Good Work:

Where Excellence and Ethics Meet

Howard Gardner¹

I’m going to speak today about a project in which I’ve been involved since the mid-1990’s. It’s called the Good Work Project. Members of the Project believe that it’s relevant to events happening in the world today—for example the meltdown of large and respected corporations in the United States as well as the subsequent dropping of the financial markets all around the world.

Let me first start with a word about my own background, and how I got into the Good Work Enterprise. I am, by training, a psychologist. I’ve worked in cognitive psychology, developmental psychology and neuropsychology. Like many psychologists I’m interested in figuring out how the mind works. I’ve taken on quite ambitious issues, such as the nature of intelligence, of creativity, and of leadership. But I’ve always taken on those topics in a deliberately amoral way. I hope I have not been immoral, but I’ve been amoral in the sense that I’ve tried to understand what intelligence is, without smuggling in whether the intelligence is used benignly or malevolently. Both Goethe, the German poet, and Goebbels, the German propagandist, were very gifted in the use of the German language. Goethe used it to write great works of art. Goebbels used it to foment hatred. The intelligence was potent in each case. The uses couldn’t have been more different.

Similarly, when it comes to leadership, both Nelson Mandela and Slobodan Milosevic are gifted leaders. They can get people in their countries to do things that might not have seemed possible. But I don’t think many of us would defend Milosevic as being as ethical or as responsible a leader as Nelson Mandela.

Anyway, in 1994 I went, along with two friends who were to later become colleagues, to California to a research centre called the Centre for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. My two colleagues were William Damon, who is a social psychologist, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, known to many of you as a person who writes about flow, and has written a book called the Evolving Self, which is certainly a book about personal meaning. Damon, Csikszetmihalyi and I had gone to the Centre to talk about various kinds of extraordinary individuals; people who are highly creative, people who are outstanding leaders, and people who have different kinds of intelligence. There was no imperative for us to create a project together; however our hope was that a project would emerge from this collaboration.

Those of you who are familiar with recent United States history will know that in 1994 there was a congressional election. For the first time in 40 years the Republicans won the House of Representatives. They had a leader who immediately became very well known--his face was in all the news magazines--Newt Gingrich. What caught our attention was that Gingrich and his supporters declared that government was the enemy, and that all spheres of life are better controlled, better governed, by market forces. Now you will probably think I’m about to launch into a political statement, but that’s not the case.

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As it turns out, the three of us, Csikszentmihalyi, Damon, and Gardner, are all over the map politically. We don’t have the same political points of view. None of us has any intrinsic objection to the market. But we all felt that there were certain spheres of life that could not and should not be governed completely by market forces. For example, should only people who can afford it be allowed to have an education? Should only people who can afford it be allowed to have medical care? Speaking to people in Canada, there’s certainly a very different philosophy about medical care than there is in the United States. Should only people who can afford it be able to have legal protection? Anyway, we felt that it was too facile to maintain that market forces are the best way to govern everything. They may well be the best way to govern the economy or to run a business.

Triggered by this Gingrich statement and this claim which we found peculiar, we decided to embark on a project—the study of professions, to see whether people could be highly qualified experts and at the same time show concern about their place in the community, concern such that they could make sure that everybody wanted it, could have an education, could have medical treatment, could have legal defence and so on. At the time, for various reasons we called this the Humane Creativity Project. We wanted to know whether people could be creative, use their minds freely, generatively, productively, use ‘out of the box’ thinking, and at the same time be humane, and use their talents in a way that displayed regard for the rest of humanity. Our hope was that a foundation—the MacArthur Foundation in particular—would give us several million dollars so that we could study different professions in the United States and perhaps elsewhere, and to see whether people could be creative and humane at the same time.

Well, life is rarely so simple as one’s dreams. The McArthur Foundation had no interest in supporting our work. Nobody liked our phrase ‘Humane Creativity’—Nobody knew what it meant. So, we were discouraged, but often out of defeat, out of a challenge, out of our frustration, something healthier can emerge.

After a while we changed the name of our project from the Humane Creativity Project to the Good Work Project. That term has a religious resonance. Most people have at least some sense of what good work is. And rather than getting one large grant for the whole study, we ended up making a virtue of necessity. We have been carrying out many smaller projects, several of which are still very much ongoing. Indeed the Good Work Project is now seven years old—1995 to 2002—but I still think it’s in its early childhood and I expect we’ll be studying good work for many more years.

Now let me tell you about my plan for the rest of the talk. I’m going to define good work, introduce some terminology and a framework for thinking about good work, describe one project that was completely carried out and described in a book called Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet. But because that’s been written about I’m also going to tell you about many facets of the project which haven’t been written about yet, facets which are still ongoing. Finally I’ll conclude with some discussion of how I think good work can be fostered. I hope these themes intersect with issues of responsibility, and with issues of personal meaning. Finally, I’ll leave you with some closing thoughts from some very wise people.

In English the word ‘good’ is a pun. Good has two meanings. It means ‘of high quality’. It also means ‘ethical, responsible’. Good work is work that meets two criteria: It’s highly expert, up to the highest standards, but at the same time it also is
moral, ethical, responsible, and takes account of its social implications. Now it’s certainly possible to be good in one of those senses and not the other. Let’s take the practice of law. One could be a very skilled lawyer, win most of one’s cases, but only take the cases of people who are very wealthy, and cut every corner in order to win. That person would be good in the first sense, but not in the second. We have another hypothetical lawyer who takes on only indigent cases, works very hard—your heart goes out to this lawyer for his or her efforts—but unfortunately this lawyer never wins any cases. That lawyer would be good in the second sense, but not the first sense. We looked for people who embodied both senses of goodness.

Now any particular example would be controversial, but let me mention some people whom my colleagues and I considered to be good workers. One is the recently deceased head of the Washington Post, Katharine Graham, who dared to publish the Pentagon papers. Another is Jonas Salk, a physician who found the polio vaccine. Another is Jackie Robinson, the baseball player who integrated baseball about 50 years ago. There’s Rachel Carson, the writer who raised consciousness about ecology in the 1960’s. Finally I’m going to mention someone probably not known to most of you, but a man who had a great influence on three authors, and to whom we dedicated our book. It’s a man named John Gardner, no relation of mine, who has been a very important civil civic leader in the United States over the last 40 or 50 years. So there are examples of good workers, though of course you and I could debate whether Jonas Salk, Katharine Graham, etc. were or were not good workers. No person is above controversy in that respect.

So, how do we think about good work? Good work happens when an individual working in a profession is able both to be highly skilled in that profession yet is also able to have a perennial concern of the implications of what he or she does. Nobody always does the right thing. Nobody always knows the implications of his or her work. But there’s a big difference between people who think about the implications of their work all the time and try to do the right thing, and people who are quite indifferent to that whole set of concerns.

In analysing good work we use three terms that I’m going to introduce to you—domain, field and alignment. The domain refers to the values of a profession. Medicine is the best example here. The domain of medicine embodies values that go back to the Hippocratic oath—do no harm, come to the aid of somebody who is not well, do not enter into special deals or relationships with your patients. That’s part of the domain of medicine. But there’s also a field of medicine. The field of medicine is the current institution that is responsible for delivering health care. In the United States, parts of the field of medicine are health maintenance organizations, managed care organizations, and doctors who are working for those particular entities. The domain of medicine—the values of medicine—have not changed very much over the millennia or over the decades and centuries, but the field has changed enormously. When I was young, 50 years ago, a doctor was a man, almost always a man who came to the house with a little black bag, took your temperature, felt your pulse, listened to your heart, told you to take two aspirins, and told you you would be okay in the morning. It was very personalized, not at all high tech. Now of course, at least in the United States, no doctor ever comes to anybody’s home. The gender split is much more equal. Most of us belong to very large organizations where there are rules about how often you can see the doctor, how much we pay, what medicines can be prescribed, what
treatments can be prescribed and so on. The field has changed enormously.

Let me introduce the notion of alignment. A profession is well aligned when all the different stakeholders want the same thing from a profession. A profession is misaligned when the various stakeholders want things to be very different than one another. So if practitioners, the general public, the values of the domain, the current institutions and, to the extent that these are publicly traded entities, the stockholders, all want the same thing from an entity or a profession, it is very well aligned. Conversely, if a doctor says he wants to do one thing and give everybody the treatment that he or she merits, but the HMO says, “no you can’t see this person because they didn’t pay their premium”, or, “you can’t tell them about this cure because they won’t pay for it”, or “we can only see a person for 7 minutes because that’s the capitation rate”, then the field is pulling the doctor in a very different direction from the values of the domain. Moreover, if it’s a publicly created company as many HMO’s are in the United States, what the shareholders want are not happy doctors, not good medical care, but the most money in the quarterly report. They want to have high return on their investment. So they have yet a third particular desire coming out of medicine. That would be a very misaligned profession. We argue that good work is easiest to do when a profession is very fully aligned and when everybody wants essentially the same thing from a profession--domain, the field, the shareholders, the stockholders, the general public, all want to have the same thing from a profession.

We look to see the extent to which a profession is aligned or not aligned. All alignments are temporary. No alignment is permanent. No misalignment is permanent and if it were the profession would stop existing and something new would come to pass. It’s relatively easy to carry out good work when you are in an aligned profession, but interestingly some of us are actually stimulated, excited, catalyzed when the domain is not well aligned. That’s an interesting interaction of personality with profession.

By now you probably are very hungry for an example so I’m going to provide one. But first let me tell you that it took us about six years to figure out exactly what question we’re asking, and those of you who are researchers won’t be so surprised because often figuring out the question is more difficult than figuring out the answer. Here is the question that the Good Work Project is designed to answer: How does a person who wants to do work, work that is at once excellent in quality but also responsible and ethical, succeed or fail in carrying out the good work at a time when: l) things are changing very quickly, 2) market forces are very, very powerful and there are few, if any, counter forces, and 3) our whole sense of time and space is being radically altered by technology. Ten years ago it would have been science fiction to think that I could be giving a live talk on video to folks thousands of miles away, and that we could then have interchange. So what does it mean to do good work when everything is changing, time and space are completely altered, market forces have enormous power and there are very few counter forces? That’s the overarching question the Good Work Project is trying to answer.

In the mid 1990’s, my colleagues and I said we would like to study a dozen different professions to understand good work in those professions. We wanted to study military, medicine, education, law, the arts--a whole range of professions. But we had to start somewhere. So, for a variety of reasons we decided to start with those professions that have the most power over our minds and over our bodies. Now we could argue a
bit about what those professions are. We decided to choose the professions of journalism and genetics. We chose journalism because journalists, writers, and anchor people, whether they’re in Internet or broadcast or print, tell us what’s going on in the world. So to use the current jargon, journalists give us the “memes”- they give us the units of meaning, personal meaning and public meaning, which we carry around in our head.

Everybody knows what genes are. Geneticists not only study our genes but increasingly they tell us about our life expectations and soon they will be advising us on what to do given the roll of the dice that we had from our genes, from our biological parents, as well as various kinds of interventions like genetic therapy. So just as journalists have a lot to say about what’s in our minds, geneticists have a lot to say about our bodies and our fates. Thus, we decided to nickname our study “Memes and Genes”.

How do we go about doing our study? We’re social scientists so we have journalists and geneticists nominated as people who are leaders in the field, and we asked permission to interview them. We interviewed each nominee for about two hours. Ours is a very in-depth kind of interview, a lot of probing. And we asked our subjects about a whole range of things. We asked them about their goals, what they were trying to accomplish, what got in the way of that, what were the opportunities and the obstacles which they confronted in their own work, what were the big influences in their own training, who were their mentors, who were their anti-mentors (or tormenters as we call them, because often those people make a big influence as well), to whom did they feel responsible, to what did they feel responsible, what kind of ethical dilemmas arose in their work? These are very searching interviews and many people who we’ve interviewed--we’ve interviewed between 700 and 800 people by now--say the interviews are very helpful to them in getting some distance from themselves, or in your terms, gaining some personal meaning from the interchange.

Even though the interview takes two hours, each interview actually takes about two weeks. First of all we researched these people beforehand. We do due diligence on them so we’re quite well informed about them before we speak to them. Then we get this all transcribed. The transcripts run from 30 to 50 single spaced pages. Then we code them--we have a very elaborate coding system because we are social scientists and codification takes the most time. We put the transcripts online on a software system called NUD*IST which is a qualitative software system. This means that we have instant access to all kinds of information about our subjects. So if, just to be cute about it, you wanted to know how many second born, left-handed journalists had anti-mentors, we could tell you because that information is available online. If nothing else, this project consists of an incredible archive of what busy professionals from the United States think about their work life at the beginning of the 21st century. We hope that in the future people will make good use of the information that we’ve gathered.

Let me move now to the results of the study of journalism and genetics. The study was completed in 1999. That’s important to note because if the study were carried out today, I think we’d already have somewhat different results. Basically we found that two fields could not be more different than each other, these two professions. Genetics in 1997, 1998, and 1999, was a beautifully aligned profession. Journalism on the other hand was a very massively misaligned profession. What does that mean practically speaking? It meant that geneticists loved what they were doing. They couldn’t wait to
get up in the morning. No geneticist we spoke to talked about leaving the area of genetics—they loved what they were doing. Why is that? Well, according to our analysis, because of the time, everybody wanted the same thing from genetics. Everybody wanted to live longer, be healthier, and make sure we knew as much as we could about how the body worked. So this is a profession that at the time had very little tension.

While this alignment didn’t guarantee people could do good work, it made it much easier because nobody was giving the geneticists any signals other than ‘go for it’. In fact when we asked geneticists what obstacles were there in their work, often they would say the only obstacle lay in themselves: Sometimes they didn’t work as hard as they should or got diverted, but there were no other obstacles. Kind of an amazing experience to hear about for those of us who are not geneticists!

Conversely, journalists were not at all happy with the state of their trade. Very few of them felt aligned. Most of them felt that they had ideals they wanted to achieve - be fair, be objective, research stories in-depth, but events had conspired to make it very, very difficult to be a good journalist. And those of you who know something about journalism will, I think, immediately understand why this is the case. In the United States, there are very few outlets that are owned anymore by individuals with a primary interest in the news. They are almost all owned by large conglomerates—many of them by people from Canada, names like Thomson and Black and Murdoch from Australia—who are not journalists themselves. They are entrepreneurs, they string together different kinds of companies and they’re interested basically in one thing—the bottom line. We have a line about television in America, ‘if it bleeds it leads’. If you ever watch local news television in the United States, it’s always about a murder or a rape or some other kind of violent act. Not that those acts shouldn’t be reported, but it’s hardly the most important story in the light of eternity. But because people find that the sensational keeps people glued to the tube or buying newspapers, this becomes the operant principle in journalism.

There’s a very nice quotation from Harold Evans. Harold Evans was the editor of both the London Times under Murdoch, then of the Daily News in New York under Mort Zuckerman. Harold Evans says the problem for American newspapers is not to stay in business—their profits are higher than ever. Their problem is to stay in journalism. This is the frustration of the journalists because they feel they want to do good work, but they feel very much thwarted.

In the book Good Work we talk about the various things that make it difficult for journalists to carry out good work. For example, many journalists would like to carry out investigative reporting, but increasingly they were told they cannot carry out investigative reporting. Why? Number 1, it’s expensive. Number 2, it may not yield anything. Number 3, it might yield something that is critical of our chief advertiser, and as the line between the business office, the marketing office, the advertising office, and the reporting in the editorial offices get blurred, it becomes more and more difficult to carry out good journalism.

Interestingly, 50 years ago people said the problem with American journalism was its parochial nature—newspapers were owned by families in cities—and it would be much better if they were publicly traded companies. That analysis could not have been more wrong. Now, essentially all the good newspapers in the United States are ones that are owned by families—New York Times by the Sulzberger family, the
Washington Post by the Graham family, and so on. It means these families have a large, if not majority, interest in the newspaper. And it means that they have influence about what’s in it. If they feel the newspaper should be doing investigative reporting, they will support it even if it means they lose money. But once it’s a publicly traded company, think about it: Let’s say you had the misfortune of owning Time Warner AOL stock. Many Americans do, whether they know it or not, because many pension plans are tied in with AOL. Nobody who reads an editorial in Time magazine feels good about the editorial because they’re a stockholder. They feel good about the company if the company makes money (By the way it’s worth a fifth of what it was two years ago so people who own Time Warner AOL are not feeling very good about it. But that’s the cost of being in a market system).

Now you might say, ‘Well those are marketing influences in journalism and I’m glad I’m not a journalist’. But one of the things that we discovered is that market influences are rampant throughout the United States. There isn’t a single profession—be it religion, philanthropy, education, or art—that isn’t influenced, if not completely roiled by financial and monetary and market considerations. Take education—we now in the United States have not only charter schools but voucher schools. A voucher is simply a market mechanism where people are given a certain amount of money and asked to choose the schools they want. Now you might like that or dislike it, but it’s clearly a market kind of system. At the university level now we have for-profit companies. The largest one in the world is the University of Phoenix. It’s in 48 out of 50 States. There are other for-profit companies like DeVry that again sell education to people and stockholders. I’m at Harvard University which at least up until recently was the wealthiest university in the world. I always ask, “is it harvard.edu, or is it harvard.com?”, because so many things that we do at Harvard, as I’m sure is also true of schools you’re involved with, are very much oriented toward markets—trying to attract the most attractive students, trying to give them the most effective facilities, bidding for professors, and cutting down professors’ teaching loads if you want to attract the prominent professors. These are all market-dictated kinds of things.

You might think that the one profession that should be immune from market forces is philanthropy. After all, in philanthropy you have the money and all you have to do is give it away. But that’s not true at all. We’ve been studying philanthropy. Philanthropy is completely influenced now by market models. The biggest question in philanthropy is--are your grantees accountable? Can you prove that what they’re doing has value added? Now there’s nothing wrong with that attitude but it’s a completely market way of doing things. That’s very much a bottom line kind of mentality. So we find that market forces are ubiquitous and you might say there have always been market forces, and it’s true that capitalist societies are run by market mechanisms.

But in addition to the familial counter-forces that I just mentioned with reference to ownership of newspapers, there have usually been very strong religious or communal or ideological counter-forces. The twentieth century was a century of ‘isms’. Like them or not, isms like capitalism, socialism, and fascism, were counter-forces to a purely market approach. Strong families, strong religious values, and strong community values all serve as counter-forces to market forces. But as those wane in power as they do all over the world, especially so in a time of globalization, then the market flexes its muscles more than ever.

I made a comment two years ago which
was incredibly prescient. I said that when the markets control everything, there’s only one profession left and that’s accounting. This is because accounting tells you whether the information about the market is accurate or not, and if the accountants can be influenced, can be ‘bought’ so to speak, if they ‘cook the books’ to use current vernacular, then essentially there’s no profession. This was a prescient comment because two years ago there was no particular reason to think that accountants were as deeply flawed as we have learned that they were, with Enron and Global Crossing and WorldCom and so on, because these companies were audited by Arthur Anderson and Price Waterhouse and Pete Marwick and so on, the biggest accounting companies. And it now comes clear that these accounting companies were anything but objective. They didn’t do due diligence. If anything they helped to cook the books, helped to fix the figures, were in bed with the CEO’s and other managers of these companies. So you can see the risk in a market drenched world when even the information about the markets is no longer accurate. And the reason the Stock Market in the United States, Nikkei in Tokyo, and the Hang Seng in Hong Kong are so low, just a percentage of where they were two years ago, is not primarily because of 9/11, not primarily because of the impact on the Twin Towers. It’s not even primarily because a company named Enron went bankrupt. It’s because people like you and me no longer believe we should invest in stocks because we no longer believe there’s honest information about the value of those companies. And in a market world, that’s a very, very serious problem.

Now I said earlier that if we did the study of journalism and genetics in the year 2002, we might find a somewhat different picture of alignment. And I can give you a few bits of evidence about that. Since 9/11, journalism has become much more important. Tabloids have less appeal. People want to know what’s going on militarily, in defence, with different racial and ethnic groups, anthrax, other kinds of bio-terror, and quite suddenly the news is more serious. Newspapers are devoting more attention to such topics. Monika Lewinsky, and Gary Condit, the congressman, are no longer headlines as they were before 9/11. So journalism is somewhat better aligned. No miracles, but it’s a somewhat more embattled, somewhat more looked-toward profession.

Nothing bad has happened to genetics, but there are danger signs. One, there’s much less money available for scientific research, for all kinds of reasons. Two, there have been some fatalities due to misapplied genetic therapy. This is very worrisome. Three, and I think most troublesome, it has now become clear that most research in genetics is no longer government funded, but funded by private companies or profit companies which have a vested interest in certain kinds of results and not others; and these companies often ask the researchers to keep their research secretly. It is often hard to get peer review in genetics research because everybody is being paid by one Biochem or Biotech company or another. So I see the handwriting on the wall, with respect to alignment within the area of genetics. My own prediction is that you’re going to be seeing much more misalignment and not alignment in genetics in coming years.

I said earlier that our study has expanded in various ways. I want to mention briefly what they are because some of you may have some questions about what else we’ve looked at—education, the law. We’ve carried out a study of business that is quite interesting because the question arises, “Is business a profession?” We would like to look at up to a dozen different professions if
we could find the funding to do that.

A second dimension is age. We have worked with youngsters as young as 10 years of age, kids gifted and talented in different domains who see their own attitudes toward good work, and we in fact have drafted a book called *Workers in Progress* about the development of very young workers. (Authors’ note: *Making Good: How Young People Cope with Moral Dilemmas at Work* was published by the Harvard University Press in February 2004). One of the things that was amazing is how at a very young age, just 10 or 12, kids are already very concerned about two things. One, whether there will be any balance in their lives when stressed. Number two, whether they’ll make enough money. In light of the events of the last two years, that latter will be even a greater concern.

We’re investigating people of all ages, up to what we call trustees. Trustees are wise people, people like John Gardner to whom we dedicated our book--People who worry about the fate of the whole domain or even the whole society. Another example is Edward R. Murrow who was a very distinguished American journalist. He was very devoted toward protecting that craft. So another dimension of our work is looking at good work at different ages, from children all the way to trustees.

The third dimension that we’re just beginning is to look at good work internationally. We’re under no illusion whatsoever that the United States has all the answers to good work. We were working in the United States because of convenience—that’s where we live. But we have a colleague in Scandinavia who’s been working both in Scandinavian countries and in Latvia, a former communist state, and trying to investigate notions of good work in those very different kinds of politics. And we hope some day if we could find other people, collaborators from other countries who are interested in these issues, we’ll be able to look at good work in different parts of the globe.

We also have a few other studies that we’ve done in the margins, so to speak. One of the studies is what’s called a lineage study. With the lineage study we find a very senior person, say someone like Edward R. Murrow, and then we look at his or her students, grand students, and great grand students; our goal is, to see the extent to which beliefs and values of these heads of the lineages are transmitted from one generation to another. We hope to be able to demonstrate that good work or bad work is basically conveyed from one person to another. You’re likely to be a good worker if you are surrounded by good workers. You’re likely to be a bad worker or a ‘no-good’ worker if you’re surrounded by other people who are bad workers or ‘no–good’ workers. Edward R. Murrow was born at the turn of the century and he was a mentor for people like Walter Cronkite who many of you will know as a leading newscaster for CBS in America for many years. The Murrow generation is dying out, as is his first generation of students. But one person in one institution still is in the Edward R. Murrow lineage. I am referring to National Public Radio, which I hope is known to many of you. The senior news analyst, Daniel Schorr, is one of the last people in the Edward R. Murrow lineage. I am referring to National Public Radio, which I hope is known to many of you. The senior news analyst, Daniel Schorr, is one of the last people in the Edward R. Murrow lineage. Many of the younger people at National Public Radio who work with Schorr, I consider to be good workers. In sum, while the Good Work Project was initially an attempt to look at simply a set of professions, now we’re looking at a number of related issues having to do with age, lineages, trustees, different countries, and so on.

Let me move toward the conclusion of my talk. First of all, let me give you an example of what you do when you are an aspiring good worker but it’s difficult to do
good work. To make it concrete, let’s say that you are an investigative journalist. You believe that the important thing about journalism is to find out what really happened and to make it public, to soothe the afflicted and challenge the powerful. But your boss says ‘we’re not going to do investigative reporting anymore, it’s too expensive, doesn’t yield much’, and as I mentioned before ‘it might threaten our chief advertisers’. What can you do? Well you can quit and go and sell insurance, but you probably don’t want to quit, and if you have kids and a mortgage to pay and you want to send them to higher education, at least in the United States, you probably can’t afford to quit. So one reaction is just to put up with your boss. Another one is to be a guerrilla worker. That means you say “Yes, yes, I’m going to quit”, but actually you keep on doing investigative reporting and sometimes you’ll get fired. Sometimes your boss will get fired first in which case you’re the winner. And sometimes you’ll get an accolade like a Pulitzer Prize and that serves as a protective device. If your investigative reporting gets very much rewarded, then you build a certain kind of protective shield around you. That certainly would count as good work but it’s a risky kind of good work.

In our study we are particularly interested in people who actually try to change institutions or create new institutions that allow them to do good work. In the United States now National Public Radio is taken for granted as is C-Span and CNN, but these are all inventions in the last 25 years by people who felt dissatisfied with the big networks like ABC, CBS, and NBC. So, individually or corporately, these social entrepreneurs created new entities that allowed them to do good work.

You will know that in the United States now we have many charter schools. Charter schools are controversial, though not as controversial as voucher schools. But charter schools are efforts by people to say ‘we don’t like the way the schools are now, we’re going to create our own school in our own image’, and that those people are often aspiring good workers.

So an option when you are an aspiring good worker is to quit; this is sad but some people do it. About a third of young journalists leave journalism. Almost no young geneticist leaves genetics. Simply ‘do what you’re told’, which is the option most of us would select because it’s too hard to do anything else. Say ‘yes, yes’ but do what you believe is right and hope you’ll ask for forgiveness rather than permission. Or, the most praiseworthy or the most courageous, I guess, is to try to organize your own entity that allows you to do good work.

What are the leverages that encourage good work? Interestingly enough, strong religious values often promote good work and this is independent of whether people consider themselves to be religious. We interviewed many people who had a religious background who no longer are churchgoers or even believers in God, but for whom that strong value system is very, very important. Early values (which don’t have to be religious, but in the United States almost always are) are a vital contributor to good work. Another factor is what we call vertical support. Vertical support means working with supervisors, mentors, masters, leaders, and bosses who are themselves good workers. And conversely trying to create good work in your own professional offspring. Horizontal support is support from your peers. If you’re in a place with peers who try to do good work, that’s going to be a positive factor. On the other hand, if you’re the only person trying to do good work in a place where most people are indifferent workers or bad workers, that’s going to be a real deterrent. But even if you’ve got good values and you’re in an
organization which has a vision of good work, like the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post all have; and even if you have horizontal support--other people like you, at the same level who are trying to do good work--it still may be very difficult if you don’t get occasional booster shots or inoculations. And experiences that remind people what it’s like to do good work, which help them to do it, could be tremendously important.

My colleague Bill Damon who was in charge of our journalism study has joined forces with two good workers in journalism, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, to create a traveling curriculum that goes to newsrooms all over America. This curriculum discusses issues of good work and gives specific strategies of how to do good work in a time when the pressures are enormously powerful. We have no illusion that we will solve individually the problems of good work in journalism, but these kinds of inoculation booster shot experiences can, we believe, be very important for individuals in mid life, and mid career.

In closing I want to do two things. One, talk with you about the four M’s that people can do if they want to do good work, and then the five M’s of people who gave me insight into what good work is.

First, the four M’s. The first M is mission. If you want to do good work, whether you are a professor, teacher, journalist, doctor, business person, or actor, you have to say, “what is my mission, and what am I trying to accomplish in my work?” And that can’t be just something written in a mission statement. It’s got to be something you believe in your heart. Why did you choose this particular calling?

The next M is model. Who do you admire, and why? Who do you look up to and say, “I would like to be a worker like them”. Who do you think about and say, “What would Edward R. Murrow or Daniel Schorr or Albert Schweitzer, Jonas Salk, Rachel Carson do in a situation like this?”.

Who are the anti-mentors? Who are the people you’d never look up to? I don’t want to be like Rupert Murdoch, not one of my heroes--but you can choose your own anti-mentors.

So missions, models, and then two mirror tests. A personal mirror test is when I look at myself in a mirror as a worker, and ask myself if I am proud of what I see or if I am embarrassed. And if I’m embarrassed by myself as a worker, what can I do so I could look at myself clearly, transparently, and not feel badly about the kind of work I do?

The fourth M is the professional mirror test. If I look at my occupation as a whole--all teachers, all professors, all priests, all clergymen, all business people--am I proud or embarrassed about how my profession is behaving? Because even if you are doing good work, if the rest of your profession isn’t, perhaps you have an obligation to work on your profession as a trustee.

So those are the four M’s which we see as the root of good work--mission, models, personal mirror, professional mirror test.

Then the 5 M’s. The first M is for Margaret Mead--I mentioned her earlier. Margaret Mead said, “Never condemn the small group of people who get together to do something new. Nothing important in the world has ever happened any other way.” What Margaret Mead says is if you want to do it right in your profession, don’t wait for other people to do it. Get together with a small group of fellow believers and go do it.

Jean Monet, the great French economist who had the idea for the European union of common market, said, “I regard every defeat as an opportunity.” People who try to do good work are going to be defeated a lot--it’s an uphill battle. But rather than giving up or ‘kicking the dog’, they’re challenged and energized by this non alignment and they work even harder to try to make this
come out right. The best workers we studied are people who say, “I won’t know till 50 years after I’m dead whether what I’m pushing for is going to work out and that’s exactly why I’m doing what I’m doing.”

The third M is Moliere, the French playwright, Jean-Baptiste Moliere. Moliere has said, “You’re responsible not only for what you do but for what you don’t do.” And that’s where the professional mirror test is important, especially as you get older and more influential—you ought to try to help your profession, not just keep your own house quarter.

The last two M’s are kind of cheating, but they’re sort of funny cheating. One is E.M. Foster, a great British novelist, whose nickname was Morgan. In his most famous utterance, Foster said, “Only connect.” What we tried to do in the Good Work Project is to connect a moral sense of goodness with the expertise sense of goodness, because we think that’s needed in the world nowadays. If there had been more good workers in the accounting firms, we wouldn’t be in the mess that we talked about earlier.

The final M is from a person local to me, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the ‘Sage of Conquered’, as he was called. Emerson memorably said, “Character is more important than intellect.” I’ve spent most of my life studying intelligence. I’m a cognitive psychologist and I’m known for my theory of multiple intelligences, but I’ve reached a point where I realize that it doesn’t matter in the long run how smart you are or even how you are smart. If you don’t have good character, if you don’t try to right things, it’s really all going to come to nought.

References