

Youth, Leisure, and Discernment in an Overscheduled Age

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THE 2018 SYNOD OF BISHOPS, ON THE theme of youth and vocational discernment, has offered an “opportune time,” a *kairos*, for reflection on the question of how the predominating culture of the United States influences children and adolescents in their process of discernment. This essay uses that *kairos* to raise a particular question about a prerequisite for discernment, namely the leisure time that allows for young imaginations to unfold in freedom. It begins with a question: how ought parents and other caregivers of children respond to the time pressures that affect childhood? It presupposes that discernment is a process that unfolds in freedom; involves the use of imagination; and leads, over time, to life decisions that coalesce in a vocational journey. Hence the question about overscheduling children is fundamentally a question about how U.S. culture affords youth the freedom to develop the practices that are constitutive of a discerning life.

Our analysis begins with international and national agencies who have raised concerns about young people’s access to leisure, particularly unscheduled free play, in our age. It points to the particular benefits of free play in comparison to goods that arise from scheduled leisure time, especially youth sports, and asks questions about the decline of free play in the United States. This analysis offers a window into a predominant social imaginary governed by economic questions and their impact on youth, and so we turn to the philosopher Charles Taylor and his exploration of the development of modern social imaginaries as a hermeneutic for understanding this decline. We then turn in the latter part of the essay to consideration of larger questions for Christian discernment, relying on a theological exploration of leisure.

YOUTH AND THE RIGHT TO LEISURE

In recent decades, national and international agencies have highlighted leisure as a fundamental right of youth. Article 31 of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), for example, calls on states to protect the rights of children to leisure time:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.¹

Similarly, the UN's World Programme of Action for Youth on Leisure-Time Activities articulated its position (1995) this way:

The importance of leisure-time activities in the psychological, cognitive and physical development of young people is recognized in all societies. Leisure-time activities include games, sports, cultural events, entertainment and community service.²

Already by the 1990s, it was becoming apparent to international child advocates that several dynamics impinged on children's access to leisure. Over the next decade, a particular focus of attention at the international level was on digital technology. In 2005, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) World Youth Report raised particular concern for what they called "information and communication technology" or ICT—this, of course, in the still-early days of the Internet and before the use of smartphones. From the mid-nineties to 2005, they write, there was a shift in perception about leisure time activities. They noted the rise of a "global media-driven youth culture," which changed patterns of socialization and had an impact on youth leisure time activities.

In the traditional view, leisure time is simply seen as "free time", but there has been a growing awareness of the vital contribution discretionary time can make to a young person's social inclusion, access to opportunities and overall development.³

They raised concerns about cuts in government spending on leisure programs for youth, highlighting the goods that such programs can cultivate in young people: physical health, development of a positive self-concept, teamwork, and greater commitment to volunteerism, to name a few. They also expressed concern that ICT is making leisure

¹ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>.

² United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development, "Leisure-time Activities," <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/leisure-time-activities-wpay.html>.

³ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Part II: Youth and Civil Society: The Emergence of a Media-Driven Youth Culture," *World Youth Report 2005*, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wyr05part2.pdf>.

time more sedentary and more individualized, thereby compromising some of its benefits. A particular target of their study is the emergence of youth-focused marketing since the Second World War, and the emergence of a youth culture as a result of new forms of communication and consumption.

One area of research which underscored this kind of change was the work done in Fiji by Anne Becker and her colleagues. Their 2002 study was a wake-up call about the extent to which television could contribute to disordered eating among a “media-naïve” population—namely, those to whom television was a new medium.⁴ The study, along with a follow up 2011 study, offered some clues as to the extent of the influence of media exposure on disordered eating and, by extension, the power of media to shape adolescent social networking.⁵ Becker began surveying adolescent girls almost immediately after TV was introduced on the island, seeking to understand the way that contributed to the reshaping of attitudes toward body image. What her research showed was that the new medium had a marked effect on adolescent girls, with hours dedicated to television consumption that negatively affected body image and socialization.

The Becker studies, along with many others, have lent credence to the concerns raised by UNDESA about the cultural reshaping of leisure time for youth. More recently, the World Assembly of Youth, the international coordinating body of national youth councils and organizations, has underscored the importance of policymaking and social support for youth leisure, in order to push back against the decrease of physical activity they see as a consequence of youth media culture. They write:

In every culture, there are hours in the day when young people are not formally required to be in school or engaged in household or paid work.... These hours, these activities, and often even these programs are considered discretionary. They are viewed as optional nice but not necessary, or even particularly important. These are the hours, the activities and the programs whose absence or disappearance would not be noticed by policy makers but would be very much felt by young people.⁶

⁴ Anne E. Becker et al., “Eating Behaviours and Attitudes Following Prolonged Exposure to Television among Ethnic Fijian Adolescent Girls,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 180, no. 6 (2002): 509-14.

⁵ Anne E. Becker, Kristen E. Fay, Jessica Agnew-Blais, A. Nisha Khan, Ruth H. Striegel-Moore, and Stephen E. Gilman, “Social Network Media Exposure and Adolescent Eating Pathology in Fiji,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 198, no. 1 (2011): 43-50.

⁶ World Assembly of Youth, “Youth and Leisure Time Activities,” <http://www.way.org.my/youth-issues/youth-and-leisure-time-activities>.

They point to the manifold benefits that come from a right approach to leisure—that is, an approach that enhances family bonds and promotes cognitive, identity, and social/emotional development in children. They urge governments to fund leisure activities for children as part of an overall commitment to social well-being. They further call on private sector companies and citizens to support youth leisure.

In the United States, the American Academy of Pediatrics has also, in recent years, raised particular concerns about children's leisure time. In particular, it has highlighted the decrease in time allotted to children to engage in free play, citing the UN's recognition of play as a right of every child.⁷ Their report highlights various factors that have reduced play: "a hurried lifestyle, changes in family structure, and increased attention to academics and enrichment activities at the expense of recess or free child-centered play."⁸ They cite a number of studies that highlight the benefits of play: development of imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive and emotional strength; healthy brain development; and many more. They call particular attention to free play, in contrast to play which is controlled by adults:

Ideally, much of play involves adults, but when play is controlled by adults, children acquiesce to adult rules and concerns and lose some of the benefits play offers them, particularly in developing creativity, leadership, and group skills.⁹

They point to surveys of elementary school principals from 1989 to 1999 which showed a significant decline in the number of schools which had a recess period. They further point to the decline of free time for children that came as a result of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, which emphasized reading and mathematics. The loss of free play time, they argue, could have long-term repercussions, due to the fact that children's cognitive abilities are enhanced by a clear change in physical activity. They even speculate that the loss of free play may exacerbate the difference in academic performance between boys and girls, since a sedentary environment may impact boys' learning styles more significantly.

The shift away from free play in the academic environment has also come during a period when parents feel pressure to find structured activities for their children from a very young age, the AAP report argues. Parents devote significant financial resources to securing opportunities for children. While many such opportunities are shown to be beneficial, they are a source of disparity between middle class and

⁷ Kenneth R. Ginsburg, "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds," *Pediatrics* 119, no. 1 (2007): 182-191.

⁸ Ginsburg, "The Importance of Play," 182.

⁹ Ginsburg, "The Importance of Play," 183.

lower-class families. They raise the question of when scheduling becomes overscheduling. "It is left to parents to judge appropriate levels of involvement, but many parents seem to feel as though they are running on a treadmill to keep up yet dare not slow their pace for fear their children will fall behind."¹⁰ Some children show benefits of parental scheduling, but the report points to other research which suggests a connection between overscheduling and child and adolescent depression. There is not yet a direct causal link, but the authors suggest that it important to consider the possibility. They conclude that "the protection of both play and high-quality family time are negatively affected by the current trends toward highly scheduling children."¹¹

Taken together, these studies over the past nearly thirty years point to widespread concerns among experts in youth culture about the decline in what might be called "healthy" leisure time. Whereas the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that active play is so central to childhood that it ought to be part of its definition, today in wealthier communities it is being replaced by highly scheduled time, while poorer children increasingly lack access to active play altogether.¹² The question of the proper balance between structured time and free play for youth is, therefore, an important question for discernment among many stakeholders, including parents and families, educators, and policymakers.

THE MODERN SOCIAL IMAGINARY AND LOSS OF FREE PLAY

Charles Taylor identifies elements of mass culture that shape interactions between people—elements which are antecedent to people's choices and which provide the contours within which social interactions take place. His use of the term "social imaginary" is a reference to the ways that these elements impact people's ability to imagine what kind of life is even possible in light of their perceptions about the way a society functions. He describes the social imaginary as a "vision of moral order" that made possible the development of Western society and suggests that political ties are an application or extension of this moral order.

The social imaginary provides a prescription for the way that people stand in relation to reality.¹³ It conditions what people see and how they respond. It helps people to identify "features of the world, or divine action, or human life which make certain norms both right and...realizable."¹⁴ Taylor's analysis focuses on the change in social

¹⁰ Ginsburg, "The Importance of Play," 184.

¹¹ Ginsburg, "The Importance of Play," 184.

¹² Regina M. Milteer and Kenneth R. Ginsburg, "Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond: Focus on Children in Poverty," *Pediatrics* 129, no. 1 (2012): e205.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 162.

¹⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 162-163.

imaginary from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century, highlighting the emergence of three key factors: the modern economy; the public sphere; and the practices of democratic self-rule.¹⁵ These modern elements of the social imaginary, he writes, have significantly impacted the way people relate to one another, and have implications for both politics and religious belief.

Taylor suggests that the modern social imaginary departs from hierarchical classical models influenced by Plato. In those older models, "The mutual service which the classes render to each other when they stand in the right relation includes bringing them to the condition of their highest virtue." The hierarchical model was predicated on a reverence for the organism of a society; individual desires were sublimated for the sake of the organism. Taylor suggests that, today, this model persists to some degree at the level of family, such as when a sibling forgoes education for the sake of maintaining the family property. Indeed, in contexts where there is the threat of indigence, Taylor writes, "The rules of family and community seemed the only guarantee of survival. Modern modes of individualism seemed a luxury, a dangerous indulgence."¹⁶ We have seen this attitude among some marginalized populations in the United States today: it may be that only one child will seek higher education in order to eventually support the family, while others enter the workforce to manage immediate needs. In such cases, commitment to unrestricted freedom of the individual cannot be a theoretical, much less real, commitment because it is simply not imaginable that each child can do whatever he or she wants if the family is to survive.

In contrast, Taylor describes that the modern order is directed toward the ordinary goals of life, liberty, and the sustenance of self and family. This organization serves individuals and families "instrumentally," not in view of virtue but rather in view of basic goods necessary for existence.¹⁷ More specifically, he writes, individuals serve each other through economic exchange—a view that developed in large part through the application of the theories of Locke and Grotius. Locke, in particular, emphasized the necessity of discipline and self-improvement as cornerstones of a divine natural order, meaning that economic activity becomes the model for human behavior in a society. In the modern social imaginary, the freely acting individual is an economic agent, and his or her economic agency is vital for the engine of the public order. Such an imaginary has implications for the way parents understand their role in child rearing, of course. In the modern social imaginary, the primary focus is not on the organism of the family but on the developing freedom and social capital of the youth. To

¹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 176.

¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 168.

¹⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 165-166.

be sure, there are strong overlaps in these different imaginaries—both involve the cultivation of virtues, and both can involve recognition of the importance of family life. Yet, in the modern imaginary, there is a stronger emphasis on forming a youth for individual economic agency.

Of course, it would be erroneous to draw too strong a line to suggest that the social construction of childhood in the modern world is a movement away from leisure toward economic agency. To be sure, there is a history of childhood economic agency that stretches back centuries. In the early nineteenth century, for example, child labor was essential for the economy of poor families. Children were important agents in the microeconomies of family farms; their labor contributed to the well-being of the family as a whole. A youth was as much an economic actor as an adult, albeit a not-fully-developed one. During the period of mass immigration to the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, children were essential for the assimilation process faced by immigrant families. They acted as translators and guides, because their abilities to adapt outpaced those of their parents or grandparents.

Only later, perhaps in part because of the changing understanding of labor that emerged in the wake of the industrial revolution, could children be seen as needing some measure of exemption from economic activity. Steven Mintz writes that the idea that childhood could be a time of life sheltered from economic imperatives “represented an effort to contain the precocities and uncertainties that had characterized the process of growing up in the nineteenth century.”¹⁸ Indeed, by the 1930s, we see evidence of a new dimension of the social imaginary with the passage of child labor laws. These laws, together with the shift away from work to schooling during the twentieth century, created a space for childhood as a social construct distinct from adulthood.

It is possible, therefore, to speak of the growth of youth culture in the United States and elsewhere as the result of both labor policy and the rise of educational systems. Those factors, together with the growth of suburban life after World War II, carved out a social place for childhood that has dramatically shaped the contemporary social imaginary. Yet what the organizations above have highlighted is a growing concern that the space created for childhood is, in effect, condensing and that the key characteristic of childhood—free play—is being compromised in favor of either structured activity ordered toward economic benefit or unstructured, unhealthy pursuits that are sedentary or otherwise harmful.

¹⁸ Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard, 2004), 87.

Our thesis, then, is that in the modern social imaginary, we see many adults treating children's leisure time in an instrumental way that results in a diminished value of free play. Aristotle viewed leisure as an active condition oriented toward virtue, an end toward which other forms of activity are rightly oriented.¹⁹ In the modern social imaginary, however, free play becomes wasted time—time that might otherwise be oriented instrumentally toward ends that serve economic interests. To be sure, this state of affairs is for many families not so much an object of clear choice as it is an economic necessity. The instrumentalization of children's time is often predicated on work schedules and the need for child care.

In this context, free play is not free. Parents are responsible for finding ways that their children can engage in useful activity that does not offer an extra burden on already-diminished time. To use one preeminent example, what has emerged in recent decades is an out-sized role for youth sports, which has developed into a multi-billion dollar industry. To be sure, there are a number of benefits: organized sports offer opportunities for physical activity, countering a significant trend toward obesity in youth.²⁰ They can encourage the virtues of fair play and cooperation. They can offer children new opportunities for fun activity that they might not otherwise engage in. Still, youth sports can be caught up in economic imperatives that are not in the best interest of children.

The U.S. youth-sports economy, which includes everything from travel to private coaching to apps that organize leagues and games streamed online, is now a \$15.3 billion market, having grown 55% since 2010.²¹ Yet even with this level of investment, more children are getting shut out of organized sports. Some 41% of children from households earning \$100,000 or more have participated in team sports, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, but in households with income of \$25,000 or less, participation is 19%. Fewer children have access to sports of any kind—organized or pick-up—compared to a decade ago.²²

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 10.7.

²⁰ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "The percentage of children with obesity in the United States has more than tripled since the 1970s. Today, about one in five school-aged children (ages 6–19) has obesity" (Childhood Obesity Facts, <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/obesity/facts.htm>).

²¹ Sean Gregory, "How Kids Sports Became a \$15 Billion Industry," *Time*, August 24, 2017, <http://time.com/4913687/how-kids-sports-became-15-billion-industry/>.

²² According to the Aspen Institute, "Fewer than half of children ages 6 to 11 meet the U.S. Surgeon General's recommendation for engaging in at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week. One way to address that deficit is through sport activity, especially team sports, as children often enjoy playing in groups. But fewer of them are doing so now than just a few years ago. The federal government does not track sports participation rates among preteens, but according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA), which does, 40 percent of kids

Kids themselves report that they choose to participate in sports because they have fun, not because they like winning or hope to earn external benefits.²³ When sports are an exercise in authentic leisure, rather than another form of following adult directions, they enjoy the experience. Many adults, though, tend to focus on external goods—the benefits that may emerge in a more-or-less utilitarian calculus. The fundamental issue, it appears to us, is that discernment about youth sports and leisure more broadly tends to operate within the context of a modern social imaginary that prizes cost/benefit analysis over a thick understanding of leisure, and especially of free play. We believe that a recovery of a more Aristotelian model will ultimately yield greater good both for families and communities as a whole.

DISCERNING YOUTH LEISURE

For Aristotle, leisure is an end in itself and not an instrumental good ordered toward something greater. “[N]ature herself, as has been often said, requires that we should be able, not only to work well, but to use leisure [*scholē*] well; for, as I must repeat once again, the first principle of all action is leisure” (*Politics* 8.3). Leisure is almost synonymous with freedom; it is that which the free person works towards. Unlike the slave for whom there is no leisure (1334a20), the free person can order work toward leisure, a state which allows for contemplation and resting in the existential good of life itself.

For children, leisure and free play are almost synonymous. Free play is the activity towards which children spontaneously order themselves without adult supervision; it is, to recall the words of the American Academy of Pediatricians, practically the definition of childhood. Just as Aristotle held that work was necessary for leisure, we are arguing that adult-supervised activities—from school to organized sports and other activities—must serve free play as a good in itself.

In Christian theology, as in Aristotle’s philosophy, leisure is ordered toward contemplation. Leisure is the active condition of being whole and purposeful as a creature of God, without need for any further *telos*. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante offers an image that is the

played team sports on a regular basis in 2013, down from 44.5 percent in 2008. Further, only 52.2 percent took part in those activities even once during the year, down from 58.6 percent.” SFIA data provided to the Aspen Institute, based on 2013 statistics. Aspen Institute, “Sport for All, Play for Life,” January 27, 2015, <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2015/01/Aspen-Institute-Project-Play-Report.pdf>.

²³ Michael A. Messner and Michela Musto, “Where Are the Kids?,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 31, no. 1 (2014): 102-122. The Aspen Institute paper cites Messner and Musto’s study: “Most of what we know involves kids already in the game, and it suggests extrinsic rewards and ‘winning’ mean far less to them than to adults. In a 2014 George Washington University study, 9 of 10 kids said ‘fun’ is the main reason they participate. When asked to define fun, they offered up 81 reasons—and ranked ‘winning’ at No. 48. Young girls gave it the lowest ratings.”

opposite of leisure. It is an image of those souls in Purgatory who have lived selfishly proud lives and who, as a consequence of their always thinking about themselves, must carry around crushingly heavy boulders—the consequence of what they have worked to build for themselves over the course of their lives. For Dante, there is a temptation to treat work as an extension of selfish pride—pointless in itself, save for the way that it can inflate a person's ego. In contrast, he offers images of people who have learned the proper relationship between themselves and God and who, as a consequence, are not tempted to make an idol of their work. There is Mary, the mother of Jesus, and King David, who dances even in the presence of servants out of an exuberant joy at the presence of the Lord. These figures, Dante suggests, are capable of joy because they know themselves to be at the service of God.²⁴

What these images suggest for parents and other adults is that they must not superimpose disordered adult understandings of utility onto children's experiences of leisure. Too often we ourselves have seen families who turn children's activities into a gauntlet of résumé-building activities, diminishing simple goods like family dinners, game nights, or even simply time at home together. The organizational responses we outline earlier in this essay suggest to us that such stories are not merely anecdotal but point to an increasingly corrosive social imaginary.

Josef Pieper argues that culture depends on leisure, and that leisure is not possible unless it is related to worship.²⁵ Following his logic, we suggest that worship is constitutive of a social imaginary: it is that toward which a life is ordered, either consciously or unconsciously. It is not a stretch to point towards the objects of worship in the modern social imaginary: primarily wealth and social capital. It is no surprise that without a transcendent object of worship, the consequence of obtaining the objects of worship is depression.²⁶ Further, lacking a transcendent object of worship, leisure becomes entertainment, for there is no sense of growth toward a transcendent end.

In contrast, in the context of worship, leisure becomes possible as that which nourishes the soul toward growth and a deepening of life ordered toward happiness. Pieper says it well:

²⁴ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto 10.

²⁵ Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952, 1964).

²⁶ See, for example, Alice G. Walton, "Why the Super-Successful Get Depressed," *Forbes*, January 26, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2015/01/26/why-the-super-successful-get-depressed/#1573f0cc3850>, and Shane Snow, "The Fascinating Reason Many Billionaires Get Depressed," *Business Insider*, Sep. 26, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/psychology-of-success-why-billionaires-get-depressed-2014-9>.

Thus, the act of worship creates a store of real wealth which cannot be consumed by the workaday world. It sets up an area where calculation is thrown to the winds and goods are deliberately squandered, where usefulness is forgotten and generosity reigns. Such wastefulness is, we repeat, true wealth: the wealth of the feast time. And only in this feast time can leisure unfold and come to fruition.²⁷

Freed from the calculus of cost and benefit, the person who worships experiences leisure as a gift in and of itself. Such a person need not treat all life as an arena of useful activity, for the natural state of life is itself enough of a gift. Given time and space, children will gravitate toward this kind of state; perhaps that is why Jesus suggested that the kingdom belongs to those who are like children (Matthew 19:14).

The opposite of leisure is frenetic, compulsive activity. Evagrius Ponticus described such activity as the result of being driven around by a demon, chasing desires that ultimately do not lead to happiness. He writes that “the demon of acedia...drives [a person] to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life’s necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself.”²⁸ Our concern, borne out through professional practice both in the classroom and the clinic, is that as a culture we are teaching young people how to work hard and play hard compulsively. To the extent that our message is that all activities must be ordered toward some other end—winning or working towards a scholarship, internship or job—we are forming young people in the habits of economic exigency but denying them the opportunity to experience real leisure.

There are, of course, some behavioral changes which can help restore a place for children’s leisure: prioritizing “feast time,” as Pieper put it, through family meals and other activities oriented toward interpersonal presence. Steering children away from screens toward active play is another strategy. Allowing children unscheduled time and even age-appropriate unrestricted space can help push back against the expectation that all activity be deemed “useful.”

At the level of organizations, we recommend other changes. Organized sports, now occupying an outsized footprint in the American family’s schedule, could seriously consider restoring Sabbath practice—leaving Sundays (to use the historical example) free. Coaches at every level ought to allow for free play even within the context of organized practices. Sports associations ought to reinforce existing rules that curtail parental involvement in organized games and consider more extensive training of parents and coaches in the goods of free play. Schools and athletic conferences could consider shortening

²⁷ Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, 48.

²⁸ See Harvey D. Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 49.

schedules, allowing for greater time between athletic seasons, and imposing stricter rules on organized training.

It is important to underscore that our concern is not organized sports per se. All of our children, and indeed many children everywhere, have experienced great benefits from sports. Our concern, rather, is that organized sports and other claims on the free time of children not be confused for the greater good of leisure, and that they be part of a more holistic approach to children's leisure time. If leisure is what we live for, and is so deeply related to happiness, it is an important responsibility of any civil society to protect encroachments on children's free play that arise from disordered attitudes towards utility. Instead, our concern is to protect children's free play, in order that they might develop a discerning approach to the proper balance between work and leisure that is constitutive of the good life. **M**