest house along a barren highway. As heavy trucks whizzed past, we saw a sign, announcing that guests were hosted at no charge. "Ah, our lucky day," we thought in delight. I stepped inside eagerly. The man behind the desk looked up and asked sharply, "Are you here to see the temple?" A simple yes from my lips would have instantly granted us a full meal and a room for the night. But it wouldn't have been the truth. So instead, I said, "Well, technically, no sir. We're on a walking pilgrimage to become better people. But we would be glad to visit the temple." Rather abruptly, he retorted: "Um, sorry, we can't host you." Something about his curt arrogance triggered a slew of negative emotions. I wanted to make a snide remark in return and slam the door on my way out. Instead, I held my raging ego in check. In that state of physical and mental exhaustion, it felt like a Herculean task— but through the inner turmoil a voice surfaced within, telling me to accept the reality of this moment.

There was a quiet metamorphosis in me. I humbly let go of my defenses, accepted my fate that day, and turned to leave without a murmur. Perhaps the man behind the counter sensed this shift in me, because he yelled out just then, “So what exactly are you doing again?” After my brief explanation he said, “Look, I can’t feed you or host you, because rules are rules. But there are restrooms out in the back. You could sleep outside the male restroom and your wife can sleep outside the female restroom.” Though he was being kind, his offer felt like salt in my wounds. We had no choice but to accept.

That day we fasted and that night, we slept by the bathrooms. A small lie could’ve bought us an upgrade, but that would’ve been no pilgrimage. As I went to sleep with a wall separating me from my wife, I had this beautiful, unbidden vision of a couple climbing to the top of a mountain from two different sides. Midway through this difficult ascent, as the man contemplated giving up, a small sparrow flew by with this counsel, “Don’t quit now, friend. Your wife is eager to see you at the top.” He kept climbing. A few days later, when the wife found herself on the brink of quitting, the little sparrow showed up with the same message. Step by step, their love sustained their journey all the way to the mountaintop. Visited by the timely grace of this vision, I shed a few grateful tears — and this story became a touchstone not only in our relationship, but many other noble friendships as well.

So I encourage you to cultivate equanimity and accept whatever life tosses into your laps — when you do that, you will be blessed with the insight of an inner transformation that is yours to keep for all of time.

The L in WALK stands for Love. The more we learned from nature, and built a kind of inner resilience to external circumstances, the more we fell into our natural state — which was to be loving. In our dominant paradigm, Hollywood has insidiously co-opted the word, but the love I’m talking about here is the kind of love that only knows one thing — to give with no strings attached. Purely. Selflessly.

Most of us believe that to give, we first need to have something to give. The trouble with that is, that when we are taking stock of what we have, we almost always make accounting errors. Oscar Wilde once quipped, “Now-a-days, people know the price of everything, but the value of nothing.” We have forgotten how to value things without a price tag. Hence, when we get to our most abundant gifts — like attention, insight, compassion — we confuse their worth because they’re, well, priceless.

On our walking pilgrimage, we noticed that those who had the least were most readily equipped to honor the priceless. In urban cities, the people we encountered began with an unspoken wariness: “Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?” In the countryside, on the other hand, villagers almost always met us with an open-hearted curiosity launching straight in with: “Hey buddy, you don’t look local. What’s your story?”

In the villages, your worth wasn't assessed by your business card, professional network or your salary. That innate simplicity allowed them to love life and cherish all its connections.

Extremely poor villagers, who couldn't even afford their own meals, would often borrow food from their neighbors to feed us. When we tried to refuse, they would simply explain: "To us, the guest is God. This is our offering to the divine in you that connects us to each other." Now, how could one refuse that? Street vendors often gifted us vegetables; in a very touching moment, an armless fruit-seller once insisted on giving us a slice of watermelon. Everyone, no matter how old, would be overjoyed to give us directions, even when they weren't fully sure of them. :) And I still remember the woman who generously gave us water when we were extremely thirsty — only to later discover that she had to walk 10 kilometers at 4AM to get that one bucket of water. These people knew how to give, not because they had a lot, but because they knew how to love life. They didn't need any credit or assurance that you would ever return to pay them back. Rather, they just trusted in the pay-it-forward circle of giving.

When you come alive in this way, you'll realize that true generosity doesn't start when you have some *thing* to give, but rather when there's nothing in you that's trying to take. So I hope that you will make all your precious moments an expression of loving life.

And lastly, the K in WALK stands for Know Thyself.

Sages have long informed us that when we serve others unconditionally, we shift from the me-to-the-we and connect more deeply with the other. That matrix of inter-connections allows for a profound quality of mental quietude. Like a still lake undisturbed by waves or ripples, we are then able to see clearly into who we are and how we can live in deep harmony with the environment around us.

When one foot walks, the other rests. Doing and being have to be in balance.

Our rational mind wants to rightfully ensure progress, but our intuitive mind also needs space for the emergent, unknown and unplanned to arise. Doing is certainly important, but when we aren't aware of our internal ecosystem, we get so vested in our plans and actions, that we don't notice the buildup of mental residue. Over time, that unconscious internal noise starts polluting our motivations, our ethics and our spirit. And so, it is critical to still the mind. A melody, after all, can only be created with the silence in between the notes.

As we walked — witnessed, accepted, loved — our vision of the world indeed grew clearer. That clarity, paradoxically enough, blurred our previous distinctions between me versus we, inner transformation versus external impact, and selfishness versus selflessness. They were inextricably connected. When a poor farmer gave me a tomato as a parting gift,

with tears rolling down his eyes, was I receiving or giving? When sat for hours in silent meditation, was the benefit solely mine or would it ripple out into the world? When I lifted the haystack off an old man's head and carried it for a kilometer, was I serving him or serving myself?

Which is to say, don't just go through life — grow through life. It will be easy and tempting for you to arrive at reflexive answers — but make it a point, instead, to acknowledge mystery and welcome rich questions ... questions that nudge you towards a greater understanding of this world and your place in it.

That's W-A-L-K. And today, at this momentous milestone of your life, you came in walking and you will go out walking. As you walk on into a world that is increasingly aiming to move beyond the speed of thought, I hope you will each remember the importance of traveling at the speed of thoughtfulness. I hope that you will take time to witness our magnificent interconnections. That you will accept the beautiful gifts of life even when they aren't pretty, that you will practice loving selflessly and strive to know your deepest nature.

I want to close with a story about my great grandfather. He was a man of little wealth who still managed to give every single day of his life. Each morning, he had a ritual of going on a walk — and as he walked, he diligently fed the ant hills along his path with small pinches of wheat flour. Now that is an act of micro generosity so small that it might seem utterly negligible, in the grand scheme of the universe. How does it matter? It matters in that it changed him inside. And my great grandfather's goodness shaped the worldview of my grandparents who in turn influenced that of their children — my parents. Today those ants and the ant hills are gone, but my great grandpa's spirit is very much embedded in all my actions and their future ripples. It is precisely these small, often invisible, acts of inner transformation that mold the stuff of our being, and bend the arc of our shared destiny.

On your walk, today and always, I wish you the eyes to see the anthills and the heart to feed them with joy.

May you be blessed. Change yourself—change the world.

Session 4

WELLNESS & VIRTUE

Excerpts from Books I & II of *Nicomachean Ethics*

By Aristotle (c. 350 BCE)

Book I

7 · Let us again return to the good we are seeking [the good for the human person], and ask what it can be. The good seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in military strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? That for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and choice the end; for it is for the sake of this that all men do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

Since there are evidently more than one end [that humans pursue], and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are complete ends; but the chief good is evidently something complete. Therefore, if there is only one complete end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most complete of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more complete than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more complete than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call complete without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.... Happiness, then, is something complete and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

Presumably to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all

things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function....

Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but *it* also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational.... Now if the function of man is an activity of soul in accordance with their rationality... If this is the case, [and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate virtue: if this is the case,] human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with virtue.

But we must add 'in a complete life'. For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy....

Book II

Human Virtue being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word for 'habit'. From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we must learn before we can do, we learn by doing, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts....

Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the

rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, habits arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the habits correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference.

2 · Since, then, the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use), we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the habits that are produced, as we have said. Now, that we must act according to right reason is a common principle and must be assumed—it will be discussed later, i.e. both what it is, and how it is related to the other virtues. But this must be agreed upon beforehand....

But though our present account is of this nature we must give what help we can. First, then, let us consider this, that it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health; both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it. So too is it, then, in the case of temperance and courage and the other virtues. For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean.

But not only are the sources and causes of their origination and growth the same as those of their destruction, but also the sphere of their activity will be the same; for this is also true of the things which are more evident to sense, e.g. of strength; it is produced by taking much food and undergoing much exertion, and it is the strong man that will be most able to do these things. So too is it with the virtues; by abstaining from pleasures we become temperate, and it is when we have become so that we are most able to abstain from them; and similarly too in the case of courage; for by being habituated to despise things that are terrible and to

stand our ground against them we become brave, and it is when we have become so that we shall be most able to stand our ground against them....

4 · The question might be asked, what we mean by saying that we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts; for if men do just and temperate acts, they are already just and temperate, exactly as, if they do what is grammatical or musical they are proficient in grammar and music.

Or is this not true even of the arts? It is possible to do something grammatical either by chance or under the guidance of another. A man will be proficient in grammar, then, only when he has both done something grammatical and done it grammatically; and this means doing it in accordance with the grammatical knowledge in himself.

Again, the case of the arts and that of the virtues are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. These are not reckoned in as conditions of the possession of the arts, except the bare knowledge; but as a condition of the possession of the virtues, knowledge has little or no weight, while the other conditions count not for a little but for everything, i.e. the very conditions which result from often doing just and temperate acts.

Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do; but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them *as* just and temperate men do them. It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good....

5 · Next we must consider what virtue is. Since things that are found in the soul are of three kinds—passions, faculties, habits—virtue must be one of these. By passions I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, love, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain; by faculties the things in virtue of which we are said to be capable of feeling these, e.g. of becoming angry or being pained or feeling pity; by states the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions, e.g. with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately; and similarly with reference to the other passions.

Now neither the virtues nor the vices are *passions*, because we are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions, but are so called on the ground of our virtues and our vices, and because we are neither praised nor blamed for our passions (for the man who feels fear or

anger is not praised, nor is the man who simply feels anger blamed, but the man who feels it in a certain way), but for our virtues and our vices we *are* praised or blamed. Again, we feel anger and fear without choice, but the virtues are choices or involve choice. Further, in respect of the passions we are said to be moved, but in respect of the virtues and the vices we are said not to be moved but to be disposed in a particular way.

For these reasons also they are not *faculties*; for we are neither called good nor bad, nor praised nor blamed, for the simple capacity of feeling the passions; again, we have the faculties by nature, but we are not made good or bad by nature; we have spoken of this before. If, then, the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, all that remains is that they should be *habits*...

6 · We must, however, not only describe it as a habit, but also say what sort of habit it is. We may remark, then, that every virtue both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the virtue and makes the work of that thing be done well; e.g. the virtue of the eye makes both the eye and its work good; for it is by the virtue of the eye that we see well.... Therefore, if this is true in every case, the virtue of man also will be the habit which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well.

How this is to happen we have stated already, but it will be made plain also by the following consideration of the nature of virtue. In everything that is continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and the equal is an intermediate between excess and defect. By the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little—and this is not one, nor the same for all.... Thus a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this—the intermediate not in the object but relatively to us.

If it is thus, then, that every art does its work well—by looking to the intermediate and judging its works by this standard (so that we often say of good works of the art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it; and good artists, as we say, look to this in their work), and if, further, virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then it must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue; for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a

form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and both these things are characteristics of virtue. Therefore virtue is a kind of mean, since it aims at what is intermediate....

Virtue, then, is a habit concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the account which states its essence is a mean, with regard to what is best and right it is an extreme.

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right about them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness regarding such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong. It would be equally absurd, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly, and self-indulgent action there should be a mean, an excess, and a deficiency; for at that rate there would be a mean of excess and of deficiency, an excess of excess, and a deficiency of deficiency. But as there is no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage because what is intermediate is in a sense an extreme, so too of the actions we have mentioned there is no mean nor any excess and deficiency, but however they are done they are wrong; for in general there is neither a mean of excess and deficiency, nor excess and deficiency of a mean.

Optional

FURTHER READING

“Routine Maintenance: Embracing habit in an automated world”
By Meghan O’Gieblyn

Of all the attempts to pinpoint the origin of modernity—an exercise of which modernity never tires—my favorite begins with medieval monks. According to this account, it was the Benedictines who came up with the idea that it was possible to do the same thing, at the same time, every day. Although time was still widely regarded as fluid and coterminous with eternity, the monastery was governed by the rhythms of that most modern instrument: the clock. The monks rose together, ate together, and prayed together, starting and stopping each task at the appointed canonical hour. In time, their obsession with order seeped into the world at large. The tradesmen and merchants in town heard the monastery bells ring out eight times a day and began to synchronize their daily tasks to their rhythm. The butcher picked up his cleaver at Prime and set it down for lunch at None. Clerks hustled to finish their work by Vespers. Time became currency, something that could be spent or saved, and people increasingly turned to machines to make life more efficient. By the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, the religious impulse behind these regimens had been long forgotten. The monastery gave way to the factory. Ritual dissolved into routine.

This is, at any rate, the story that Lewis Mumford tells in his 1934 book *Technics and Civilization*, which argues that monasteries “helped to give human enterprise the regular collective beat and rhythm of the machine.” Contemporary medievalists have come to doubt this tidy account, but I have always liked the picture it paints, as though the life of that era were an enormous astronomical clock with its automaton figures (the friar, the cobbler, the weaver) clicking along their tracks to the same relentless metronome. I’ve thought of it more than once while plodding along my own daily course, rising at six to prepare the same breakfast every morning (oatmeal, coffee), leaving at seven to embark on the route I have walked for the past ten years, one that winds around the lake and is timed precisely (fifty minutes) so that I can sit down at my desk by eight. I work from home, so I have no co-workers or time card to register my punctuality—though I suppose you could look at my browsing history, which bears the record of a life so deeply routinized that even my screen time falls into a discernible pattern: the email log-in at the top of each hour, the thirty minutes allotted to social media during lunch.

Repetition is a component of all ascetic traditions, and I like to think that my own habits constitute something like a spiritual discipline. My nature bends toward listlessness and disorder. Resolving to do the same thing each day, at the same time, has given my life a center, insulating me from the siren song of novelty and distraction that has caused me so much unhappiness in the past. I live a monotonous life, which is not to say a tedious one. (I believe, with Rilke, that those who find life dull are not poet enough to call forth its riches.) And I imagine that these tightly circumscribed days are radiating, with each turn of the circle, into widening arcs, amounting to a life whose ties are deeper, whose direction is more certain.

But perhaps this is merely so much self-justification. It does not escape me that what I've been describing as a spiritual discipline bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the cruder ethos of "life hacking." Perhaps I am no different from those data fetishists in Silicon Valley who refer to Benjamin Franklin as a "productivity master," and speak of free time as a "release valve." It is difficult today to avoid the thought that we are becoming as rigid and inflexible as the machines that structure our lives. The *New York Times* columnist Kevin Roose calls this process "machine drift," arguing that it's degrading our humanity and making us professionally obsolete. "For years, the conventional wisdom has been that if machines were the future, we needed to become more like machines ourselves," he writes in his recent book *Futureproof: 9 Rules for Humans in the Age of Automation*. This wisdom, a relic of the Industrial Revolution, persists in our efforts to streamline and quantify our lives (tallying our steps, tracking our REM cycles), and is reinforced by our reliance on algorithms that corral us into making the same choices we've made in the past. The writer George Monbiot similarly considers repetition "dehumanizing," arguing that schools, with their rigid lessons and classroom regimes, are senselessly preparing children for life in a nineteenth-century factory. "In the future, if you want a job, you must be as unlike a machine as possible," he writes in the *Guardian*. In striving to be more efficient, these critics argue, we are ceding our true advantage over the artificial intelligence systems that are encroaching on so many lines of work. Instead of succumbing to repetitive habits, we should cultivate those qualities that make us most human—our flexibility and spontaneity, our ability to respond to surprises and learn new skills.

Those of us who work in "creative" fields should take comfort in these predictions. It's true that my own livelihood as a freelance writer, adjunct instructor, and gig worker requires no small amount of agility, and that writing, even in light of recent advances in AI language modeling, is among the skills experts have long deemed safe from automation. But these writers are not merely giving professional advice. They are offering sweeping claims about what makes us human while denigrating consistency as an outdated survival skill. Each time I encounter this argument, it renews my fundamental ambivalence about habit, which seems to belong, as Mumford's theory suggests, to that uncertain territory between the monastery and the machine. Is it possible in our age of advanced technology to recall the spiritual

dimension of repetition? Or has it been conclusively subsumed into the deadening drumbeat of modern life?

There is, to be sure, a certain logic in describing habits as machinelike. The actions that are most familiar to us—walking, riding a bicycle, driving a car—are those that can be performed without conscious deliberation, as though we were “on autopilot.” Habit, it’s often said, is nature’s version of outsourcing, a way to off-load cognitive overhead to the rote movements of muscle memory and free up the mind to think about other things. At their most extreme, habits can slide into addictions and compulsions, patterns that resist our conscious efforts to break them. As the philosopher Clare Carlisle observes, it is this tendency to slip in and out of consciousness, transgressing the neat binaries of modern thought—activity and passivity, freedom and necessity, mind and body—that has made habit so troublesome for philosophers, raising uneasy questions about freedom and individual autonomy. Kant excluded habitual actions from moral philosophy, maintaining that the “thoughtless repetition of the same action” cannot be ethical because those actions are not freely chosen.

The notion that habits are mindless and mechanical flourished, unsurprisingly, during the Industrial Revolution. An 1855 article in Charles Dickens’s magazine *Household Words* calls routine “the automaton imitating the work of the living, thinking man,” a phrase that might well apply to Dickens’s characters, many of whom are prone to tics and compulsive sayings and are unable, even when a windfall of fortune comes their way, to abandon the telltale habits of their class. Nineteenth-century psychologists compared habit to the flywheel and stereotype printing, industrial technologies that yielded repetition without variation. Walter Pater, in his conclusion to *The Renaissance*, similarly compared habit to a stereotype, concluding that the habituated mind, which failed to make artistic discriminations, had succumbed to the mechanical regularity of modern production. For the American clergyman and reformer John Weiss, habits embodied the thoughtless precision of natural laws: “The more enslaved a man becomes by the original tendencies of his nature,” he wrote in 1870, “the more closely he imitates the mechanical life of all material objects.”

Still, the hope has persisted that the very machines that make life repetitive will one day liberate us from the daily grind. Marx believed machines had “the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labor,” arguing that so long as they were used for the right purposes and controlled by workers, they could disrupt the trend of specialization and allow people to become “totally developed” individuals. Oscar Wilde imagined a more utopian scenario, one in which machines performed all disagreeable work and humans were free to make art, read, and enjoy a life of leisure. “All unintellectual labor, all monotonous, dull labor, all labor that deals with dreadful things, and involves unpleasant conditions, must be done by machinery,” he wrote in his 1891 essay on socialism. It was only then that we’d be free from the “tyranny of habit” which reduced humans “to the level of a machine.”

Despite the pervasive view that habit is mechanistic, many thinkers have, like Mumford, perceived a spiritual motivation still lurking in the gears of modern routine. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt, citing a study reporting that most German workers “prefer monotonous tasks,” suggests factory workers, like the early Christians, prefer repetitive manual labor because it requires little attention and allows for contemplation. (She quotes the German economist Karl Bücher: “rhythmic labor is highly spiritual labor.”) Max Weber argued that the Protestant work ethic—as exemplified by Franklin’s aphorisms about habits and self-regulation—was bound up with a quest for salvation, one whose otherworldly motivation had long ago been forgotten, sublimated into what he called “the technical and economic conditions of machine production.” The Reformation, Weber writes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, “took rational Christian asceticism and its methodical habits out of the monasteries and placed them in the service of active life in the world.” The desire for regularity had itself become habitual, loosened from its animating religious incentives and perpetuated unthinkingly by the automatic operations of modern life. Weber found industrial society haunted by “the ghost of dead religious beliefs,” a phrase that echoes Henri Bergson’s definition of habit: “the fossilized residue of a spiritual activity.”

I have long sensed that residue myself, believing that there is something transcendent in the pleasures of repetition. During the early months of the pandemic, many people complained that lockdown had caused their lives to take on the unvarying déjà vu of the 1993 film *Groundhog Day*. But the movie can also be understood as a spiritual parable. Although the protagonist, Phil, initially believes that the time loop he’s stuck in is a curse, he eventually comes to accept his fate and harnesses its dreary circularity into a program of ethical refinement—learning new skills, perfecting his self-discipline, and honing his moral responses—until he has become the best possible version of himself. Critics from a number of different faiths have interpreted the story as a meditation on escaping the cycle of samsara, reaching enlightenment, or undergoing the Puritan order of conversion. Still, for all these mystical interpretations, the film appears to recognize that repetition is not always transcendent. In one scene, Phil, desperate for a way out of his predicament, asks two local men he’s drinking with in a bowling alley: “What would you do if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?” One of the men replies, “That about sums it up for me.”

The fourth industrial revolution, like the previous three, has prompted anxiety that we are turning into machines, and has spurred a strain of rhetoric—debate would be too generous—about what makes us human. For the past two decades, this rhetoric has hinged on a definition of “routine” established in a 2003 paper by the economists David Autor, Frank Levy, and Richard Murnane, which has come to be known as the ALM hypothesis.

According to the paper, a task is considered routine if it can be reduced to a set of clearly defined rules that can be programmed into a machine. This includes manual tasks, such as

moving a car windshield into place on an assembly line, as well as cognitive work like bookkeeping and accounting. The definition proves a bit confusing for those who take routine to mean simply actions that are performed frequently—which often *cannot* be explained in a series of clear steps, relying as they do on tacit knowledge. (In some cases, explanation can even interfere with the execution of such skills. Karl Popper, in his book *Knowledge and the Body-Mind Problem*, writes of how Adolf Busch was once asked by a fellow violinist how he played a passage of Beethoven’s violin concerto. Busch replied that it was very simple, but as he began the demonstration he found he could no longer play it.)

As the ALM hypothesis made its way into corporate and political rhetoric, “routine” frequently slipped into this more common usage, denoting tasks that are “repeatable,” as Barack Obama put it in a 2016 interview about the economic implications of AI. A survey of *New York Times* articles on automation from the past decade reveals that “routine” tasks include sales, reviewing legal documents, diagnosing medical conditions, grading student papers, teaching “facts and figures,” and many of the skills performed by home health aides, including cooking meals and helping patients out of bed. It is a term, in other words, whose vague parameters and sufficiently unsavory undertones make it ripe for reassuring an anxious workforce that only the most mundane responsibilities will be handed over to machines—“those tasks they probably didn’t want to do anyway,” according to the insurance giant American Fidelity, which introduced automation software to its employees with a campaign called Drop the Drudgery.

Among the automation evangelists—entrepreneurs, innovation consultants, “thought leaders”—such reassurances often slide into an emancipatory, if not utopian, register. Duncan Wardle, a former Disney executive, echoes the popular refrain that “the rise of robots will only make us more human,” as it will allow us to embrace our core strengths—intuition, curiosity, creativity, and imagination. The promise that automation will make us more authentically human is, as we’ve seen, an old one, but rarely has it reached such poetic heights as on the stages of ideas festivals and innovation conferences. Tim Leberecht, an author and entrepreneur whose TED talks have been viewed millions of times, argues that the automation of “linear, process-driven, monotonous” work will usher in a second Romantic movement, one that rebels against the logic of optimization and efficiency. Onstage in Dublin, backdropped by Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, Leberecht calls on employers to create a sense of “drama, intrigue, and romance” in the workplace, and seek employees that thrive on “inconsistency,” “serendipity,” and “emotional agility.”

The skills that experts deem most automation-proof—the capacity for “situational adaptability” and “novel and adaptive thinking”—are celebrated in the popular media under the more user-friendly synonyms “flexibility” and “spontaneity,” qualities that are at times given the status of moral virtues. In an economy where everyone is their own brand and

where professional development frequently draws from the gospel of personal growth, the mandate to guard oneself against rigidity extends beyond the workplace, becoming a philosophy for how to live. Bethanie Maples, a senior product manager in Alphabet's "moonshot" division, argues that remaining human in the age of AI will require us to become "more like babies and less like robots," which is to say, free from unbending convictions and willing "to constantly reassess or even challenge our views of the universe."

But even as workplace technologies promise to liberate us from routine, the tools we use in our private lives threaten to make us more rigid and habitual. This is particularly true of "lifestyle automation," those apps and algorithms that have routinized our media consumption (not to mention intimate activities such as sleep, exercise, and sex) and that prompt us to take actions we've taken in the past, or buy products similar to those we've bought before. Social-media platforms rely on operant conditioning and other forms of psychological manipulation to habituate us to the unthinking cycle of cues and rewards (likes, notifications, retweets) characteristic of all addictive patterns. Roose recalls the moment he realized that his reliance on Gmail autoreplies, Netflix recommendations, and algorithmically curated news feeds was turning him into a person "with more fixed routines and patterns of thought, and an almost robotic predictability in my daily life." He offers his readers a short quiz to determine whether they've become victims of machine drift: "Lately, have certain parts of your life felt a little . . . predictable?" he asks. "Have you caught yourself coasting on mental autopilot—saying the obvious things, repeating the same activities, going through the motions without any variety or serendipity—for weeks or months at a time?" For those who answer yes, he advises opting out of automated solutions and incorporating more "surprising" actions into one's daily life ("Bring home flowers for no reason").

It is difficult to argue with such wholesome advice. Still, I remain skeptical of this veneration of flexibility, if only because it is often serving other ends. The French philosopher Catherine Malabou points out that flexibility and reactivity, which have been corporate watchwords since the Nineties, are by no means politically neutral, validating as they do an "economy of flexibility" that thrives on technological disruption and requires a supple workforce capable of responding to fluctuations in the market and adapting to reconceptualized job descriptions. Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix, argues that companies wishing to remain viable in such a climate need to be "optimized for innovation or flexibility." This means holding on to their "maverick" employees, those who think outside the box and respond rapidly to change, though it also involves eradicating corporate policies and provisions intended to regulate the workplace. Hastings advises entrepreneurs to start by "ripping pages from the employee handbook. Travel policies, expense policies, vacation policies—these can all go." In some cases, the automation evangelists suggest, bizarrely, that stable employment is itself a form of drudgery. As Kai-Fu Lee, the former president of Google China, noted in 2020, "By freeing us from the routine, and allowing us to find meaning in our lives beyond repetitive work and repetitive paychecks, AI may free us

to rediscover what made us human in the first place.” But what worker has ever complained of repetitive paychecks?

The idea that digital technologies can free us from rigorous routines is true to the extent that they have made work arrangements more flexible, enabling the rise of remote work, gig work, and “outcome-based” management, trends that have allowed many employees to choose their own schedules and work partly or wholly from home. As welcome as these developments may be for some, they nevertheless clearly privilege the interests of corporations, which have seized on the opportunity to do away with employee benefits, stable contracts, and other safety nets. The rhetoric of flexibility, in other words, despite its existential promise to make us more human, frequently undergirds policies that make the lives of workers more precarious. And it’s far from clear that all workers welcome the liberation from routine work. In many cases, people are left structuring each day from scratch, becoming responsible for a host of decisions that were once codified into the rhythms of the workplace.

To some extent, my own habits are a response to the nebulous shape my days have taken as a gig worker in the so-called passion economy, a vocation that often appears to be built on nothing more solid than desire, will, and cloud computing. (I have used the term “flexible” so many times in scheduling messages to editors and clients that it appears regularly in my autocomplete suggestions.) When there is no time clock marking the start and end of the workday, no clear frontier between home and office, each hour becomes subject to negotiation, each task a battleground of the will. The effort required to resist the twin temptations of procrastination and overwork quickly depletes one’s reservoir of motivation. A regimented life, I’ve learned, is the only way to avoid the spell of noonday dithering, the infinite black hole of Google, the nap that will be paid for with a manic all-nighter.

In fact, for all the hand-wringing about machine drift, current technologies share little with the bleak imagery of industrialization that the self-appointed automation experts so often invoke. If machines once ordered life around the uncompromising efficiency of the clock, digital technologies have dissolved the structure of the workweek and further collapsed the distinctions between public and private life. The internet is not a place of order but a boundless abyss that erases the contours of individual hours, swallows entire days, and inundates our lives with a vague sense of possibility never quite realized, leaving us, in the end, with that low-grade spiritual exhaustion for which “decision fatigue” seems too weak a term.

The Stoics called this feeling *stultitia*—“fickleness and boredom and a continual shifting of purpose,” as Seneca put it. It describes the never-ending hunger for novelty; the inability to stick to commitments; the will’s imprisonment by competing desires. St. Benedict describes something along these lines in his *Rule*, denouncing itinerant monks who “never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites.” It is the same problem that William

James identifies when he writes, in *The Principles of Psychology*, of the miserable person for whom

nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation.

Neither Seneca, Benedict, nor James would have denied that spontaneity is essential to our humanity. But in order to achieve tranquility, this first nature had to be supplemented with a “second nature,” the long-standing epithet for habit often attributed to Aristotle. Rather than understanding habit as mechanistic, these earlier thinkers saw repetition as a means of naturalizing a behavior such that it approaches the fluidity of instinct. Thomas Aquinas wrote that habit “makes the doing of something our own, as if natural to us, so to speak, and therefore pleasurable.” For Aristotle, habit was an aid in the quest for the virtuous life, a way of unifying the will and directing it, through practice, toward what is good. While base people, Aristotle writes in *Nicomachean Ethics*, “are at variance with themselves and have appetite for one thing and wish for another,” the virtuous person “remains consistent in his judgment, and he desires the same objects with every part of his soul.”

This is the quiet miracle of repetition: its ability to not only make actions easier over time, but also change one’s desires, bringing the cravings of the flesh in line with the aspirations of the spirit (or as James puts it, making “our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy”). It is a miracle well known to the religious convert who comes to look forward to the once-dreaded rite of confession, or the new parent who becomes acclimated to a lack of sleep, or the Twitter addict who realizes a few months after deleting the app that he can no longer recall the enthralling drama of the feed. Félix Ravaisson, the vitalist philosopher whose *Of Habit* remains one of the most in-depth treatises on the phenomenon, deems habit a form of grace, one that allows humans, who are burdened with consciousness and will, to take part in the spontaneity of the natural world. Far from its present techno-utopian associations with whimsy and serendipity, spontaneity to Ravaisson refers to actions that are so ingrained they no longer feel like a choice. The person who is steeped in the virtue of generosity will find that she is incapable of being ungenerous, just as salmon are incapable of refusing the chemical cues that spur them upstream to spawn. When an action becomes second nature, the initial desire for goodness “forgets itself” and “draws near to the holiness of innocence.”

For contemporary critics of habit, this understanding of freedom—the ability to consistently choose the good, or to act routinely in accordance with one’s highest nature—would be largely unrecognizable. According to the most zealous advocates of automation, true freedom requires gradually eliminating necessity from our daily lives by rendering work and labor superfluous, leaving our schedules open for limitless choice and novelty. This is the scenario that Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, proposed in his well-publicized 2021 article “Moore’s Law for Everything.” In the next decade, Altman speculates, AI, which is already

making inroads into nonroutine work, will read legal documents, offer medical advice, do assembly-line work, and perhaps serve as “companions.” In the years after that, it will make scientific discoveries and do essentially all of the work that currently constitutes human employment. AI companies will become so astronomically wealthy they’ll be able to bankroll a universal basic income for all citizens, a system that will create “a virtuous circle of societal wealth.” Everything from food to video games will be so cheap that people will be able to buy whatever they want, without having to labor for long hours. If we get bored from not working, we can always make up new jobs, and “we will have incredible freedom to be creative about what they are,” he writes. “The future can be almost unimaginably great.”

If Altman’s future is “unimaginably” great, perhaps that’s because it’s almost impossible to picture oneself happy there, much as it’s hopeless to envision contentment in heaven. I find it difficult to read about such scenarios without experiencing that creeping agitation that so often ruins vacations and holiday weekends, days when the structure of life dissolves and the liberty to spontaneously follow one’s whims is overshadowed by an unnameable dread. In a 1934 essay, Simone Weil expressed a similar skepticism that an “unconditional surrender to caprice” could succeed in making us happy. She was responding specifically to the utopian ideal—one she attributes somewhat controversially to Marx—that technology would one day liberate us from toil, a scenario in which “the ancient curse of work would be lifted.” Weil was naturally skeptical of this vision, not only because she believed routine work to be inescapable, but because she believed human nature to be ill-equipped to handle unqualified freedom, which would leave us at the mercy of our own desires. “The efforts that are the result of pure whim,” she writes, “do not form for a man a means of controlling his own whims,” an observation that echoes Seneca, Benedict, and James on the paradoxical way in which absolute freedom can become enslaving.

Weil offers a more useful conception of freedom, one that is particularly relevant to contemporary conversations about work and automation. Freedom, she argues, is not merely the absence of necessity; rather, it involves achieving the right balance between thought and action. The reason so much modern work feels like drudgery is not because it’s repetitive, but because it’s mystifying. The division of labor means that we don’t always understand the ultimate consequences of our work, and the use of machines, whose methodologies remain opaque, estranges us even further from these final objectives. She acknowledges that it would be impossible to retain conscious thought and deliberation through every step of modern production. In fact, she notes that we outsource thought all the time to the rote movements of the body, through the development of habits. Technology is an extension of that process, and can, like private habits, make our lives more efficient. But its usefulness begins to wane as it becomes more complex, transcending human thought and understanding. After a well-understood methodology is surrendered to mechanical processes,

one is thus presented with the strange spectacle of machines in which the method has become so perfectly crystallized in metal that it seems as though it is they which do the thinking, and it is the men who serve them who are reduced to the condition of automata.

More and more tasks become incomprehensible to the worker. (One thinks of Alfred North Whitehead's remark: "Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them.") If one follows this trajectory to its logical end, Weil argues, the result would be a society that functions "without a single human being understanding anything at all about what he was doing."

It is hard not to feel that this is the kind of society we are rapidly becoming. Many of the AI systems being incorporated into institutions, government agencies, and corporations are black-box models, relying on mathematical calculations so complex that it's impossible to know how they reach a particular decision, prediction, or recommendation. These models currently aid judges in sentencing decisions, determine which neighborhoods are patrolled by police departments, and recommend which loan applications should be approved. These technologies account for quantities of data no human can process. But for all their superior abilities, they have not managed to avoid the kinds of patterns to which humans are prone. Recidivism-assessment models assign higher risk scores to black defendants; recruitment algorithms rate women as less desirable than men for technical jobs. Because these algorithmic decisions are informed by historical data—which loans have been approved in the past, which crimes have been subject to harsh sentencing—they tend to reinforce historical biases, a problem the journalist Cade Metz compares to "children picking up bad habits from their parents."

Defenders of these technologies often reply that human decisions are just as unthinking: we, too, often function on autopilot; we, too, get stuck in feedback loops, making the same decisions we've made in the past, not realizing that we are spurred by simple familiarity. But even the most ingrained human behaviors are accompanied by sensations that prompt us to pause and recalibrate when something goes wrong—a truth well known to anyone who has caught themselves driving home to a previous residence or gagging on the hemorrhoid cream they've mistaken for toothpaste. Ravaisson calls habit the "moving middle term," a disposition that slides along the continuum between rote mechanism and reflective freedom. Weil, who similarly saw habit as a continuum, believed that we should strive to remain on the reflective side of that spectrum. The Stoics advised nightly meditation, so as to judge the virtue of the actions they'd taken that day, and Charles Sanders Peirce, the father of pragmatism, noted that in cases where habits have begun to work against a person's interests, "reflection upon the state of the case will overcome these habits, and he ought to allow reflection its full weight." It is this connection to thought that allows habits to remain fluid and flexible in a way that machines are not. Habits are bound up with the brain's plasticity, a term James describes as "a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but

strong enough not to yield all at once.” Unlike algorithms, which lock in patterns and remain beyond our understanding, habits allow us to negotiate a livable equilibrium between thought and action, maintaining, as Weil puts it, “a certain balance between the mind and the object to which it is being applied.”

Late last spring, my husband convinced me to abandon my routine. It was a cloudy but unusually warm afternoon at the tail end of May. His academic term had just ended, and, flush with the sense of possibility that characterizes the early weeks of summer, he suggested walking in the arboretum. I was reluctant to go, thinking only of the ripple effects it would have on my week—the work that would have to be postponed, the calls that would require rescheduling. But in the end, I agreed. The grass was still wet, and we walked for a while in silence, down a corridor of dogwood, idly looking at plaques affixed to the trees. Most of the trees were still in bloom, shedding white petals on grass that was a bright, astonished green. It had been raining all week, and it was the first time in days I’d spent more than a few moments outdoors. “Isn’t it nice to do something different?” my husband said. He was right. It was quiet at that time of day, and we had the park largely to ourselves. I had forgotten this place existed, so close to our apartment. As we approached the edge of the woods, the sun came through the clouds, casting shadows on the grass and briefly illuminating the flowering trees, like paper lanterns. My mind, too, felt remarkably bright and clear. With sudden conviction, I turned to him and said, “We should do this every day.”

It wasn’t until he broke into laughter that I realized what I’d said—and had to laugh at myself. I thought of Bergson’s phrase from his essay on the comic: “something mechanical encrusted on the living.” We laugh at the sight of humans who have succumbed to mechanical thoughtlessness, Bergson claimed, because it touches on the ever-present modern anxiety that we are becoming machines. Laughter serves as a social corrective—a warning of the dangers of becoming too rigid and a reminder that we can always find our way back to a more elastic state. The patterns we establish for our lives are, after all, not hardwired or set in stone. They are able to bend, and, when needed, break.