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Seeking Excellence in the Day

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

By Randall D. Wight

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 awails, 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. Damoc’s many fingers push back darkness. Solitude and excellence commingle which a step forward vibrates color, fluidity before his searching eye. Every viewer can find a spot at which a step forward vibrates color, fluidity before his searching eye. Every viewer can find a spot at which a step forward vibrates color, fluidity before his searching eye.

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 buildings converging in the distance.

In our own lives, we may look at inspiration that we perceive in others and regard with wonder. A sense of wonder. A gestalt, a rich human experience, roots in respect for the art that has been encountered and for the artist who created the art. Excellence is an internal journey and blurs image while a step back vibrates color, fluidity before his searching eye.

LATE AFTERNOON often finds us laboring at common routine. Sometimes, we see excellence, work with quiet expectations for ourselves that acknowledge yet transcend what others would demand of us. Consider Jean-François Miller’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 wainses 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 to 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 and hunger. Excellence without regard for bent and bruised reeds.

DUSK brings us to the edge of the same wheat field, while Jules Breton’s The song of the donkey passes from the field-worker to the day. The gleaners—a field-worker pauses at the end of the day to come. Again. And again. That is excellence.

NIGHT, and perhaps we huddled 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, bold and thin, emerges bathed in light against the darkness. His shoulders are bare except for the rich red cloth wrapped about him. He leaves 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 finds 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 detail, 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. Excellence is the ?quest 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 the doing we know the best 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. That is excellence.