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Conclusion: Lives Worth Living in a Secular Age

In Yankee Stadium on the Fourth of July, even the loss of the opening game couldn't spoil the mood of the crowd. Fans craned their necks for a glimpse of the big, shy man and current Yankee captain, Henry Louis Gehrig. Known as The Iron Horse, Gehrig had recently ended his record-setting streak of 2,130 straight games, played over the course of fourteen seasons of baseball.

The long run dated back to the beginning of the 1925 season, and during that period Gehrig had played through broken bones, crippling attacks of lumbago, and even pitches taken to the head. Despite his legendary toughness, however, on May 2 the captain of the Yankees had voluntarily removed himself from the lineup. A mysterious and debilitating weakness in his muscles had led to increasingly erratic play; he felt he was becoming a burden to the team. Gehrig stayed on as captain and watched the games from the dugout, but speculation about his health filled the papers. Finally in late June, after an extended trip to the specialists at the Mayo Clinic, Gehrig was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—the fatal wasting disease of the motor neurons in the brain and spinal cord that now bears his name. Although nobody knew for sure at the time, in fact the disease was already at a relatively advanced stage.

Less than two years later, at the age of thirty-seven, Gehrig would be dead.

Lou Gehrig was perhaps the most revered player in all of baseball—admired not only for his skill and stamina, but as a shining example of "sportsmanship and clean living."[1] Despite his virtual allergy to the spotlight, Gehrig's friends, fans, and teammates would not be denied the opportunity to celebrate his life. In what was described as "perhaps as colorful and dramatic a pageant as ever was enacted on a baseball field," the capacity crowd had gathered at Yankee Stadium on the Fourth of July to "thunder a hail and farewell" to Henry Lou Gehrig.[2]

The event did not disappoint. During the break between the games a bed of microphones sprouted up around home plate, and Gehrig's teammates gathered behind him there in support. A long line of well-wishers—from the mayor of New York City to the janitorial staff at the stadium—showered him with gifts and praise.

When the time came for Gehrig to give his thanks, he was too moved to speak. Sid Mercer, the MC of the event, noticed Gehrig's fragile state and stepped to the microphone to offer thanks on his behalf, before calling the ceremony to an end. But as Gehrig was walking away, and the crew was taking down the microphones, the crowd broke into loud chants of "We want Lou! We want Lou!" In a moment of resolution Gehrig turned back toward home plate. When his shaky legs made it almost impossible for him to approach the microphone, his friend and manager Joe McCarthy took him by the arm. Then, speaking without notes, and in a voice that was on the verge of breaking, Lou began his short speech to the crowd with two famous sentences:

> Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

He described his heartfelt gratitude for the kindness and encouragement he had gotten from the fans over the course of his career, for the

honor he felt in playing with his teammates and for his coaches, and for the blessing of a good family and a wife who is a "tower of strength and courage." He concluded with another now famous sentence. "So I close in saying," he said, "that I might have been given a bad break, but I've got an awful lot to live for."

The thundering applause filled the stadium for two full minutes.

At fewer than three hundred words, Lou Gehrig's farewell speech stands as perhaps the most powerful example of American rhetoric ever produced outside the political sphere.[3] Film clips from the event show a stadium that vacillates between pin-drop silence and thunderous applause. The papers described it as "without doubt one of the most touching scenes ever witnessed on a ball field and one that made even case-hardened ball players and chroniclers of the game swallow hard."[4] It is a fair bet that nobody in the stadium that day felt even a tinge of T. S. Eliot's indecision, or Samuel Beckett's sense of an interminable wait, or David Foster Wallace's anger and frustration at his inability to find meaningful differences in life. For the moments that led up to and were held together by Gehrig's speech, 62,000 people knew exactly what they were about. And paramount among them was a great man on the verge of death—Henry Lou Gehrig himself.[5]

SPORTS MAY BE THE place in contemporary life where Americans find sacred community most easily. We saw already in our opening chapter that a great athlete can shine like a Greek god, and that in the presence of such an athlete the sense of greatness is palpable. It has even become popular to argue that in recent years sport has come to form a kind of folk religion in American society, standing in for more traditional kinds of religious practice and belief.6 Whether or not it is true as a matter of historical and sociological fact that sport now plays this kind of religious role in America, a related phenomenological claim seems harder to dispute. There is no essential difference, really, in

how it feels to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Lord, or to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Hail Mary pass, the Immaculate Reception, the Angels, the Saints, the Friars, or the Demon Deacons.

In part this association between sport and religion derives from the importance of community in each. The sense that one is joined with one's fellow human beings in the celebration of something great reinforces the sense that what one is celebrating really is great. It is one thing to sit alone on the living room sofa and be astonished by some amazing feat of athleticism seen on the television as David Foster Wallace sometimes did. But moments like this take on greater meaning when they are shared with a community of like-minded folks who are experiencing the same kind of awe. Whether it is in the church or in the baseball stadium, the awesomeness of the moment is reinforced when it is felt as shared by others. When it is also shared *that it is shared*—when you all recognize together that you are sharing in the celebration of this great thing—then the awesomeness of the moment itself bursts forth and shines. When you find yourself spontaneously high-fiving the stranger sitting next to you at the stadium, the mood of "Do I dare to eat a peach?" is far away.

In the best cases events like this do more than draw you into a simple mood of exultation; they bring out everything that is important in the situation, letting each thing shine at its very best. A great baseball game, for example, played in a ballpark that highlights the most beautiful or exciting aspects of the city, can gather people together and focus them on what is best about the season, the community, the game, and themselves. Albert Borgmann, the philosopher of technology, writes movingly about this possibility, tying it explicitly to a notion of the presence of divinities. "A rich reality is needed to sponsor a sense of community," Borgmann writes.

> A thoughtful and graceful ballpark tunes people to the same harmonies. It inspires common pride and pleasure, a shared sense of season and place, a joint anticipation of drama. Given

> such attunement, banter and laughter flow naturally across strangers and unite them into a community. When reality and community conspire this way, divinity descends on the game, divinity of an impersonal and yet potent kind.[7]

As Borgmann says, the divinities that descend upon a game are impersonal ones. They bear no metaphysical issues—no questions, for instance, about how to reconcile three persons in one God, or how many angels can dance on the head of a pin—and the impersonal gods of baseball encourage no questions about the afterlife or the nature of the soul. But this lack of any personal element strips the notion of the sacred to its essential core. Nietzsche said that the sacred is whatever it is in a culture at which one cannot laugh. One can laugh, of course, at the spectacle of grown men trying to hit a hard ball with a wooden stick, or carry a spheroid across a line. It is not that sports are sacred to the culture in any absolute sense. But there are moments in sport—either in the playing of them or in the witnessing of them—during which something so overpowering happens that it wells up before you as a palpable presence and carries you along as on a powerful wave. At that moment there is no question of ironic distance from the event. That is the moment when the sacred shines.

David Foster Wallace, more than most, had a strong sense for sacred moments like this. Perhaps such a claim will sound surprising: after all, the main point of our chapter on Wallace was to highlight the nihilistic strain in his thought. But although a kind of willful Nietzschean nihilism dominates Wallace's work, he was an amazingly receptive writer. Indeed, he seems to have resonated with most of the varied and incompatible phenomena that animate our contemporary world. In particular, one finds a strong counterstrain to Wallace's nihilism in his writings on the sacred moments of sport.

Wallace was a special devotee of tennis, and among his pantheon of players there he rates Roger Federer at the top. Wallace's principle hymn to Federer appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* article he wrote titled "Federer as Religious Experience."[8] "[I]f you've never seen the young man play live," Wallace writes,

> and then do, in person, on the sacred grass of Wimbledon, through the literally withering heat and then wind and rain of the '06 fortnight, then you are apt to have what one of the tournament's press bus drivers describes as a "bloody near-religious experience." It may be tempting, at first, to hear a phrase like this as just one more of the overheated tropes that people resort to. . . . But the driver's phrase turns out to be true—literally, for an instant ecstatically—though it takes some time and serious watching to see this truth emerge.[9]

Wallace's analysis of Federer is masterful. He argues that Federer's combination of power and beauty has revivified a power baseline game that others worried had reached its evolutionary endpoint. In this way, he shows, Federer has "figuratively and literally re-embodied men's tennis." Because of the way he embodies this new style of playing, for the first time in years the game's future is open, unpredictable, alive. If Wallace is right about this then his interpretation makes sense—really, literal sense—of the claim that watching Federer play is like having a religious experience: it focuses a new understanding of human beings and their pursuits.

This new understanding of the sacred highlights a tension, perhaps even an irreconcilable conflict, both in Wallace's writing and in our culture more generally. For the redeeming value that Wallace finds in Federer, literally the salvation he finds in the experience of Federer's kind of athletic grace and beauty, is not just at odds with but turns completely on its head the disembodied kind of bliss he had hoped to find in the levitating tax-return examiner Mitchell Drinion.

The best way to see the conflict between these notions of the sacred is to focus on the body. Most human tasks—even intellectual or spiritual tasks—are related in some way or another to the body. The pain from Don Gately's gunshot wound, for example, instigates his long reverie at the end of *Infinite Jest.* But the revelation that this reverie generates involves a repudiation of the body as enfeebling. Like Augustine, Gately is ultimately aiming for a kind of *disembodied* state—a state in which the body and its limitations melt away and there is nothing left but the alive, exhilarating bliss of the eternal present. Wallace wrote the Gately passages quickly—perhaps in a kind of Gately-esque trance himself—and he seems to have had a very personal relationship to them. At the time he told a friend he was working so well he "couldn't feel my ass in the chair."[10]

The point of Gately's experience, of Wallace's own ass-lessness, and of course the point of the levitating Mitchell Drinion, is that the body is a hindrance. True bliss, true deliverance, on this traditional, Augustinian view, comes from sloughing off the burden of the body. No doubt this is one way of approaching the body that is clearly recognizable today.

But Federer's athletic grace reveals a different, more nuanced understanding of the role of the body in the experience of the sacred. Indeed, far from repudiating it, Federer's tennis mastery becomes an episode in "human beings' reconciliation with the fact of having a body." This does not mean that bodies are always and entirely good:

> There's a great deal that's bad about having a body. If this is not so obviously true that no one needs examples, we can just quickly mention pain, sores, odors, nausea, aging, gravity, sepsis, clumsiness, illness, limits—every last schism between our physical wills and our actual capacities. Can anyone doubt we need help being reconciled? Crave it? It's your body that dies, after all.

But if one focuses only on these bodily miseries, then salvation lies in not having a body: ecstatic bliss in feeling the absence of one's ass. Federer's bodily, athletic grace, by contrast, drives one to extol the sacred wonders of the body instead:

> There are wonderful things about having a body, too, obviously—it's just that these things are much harder to feel and appreciate in real time. Rather like certain kinds of rare, peak-type sensuous epiphanies ("I'm so glad I have eyes to see this sunrise!" etc.), great athletes seem to catalyze our awareness of how glorious it is to touch and perceive, move through space, interact with matter. Granted, what great athletes can do with their bodies are things that the rest of us can only dream of. But these dreams are important—they make up for a lot.

Federer's athletic grace, in other words, focuses the possibility of a fully embodied, this-worldly kind of sacred. This notion of the sacred embraces the limitations of the body precisely because exploring, extending, and reforming bodily constraints can open up new kinds of experiences for us.

And more than that, it allows us to find a kind of mystery and magic right here upon the earth: a metaphysical mystery, as Wallace himself insists, in "those rare, preternatural athletes"—athletes like Federer and Michael Jordan and Muhammad Ali—"who appear to be exempt, at least in part, from certain physical laws." It allows us to find something sacred and divine in Jordan the human being, as Wallace once wrote, "hanging in the air like a Chagall bride."[11] It allows us to rise as one in ecstatic and spontaneous joy at the human greatness of Bill Bradley splitting the defenders or Wesley Autrey diving on the subway tracks. Indeed, it accounts for Wallace's own reaction to seeing—on the television, no less[12]—that impossible shot by Federer, like something out of *The Matrix:*

> I don't know what-all sounds were involved, but my spouse says she hurried in and there was popcorn all over the couch and I was down on one knee and my eyeballs looked like novelty-shop eyeballs.

This kind of encounter with fully embodied athletic grace—like our encounters with other kinds of fully embodied joys—can give us a genuine kind of religious experience. But it differs from the Augustinian notion of the sacred we encountered before. It is a religious experience that—unlike Gately's eternal Present—cannot be approached directly, cannot be uncovered through control and will and confrontation:

> You more have to come at the aesthetic stuff obliquely, to talk around it, or to try to define it in terms of what it is not.

This glancing approach is inclined toward reconciliation instead of purification. It involves a fully human notion of the sacred that lives not in the repudiation or transcendence of pain and boredom and anger and angst, but rather in the recognition that these difficult aspects of our existence live together with the sacred moments, that they complete one another, and make sense of one another. It is a notion of the sacred that is reconciled with the idea that you cannot have gods that care about you without having gods that sometimes get angry as well.[13]

And finally—for that reason—it is an experience that requires recognizing the need for practices to "propitiate the divine."[14] These are the practices that Wallace cannot envision, but that this conclusion will focus and describe. For all his sensitivity to embodied, athletic grace, Wallace nevertheless remains deeply entrenched in a nihilistic Nietzschean world. For him these practices look like naive superstitions[15] instead of genuinely sacred rites, because after all he lives still beneath Descartes' "egotistical sky" beside his "now-unhaunted hill."

That's why he has not yet been able to lure back the gods. And yet, even so, he cannot help but to be amazed and awed by the world in which this kind of fully human religious experience lives. "It's hard to describe," he says,

> [I]t's like a thought that's also a feeling. One wouldn't want to make too much of it, or to pretend that it's any sort of equitable balance; that would be grotesque. But the truth is that whatever deity, entity, energy, or random genetic flux produces sick children also produced Roger Federer, and just look at him down there. Look at that.

There are four points to notice about the sacred moments in sport, points that start to fill in what Wallace could not see. First, in the truly extraordinary moments, something overwhelming occurs. It wells up and carries you along as on a powerful wave. The wave metaphor is crucial here. When a wave is at its most powerful it is a solid foundation that can support as many riders as will fit upon it. It can even sweep up more as it runs along. But when the wave passes, nothing but its memory survives. Try to stand upon the still water and you'll find that the supporting foundation is gone. These moments of sport are like that. When you are in the midst of them, riding the wave, they carry you along and give meaning to life. As Borgmann says:

> At the beginning of a real game, there is no way of predicting or controlling what will happen. No one can produce or guarantee the flow of a game. It unfolds and reveals itself in the playing. It inspires grace and despair, it provokes heroics and failure, it infuses enthusiasm and inflicts misery. It is always greater than the individuals it unites.[16]

But the meaning they give is temporary. One can remember having been caught up in the excitement of the play, having been taken

over and directed by the situation. But the memory tells you nothing about how to act once the situation is gone. This makes our contemporary notion of the sacred and the real radically different from many others we are familiar with. This situational notion of what grounds our existence, for example, is nothing like the eternal, everlasting kind of certainty and security that philosophers from Plato to Descartes to Kant desired. And it is nothing like the monotheistic, unified kind of certainty that the Judeo-Christian religions offer either. Rather, this pre-Axial kind of certainty is transient and multiple and it requires care. As Homer knows it carries you along for a while but it cannot last forever.

Second, this characteristic of the sacred as we experience it in our culture ties it very closely to the Homeric Greek conception of what is real. In Homer's age the name for nature, or what there is, was *physis*. This is the word from which our word *physics* derives. Physics today is likewise the study of what there is, but we now have a very different conception of what there is than Homer had. For us, the ultimate elements of nature are quarks and leptons and other subatomic particles that have mass and charge. Or perhaps the ultimate constituents are minuscule multidimensional strings that vibrate. Or maybe the final physics will tell us something different still. But whatever physics ends up saying about the universe, the story it gives will be a story about basic constituents and the laws that govern how they casually interact. For Homer this notion of reality isn't wrong on the facts, as if some other physical, causal story could get it right.[17] Instead, for Homer, the causal account starts in the wrong place altogether. For the word *physis* in Homeric times wasn't the name of some ultimate *constituent* of the universe; it was the name for the *way* the most real things in the world present themselves to us.

The most important things, the most real things in Homer's world, well up and take us over, hold us for a while, and then, finally, let us go. If we had to translate Homer's word *physis,* then whooshing is about as close as we can get. What there really is, for Homer, is whooshing

up: the whooshing up of shining Achilles in the midst of battle, or of an overwhelming eroticism in the presence of a radiant stranger like Paris; the whooshing up of a rock in the turbulent sea that calls forth Odysseus's hand to grab it. These were the shining moments of reality in Homer's world. And whooshing up is what happens in the context of the great moment in contemporary sport as well. When something whooshes up it focuses and organizes everything around it. The great athlete in the midst of the play rises up and shines—all attention is drawn to him. And everyone around him—the players on the field, the coaches on the sidelines, the fans in the stadium, the announcers in the booth—everyone understands who they are and what they are to do immediately in relation to the sacred event that is occurring. In Homer's world what whooshes up is what really shines and matters most. And we can still sense this in the moment of sport.

It is worth emphasizing that this Homeric notion of reality is orthogonal to our contemporary scientific understanding—they are simply not explaining the same kinds of things. Indeed, one could embrace both notions—and we think one should embrace both notions—without any conflict. The scientific conception of what there is focuses on the causal basis of reality; Homer's account, by contrast, describes the way the most important or meaningful moments of existence present themselves to us. Of course it is true that meaningful events—like great moments in sport—involve entities that have a causal basis. But the causal structure of the leg muscles in Lou Gehrig's left thigh is neither here nor there when it comes to the question what it is like to be caught up in the response to one of his extraordinary plays or his moving farewell.

The third point to make is that the *physis* phenomenon is not unique to sport. It may be that in our culture sport provides the central locus for the phenomenon—that in general it is in the context of sport that contemporary Americans are most likely to feel this sense of community and focused meaning, this sense of understanding exactly what one is about, if only for a while. But that is not to say it

can't happen in other contexts too. Many people, for instance, felt their sense of themselves and their world come into focus during the speech by Martin Luther King Jr. on the National Mall. For someone else it might happen occasionally in the context of an important family meal at Thanksgiving. Perhaps some other folks feel this kind of focused, communal meaning taking them over in the context of the classroom. There is nothing in our position that requires the story to focus on sports. It's just that this is the place in contemporary American culture where the phenomenon seems most familiar.

But the sports example is important for another reason too, and this brings us to the fourth point we want to make. Namely, there is something inherently dangerous in the phenomenon we are describing. Inherently dangerous, and perhaps even repellent. We need now to address this final point about *physis*.

AT A DINNER PARTY recently one of us was describing the phenomenon of whooshing up. A colleague at the table—himself a kind and clearheaded philosopher who thinks deeply about related issues—had an immediate response. "I know exactly what it's like to feel that kind of energy pulsing through a crowd," he said. "And every time I'm near it I want to get as far away as possible." The discussion was cut short at this point, as social conversations often are, and the source of this colleague's concern was never explicitly articulated. It is clear, however, what someone might mean by a comment like this, and there is a very serious worry behind it. Without attributing any of the following views to our friend, therefore, we need to lay out the danger of whooshing up.

First we need to notice that to be overtaken by some potent force is to have one's actions no longer completely under one's control. When I find myself rising as one with the crowd in the presence of some great athletic feat, there is an important sense in which I am not the source of my own activity. It is my muscles, of course, that

generate the motor actions—straightening the legs, raising the arms, emitting the inarticulate utterance that means "Hooray!" But there is a strong sense in which I perform these movements without ever having decided to do so. The activity is out of my control in the sense that I do not perform it voluntarily. It's not as if I was *forced* to jump up and cheer either, of course. It was always an option for me to adopt a kind of ironic distance from the situation, or even, as our colleague recommends, to walk away. But so long as I find myself taken over by the situation, there is an important sense in which I am no longer the source of my own activity.

From the point of view of the Enlightenment, this condition is appalling. In a famous essay, Kant argued that "enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity."[18] To be immature, in the Kantian sense, just is to allow oneself to act in ways that one has not chosen freely on one's own. Failing to resist the madness of crowds is a prime example. Maturity, by contrast, is having the resolve and courage to use one's own understanding in choosing how to act, without guidance from anyone or anything external to oneself. The mature thing to do at the baseball game therefore, in this Kantian sense of maturity, is to resist the power of the community response in order to decide as a rational individual what the appropriate response to the situation should be. One might well decide that an athletic feat merits applause, and if so, one might express one's approval appropriately. But rising as one with the crowd is out of the question.

This might sound like a boring way to act at a baseball game, but there is sense behind Kant's caution. There is, after all, a vanishingly small distance between rising as one with the crowd at a baseball game and rising as one with the crowd at a Hitler rally. Indeed, insofar as Lou Gehrig's farewell address is properly considered an act of rhetoric instead of an act of athletic greatness proper, perhaps the distance there is smaller still. So the power of the whooshing up phenomenon is revealed to be Janus-faced. If we cannot articulate a distinction be-

tween Lou Gehrig's farewell and Hitler's taking over, then perhaps Kantian maturity, though relatively boring, really is the wisest course.

Is THE CHOICE WE FACE, then, one between a life of boring but mature and moral activities, on the one hand, and a life of risky—potentially even abhorrent—but nevertheless meaningful ones, on the other? No. The stakes are even higher. The Englightenment's metaphysical embrace of the autonomous individual leads not just to a boring life. It leads almost inevitably to a nearly unlivable one. Already in Dante, for example, the assertion of the individual's autonomous will was a rebellion against the source of meaning in the world. And Melville's Ahab was "daft from strength" in something like this sense as well. His need to find a clear, articulate, and completely certain answer to the question of his individual place in the universe, that monomaniacal need to find out whether he is at the center of it all, was in Melville's view, a deeply tragic flaw.

And perhaps our contemporary situation is even worse. David Foster Wallace's need to create meaning ex nihilo out of the individual puts him in the traditional position of God, a position that Nietzsche embraced as well. But Wallace's exploration of this God-like position led him ultimately to feel both that it was necessary for a meaningful existence and that he could neither understand nor live it himself. If these authors have got the phenomena clearly in mind, then individualist autonomy, it seems, leads at least to wickedness or tragedy, and more likely to nihilism or even suicide. The Enlightenment embrace of this kind of metaphysical individualism, in such a view, was indeed a dramatic turn in the history of the West. But rather than standing as the final and most advanced stage in the history of our understanding of who we are, it seems instead to be the final step in the decline from Luther to Descartes to Kant to Nietzsche, a self-conception that destroys the possibility of a meaningful and worthwhile existence.

As an antidote to this condition we have been arguing that the basic phenomenon of Homeric polytheism—the whooshing up that focuses one for a while and then lets one go—is still available in American culture today. This source of meaning, of course, stands in direct contrast with the ideals of Enlightenment individualism, for at least the simple reason that whooshing up takes its start in the response of a community rather than of the individual. It is in this kind of community, for example, that Ishmael felt he could go on squeezing spermaceti forever. And the moment of exultation in a ballgame can be like that as well: one wishes it would last forever while knowing that it can't. That sort of moment offers what autonomy cannot: a sense that you are participating in something that transcends what you can contribute to it.

There is something enormously hopeful in the idea that we might be able to resist the sense that life is meaningless by appropriating and developing our receptivity to this ancient phenomenon. And if things were easy we would be able to stop the story here. But the potential cost of this appropriation is apparently prohibitive. For surely no way of living that leaves us open to fascist rhetoricians is tenable. We are stuck, therefore, between Scylla and Charybdis: a nihilistic and meaningless life on one side, a meaningful but potentially abhorrent one on the other.

Unfortunately, we cannot steer between these dangers simply by embracing Homer's polytheism. There are things in Homer by which we are rightly repulsed, and it would be regressive to call for a return to them. In the *Iliad*, for example, after Achilles kills Hector, he drags the body around the walls of the city of Troy for three days straight in a kind of manic heroic madness. Homer does not applaud this notorious action. But he doesn't condemn it either; he just describes how it affects Hector's father Priam. We must position ourselves so that we can condemn an act like this even if we find ourselves in a crowd drawn to applaud it at the time. Homer is dangerously noncommittal on this crucial point.

EVERYTHING WE HAVE SAID so far is in vain if we can't avoid the danger to which Homer leaves himself open. The correct response to this danger begins with the observation that fortunately, besides ecstatic *physis,* there are other sacred practices left in our culture. Properly understood and appropriated, these other notions of the sacred preserve *physis* at its best while forbidding its repellent manifestations. Before we can understand this response to the dangers of *physis,* however, we need to examine a kind of sacred practice still available at the margins of our culture that will lay the groundwork for putting *physis* in its proper place.

That nurturing practice was called *poiesis.* Until about a hundred years ago, the cultivating and nurturing practices of *poiesis* organized a central way things mattered. The *poietic* style manifested itself, among other places, in the craftsman's skills for bringing things out at their best. This is an ancient practice in the culture that was already recognized in Homer's world where Hephaestus, the craft god, brought forth shining things, and Homer's Greeks stood in wonder before them. But Hephaestus was a marginal figure in the Homeric Greek pantheon. It wasn't until Aeschylus that Athena's *poietic* style of bringing the culture out at its best organized the understanding of everything that is. This cultivating, craftsman-like, *poietic* understanding of how to bring out meanings at their best was alive and well into the late nineteenth century, but it is under attack in our technological age.

Despite the general trend away from the development of *poietic* skills, there are some domains in which they are still essential. The skill of playing baseball, or tennis, or piano, for example, is still something that we teach in a relatively traditional way. We assign exercises that teach the aspiring athlete or musician how to respond automatically and well to certain kinds of situations—a groundball to the left side, a three-octave run—and on the basis of these exercises we expect the beginner to gain technical proficiency in the domain. Still, this

method of learning strikes some as drudgery, and the kind of automaticity that it develops can seem too trivial a prize for such hard work

In fact, skills are a much richer phenomenon than this picture suggests. We can begin to understand this by noticing that the achievement of skill involves substantially more than the mere acquisition of a physical ability. Learning a skill is learning to see the world differently. The skilled surgeon, for example, sees something more than a broken and bloody leg; he sees a particular kind of break, one that requires this precise surgical technique to fix it. Likewise, we hear people say that the successful running back has "great vision," the point guard has extraordinary "court sense." In each case this means that the person's skill at surgery or running or passing allows them to see meaningful distinctions that others without their skill cannot.

To get a fuller sense for this phenomenon, we need to think about something more wide-ranging than mere physical skills. We need to return to a time when craftsmen's skills were central to the way people lived their lives.

Take the wheelwright at the end of the nineteenth century, for example. The wheelwright's shop was inhabited by workmen who had learned their skill by apprenticing to masters of the craft. This notion of skill, or more broadly of craftsmanship, that organized the life of the wheelwright was much wider and more pervasive than our own. Whereas we understand skill primarily in terms of technical proficiency, the wheelwright's conception goes beyond this in at least three important ways. George Sturt, the last in a succession of wheelwrights, wrote about this traditional conception of his craft nearly one hundred years ago.[19] We can begin with the wheelwright's skilled understanding of the wood itself. Sturt writes:

> I have known old-fashioned workmen refuse to use likely-looking timber because they held it to be unfit for the job.
>
> And they knew. The skilled workman was the final judge. Under the plane (it is little used now) or under the axe (it is

> all but obsolete) timber disclosed qualities hardly to be found otherwise. My own eyes know because my own hands have felt, but I cannot teach an outsider, the difference between ash that is "tough as whipcord," and ash that is "frow as a carrot," or "doaty," or "biscuity." In oak, in beech, these differences are equally plain, yet only to those who have been initiated by practical work.[20]

Sturt is emphasizing here what we have glimpsed in the skilled athlete; like the running back who immediately sees the hole, the skilled workman has learned from years of experience how to discern distinctions of worth that those without his skill cannot see. But Sturt highlights something that we have not noticed yet: the precise connection between the worker's physical abilities and the distinctions he can discern. The timber discloses qualities under the axe or the plane, according to Sturt, that it does not reveal otherwise. It is only because one has felt these distinctions in one's hands that one can identify them by sight. This ability to see what is worthwhile cannot be taught to the outsider, since it is not a matter of distinguishing shades of color or texture or some other merely visible property in the wood. Rather, it is seeing immediately how the wood will respond to an axe or saw or plane, seeing immediately how it will bear up or collapse under the weight of a carriage. To see these distinctions in the environment requires skill in chopping and sawing and planing the wood, in building the wheels and putting them on the carriage in a way that suits the needs of the farmer for whom it is made. This vision of skill is essentially practical and embodied.

It is worth noting that although there is nothing *mysterious* about this vision of the master wheelwright—it is in no way magical or supernatural—nevertheless this phenomenon is already a revelation. For considered properly it is the clue to a whole new understanding of who we are. The wheelwright sees meaningful distinctions *in the wood*—distinctions of worth and of quality—that in no way find

their source in him. The skilled craftsman does not *decide* to treat the ash as if it were "frow as a carrot," the way David Foster Wallace decides to treat the lady in the checkout line as if she were on her way to the hospital. Rather, the fact of the matter is out in the world. The task of the craftsman is not to *generate* the meaning, but rather to *cultivate* in himself the skill for *discerning* the meanings that are *already there*.

But there is more to this phenomenon as well. For it is not just that the wheelwright can discern a few distinctions; his understanding of the wood is detailed and rich. Sturt is clear about this in a way that the contemporary examples are not. Indeed, the truly skilled craftsman, according to Sturt, understands that every piece of wood he works with is distinct and has its own personality, its own individuality. Each piece throws up different obstacles than the last, or makes possible approaches to it that the previous pieces did not. To be a true master of the wood, one must be able to recognize precisely how *it* requires to be worked:

> [The woodworker] had no band-saw (as now) to drive, with ruthless unintelligence, through every resistance. The timber was far from being a prey, a helpless victim, to a machine. Rather it would lend its own subtle virtues to the man who knew how to humour it: with him, as with an understanding friend, it would co-operate.[21]

Sturt's description here gives us a second enrichment of the notion of skill. For the master of wood, each piece he works with, and therefore more generally each woodworking situation in which he finds himself, is unique. The master's skill for working with wood, therefore, involves intelligence and flexibility rather than rote and automatic response. This does not mean that the master is constantly planning out his actions; his ingenuity is practical, embodied, and in the moment. The master workman will rarely do the same thing twice.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the uniqueness of each situation gives a sacred dimension to the craftsmanship. Because each piece of wood is distinct, has its own personality, on Sturt's account, the woodworker has an intimate relationship with the wood he is working. Its subtle virtues call out to be cultivated and cared for. This sense of intimacy with the wood initiates in the woodworker a feeling of care and respect for it. But it is not just the wood alone, as if it sprang fully cut and dried into his workshop. The wood has a place of origin, too, so the master becomes familiar with the local soil, the terrain, and the sources of water that nourish the trees. He comes to know intimately the weather and the seasons, since they change the way the trees will respond to his saw; and he knows that timber cut in the wintertime dries differently from that cut in the late spring or summer or fall. Ultimately this diverse practical knowledge instills in the woodworker a connection to his countryside and his land that goes beyond a mere sense of responsibility to it. Indeed, Sturt speaks of the *craftsman's reverence for the land and countryside* in which he lives. This sense of reverence for a place goes far beyond our notion of skill as automatic technical proficiency and begins to tie it to a sense of the sacred—and ultimately to bringing ourselves out at our best.

Sturt is perhaps most eloquent about the wheelwright's reverence for his countryside when he contrasts it with the development of the modern world. As the craftsman's skill and intelligence for working with the land is replaced by the "ruthless unintelligence" of machines, the sense of reverence for the countryside is quickly lost.

> [T]here had been a close relationship between the tree-clad country-side and the English who dwelt there. But now, the affection and the reverence bred of this—for it had been with something near to reverence that a true provincial beheld his native trees—was all but gone. A sort of greedy prostitution desecrated the ancient woods. All round me I saw and heard of things being done with a light heart that had always seemed to me wicked—things as painful to my sympathies as harnessing a carriage-horse to a heavy dray, or as pulling down a cathedral to get building-stone.[22]

The trees that furnish the material for the wheelwright's craft, therefore, are much more than the collection of physical properties that describe them. Like the stones of the cathedral, they are sacred and must be treated with care and reverence. To do otherwise is desecration.

Sturt's account establishes a rich and appealing notion of skill. In place of the technical proficiency of an isolated and autonomous individual, Sturt's craftsman exists entirely in relation with his domain. Like any good relationship, each side brings out the other at its best. It is because the craftsman is an intelligent observer of wood and not a ruthless and unintelligent machine, that the wood can reveal to him its subtle virtues. But it is because the wood has these virtues already that the craftsman can cultivate in himself the skill for discerning them and ultimately can come to feel reverence and responsibility for the wood and where it lives. There is, therefore, a kind of feedback loop between craftsman and craft: each jointly cultivates the other into a state of mutual understanding and respect.[23] We have seen the name Aristotle gave to this dual cultivation of craftsman and craft. He called it *poiesis.*

Unfortunately, the cultivation of *craftsman-like* skill will not by itself annul the dangers of *physis.* Even master wheelwrights with reverence for the land were swept up by the power of Hitler's rhetoric. But the notion that skills reveal meaningful differences is crucial nevertheless. There is another kind of *poietic* skill that no one has noticed yet, although it is already at work in people's lives: the higher-order skill for responding to meaningful distinctions between dangerous and benign ways of being swept away. The person who has acquired this skill knows that it's not *always* appropriate to walk away from the crowd—getting caught up in the mood of "I have a dream," and rising with 200,000 people to cheer Dr. King, is not

an event one should be proud to have walked away from. Indeed, if everyone on the National Mall that day had walked away or merely responded with coolly considered rational approval, the event would have failed to have the effect it did, and the world we live in would be poorer for it.

To recognize when it's appropriate to let oneself be swept up and when it's appropriate to walk away is a higher-order skill that is crucial for us in the contemporary world. To acquire this skill, like any skill, requires taking risks as we shall see later. For the moment, however, it is sufficient to note that such a skill allows us to cultivate one prominent form of the sacred available in the culture today. *Meta-poiesis,* as one might call it, steers between the twin dangers of the secular age: it resists nihilism by reappropriating the sacred phenomenon of *physis,* but cultivates the skill to resist *physis* in its abhorrent, fanatical form. Living well in our secular, nihilistic age, therefore, requires the higher-order skill of recognizing when to rise up as one with the ecstatic crowd and when to turn heel and walk rapidly away.

We shall return to *meta-poiesis* in a moment. But first we need to see how the understanding of ourselves on which it depends—the understanding of human beings as beings who reveal meaningful differences through the cultivation of skills—is itself under attack in the technological age.

If wild, ecstatic *physis* is the sacred realm of meaning still evident today, gentle, nurturing *poiesis* is a dying art. In part this is the result of our own success: advances in technology have diminished the importance of specialized skills in contemporary life. Indeed, perhaps the central goal of modern technology is to make every domain accessible to everyone, no matter what his or her level of skill. "Even a child can do it!" is the mantra of the technological age. To cook a meal is to press a button, to travel across the country is to step on a plane.

To navigate an unfamiliar terrain is to turn left or right whenever the Global Positioning System (GPS) says. Technology improves our lives by making hard things easier. That is a basic axiom of the contemporary world.

But the improvements of technology are impoverishments as well. The GPS covers over the meaningful distinctions that the art of skilled navigation revealed. To the extent that technology strips away the need for skill, it strips away the possibility of meaning as well. To have a skill is to know what counts or is worthwhile in a certain domain. Skills reveal meaningful differences to us and cultivate in us a sense of responsibility to bring these out at their best. To the extent that it takes away the need for skill, technology flattens out human life.

There are two aspects to this flattening. First, the world itself begins to look increasingly nondescript. That is what Sturt means when he says that the local knowledge of timber has died: for most people nowadays the distinction between ash that is "frow as a carrot" and ash that is "tough as whipcord"—a genuine distinction of meaning and worth—is no longer recognizable. Myriad other endangered distinctions, previously revealed by the skillful craft of woodwork, have slipped into obscurity with its death. Because the band saw never met a knot it couldn't tackle, for example, there is no need anymore for one to see the distinction between the knot that is an obstacle to be deftly avoided and the knot that can be turned to advantage, to strengthen the piece. The inability to recognize this distinction lowers the quality of the product: as Sturt says, the felloes produced by machine may look better to some "theorist from the office," but the skilled craftsman can see that they were made completely without intelligence. Even worse than losing quality, however, is losing the skill for telling the difference. As we lose our knowledge of craft, the world looks increasingly devoid of distinctions of worth.

Flattened out along with this worldly loss of meaning is our understanding of ourselves. Moods of affection and reverence—born of close and skillful attention to distinctions of worth in a domain—are

nearly lost to us. Perhaps Lou Gehrig's speech was moving not just because Gehrig was a dying hero, but because the crowd's response to him proved that these moods are available to us still. But the loss of reverence is important for another reason. Reverence reveals us as cultivators of meaningful distinctions. To revere the timber, after all, is not just to hold it up as worthy of our amazement, but to care for it and bring it out at its best—to let it shine. As technology strips away the need for skill, it strips away too this noble understanding of ourselves as cultivators of meaning.

Understood in this context, the march of technology presents a grave danger. The danger lies not in particular technological advances or technological gadgets, but in the understanding of ourselves and of what we can aspire to that a technological *way of life* encourages. To aspire to a life that requires no skill to live it well is to embrace the flattened world of contemporary nihilism. The appropriate response to this danger is not to reject technology per se, but to accept individual technological advances while preserving the *poietic* practices that resist a technological way of life.

Take the GPS, for example. There is something convenient about this device with which you are never lost. Occasionally, of course, it tells you to take a sharp right turn when you are in the middle of a long bridge. But this kind of inadequacy will soon be ironed out. For those of us who are directionally challenged (and both authors count ourselves among this group) the GPS seems to offer a great technological advance.

But notice the hidden cost to this advance. When the GPS is navigating for you, your understanding of the environment is about as minimal as it can possibly be. It consists of knowing things like "I should turn right now." In the best case—and we want to take the best case here—this method of navigating gets you to your destination quickly and easily. But it completely trivializes the noble art of navigation, which was the province of great cultures from the seafaring Phoenicians to the navigators of the Age of Discovery. To navigate by GPS requires no sense of where you are, no sense of where you're going, and no sense whatsoever for how to get there. Indeed, the whole point of the GPS is to spare you the trouble of navigating.

But to lose the sense of struggle is to lose the sensitivities—to landmarks, street signs, wind direction, the height of the sun, the stars—all the meaningful distinctions that navigational skill reveals. To navigate by GPS is to endure a series of meaningless pauses at the end of which you do precisely what you are told. There is something deeply dehumanizing about this: it's like being the central figure in a Beckett play without the jokes. Indeed, in an important sense this experience turns you into an automated device the GPS can use to arrive at its destination. This is one of the ways the world can be, and at times it is the best the world can be. But to aim for this as an entire way of life is to lose touch with the skill and care, the reverence and awe, that are some of the moods that bring out human beings at their best.

Caring for the goods of a worthwhile domain and cultivating the skill for revealing meaningful distinctions within it are necessary for resisting the technological way of life. But you can't just decide to care about a domain, any more than you can make a decision about whom to love. How is anyone to discover what is worth caring about?

The fact is, whether you know it or not, you already care about a whole range of goods. Just as the world is pregnant with meanings waiting to be revealed, human beings are filled with modes of caring that they have hidden from themselves. This may seem surprising. The idea that our cares exceed our understanding of them seems an affront to fundamental principles of self-knowledge. Surely, if I care about something then I am in a position to know that I do. The Enlightenment tradition of autonomy suggests such a principle, and contemporary philosophy takes it virtually as an article of faith. But to be an embodied being as we are, open to moods that can direct us and reveal the world as meaningful, just is to be a being who extends beyond what we can know about ourselves. The project, then, is not

to *decide* what to care about, but to *discover* what it is about which one already cares.

Let's take a simple example. You get up in the morning, stumble down to the kitchen, and make coffee. Does it matter which cup you choose as the vessel for your morning drink? Or is the cup completely irrelevant to the morning coffee drinking routine? If it could have been any old cup, if the Styrofoam cup would have done as well as the fine china, then we can say that you are using the cup as a mere resource. That's because you are treating it as something that is completely exchangeable. The particular cup, the cup in all its uniqueness, has become completely generic and banal.

Notice the strong contrast between the banality of the generic cup and the uniqueness of the wood in the wheelwright's shop. The intimacy that characterized the wheelwright's relation to his wood—the sense that it was an understanding friend, that it would reveal its subtle virtues to the skilled individual who knew how to bring them out at their best—that sense of the routine of woodworking as a sacred ritual shot through with intimacy, meaning, and worth, is completely lacking from the generic coffee drinking routine. To treat the cup as totally irrelevant to the task is to approach the coffee with ruthless unintelligence; to turn what might have been a revered domain into something completely devoid of worth.

But what is there to a cup, you might well ask, beyond the generic function of holding liquid? Surely any appropriately shaped object can perform such a function equally well. It is worth noting in passing how strange this observation would sound if made about certain kinds of cups: the simple cups of the Japanese tea ceremony, for instance, or the Holy Grail used by Jesus at the Last Supper. But perhaps these are exceptional cases. How can it be any insult to the cup, or indeed to the coffee-drinking routine as a whole, for me to care so little about it?

This generic way of treating the cup, and the coffee it holds, obscures its meaningful distinctions, diminishing the quality of the coffee we drink, as the unskilled coffee drinker necessarily fails to choose better ways of serving it over worse. The situation is eerily reminiscent of Sturt's complaint. Indeed, the ruthless unintelligence of Sturt's hated band saw mirrors the generic unintelligence of the Styrofoam cup. The generic cup, in its stupidity, treats every coffee and every coffee-drinking situation as if it were indistinguishable from the last.

To approach the domain of coffee drinking this way is to dehumanize yourself as well. Like navigating by GPS, the coffee-drinking routine that recognizes no distinctions of worth is a routine in which the coffee drinker becomes exchangeable: assimilable to all of the millions of others who are sleepwalking through the same generic routine. If the cup is exchangeable in the activity, then so are you. To treat the cup as a mere resource is to treat yourself as a mere resource too, to dehumanize yourself by failing to recognize the care you might have shown for that domain.

Now, perhaps there is nothing wrong with this some of the time. One cannot expect every moment of one's existence to be a sacred celebration of meaning and worth. Indeed, there is probably something about us that resists this or even makes it impossible. But to endure the absence of meaning is one thing, to embrace it another. If we are to be human beings at all, we must distinguish ourselves from others; there must be moments when we rise up out of the generic and banal and into the particular and skillfully engaged. But how is one to know whether the coffee-drinking ritual is one of these moments?

The answer is that one must learn to see. That you already care about coffee drinking is something you may have hidden from yourself. To find out whether this is so, ask whether you take the routine to be functionally exchangeable. The morning ritual is delightful in part because it wakes you up. But would anything that woke you up be equally good? Would a quick snort of cocaine substitute in a pinch? Or if that's too extreme, then perhaps a small caffeine pill that one could swallow on the way to the car? To the extent that these exchanges seem appealing, then the coffee really is just performing the

function of waking you up. In that case any form of stimulant would do. But to the extent that these do not seem appealing substitutes, there are aspects of the coffee-drinking ritual that go beyond its function, aspects about which you already care.

If you do care about drinking coffee in the morning, then there are meaningful distinctions to the ritual that are worth uncovering. The clue to revealing these distinctions lies in further simple questions you must ask yourself. Why exactly do you prefer a cup of coffee to a caffeine pill or to a cup of tea? Is there something in the coffee itself, not just in its stimulating effect but in its aroma, its warmth, the ritual of drinking it, or something else—that drives you to this activity rather than some other? And to the extent that there is, then what kind of coffee, what kind of coffee-making process, what kind of coffee-drinking companions or coffee-drinking places, what kind of coffee cup would bring these things out best?

These are not questions you can answer in the abstract. You need to try it out and see. If it is the warmth of the coffee on a winter's day that you like, then drinking it in a cozy corner of the house, perhaps by a fire with a blanket, in a cup that transmits the warmth to your hands might well help to bring out the best in this ritual. If it is the striking black color of the coffee that attracts your eye and enhances the aroma, then perhaps a cup with a shiny white ceramic interior will bring this out. But there is no single answer to the question of what makes the ritual appealing, and it takes experimentation and observation, with its risks and rewards, to discover the meaningful distinctions yourself. This experimentation with and observation of the coffee ultimately develops in you the skill for seeing the relevant features of the ritual and ultimately develops the skills for bringing them out at their best. These skills are manifold: the skill for knowing how to pick exactly the right coffee, exactly the right cup, exactly the right place to drink it, and to cultivate exactly the right companions to drink it with. When one has learned these skills and cultivated

one's environment so that it is precisely suited to them, then one has a ritual rather than a routine, a meaningful celebration of oneself and one's environment rather than a generic and meaningless performance of a function.

There are a wide variety of domains worth caring about and there are no objective, context-independent principles for determining which domains these are. You just have to try it out and see. Some people care about mathematics, others about music, some prefer baseball and others bullfighting. Some prefer drinking a local wine with their friends. Whether a domain is worth caring about is determined by whether it appropriately elicits further and further meaningful involvement with it.

Because there are no objective rules about this, one must constantly be open to the possibility that the domain to which one is drawn will reveal itself as too brutal or too trivial or too isolating or too dull or in some other way inappropriate for bringing out everything at its best. One must be prepared, as Helen was, to regret having been drawn into such a world and to allow oneself to be drawn to a more rich and meaningful one. This risk of regret is the risk associated with everything meaningful, a risk without which our lives would descend to meaninglessness and boredom, expressionlessness and angst.

THIS BRINGS US BACK to *meta-poiesis*. For recall that in addition to the first-order skills for operating within a domain, we moderns must also develop the higher-order, *meta-poietic* skills for bringing out *physis* at its best. In addition to the gentle, nurturing skills of the craftsman's sacred domains, our culture also harbors a wild, ecstatic form of the sacred. But we saw that this has a dangerous side. How can we develop the skills to distinguish when it's appropriate to rise up as one with the ecstatic crowd and when it's appropriate to walk away?

The stakes are high here. We've seen already that without the ecstatic form of the sacred our world would be a poorer place. After all, crowds can rise up as one to change the mood of a culture in positive and transformative ways; without the phenomenon of *physis* such radical, paradigm-shifting changes would never occur. We need to find a way, therefore, to skillfully appropriate the phenomenon of *physis,* to bring out this form of the sacred at its best. We cannot rest content with the safe but lazy, rational approach of rejecting *physis* altogether.

A new kind of courage is required for this path. In place of the Kantian courage to resist the madness of crowds, we need the courage to leap in and experience it. Sometimes, as with Martin Luther King on the Mall, things will turn out extraordinarily well: paradigms will shift and the culture will come to understand itself in new and more shining and meaningful ways. Sometimes, by contrast, one dances with the devil. Like Ishmael being drawn into the contagious mood of Ahab's monomaniacal quest, one can only survive its fiery darkness if one learns by experience the dangerous world it reveals. Only by having been taken over by the fanatical leader's totalizing rhetoric, and experienced the dangerous and devastating consequences it has, does one learn to discriminate between leaders worth following and those upon whom one must turn one's back.

Developing any skill necessarily involves risk. Whether it is the skill of fielding ground balls or making coffee, or the meta-skill of bringing out *physis* at its best, one does not become a master without taking chances and learning from the consequences of one's mistakes. But our culture calls for a special kind of skill. The hidden history of the West—the history of the ways the practices have gathered to reveal the possibility of sacred, shining things—has bequeathed to us not one form of the sacred, but a variety of different and incompatible types. *Physis, poiesis,* and technology show us, respectively, a wild, ecstatic sacred that lifts us up like a wave; a gentle, nurturing style that brings things out at their sacred best; and an autonomous and self-sufficient way of life that laughs at everything of sacred worth.

Having taken the risk required in learning, the special, *meta-poietic* skill called for at this stage of our history, then, is the skill to give each of these sacred modes of gathering its due. The master of living in our poly-sacred world will understand immediately and without reflection that one moment calls for the microwave, while another moment calls for a grateful feast. He will have acquired the skill to let himself be overwhelmed by the ecstatic and wild gods of sport, but the discrimination to keep himself from being drawn in by the rhetoric of the fanatical and dangerous demagogue. He will live a life attuned to the shining things and so will have opened a place to which all the gods may return.

Are we saying that everyone *ought* to live a polytheistic life? No. Ours is not a moralistic claim, but a claim about what the gods are calling us to do. It is a natural temptation to ask why one *should* hear the call, or why one *should* heed it if it makes itself heard. But these moralizing temptations must be avoided. There is no *reason* why one ought to hear or respond to the call of the gods: callings just demand to be heard and obeyed. We in our culture are being called to cultivate ourselves as beings who are sensitive to what we are called to do. The calling is there, and those who are sensitive enough to the culture and to its rich heritage will hear it. But our focus on ourselves as isolated, autonomous agents has had the effect of banishing the gods—that is to say, covering up or blocking our sensitivity to what is sacred in the world. The gods are calling us but we have ceased to listen. They are calling us to cultivate our sensitivity, but like Dante's sinners, we have closed ourselves off by telling ourselves that we ought to be self-sufficient.

As autonomous subjects we have closed ourselves off to the calling of the gods, and it is in this sense that we have banished them. Nobody seems to have noticed this. Martin Buber talks about the eclipse of God, Beckett about how we are waiting for God to return. Others talk about God's absence, withdrawal, or death. But the picture we are offering turns on its head the traditional twentieth-century narrative.

The gods have not withdrawn or abandoned us: we have kicked them out. They are waiting plaintively for us to hear their call. Ask not why the gods have abandoned you, but why you have abandoned the gods.

THE INTENSE AND MEANINGFUL world of Homer's Greeks evidently shone with sacred force. Our technological world, by contrast, seems impoverished and dull. We cannot return to Homer's world, and we should not hope to do so. But we can become receptive to a modern pantheon of gods—to the ways in which Gehrig and Federer shine, the ways in which Marilyn Monroe or Albert Einstein changed how we see the world in which we live. And we can also lure back the gods of old—the great works that were venerated once before and now can be re-experienced in their sacred worth. To do this requires more than simply canonizing these works on reading lists and classroom syllabi. It requires developing the skills for responding to the manifold senses of the sacred that still linger unappreciated at the margins of our disenchanted world.

These notions of the sacred are richer and more varied than anything Homer ever knew. For his gods shared a common style; they literally had a family resemblance with one another. Whether it was Aphrodite's sacred erotic world or Ares's sacred world of war, Athena's world of practical wisdom or Hephaestus's world of beautifully wrought, shining things, the sacred worlds of all the Homeric gods had something in common: they whooshed up like a wave and carried one for a while, before finally losing power and letting one go. This sense of the sacred as *physis* is still available at the margins of our culture today, but it is not the only kind of sacred open to us.

In addition to *physis,* we also have a *poietic* conception of the sacred that was completely absent in Homer's age, a sense of being able to cultivate the world, to develop the skills needed to bring it out at its shining best. This *poietic* understanding of the sacred comes in many forms. Whether it is Jesus' sense that the world is best revealed

through the light of His mood of agape love, or Dante's sense that we can teach ourselves the skill to be receptive to the love that moves the sun and the other stars; whether it is Aeschylus's sense that we can bring out the culture at its best by finding an appropriate place for all its nascent forces or Sturt's sense that we can dwell in a natural world of sacred worth, these *poietic* accounts of the sacred are gentle and nurturing in a way that was alien to Homer's world.

And in addition to all these accounts of the sacred, we also have a technological conception of the world, an efficient and resourceful understanding of things that allows us to produce and control what is. The world is this way too at times—not sacred but devoid of intrinsic worth, ready to be molded to our desires and will.

The practices have gathered throughout the history of the West to reveal these manifold ways the world is. Perhaps there are other ways the practices have gathered too. But only now, released from the ancient temptation to monotheism, can we find a place for each of these ways of being in our contemporary world. The polytheism that gets all these ways in balance will be more varied and more vibrant than anything Homer ever knew.[24]

This contemporary Polytheistic world will be a wonderful world of sacred shining things.

Epilogue



Two students had studied for many years with a wise old master. One day the master said to them, "Students, the time has come for you to go out into the world. Your life there will be felicitous if you find in it all things shining."

The students left the master with a mixture of sadness and excitement, and each of them went a separate way. Many years later they met up by chance. They were happy to see one another again, and each was excited to learn how the other's life had gone.

Said the first to the second, glumly, "I have learned to see many shining things in the world, but alas I remain unhappy. For I also find many sad and disappointing things, and I feel I have failed to heed the master's advice. Perhaps I will never be filled with happiness and joy, because I am simply unable to find all things shining."

Said the second to the first, radiant with happiness, "All things are not shining, but all the shining things are."

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Isaac Newton said famously, "If I have seen further than other men, it is because I have stood upon the shoulders of giants." Unable to climb to such lofty heights, we have articulated in this book intuitions that have come primarily from standing upon each other's shoulders. Each of us is, therefore, grateful in the first place to his coauthor for the contortions, extensions, offerings, suppressions, and support that have made such a wonderful working relationship come to be.

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