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LEADING  
LIVES  
THAT  
MATTER

*What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*

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## INTRODUCTION

This book is designed for people who want to lead lives that matter. The selections gathered here have been chosen because they can help readers think with greater clarity and depth about just what that might mean. In creating this book, we have been thinking about young people who are pondering what to do with their lives, and also about older people who feel that their lives lack significance for themselves or others. Both groups, we believe, want to “make a difference” in the world, as our own students and friends put it. They desire, as we ourselves do, to lead lives that are meaningful but also significant, lives that manifest both personal integrity and social responsibility.

### What We Do and Who We Are

In the United States, fundamental questions about our purpose in life tend to emerge most forcefully when we are wondering what work we should do to earn a living. As many foreign observers have noticed, ours is a very pragmatic culture. When we make new acquaintances, we ask them first about what they do, not about what they believe, or where they live, or what and whom they love. Those questions come later, if at all. Similarly, most of us are impatient to answer questions about work for ourselves. Our eagerness to act can even prevent us from slowing down long enough to think carefully about what work would truly be best for ourselves and others.

The fact that these questions are so prominent in our lives suggests that they are related to other concerns, even beyond our need to make money. Many of us assume that what we do to earn a living somehow emerges from who we really are, and we also suspect that what we do to earn a living will somehow shape who we will be. A person’s thinking about what to do to earn a living, in other words, is entangled with her identity and how she understands it. A person’s choice of livelihood is framed by a sense of who he is and what he hopes to become as a particular human being — that

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is, when one *has* a choice in the matter, as many people do not; more on this later.

*Leading Lives That Matter* seeks to address a pragmatic society in a way that shows serious regard for ultimate concerns. Thus it invites readers into a set of questions and documents that attend both to immediate practical issues about what work we will do and to underlying religious and philosophical issues about identity and purpose. More important, the readings are arranged in a way that seeks to overcome the division between these two kinds of concerns. The essays, poems, and stories included here explore fundamental issues of human life and its meaning and purpose, to be sure. But they are clustered in chapters that respond directly to the practical questions that Americans who find themselves at important turning points in their lives most frequently ask.

In a sense, then, this book both yields to and resists Americans' obsession with work. Because jobs are such a focus of concern for people in our culture, the anthology often considers other vitally important parts of lives that matter — love and friendship, family and community, leisure and play, study and worship — primarily in connection to paid employment. Yet many of the readings also challenge this way of thinking, leading us to wonder whether our jobs really are or should be such important indicators of meaning and significance. We will find ourselves asking again and again, “Do our jobs really define who we are? And if so, should they?”

### Multiple Traditions

This book seeks to overcome another division as well. Popular media in the United States often feature events and stories that pit the religious against the secular, the pious and devout against the skeptical and irreverent. Much that happens in our common life warrants the prominence of these depictions. Nevertheless, over the course of Western history, worldly and religious life, the secular and the sacred, have often informed, enriched, deepened, and constructively corrected one another. In this anthology, the readings are arranged in a way that will encourage that same dynamic of mutual correction and enrichment. Sources from both of these streams are intermingled, because wisdom and understanding from both are essential if we hope to explore together what it means to lead lives that matter.

All the great religious traditions contain abundant wisdom about questions of what we should do and who we should be. In this anthology, most of

the religious authors and texts come from the Christian tradition. However, texts from other religious traditions also appear at certain points, adding crucial insights to the issues under consideration. Ours are small steps toward expanding the treasury of wisdom on which contemporary readers can draw – an important project that is currently under way in higher education and other parts of American culture. We hope that other authors will continue to add resources from other traditions to contemporary conversations about the questions explored in this book.

A similar restriction applies to the secular writings. Although secular culture, like Christianity, includes multiple and sometimes discordant modes of thought and reflection, most of the authors and texts in this volume belong loosely to what the philosopher Jeffrey Stout has called the “tradition of democracy.” Perhaps the dominant voice among the many secular voices that define our common life, the voice of democracy emphasizes notions of equality and self-determination. As we shall see, the Christian tradition and the democratic tradition sometimes clash. At other points, however, they inform one another so closely that they are hard to distinguish. In any event, we should take every opportunity in these frequently contentious times to promote conversation between people of religious conviction and those who do not share such conviction, in the pursuit of common questions and ideas like those that define what it means to lead a life that matters.

### **Fostering Conversations about Lives That Matter**

The pragmatism and impatience that infuse American culture have helped in recent decades to create a large market for self-help books. And so we must say: Readers beware! This is not a self-help book that provides ready answers to the questions it explores! Instead, the book is designed to lead readers to know their own minds better by encountering the minds of others who have gone before them. To read this book is to become a pilgrim along life’s way, traveling in the company of other pilgrims who have left behind them records of their own journeys or the journeys of others. And as those who have read Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* know, pilgrims like to talk while they travel. Reading this book is therefore more like joining a conversation than it is like going to a consultant or therapist. We hope that the book will enable readers to join an ongoing conversation that reaches back to ancient Israel, China, and Greece. But beyond this, we hope that it will encourage actual conversations among living companions who share the book’s ques-

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tions and concerns, including companions who bring different beliefs and experiences. Such conversations not only help us to refine our opinions; they also help us to enlarge our moral imaginations.

Happily, there is reason to think that readers are ready and eager to enter the conversation. *Leading Lives That Matter* has arisen in a context where multiple conversations and concerns are already alive. One group of conversations and concerns belongs to the young men and women in colleges, universities, and professional schools, or in the years just after graduation, who are struggling with questions of what they should do to earn a living and what that may mean for who they will become. Those who have been fortunate enough to attend institutions of higher education have long had the opportunity and burden of deciding what work to pursue – a privilege denied to most people in the past and one still denied to many in the United States and around the world. Our system of higher education, however, does not consistently encourage students to explore the kinds of basic questions this anthology raises. The vast majority of those who attend colleges and universities do so primarily to prepare for jobs of one kind or another, not to gain greater clarity about who they are or to discover what is true about the worlds of nature and culture. To be sure, most postsecondary schools do require students to take “liberal education” courses, in which basic issues of meaning, significance, value, justice, identity, and purpose should be raised and explored. However, these questions are often considered in isolation from the main concern that led most students to attend college in the first place: preparing for a job. Because of this division, which is structured by educators, many students come to believe that courses in literature or philosophy or history or religion are just academic requirements to be “gotten out of the way” until the “real” and more practical subjects can be studied. Resisting these assumptions, we hope that the readings gathered here will help students and recent graduates to see the importance of questions about meaning and purpose and to include reflection on these questions in their thinking about what they hope to do and become.

Another group of conversations and concerns is taking place within higher education itself, as well as in the many fields of endeavor to which it is related. At colleges and universities, administrators and faculties are asking how values, religious convictions, and ideals of service should influence education and scholarship. Meanwhile, at some hospitals, doctors, nurses, and medical students are gathering to discuss literature and philosophy, in an effort to clarify and deepen their sense of the profound human issues at stake in their profession. Those in other professions are engaging in similar

explorations. In many cases, an effort to envision the work they do in relation to the kinds of philosophical and religious questions addressed by the readings gathered in this book is at the heart of their concern.

Beyond these arenas, a larger public composed of serious-minded citizens is deeply interested in thinking together about how best to spend their lives in order to bring about a better world both for themselves and for others. The emergence of large numbers of reading groups that focus on challenging literature similar to the texts gathered in this anthology provides evidence of a widespread hunger for engagement with the issues surrounding what we should do and who we should be. Even popular culture has been exploring these issues in recent years. The enormous popularity of the Harry Potter books and films may well arise from their capacity to explore for a mass audience stories about vocation, duty, and hope. *Black Panther*, *Wonder Woman*, and other superhero films take up similar concerns, gaining immense popularity with a mass audience hungry for images of strenuous and significant lives.

Although it is too early to know whether such developments amount to “straws in the wind” or a reconfiguration of public discourse, many of the economic and cultural forces driving them will probably remain in place for the foreseeable future. Global capitalism continues to reshape the workforce, displacing people, widening the gap between rich and poor, and saddling many with burdens that impede their freedom, including crippling debt. The rising number of maladies that are at least to some degree culturally induced (anxiety, depression, drug and alcohol abuse) suggests that millions have come to feel a loss of significance and purpose. The pressures that two-career marriages and single-parent households place upon individuals, children, and institutions complicate established patterns of employment and belonging. Meanwhile, the notion that material prosperity brings genuine fulfillment is rarely questioned — even though millions of people have learned by experience that this equation is false.

### How Can I Use This Book to Greatest Advantage?

This anthology seeks to make easily available to readers of all kinds some of the best thinking and writing done over the centuries about the very questions that most trouble human beings when they wonder about how to lead lives of substance and significance. But not all readers are the same. For some, the most important question is, With whom and for whom shall I live? For

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others, the most urgent matter before them is, Is a balanced life possible and preferable to a life focused primarily upon work? Still others are trying to sort out all the conflicting advice they are receiving; for them, the question is, To whom and to what shall I listen as I decide what to do for a living? For many who share increasing awareness of the environmental degradation overtaking our planet home, the crucial question is, What are my obligations to future human and other life? Meanwhile, many ask, Must my job be the primary source of my identity?

The longest section of this anthology is organized around exactly these concerns, ending with the summative question, How shall I tell the story of my life? Those readers who come to the book with a particular, well-defined question are welcome to turn directly to the chapter that addresses just that question. Understanding and learning from the readings in any one chapter do not depend in any major way upon an understanding of the readings in other chapters. Even so, the introductions to readings in a given chapter often refer to readings in other chapters. We hope that these references will lead readers to move beyond their first question to consider other issues, which will in all likelihood set their initial question in a helpful, wider context.

Other readers will prefer to ponder the big picture before they attend to the more immediate and practical matters explored in “Questions.” These readers should turn to “Vocabularies,” which addresses a broad and somewhat abstract question: How should we think and talk about what makes a life meaningful and significant? This section of the book addresses a concern that is far more urgent than it might at first appear. Today many of us have difficulty articulating what we really think and believe about what makes a life choiceworthy. We may be reluctant to admit that we make judgments, or we may hold a number of views that are difficult to reconcile with one another, or we may just find it hard to express ourselves very clearly about what we really think and care about. The section entitled “Vocabularies” endeavors to help readers make better judgments about their own lives and the lives of others by exploring four distinct sets of terms and ideas that people have used over the centuries to speak about what makes a life choiceworthy and admirable. Most of us draw primarily upon one of these vocabularies today, though many of us find creative ways to combine them. The key terms or ideas in each of the four vocabularies suggest what each of them will emphasize: authenticity and individualism, virtue and character, exemplarity and admiration, and vocation and the divine.

Whether readers are initially drawn to “Vocabularies” or “Questions,”

we encourage all readers first to read the prologue. It begins, as does each chapter, with a brief essay by the editors that sets forth the key issues readers should consider. In the prologue, this essay is followed by two wonderful readings that explore the underlying question of what makes a life significant, raising issues we shall revisit throughout the book.

The epilogue consists of only one reading, but it is arguably the most important one in the book: *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, by Leo Tolstoy. Because this short novel raises in a vivid and complete way all the questions that the anthology addresses, it can serve readers in at least two ways. First, it can provide a rich opportunity to exercise some of the capacities for judgment that other readings in the anthology should strengthen and sharpen. And second, it can be itself a rich source of wisdom about what it means to lead a life that matters. Many readers will want to read this novel more than once, even perhaps both before and after they engage with the other treasures in this anthology. Engaging texts like *The Death of Ivan Ilych* in this way will be at one and the same time an exercise in liberal learning and an exercise in vocational preparation. Moreover, as we noted at the outset, the anthology as a whole is based upon the assumption that one cannot think very well or very long about practical matters without sustained attention to the fundamental questions that have preoccupied human beings from the time they first began to think and talk together. We cannot ponder our livelihoods without at one and the same time thinking about the shape, the meaning, and the significance of our entire lives. We cannot decide what we should do without considering who we are and what we might become.