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SEEKING EXCELLENCE IN A DAY

By Randall D. Wight

Ars longa, vita brevis
HIPPOCRATES

JEROME SLUMPS BEHIND ME OVER HIS BOOKS. To his left from a precipice a well-coiffed gentleman surveys a fog bank. Nearby flags flutter up multiple architectural stories and down a people-filled avenue. Three women stoop to collect remains of a harvest. Another woman stops to hear a bird sing. From the wee hours to dusk, these scenes, these people, daily surround my desk to remind of the pursuit of excellence.

Philosophers from Aristotle to Shaquille O’Neal recognize that excellence is a habit rather than a standard. It is what we do repeatedly, an art fixed by discipline. Art, for me, calls repeatedly to mind that we spin excellence in the focused whirling dervishes of days.

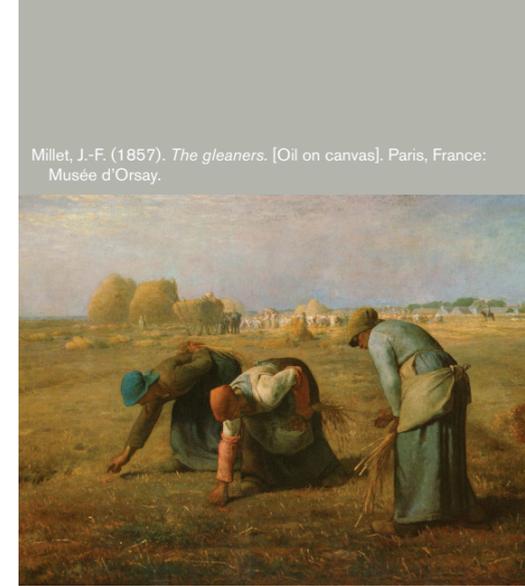
“THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE FINDS JOY IN EMBRACING GREATNESS THROUGH SMALL DETAILS.”



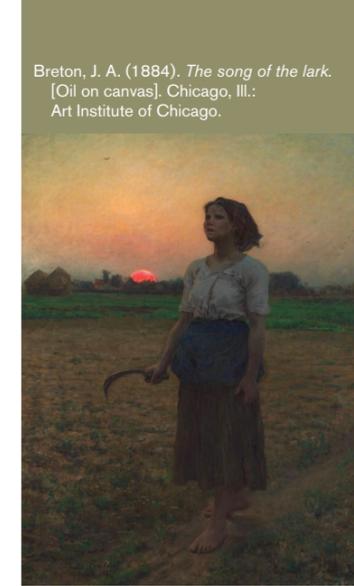
Friedrich, C. D. (1818). *Wanderer overlooking a sea of fog*. [Oil on canvas]. Hamburg, Germany: Hamburger Kunsthalle.



Monet, C. (1878). *Rue Montorgueil, Paris, Festival of June 30, 1878*. [Oil on canvas]. Paris, France: Musée d'Orsay.



Millet, J.-F. (1857). *The gleaners*. [Oil on canvas]. Paris, France: Musée d'Orsay.



Breton, J. A. (1884). *The song of the lark*. [Oil on canvas]. Chicago, Ill.: Art Institute of Chicago.



Caravaggio. (1606). *Saint Jerome writing*. [Oil on canvas]. Rome, Italy: Galleria Borghese.

DAYBREAK, stillness and the faintest piccolo of light notes the sky. Rise, dress, begin to climb. Curiosity, not self-conscious excellence, fuels the ascent of Casper David Friedrich’s *Wanderer overlooking a sea of fog*. A mountain awaits, muscles contract, sweat cools yet warms in damp morning air. Neither lost nor meandering, the wanderer in this painting chose his overcoat, chose his walking stick, chose his path and chose his destination. He chose with forethought and purpose.

Now perched on a bluff, hair caught in the wind, he watches swirling vapor roll in broken fluidity before his searching eye—along jutting rock and wood; across an obscured plain; up to an irregular, mountainous horizon; into a clouded sky. Dawn’s rosy fingers push back darkness. Solitude and excellence commingle as the walker aligns design and deed in careful reflection. Henry Ward Beecher insisted that we not judge people by the distance they travel but by the point from which they begin. Our journey—our habit—of excellence begins with an edgy climb in the early light of day.

MIDDAY arrives as excellence first sought in silence gives way to excellence sought in conversation. Painted from a balcony overlooking a street festival, Claude Monet’s *Rue Montorgueil, Paris, June 30, 1878*, presents excellence amid the human stream. Blue-white-red fluttering flags line the street, decorating multiple floors of buildings converging in the distance. Small brush strokes infuse flags and people with movement. Commerce pulses through a café’s tables, life breathes in a bakery’s fragrance, possibility spills from a market’s produce display. The pursuit of excellence finds joy in embracing greatness through small details.

An interesting visual experience emerges in impressionistic work that is especially striking in this piece. Every viewer can find a spot at which a step forward vibrates color and blurs image while a step back mutes color and sharpens image. Excellence is an internal journey into multiple contexts. No praise, no blame, just movement toward the best within ourselves and in others. Varying between the close and the distant view of a scene, excellence avoids the petty and precious sniping of cynicism and arrogance, choosing rather to align with and promote the best that humans say and do.

LATE AFTERNOON often finds us laboring at common, routine tasks. If we labor with excellence, we work with quiet expectations for ourselves that acknowledge yet transcend what others would demand of us. Consider Jean-Francois Millet’s *The gleaners*. Soft earth tones in a harvested field find three poor women gathering the remains of reaped wheat. A distant crowd of workers reap grain and load wains as a supervisor watches from horseback. In the foreground, the three women, their backs stooped and rounded, persist in labor necessary to place food on their families’ tables.

Excellence roots in respect for individuals. Often when I see *The gleaners*, I hear Ezekiel’s condemnation of Sodom. The prophet extends his criticism of that ancient city far beyond the usual trope to include pride, self-sufficiency and abundance in the face of abasement, poverty and hunger. Excellence without regard for bent and bruised reeds among us is the world’s, not God’s, excellence—and hence no excellence at all. These struggling women depict Martin Luther King, Jr.’s observation that labor uplifts human dignity. That dignity’s importance merits our painstaking excellence. God’s path to excellence shares and lightens loads.

DUSK brings us to the edge of the same wheat field, while Jules Breton’s *The song of the lark* speaks to a thread that runs through all excellence: a sense of wonder. A field-worker—hot, tired, covered with dirt, barefoot, holding a scythe, her task unfinished, perhaps from the multitude working before the gleaners—a field-worker pauses from her labor. She listens. A burnt orange sun slips beneath Earth’s contour and home lies distant on the horizon, yet the young woman stops. She listens. Eyes wide with amazement, mouth slightly gaping, she stops to hear a distant lark sing evensong to the day.

Prospective students from urban regions pass through my office. Occasionally I hear that our school’s bucolic environment offers too little for their active minds. I smile and nod toward the listening field-worker. Everyone wants to be extraordinary, but few recognize the place for simplicity within the grand. Ralph Waldo Emerson noted that none of us ever accomplish anything excellent or commanding except when we listen to the whisper that we alone can hear. I imagine Emerson smiling at the young woman’s readiness to learn from wood and field, earth and sky. To search for excellence is to allow ourselves amazement at what others take for granted. As Voltaire knew, our appreciation and wonder appropriate what is excellent in others to us as well.

NIGHT, and perhaps we fiddled away the day. Not so *Jerome*, particularly as Caravaggio depicts him. Caravaggio used stark black backgrounds to thrust his subjects from the canvas into the viewer’s own space. Jerome, bald and thin, emerges bathed in light against the darkness. His shoulders are bare except for the rich red cloth wrapped about him. He leans across a large book spread open on a small table. A second book, closed, sits nearby; a third, cast in light, lies stacked and opened. A skull sits on the smaller book—a reminder that time is short and we are mortal.

Jerome listens for inspiration. In our own lives, we may look at inspiration and call it excellence; yet in so doing, we evade or ignore the question of inspiration that does not produce excellence. We forget that God calls many but uses only those who respond—those who practice forethought, purpose, attention to details, necessary labor, a cheerful spirit, and, perhaps most significant of all, a listening ear. We can no more hear God’s voice than the lark’s song unless we listen. As Euripides saw, human excellence means nothing unless it works with God’s consent.

Our days, daughters of time, request from us excellence, not perfection. They request clarity of goals, ever-pressing balance between challenge and skill, merger of action and awareness, and losing self to embrace others. Perfection is a noble goal but an unrealistic expectation. Excellence is our path and our effort to maturity and joy. It is doing the best we know with what we have to reach uncommon ends even with common means. After a day given to the search for excellence, we accept soft sleep knowing that we prepared for the day to come. Again. And again. And again. That is excellence.



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