The Academic Community
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In preceding chapters, I discussed a truly daunting amount of work that we in the academy need to engage in. To some, it may sound like a form of frenetic workaholism that I am advocating or taking for granted here. That is not the case. Yes, we have profound responsibilities to our students, our colleagues, and the public that we must meet, but I well realize that all of us also have a myriad of other commitments, needs, and desires: physical, familial, spiritual, and recreational. None of us should so obsess about a career or set of professional responsibilities that we risk burnout, divorce, ill health, and irresponsibility in our relationships with loved ones. We must seek a life and lifestyle that balances our own diverse needs and goals, but that also reflects and respects our commitments to others: partners, children, parents, and friends.

Yet in discussing a subject as complex and as inevitably personal as “balance” in an academic life, I want to begin by exploring over the next few pages the ambiguity of the very terms that I am using, for even seemingly simple categories such as the “professional” and the “personal” are not self-evident and neatly oppositional in the academy. Indeed, the difference between what I am doing here and what some self-help gurus do daily on their talk shows involves the role of ambiguity in our lives. We cannot—or at least should not—rest comfortably on formulae when approaching highly nuanced and always dynamic situations. Ours is the
much harder task of recognizing that one size does not fit all and that what is reality for you is not necessarily comfortable or even credible for me. I can only speak out of my own life and perspective in these pages, and what I offer is not meant to deny that others’ lives are differently complicated and just plain different in many ways. No one voice in a conversation can or ever should claim to capture the complexities of all other points of view. My words here, from the perspective of a partnered gay man without children or caretaking duties (for the time being, at least), are offered only as an addition to a give-and-take that must involve many others whose lives I hope to hear about and learn from.

However, allowing, even embracing, that relativism does not mean a wholesale rejection of guiding principles and long-term planning. Let’s not get trapped in the false binaries used often to dismiss cultural studies and other forms of inquiry informed by poststructuralism, that recognizing relativism and the partiality of any individual’s knowledge base leads inevitably to chaos or, alternately, inertia. That, too, is simply not the case. Many of us writing about and living our lives in ways deeply indebted to postmodern feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory do so while working on long-term political projects that reference deeply held ideals and while also investing in enduring relationships with our partners and communities. All of these activities demand negotiation with others whose perspectives and beliefs do not fully mirror our own. But that dynamic hardly leads to stasis, but rather the opposite.

Indeed, giving up easy formulae means a lot of discussion and an energetic, conversational exchange of perspectives. As I have suggested throughout this book, we are always inside of our own standpoint epistemologies; however, we can also gain a critical distance on them by sharing our life stories, life choices, and lifestyles with others. In fact, that is the only way we have of learning about other options and different possible choices. Our lives are based on and lived in narratives; we work off of scripts, of sorts, that we inherit from others and that we synthesize and customize to make useful and appropriate for ourselves. From my perspective, there is neither a transcendental nor wholly immanent source of information about how we can or should live our lives—whether personal or professional, and whatever those two terms mean—we only have the varying possibilities that are handed down to us and that we alter in often incremental or occasionally more radical ways. While not dwelling on the
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autobiographical, what I can perhaps best do here is lay out some of my own definitions and decisions, to serve as one reference point in what I hope will be a broadly cast and widely engaged conversation that continues long after this book concludes.

What do I mean when I reference the concept of an “academic life”? I know, for instance, that that term is not at all analogous to what my father meant when he talked about his “work life” that somehow stood in clear contrast to his “family life,” both of which also bordered and only rarely intersected with his “social life” of fellow pool players and racetrack-goers. Those neat and secure distinctions—relatively easy to make when one works as a midlevel manager for the telephone company—are ones that we in the academy sometimes use, because we have inherited the terminology, but that does not always do justice to the complexities of our daily existences. My campus life, my social life, and my home life all intersect and overlap in ways that they did not for my father in his conception of a carefully circumscribed “work life.”

In fact, what an “academic life” means to me is a broadly cast “intellectual life,” and it is on the basis of that personal and even idiosyncratic definition—of academic life as intellectual life—that I then try to work out what balance means to me (though perhaps in ways that my readers, too, might find useful or at least interesting). Of course, intellectualism is, itself, a loaded term, as I explored briefly in chapter 2. It is often a pejorative in American culture and popular usage, as if “thinking about things” is somehow a suspicious or perhaps simply ridiculous activity. But I want to reclaim that term as energizing, vital, and productive. It has a long, rich, and wonderfully evocative history: from the lived commitments of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre to the retheorizations of the “specific intellectual” by Michel Foucault, by way of which we in the academy might work within our immediate contexts to change our institutions, our students’ perceptions of truth and justice, and our communities in the discrete ways that are at hand to us. And in defining my academic life as intellectual life, I have also come to see many of the various components of that life as potentially (even equally) vibrant fields of intellectual engagement.

My teaching, my service to the institution, and my research are all potentially vital component parts of that intellectual life as it manifests itself on campus. Thus, when I begin to think of “balance” I am not
“balancing” teaching, service, and research as wholly distinct, zero-sum, or oppositionally defined subunits of something called “work,” that is itself defined in stark contrast to something called a “personal life” and something else called a “social life.” That would be a truly daunting physics problem. Granted, these are not all the same, but it is a fundamental, definitional choice that I make regarding my life to find intellectual importance and vibrancy in all of those arenas. I have to make decisions every day, of course, about how I will use my time, but those choices will not be determined for me by hierarchies inherited from others and adopted without interrogation and modification. Not all of us have to find all academic life activities equally attractive or fulfilling—homogeneity is not what I am calling for here, by any means—but we should at least examine critically whatever hierarchies that we have internalized and that form the basis of our choices concerning “balance.”

This, then, is the first of eight general suggestions I will offer here for working toward balance in one’s academic life: Define as best you can what “academic life” means to you, and how you differently value the component parts of that life. This does not have to replicate the definitions of peers and mentors and it does not have to remain static over time. In fact, this type of self-assessment of priorities and values has to take place regularly and is itself an intellectual activity, for it should involve critical reflection, interpretation, and the possibility of effecting change in our relationships, classrooms, departments, and communities. Balance always depends upon grappling first with what it is you are trying to balance and what the touchstone values are that underlie your decisions. Perfect self-transparency is obviously impossible, but clarification certainly is.

What drew you to this life in the academy? What were you seeking here and what have you found? In a sense, I stumbled into this career and any success I have had in it is a by-product of pursuing goals that were largely personal ones not tied to a single, fixed narrative of what constitutes success in the academy. Many of the professors whom I met during my undergraduate days twenty-five-plus years ago were unhappy people and certainly would not have described their lives as “balanced.” They were, in their often expressed opinions, underpaid, overworked, and unappreciated—and many complained loudly about that state of affairs even to students. They were employees of a large state university, much like the ones in which I’ve spent my career to date. So I certainly did not enter the
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academy because I had some idealized image of academic life (if anything, my expectations were so modest that I have been surprised at how happy I have been). But I still eventually became an academic because I loved writing, I loved teaching, and most of all, I loved being around smart people who could talk about ideas (even if some of them did—and do—complain a lot). Those loves have sustained me during hard times and they have been ones that I often have had to remind myself of so as not to get caught up in the careerism and petty politics that can sap our good humor and undermine our sense of well-being. The complaints that I heard as an undergraduate were those of individuals who probably were underpaid and underappreciated, but who also became increasingly bitter over a sense of status deprivation in a profession where there are still stunning hierarchies of prestige and “value” (ones that too often go uninterrogated even as we critique hierarchies of gender, race, and sexual identity).

Thus, balance for me has been tied fundamentally to those touchstones of loving my writing, my teaching, and my community of smart people eager to talk about ideas. Balance for me has always also been self-articulated with a sense of skepticism regarding that careerism and career envy that I saw plaguing the lives of so many academics over the more than quarter century I’ve spent in and around the academy. I can write, I can teach, and I can talk about ideas with colleagues in a very wide variety of institutional contexts. This does not mean that I will be equally happy doing every conceivable job in this profession, but it does mean that I will not allow anxieties over professional prestige to draw me into a competition to succeed as measured by a set of professional standards that I do not have to accept as real for me. Those are fundamental, definitional decisions that I have made.

If we cannot to some extent determine for ourselves what will make us feel happy and fulfilled on a day-to-day basis, and if we cannot reject larger professional formulae concerning what constitutes success in a career, then we will never have any agency in working toward balance. This bears repeating because it is fundamental: you must first create your own definition of “success” in academic life. A pernicious sense of status deprivation related to an envy of other people’s jobs, successes, or prestige will destroy, absolutely, any attempt to achieve balance.

But you will note so far that I haven’t talked much about “academic life” in the context of what we call “personal life,” and this is the second of
my eight suggestions here. My own definition of how my professional life sometimes intersects with and sometimes diverges from my personal life is wholly idiosyncratic, and that will be the case for every person reading this book. What is comfortable and happiness-engendering for me will not be so for you, and vice versa . . . so please take what I say here with more than a grain, a whole shaker, of salt. My most content moments in my “life”—academic, personal, or somewhere in between—are (and these are not in hierarchical order): spent with my partner eating dinner and watching movies together, sitting in front of my computer alone and in the quiet of the morning writing, and working with colleagues on a well-defined project to improve our institution or profession. I know this about myself and to the extent possible am honest about what I need to be happy in a “life” that is subdivided only artificially and imperfectly into the “professional” and the “personal.” To the extent possible I work to protect those periods of time I need—especially the two hours in the morning writing and several in the evening with my partner—as many days of the week as possible (and it is not every day) and work toward balance in that way.

All of us have to begin with some knowledge of what it is we need, and need to protect, before we can hope to achieve a balanced life. I can only make that decision for myself and in consultation with those whom I love. Where do our children, if we have them, fit into that sense of balance, our aging parents, and our friends? Attempting to articulate this does not mean overscheduling our lives—devoting fifteen minutes to petting our dogs in the morning, and then precisely thirty to chatting with our spouses. But just because we would never go to those extremes (or if we do, would find them unlivable) does not mean that we can’t get a better grasp on what we need to augment and what we can reasonably cut back on in that attempt to balance our lives. Letting it work itself out without serious reflection will be as disastrous as those market economies that find their own equilibrium without checks and protections against exploitation and always increasing expectations of “productivity.” Laissez-faire economics always leads to horrific oppression. A laissez-faire approach to our personal and professional relationships will lead often to anxiety, overcommitment, and even despair.

However, and this is a big however, our “lives” are lived communally and we cannot ignore the contexts in which we think of “balance.” And
this is the third of my eight suggestions. If we are going to attempt to prioritize or reprioritize our academic lives, we also have to understand the consequences of any changes that we make. If I decide to devote more time to my teaching and less to my writing, or cut back on committee work so I can have more time at home with my children, or cut back on my time with my children so I have more time to spend on committee work, I have to understand how that is going to impact my relationship with my children, colleagues, and students, and—on the institutional level—affect my progress toward promotion or tenure. I suggest in *The Academic Self* that we must learn to “read” our institutional environments as texts, that we acquaint ourselves thoroughly not only with their literal documents—faculty handbooks, employment contracts, tenure and promotion guidelines, etc.—but that we must also come to understand and critically engage with their unwritten norms, policies, expectations, and practices. The same is true for the many texts of our lives and relationships.

Gadamer suggests the fundamental, lived reality of this process in his concept of philosophical hermeneutics. We live in a mundane process of interpretation, of engaging with others and the world around us as we work toward understanding (even if perfect understanding is always impossible). The most important metacritical move that we must take if we are going to be responsible participants in this process is to try to understand to the best of our abilities where the other is coming from, and to accept responsibility for acquainting ourselves with the meanings and contextual motivations of the person, institution, or print text at hand. And this we have to do with institutions and administrations, as well as conversation partners and life partners and students in the classroom, if we are going to be partners rather than potential victims, or perhaps even worse, potential oppressors in those relationships. This means working to understand how others’ lives are impacted by their position in a network of expectations and relationships involving gender, age, and employment status (full- or part-time, newly hired or tenured), and how limited one’s own knowledge is of those different positionings. Proactively, this means researching others’ needs and desires before taking definitive actions, especially when one is an administrator.

But there is also a reactive component to this dynamic. On far too many occasions, I have heard faculty complain about some action or evaluation made by a department chair, a committee, or a dean, but when
I ask them that very question, “Tell me to the best of your ability where that other person (or group) ‘is coming from’”—in other words, the presuppositions, values, perspectives that underlie the accursed action—the self-described “victim” cannot answer the question other than in an expression of outrage or angry rejection of even the need to understand that other’s positioning or viewpoint. Even in a case of a duplicitous or unfair use of power, or other act of injustice, that response (“I don’t know and I don’t want to know”) is a dead end; it leads to no possibility of effective response. It certainly does not do justice to an “academic life” that in any way purports to be an intellectual life. If, moreover, we do not pursue that knowledge beforehand—how will my institution and the actors within it respond to my activities and reprioritizations?—we will inevitably be surprised, and perhaps unpleasantly so, when it is their turn to respond in the conversational process that is academic life.

Only by knowing what balance means to us, and then what expectations our institution and colleagues have of us, can we begin to plan carefully and self-protectively about what changes we would like to make in our “academic lives.” This leads to the fourth of my eight suggestions: take stock of what you want to accomplish and choose discrete goals carefully. Part of the reason that many lives can be termed “out of balance” is because we simply take on too much, unwittingly and even haphazardly. I suggest in The Academic Self that we all write and regularly return to a sort of personal “mission statement,” that we put into writing so we can better remember the priorities and primary goals that we have for the next year, two years, even five years. This can work as a preventative (so we know how to evaluate new opportunities that arise that might overload us or render our cherished projects impossible to complete) and it also works as a necessary step in any reprioritization, which again demands that we isolate among a myriad of possible activities and interests a more select few that will receive our attention. This is a principle of what we might call career and academic life “management” as much as it is a response to a career or life in crisis.

I regularly say “no” to tempting additions to an already busy academic life. Indeed, we all have to remind ourselves that sometimes we have to say “no.” For women in the academy and for members of underrepresented groups who are besieged by requests for service, the situation can be especially difficult and dire, and administrators have an undeniable
responsibility to become aware of and help redress inequities. But self-protection and the protection of one's own personal life and career, within boundaries of continuing professional responsibility, are also of paramount importance, over and beyond what a department chair or dean might do. In offering this suggestion, I don't mean simply finding a way to decline to serve on a tenth committee in our colleges or departments, though that is certainly something we may need to learn to do (unless we want to serve on ten committees), but also saying “no” to opportunities that seem very appealing at first glance but that will probably distract us from other, more important, goals, because they require time. We might have to say “no” to possible conference presentations, to inquiries about writing essays or reviews, or to requests to serve on various boards and panels, all of which might be possible for us occasionally, but which can also keep us from working on the book that we desperately want to write or preparing thoroughly for the class that we are teaching or completing work on the curricular revision that we see as our most important task at the moment. Know and remind yourself often of your priorities. Write a brief narrative that you keep on your desk, or make a list and post it on the wall of your home office, whatever will remind you of those priorities. Revise it when necessary. But don't lapse into an easy, at times even chosen, forgetfulness or well-intentioned rush to accumulate new, exciting projects when the old ones aren't even completed.

Number five on my list of suggestions for balancing one's life follows from the above: work with “time” as best you can. This seems so simple and obvious as to be almost laughable, but I am still stunned at how loosely and haphazardly—sometimes even irresponsibly—many people in the academy engage with one of the fundamental dimensions of our existence: temporality. Again this is not a call to live a Fordist nightmare of excessive calculations and time-and-motion studies. Indeed, there is a huge swath of gray area between the extremes of a wholly intuitive, impressionistic temporal existence and an obsessive/compulsive approach to “time management.” Let us live in that gray area more decisively.

I've mentioned some of my own “tactics” in The Academic Self; I'll repeat a few and add a couple here. A simple one: most of us keep day planners and/or palm-pilot-like organizers, but—I know from experience—these can be of various use values depending upon their fundamental design. Yes, it is helpful to see “at a glance” what appointments
are scheduled for the day, as we do in one of those hour-by-hour planners or displays (“day at a glance”). But focusing solely on “the day” as the basic unit of time consciousness delimits my academic life—specifically, its deadlines and my responsibilities in meeting them—far too narrowly for my purposes. If I look at my day planner in the morning and focus intensely on the next eight or ten hours to come, I will no doubt be responsible in meeting my most immediate obligations. But unless I have annotated that planner with the microdetails of what I need to do today to meet deadlines coming up next week and next month, I am (to use a cliché) seeing only the closest trees and not the forest. There is an obvious comfort in knowing that we can see and fulfill our responsibilities vis-à-vis our work day. But our academic lives—our teaching, writing, and service activities—only rarely involve eight- to ten-hour projects. I also need to remember today what I’ve committed to finish a month or even a year from now.

This may sound trivial but it is not, because it concerns how we conceptualize our “academic lives.” If we do not get the books written that we desperately desire to write, the curricular redesign projects accomplished that we feel are necessary for the vitality of our institutions, the reading groups established that I discussed earlier as one way of invigorating our departments or colleges, or even just the batch of papers graded that we promised to return to our students, it is often because we attend only to what is most immediately at hand—the person at our office door or the two o’clock meeting with the honors committee—but forget to find time for the chapter we are supposed to be writing or for the paperwork we need to complete on the project that we have prioritized. So—and these are a few practical, personal choices that I make—I don’t use the “day” as my basic unit for planning. I always use a “week at a glance” style appointment book/organizer, so that every morning I see the week’s obligations. I also keep a very large monthly calendar hanging beside my work station at home, with major commitments noted on it. Finally, I use a white (dry erase) board with longer-term goals and deadlines written out that I need to remember, also placed near my work station. To continue with the metaphor above, I have learned the hard way that focusing solely on “the day” means that the forest may be on fire while I am looking obsessively at the tree in front of me.
That multilayered attention to “time” allows certain protections on my part. I don’t want to forget deadlines so that I have to work far into the night writing a conference paper immediately before presenting it. Nor do I want to have to work into the evening several days in a row to try to write a report due to a committee or the dean’s office. I do not want to engage in those “academic life” activities after 5 P.M. I want to spend time with my family and my friends, perhaps reading or attending a community function, but not writing or grading papers. Others will want to organize their evenings differently and have their mornings and late afternoons free for their children (I know well from friends’ experiences that sometimes after the kids are off to school and later when they are in bed is the only free time even available for “organizing”), but you can only set boundaries that will mean anything if you do not forget what you have to try to accomplish today so as not to miss a deadline looming next week or next month.

My sixth suggestion: subdivide your tasks and goals, and appreciate the “incremental.” I discuss this in *The Academic Self*, but I think it is worth elaborating upon here. Every professional task that we take on and every goal that we set for ourselves involves a process that will lead to its completion or its failure. Teaching involves the process of class preparation and grading; research involves the various steps that lead up to its dissemination; and service—whether program management or curricular redesign— involves meetings, proposal or document generation, and a variety of other mundane activities. I would never suggest that we can exercise “control” over these; there are too many surprises, interruptions, and redirections in our daily lives to allow anything like “control.” However, we certainly can attend closely to the component parts of almost any professional activity to better balance our lives vis-à-vis that activity.

I have used a very mundane example before. After many years of sitting in front of computer screens and struggling with a dissertation and the writing of several books to date, I know that I can produce about one to two pages of new writing per hour—sometimes a little less, occasionally a little more. If I spend even just an hour or so per day writing, working at least to the point where I have written a page or two, and I do so almost every day, Monday through Friday, I can produce a rough draft of a book within one year. Write one to two pages a day and you will have a book-
length rough draft in a year. Of course, it may take me two more years to revise that very rough draft, but at least I have something on the page. The same incremental process holds true for any large project that we take on: program creation, the redesign of a major or minor, or grading a batch of papers. If we focus on the enormity of the project and the final outcome only, we can be paralyzed. If we break it down into some of its smallest subunits and build some attention to those increments into our daily or weekly lives, we can avoid paralysis and the catastrophic consequences of procrastination. Focus on the daily or weekly increments that you need to attend to and that will add up to the larger product or outcome that you desire.

This attentiveness does not mean an attempt to exercise control. In fact, I want to make an even broader statement here about how we conceive of ourselves in the academy. My seventh recommendation: give up the concept of “mastery” as our touchstone for academic identity. We need to reconceive our academic selves as ones demonstrating continuous intellectual engagement, but not depending upon the goal of or a state of mastery. I have mastered nothing in my academic life, not a particular subject matter, not an administrative skill set, not a pedagogy, and certainly not academic “life” itself. Everyone reading this book will, of course, have life circumstances and professional complexities that I cannot even imagine and about which it would be the height of arrogance for me to assume I have masterful knowledge. Indeed, if we think we have mastered something or that we have to master in order to be successful academics, we are lying to ourselves and setting ourselves up for easy derailment or bitterness. Mastery, finally, is a concept born of egotism and insecurity. We have to be content with continuous intellectual engagement and the joys that such engagement offers. And we must seek fulfillment in the ways that such engagements are enacted on a daily, incremental basis. That redefinition, away from mastery and toward continuous engagement, is one useful step toward achieving “balance” in our academic lives.

This focus on the incremental leads me to my final suggestion: remind yourself often that change usually occurs very slowly. Rebalancing your life will not happen overnight. Changing your department or college will not happen overnight. I have seen too many worthwhile academic, as well as broad social, projects fail because participants expected quick
results. To reference Gadamer again, we are always bound by our traditions—personal, institutional, and variously social—that alter very, very slowly. We are all creatures of habit, otherwise we could not exist in the complexity of a single day's requirements for decision making. We live in language and the discursive norms through which we are acculturated as subjects in our careers and social lives. In the rush of modern communication, transportation, and technology, we can easily forget that we and those around us actually change very slowly. If we set incremental goals for ourselves, appreciate the small steps, and remain patient and forgiving, I believe we can all avoid burnout, bitterness, and cynicism in our academic lives.

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There is an intriguing social movement that has garnered attention recently and that has something to say about this topic of lives in and out of balance. The “Take Back Your Time” movement is devoted to addressing the terrible imbalances created by increasing workloads today. Its main spokesperson is the documentary filmmaker John de Graaf, but the movement also has academic ties in its nonprofit sponsor, the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy at Cornell University. A couple of the movement’s basic tenets are pertinent to my discussion here. Jerome Segal in an essay in de Graaf’s collection, Take Back Your Time, says that for those individuals who are overworked, overburdened, and at risk of burnout, there are three ways of taking back time: “1) Sell less of it: work less at those things you get paid for. 2) Prevent other people (or circumstances) from extracting it: end those situations in which, against your will, you are forced to devote your time to things you would rather not do. 3) Use your time (at work or at home) in ways that make it truly and deeply your own” (211).

As academics, especially those of us with the privilege of tenure and full-time employment, we probably cannot “sell” less of our time unless we go on phased retirement or convert to part-time status, which would mean giving up many of the benefits—material and communal—that may have drawn us to this profession. But we can certainly reflect on how we can prevent people and situations from squandering our time (what Segal calls “time thievery”) and how we can use our time more meaningfully
(ending what he terms “time estrangement”). As an example, what makes service so odious for some people in this profession is the perception that it is a “waste” of time—with inefficiently run meetings, fuzzy agendas, and a feeling that one is simply participating in a bureaucratic fad. Certainly assessment and strategic planning processes can often elicit cynicism for the very reason that they seem to require inordinate amounts of time that are being commandeered simply to fill up report documents destined for a file cabinet. Of course we feel estranged from our time and work if, in Sisyphean fashion, we believe we are rolling out a report that exists only to precede the next report we have to roll out.

But that is an attitude toward, rather than a fact of, our existence. Yes, our time can be wasted, but it doesn't have to be. If we are individually very good at running efficient meetings we should be volunteering to chair committees rather than simply complaining about how others chair committees. It often takes far less time to run meetings ourselves if we run them well rather than letting others do the “work” but do it poorly.

Many aspects of our work from which we might feel “estranged” are only so because we haven't defined our goals in productive and useful ways. When I speak to colleagues about strategic planning or assessment, I always emphasize that whether or not we are being enjoined to do something that is faddish or destined for the back of a file cabinet in someone’s office, we can always make the task our own, and glean from it information that we can use locally in ways that may or may not have been intended by the originators of the mandate. We can make communal vibrancy one of our strategic goals; we can assess the effectiveness of our pedagogies in ways that lead to dynamic discussions of how we have or have not created effective learning environments. If we are estranged from our work, we need to self-assess, because often the estrangement results from our attitudes about our work, not the work itself. Yes, there are oppressive and intolerable job situations that some of us find ourselves in. But for those of us who are fully employed with tenure, and who are reasonably compensated, our “work” lives are unparalleled in how they offer us meaningful ways to live our lives, interact with others, and bring about social change.

Indeed, that concept of “time thievery” should never be used to excuse our own selfish actions or problematic attitudes. Two real-life
examples: one is an academic acquaintance who, because he defined himself as a “writer” (who used his academic job simply to pay his bills) and wished to maximize the amount of time that he could devote to writing, said once, “Frankly, if I can get you to do some of the committee work that I don’t want to be bothered with, that just shows how smart I am and how stupid you are.” That attitude—starkly revealed there but underlying a lot of uncollegial behavior that I’ve seen over the years—demonstrates the pernicious effects of defining our “academic life” without reference to the community of our departments and institutions. Incidentally, that same colleague later lost his tenure-track job for abusive behavior that reflected his basic philosophy.

The other example is a colleague who, when offered the opportunity to join a research-sharing group of the type I discussed in a previous chapter, rolled her eyes and said, “Ugh, can’t do it, I’m on too many other boring committees already.” If interacting with one’s colleagues about their most exciting ideas and sharing with them one’s own intellectual passions is considered “boring committee work,” that also reveals a potentially problematic vision of an academic life. I highlight these two examples to point out simply that complaints about imbalance may have roots in any number of individual conceptions about what an ideal academic life “would be”—in both cases just mentioned, a life without having to interact with colleagues at all—that may not be ones that would stand up to a test of being communally responsible. Our academic life is a life shared with others in the academy, with our families and partners, and within a much larger sociocultural and political context. Selfishness and solipsism are plagues threatening all aspects of those lives.

A final piece of useful commentary that is offered in the Take Back Your Time collection is expressed by a career counselor: “Planning one’s life and taking actions without a conscious vision of a desired future is like driving a car while looking in the rear view mirror” (quoted in Myers et al., 155). If any one of us feels that our academic life is “out of balance,” we have to take responsibility for defining for ourselves precisely what type of life we would like and how our current life needs to change. It is to consciously revisit our “life plan,” as Paul Ricoeur suggests. However, and as I noted before, the changes resulting from any such revisiting and revisioning can only be done responsibly with careful reference to the
lives and needs of other members of our academic and domestic community, and with a careful assessment of our own presuppositions about our “work” and what constitutes “success” in and around it.

There may be many barriers to realizing the vision of the academic life that you wish to lead, to achieving the balance that you find personally desirable, but you certainly can claim your own agency in defining that vision and balance, and strategizing in the ways that I have mentioned and in many others that will occur to you individually and collectively to achieve a better balance. Articulate to yourself, your colleagues, and your significant others that “conscious vision of a desired future.” There is no one vision that all of us will share. What is workaholism to one person will be a vibrant, exciting life to another. What is an untenable daily routine from my perspective will be a nuanced and careful juggling of responsibilities for someone else. For some of us, family life provides a source of deep satisfaction that is unparalleled by any aspect of our work. For others of us, passionate about what we are writing, sitting in front of a computer screen working late on a Tuesday night or early on a Saturday morning will be as exhilarating as sitting in front of an easel was for Georgia O’Keeffe. Those are idiosyncratic, internal states of being and valuation, not ones that should be determined by others’ success stories or any expectation of fame or applause. Nevertheless, none of us works or lives alone, and our decisions about balance must be made communally, for only in hearing about your needs can I better assess the communal impact of my demands. And only in learning about how my hours in front of the computer screen impact the life and needs of my partner can I seek a balance that is not simply self-serving.

The key here, as it has been throughout this book, is dialogue. If we do not talk to each other, often and at length, about our differing perspectives and insights, our loves, needs, and priorities, we may lead a life that is “academic” in the pejorative sense of trivial or of questionable importance, but not one that fulfills the very highest potential of the “academic,” which is nothing less than personal, institutional, and broad communal transformation.