The Unlikely Key to a Gracious View of Others (and Yourself)

LOW ANTHROPOLOGY

DAVID ZAHL

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BrazosPress
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Introduction

“I FEEL LIKE EVERYONE ELSE GOT SOME MANUAL when they turned twenty-five, and I was sick that day,” Josh said.

“What kind of manual?” I asked.

He gave me a weary look. “You know, a guide to adult life—with instructions on mortgages and insurance policies and dry cleaning and long-term relationships and raising kids who don’t hate you.”

“Oh, *that* manual,” I responded. “I think I let your brother borrow mine.”

Josh smiled, but I could tell he was being serious. Like me, he was in the trenches of the days-are-long-but-years-are-short stage of midlife. He’d had a rough go of it lately, losing a job he’d long lobbied for just as his daughter decided to dial up the teenage rebellion to eleven. I knew his marriage had been struggling as a result, and he almost never got out anymore.

It didn’t help that his younger brother was apparently “killing it” in the city as a commercial real-estate broker. Most of Josh’s and my interactions these days had been limited to sending his brother’s Instagram posts back and forth, trying to poke enough fun not to sound too jealous. Oh, to be young, single, and preternaturally photogenic.

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"Just tell me I'm not the only one who's making it up as he goes," he said.

He definitely is not. I'd heard some version of Josh's refrain hundreds of times, sometimes from my own mouth. Earlier that day, in fact, in my capacity as a staff member at our local church, I'd gotten an email from a college student named Addie who felt like she was the only person in her pre-med program hanging on for dear life. "It just seems to come so easily for everyone else," she said. "I honestly don't know why they let me in."

I was late for coffee with Josh, so I typed her a quick message and attached an article on the pressure of perfection that I thought might shed some light. The piece, published in the *New York Times* a few years prior, seeks to account for the fast-rising levels of mental-health emergencies on college campuses. At one point it cites Gregory T. Eells, then-director of counseling and psychological services at Cornell University. Eells mentions hearing sentiments like Addie's from other students with alarming frequency—this sense that everyone else is happy and not struggling. His go-to response is to inform them that the struggles are more widespread: "I walk around and think, 'That one's gone to the hospital. That person has an eating disorder. That student just went on antidepressants.' As a therapist, I know that nobody is as happy or as grown-up as they seem on the outside."[1]

You don't have to be a college student or a parent of teenagers to experience what Josh and Addie are describing. They are both in the throes of imposter syndrome, the nagging sense that you don't belong, that it's only a matter of time before the house of cards comes crashing down.

After twenty years in the people profession—and twenty before that growing up in the house of a pastor—I'm fairly certain this syndrome is universal. It's less of a syndrome and more of a

1. Julie Scelfo, "Suicide on Campus and the Pressure of Perfection," *New York Times*, July 27, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/education/edlife/stress-social-media-and-suicide-on-campus.html.

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condition, best expressed in that timeless cartoon of a crowded street abuzz with people headed in different directions, all sharing the same thought balloon: "All these people really seem to have it together, and I still have no idea what's going on." Can you relate?

Josh could. I pulled up the cartoon on my phone, and this time the smile he gave me lit up his eyes. His entire body seemed to relax as his *anthropology* visibly readjusted.

We're All Anthropologists

Don't be put off by the four-dollar word. I'm not talking about graduate-level courses on the customs of aboriginal tribes. Nor am I talking about a chain of boho-chic clothing and décor stores. At base, *anthropology* simply means what we believe about human nature.

We all go through life with powerful, often unspoken ideas about what human beings are like. For example, we believe that "people can always change" or that "some people can never change." We believe that "pressure produces results" or that "pressure produces paralysis." More generally, though, what would we say humans are good at? Not so good at? What principles govern our behavior and make us distinctly human?

Theologians and philosophers call how we answer these questions our anthropology. For our purposes, we can define anthropology as our operative theory of human nature.

Whether we realize it or not, our personal anthropology funds expectations in our relationships, jobs, marriages, and politics. Its bearing on our worldview—and, therefore, our happiness—cannot be overstated. For example, some anthropologies lead to serious disappointment, anger, and cynicism. Other anthropologies can be energizing and life-giving.

This is not to suggest that things are always clear-cut. Conceptions of human nature can be carefully constructed and spelled out, or they can be open-ended and unconscious. They can arise

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mainly from experience, or mainly from gut, or from learning, or from some combination thereof. What they can't be is nonexistent. Everybody has an anthropology.

Seeing people as they truly are, as opposed to how we would have them be, is a crucial ingredient in generating authentic compassion and lasting love. An accurate anthropology opens us to all sorts of unexpected vistas of hope—not a flimsy hope but one that endures.

Take Me to the Altar

In 2018, the London-based School of Life devised a video tutorial on "How to Get Married."[2] The aim was to update the traditional marriage service for a post-religious crowd without devolving into sentimentality. The results were, by design, both profound and hilarious.

The first order of business in this reconfigured ceremony is called the ritual of humility. Each party, dressed in their finest, faces the other and reads from their personalized "Book of Imperfections." They say, for example, "I'm not good at communicating my feelings maturely," "I tend to assume that if you're upset it's something about me," and so on. The Hallmark Channel this is not.

Unromantic as this first step sounds, it flows from the conviction that humility is the most important emotion for the success of a relationship. As the voiceover tells us, "Self-righteousness is, after all, the great enemy of love." In other words, if you are focused on your own rightness, the other person in the relationship will inevitably appear wrong. You will wonder why they cannot change to be more like you.

It is hard to be in a relationship with someone who never says they're sorry. And it's nigh on impossible to be loved when you

2. "How to Get Married," YouTube video, 7:27, posted by the School of Life, April 26, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hAa9BIGNpU.

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never let your guard down. True intimacy requires vulnerability and forgiveness, so why not make that explicit on the big day?

After the reading, the couple looks each other in the eye and recites in unison, "Neither of us is fully sane or healthy. We are committed to treating each other as broken people, with enormous kindness and imagination—when we can manage it."

This modest declaration elicits a smile, even a chuckle, from the onlookers and participants. You can almost hear the inner monologues. *Now* this *sounds like something I can get on board with! All that comfort-honor-and-keep stuff was so daunting.*

Next, the congregation chimes in with a recitation of their own. As one, they issue the following affirmation: "We are all broken. We have all been idiots and will be idiots again. We are all difficult to live with. We sulk and we get angry, blame others for our own mistakes, have strange obsessions, and fail to compromise. We are here to make you less lonely with your failings. We'll never know all the details, but we understand."

I've shown the clip in public at least thirty times and never had a group not crack up at this point.[3] We're simply not used to that degree of candor in such a solemn context. It would be hasty, however, to dismiss the bit as pure comedy.

Some might say the service is clever but a little dour. Isn't your wedding supposed to be a day of aspiration and beauty? An occasion to lift up love and charity, to celebrate the best of your spouse-to-be, not talk about their abiding idiocy? We have every other day of the year to court cynicism. Allow us this one fairy-tale moment.

Yet most viewers have the opposite reaction. They find the honesty refreshing and even cheerful. They see a picture of two people coming together in full view of their flaws, and as a result, the connection exudes hope, not dismay.

The School of Life put together what we might call a *low anthropology* wedding.

3. The older the crowd, the louder the laughter.

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How Low Can You Go?

Anthropologies can be charted on a continuum from high to low. Think of it as a barometer of human potential. On the "high" end, we find sunnier estimations of what women and men are like. We run into grander visions of human enterprise. The higher we get, the more optimistic the assumptions. For example, any characterization of human beings as basically good belongs on this end. We may not be perfect or perfectible, mind you, but we are generally decent when unsullied by outside forces. The primary limitations we encounter in life are the ones we place on ourselves, and so forth. Such sentiments would fall under the banner of *high anthropology*.

Graduation speeches may be ground zero for the proliferation of anthropologies. Apple guru Steve Jobs drew on the high side of the scale for just such an occasion: "Have the courage to follow your heart and intuition," he told graduates. "They somehow know what you truly want to become."[4]

On the "low" end of the spectrum sit the more sober estimations. We find understandings of the human spirit as something that veers, by default, in a malign direction and, as a result, cannot flourish without assistance or constraint. We find descriptions of people as finite, blind, and, in many cases, quite weak. This lower end does not discount our noble and good impulses but suggests that we are underdogs in the struggle to heed them. Our humanity contains an ineluctable dark side, whatever we say to the contrary. This does not mean we're incapable of sacrificial love and charity. It just means that the moments we demonstrate those ideals are the exception, not the rule.[5]

Anne Lamott articulates a low anthropology when she observes, "Everyone is screwed up, broken, clingy, and scared, even

4. "'You've Got to Find What You Love,' Jobs Says," commencement address, Stanford News, June 12, 2005, https://news.stanford.edu/2005/06/14/jobs-061505/.

5. The temptation to equate high with good and low with bad is both strong and understandable, but as we will see, that dichotomy only maps in part.

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the people who seem to have it more or less together. They are much more like you than you would believe. So try not to compare your insides to their outsides."[6]

A high anthropology views people as defined by their best days and greatest achievements, their dreams and their aspirations. A low anthropology assumes a through line of heartache and self-doubt, that the bulk of our mental energy is focused on subjects that would be embarrassing or even shameful if broadcast, and that our ability to do the right thing in any given situation is hampered by all sorts of unseen factors.

Since this is a continuum, high and low are not the only options. Maybe we try to hew a middle path by maintaining the essential neutrality of the species. We come into this life as a blank slate, and how we turn out has everything to do with the influences we encounter along the way. "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains" is how the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau put it.[7]

Or perhaps we mix and match. There are good people and bad people, and the great task of life is trying to figure out who's who. Many of our favorite stories—in Hollywood and elsewhere—follow this line of thinking in their portrayal of heroes and villains.

Not that we're always consistent. After all, many of our assumptions about human nature operate below the level of conscious thought, according to disposition and personality rather than intention or deduction. So maybe we say we expect people to be generally self-absorbed, yet when they act that way toward us, we are shocked. Or possibly we are scandalized by a neighbor's altruism and insist on locating a sinister motive behind every act of kindness.

6. Anne Lamott, "Anne Lamott Shares All That She Knows: 'Everyone Is Screwed Up, Broken, Clingy, and Scared,'" *Salon*, April 10, 2015, https://www.salon.com/2015/04/10/anne_lamott_shares_all_that_she_knows_everyone_is_screwed_up_broken_clingy_and_scared/.

7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. George Douglas Howard Cole (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1920), 5.

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Note your responses to Jobs and Lamott. On the one hand, Lamott's words sound a little harsh at first, do they not? Sure, *I* may be a little scared and clingy, but *everyone*? Isn't that extreme? That guy Darren from high school sure seemed comfortable in his own skin. Plus, if you heard a friend refer to themselves with Lamott's language, you'd probably assume they were depressed and would want to give them a pep talk: "Don't be so hard on yourself; you're just going through a rough time right now."

On the other hand, Jobs's invitation must have inspired those graduates, wouldn't you think? How fortunate they were to walk away with the knowledge that they already possessed everything they needed to become the next Steve Jobs.

But say you had a tough week, spoke insensitively to a loved one, or fumbled the ball at work. Lamott's description all of a sudden might strike you as more accurate. You might feel recognized by her words and a little burdened by Jobs's exhortation. After all, you're no longer twenty-two and don't always like what you've become or where your intuitions have steered you. Where is *my* courage? *My* good intuition?

Lamott's admission conveys compassion. You can feel your shoulders unknot. Jobs's advice, not so much. His words convey pressure.

This is the great irony of low anthropology: what sounds insulting is actually liberating, and what sounds liberating at first is actually oppressive and embittering.

Where I'm Calling From

My interest in this topic—and conviction about its urgency—stems from several factors. First, I have spent more than ten years working with college students at a major public university. The uptick in anxiety and basic unhappiness over that period has been pronounced. A report published in the journal *Pharmacotherapy* found that, from 2007 to 2019, the proportion of college students

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with prescriptions for antidepressants or antianxiety medication essentially doubled.[8] In the conversations I have with students, they tend to describe school—and life—in one of two ways: either as a series of audiences to impress or as an adversarial environment full of potential enemies and allies, where failure must be avoided at all costs.

As a result, I see fewer social and intellectual risks being taken every year, less venturing out of one's comfort zone, and more burnout. Real connection with fellow students seems to be in shorter supply, prompting many of them to retreat into bubbles—viewing other "types" of students as cardboard cutouts to be avoided or appeased but never engaged. Keeping your head down is much safer. Moreover, they think they're the only ones having a hard time or barely staying afloat. Social media amplifies this perception a hundredfold.

Yet this perception isn't restricted to eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds. I hear basically the same thing from my peers in their forties. Which brings me to my second point. I have preached nearly twenty years' worth of sermons at various churches across the country. With almost zero exceptions, the sermons that have garnered the most enthusiastic response—the ones that people remember years later—are the ones that assume the listener is suffering. No matter how poised the audience appears, talks on depression, betrayal, addiction, grief, loneliness, and greed resonate much deeper than those on more upbeat topics. In fact, the more you emphasize the hurts of life, the more people feel known and uplifted.

This applies across every demographic I can think of. I've spoken to audiences that are more educated than others, or older, or more affluent, or more outwardly pious. Some audiences skew more conservative, some more progressive. Some lean more female,

8. Marcia R. Morris et al., "Use of Psychiatric Medication by College Students: A Decade of Data," *Pharmacotherapy* 41, no. 4 (April 2021): 350–58, https://doi.org/10.1002/phar.2513.

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some more male; some are racially diverse, and some are homogeneous. But I've never encountered an audience that didn't recognize the reality of regret, or the fear of being unloved, or the nagging suspicion of not being enough.

Third, and related to the second factor, we are living in a time marked by deep division and acrimony. People from different backgrounds and ideologies have never had a harder time talking to—or listening to—one another, and the result is a fraying social fabric that infects our day-to-day with the worst kind of tribalism. You cannot turn on the TV or peruse a news website without breathing in some of the fumes.

These antagonisms, even when well founded, are painful. The temptation toward retreat grows stronger with each fresh meme ridiculing the other side as evil or insane. The question becomes whether there is anything other than death and taxes we might appeal to in order to bridge the gaps in human experience. Or are our differences, be they biological or socialized, too deep to overcome?

Low anthropology is my attempt at an answer. I am convinced that if you want to see an increase in hope, understanding, and unity amid the engulfing mercilessness of today—indeed, if you want to communicate anything approaching grace—you must begin with a low anthropology. Vulnerability, as Brené Brown says, is the birthplace of love.[9]

Last, I've found that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, makes very little sense in the context of a high anthropology. Words like *sin* and *salvation* are scarcely intelligible to a person persuaded of their own virtuousness. If anything, ascribing blanket moral limitations to one's fellow humans (or oneself) is considered judgmental at best, dangerous at worst.

As someone persuaded of the veracity of the Christian gospel—and that it is a force for good unlike any other—I am saddened to see Christianity lose its unique insights about who we are (and, by

9. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham, 2012), 34.

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extension, who God is). After all, it was Christ who said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17 NRSV). He was not interested in the role models, the moral strivers, or those whose lives were a template for perfection. He beelined toward those whose ledgers were tipped toward failure and who couldn't seem to find a way out of the messes they'd made (see Rom. 5:6).

But my concern moves beyond ecclesial or confessional loyalties. Because no matter our religious background or beliefs, we are all well acquainted with the fallout of tireless perfectionism. It is killing us. The advent of a place we might bring our failures and inadequacies—where those liabilities might be upended and even redeemed—well, that would be welcome news indeed.

What Low Anthropology Isn't

A few common misconceptions about low anthropology are worth dispelling at the outset.

To begin with, low anthropology, especially from a religious point of view, sometimes provides a rationale for shame or self-loathing. Likely this has to do with how one of the major antecedents of low anthropology—original sin—has been misused. We'll explore the precise contours of the relationship between low anthropology and sin later, but for now it bears stating that self-loathing is usually born out of a high anthropology rather than a low one. That is, people are more likely to be ashamed of themselves if they are working with inflated notions of what they are capable of. The better you expect yourself to be, the more crushed you will be when you fall short—and the more fuel you'll have for negative self-regard.

A low anthropology gives us permission to look at ourselves clearly without hiding behind a scaffolding of self-flattery. It frees us from the tyranny of expectation, which fuels resentment of others.

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Second, low anthropology can strike modern ears as defeatist, an invitation to a "Why bother?" shrug. I suppose, like many things, a low anthropology can be used as an excuse not to try. But as we will see, apathy actually represents a flight from low anthropology rather than an embracing of it. It constitutes a refusal to "go there" when it comes to the suffering in and around us as well as an avoidance of the goodness and beauty on offer in so many unexpected places. It takes enormous courage to see the world as it truly is and move forward in love. This extends to oneself as well.

The reality is that low anthropology paves a way for real growth and momentum. It does this because it shifts a person's hopes from their own internal resources (willpower, discipline, natural energy level) to external possibilities. It opens a person to the outside world, to the possibility of love and the surprise of grace.

Put another way, if you think your only hope for happiness or betterment lies within you, then you'll give up when your limitations are revealed—or when your capacities expire with age. If, on the other hand, you accept those fallibilities, well, everything is gravy. The world is your playground, and setbacks are nothing more than par for the course.

This has certainly been true in my own life. Almost every significant experience of grace—either given or received—can be traced to the wellspring of low anthropology. This applies to my marriage, my relationship with my kids, and my dealings with friends and coworkers, to say nothing of strangers. Low anthropology keeps the avenues of communication open. It provides a bulwark against burnout. It has led to a kinder view of myself and a fount of curiosity, courtesy, honesty, humor, compassion, connection, and love. In those times that I've lost sight of low anthropology, feelings of self-righteousness, resentment, and disconnection have been quick to follow.

In coming chapters, we will explore exactly how this occurs in various areas of our lives, from relationships to religion to politics.

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We will also lay out a few of the ways we dodge low anthropology as well as the fruit we often see when someone welcomes it. The goal is to examine how low anthropology fuels hope rather than despair, both materially and spiritually.

Bryan Stevenson captures the nature of this hope with unswerving potency in his bestselling memoir, *Just Mercy*. The book (and subsequent movie) dramatizes Stevenson's advocacy on behalf of inmates on death row. These are men who, in most cases, have been convicted of heinous and violent crimes. They occupy the lowest rung on the social ladder and are seldom the recipients of sympathy or interest from the outside world.

How does Bryan keep going, year after year, when the cards seem so stacked against him and his clients? "I do what I do because I'm broken too," he confesses.

> We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. I desperately wanted mercy for [a client] . . . but I couldn't pretend that his struggle was disconnected from my own. Our shared brokenness connected us.
>
> Our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion.[10]

Fortunately, you don't have to be on death row to experience the life-affirming communion being offered. You can be a student struggling to keep up with your classmates or a bride standing in front of an over-flowered altar. You can be a retiree looking to come to terms with a life that you hope has been well lived. You can even be a middle-aged father drowning in what feels like a sea of obligations and scrambling for a manual to guide you through.

10. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2014), 289.

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1) The Problem of High Anthropology

THERE IS AN OLD TROPE about job interviews that's hard to resist. After an employer asks you about your strengths, they follow up with a question about weaknesses. You're required to divulge a few of what you consider to be your "growing edges." Instead of admitting what actually springs to mind—maybe you struggle with deadlines—you trot out that beloved chestnut: "My main issue is that I'm too much of a perfectionist." You don't say?

This is a humblebrag—a way of framing a strength as a weakness—and even when transparent, it's enough to check the box. Make no mistake: possessing high standards that you'll work toward without much external motivation is not a liability for a potential boss. The company can only benefit. It's one step away from copping to workaholism. You can picture the interviewer barely suppressing a grin while saying, "Well, we'll try our best not to penalize you for perfectionism."

Of course, perfectionism—the real, not the feigned kind—takes its own penalty. It may get you a job in the short run, but over the long haul it exacts a serious toll. This is because a perfectionist has usually equated their performance at x, y, or z with their value as a person. Their fear of not being good enough drives them to accept

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nothing less than pristine levels of achievement and presentation, even if it means neglecting their relationships or well-being.

Alas, since perfection doesn't really exist where human beings are concerned—there's always someone just a bit better than you—perfectionism turns life into a perpetual falling short and therefore a bed of exhaustion and anxiety. As journalist Will Storr writes, "Perfectionism is the idea that kills."[1] It is not something to brag about.

Perhaps at one point perfectionism was solely the bastion of type A overachievers and nervous types who couldn't leave well enough alone. Today, thanks in large part to the internet, it is more widespread. Take what writer Ada Calhoun noticed in 2020. Having reached middle age, with all the attendant opportunities and prosperity, she was struck by how unhappy most of her peers seemed. She set out to discover why women her age were having trouble sleeping. She found that a great number of them were struggling with an unspoken imperative to shine in every area of life: "In the past the question was, how nice is your home? Or how good are you at your job? Now it's like, it's all of the things. So it's—are you a good parent? Are you good at work? Is your house nice? Are you in shape? Are you recycling? Like, it's every single factor in life you have to excel at."[2]

In some cases, that pressure was communicated by a parent or a teacher, but most of the time it was more free-floating, the result of years of seeing advertisements and social media posts by others who appeared to "have it all." The opportunities afforded to these women's mothers had become mandates for the daughters, and the situation was not producing peace. As Calhoun remarked, "The idea that [women] could do anything somehow morphed . . . into a directive that they must do everything—and do it all effortlessly."[3]

1. Will Storr, *Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us* (New York: Abrams, 2018), 17.

2. Ada Calhoun, "'Why We Can't Sleep' Documents the Unique Pressures on Gen X Women," interview by Rachel Martin, NPR, January 7, 2020, transcript, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/794022766.

3. Ada Calhoun, "Gen X Author Ada Calhoun Discusses the Unique Challenges Facing Her Peers," interview by Susan Pascal, *Maria Shriver's Sunday Paper*,

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Men have their own set of imperatives to contend with—to win the rat race; pay those college bills; keep the vacations coming while remaining completely present, stable, and strong (but never stoic); and so on—and the effect is the same: demoralization.

What binds together all aspects of perfectionism is the underlying anthropology. In order to be a perfectionist, you have to believe, consciously or otherwise, that human beings can get a lot closer to perfection than they are right now. You have to believe that some of us really can do it all, if we could just figure out the right strategy.

The internet takes whatever inclinations we have in this direction and runs with them. We all know what it's like to gaze longingly, or despondently, at other people's achievements. We may know that what we're seeing is no less curated than what we put out there, but that knowledge seldom does much for us. Instead, we convince ourselves that perfection—or the appearance of it—lies within our reach. Then we spend our blood, sweat, and tears in that pursuit.

The result of this perfectionism has a name: burnout. Burnout describes the emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress. It manifests as restlessness, procrastination, apathy, and low-level persistent unhappiness. To be burned out is to feel like you cannot take on one more task—and there's *always* one more task. You try too hard for too long to fulfill the demands of modern life, and then you lose the capacity to fulfill any of them. *Errand paralysis* is a commonly used term for it.

Burnout is more than tiredness.[4] It is often accompanied by a nagging guilt over not feeling more grateful. On top of whatever

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January 26, 2021, https://mariashriver.com/gen-x-author-ada-calhoun-discusses-the-unique-challenges-facing-her-peers. Cue the classic McSweeney's headline "Woman Hospitalized after Attempting Effortless Lifestyle." This satirical essay by Patricia Lawler Kenet is available at https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/medical-report-woman-hospitalized-after-attempting-effortless-lifestyle.

4. It is never less than tiredness, though. As the term *burnout* begins to, er, burn out, we have started coining specific terms for fatigue. There is zoom fatigue, outrage fatigue, compassion fatigue, etc.

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listlessness you're feeling lies the conviction that you have no right to feel that way, not when others have it so much worse. At the same time, burnout feels like betrayal. It involves the dawning, somewhat shameful realization that the treadmill you're on isn't taking you where the manual said it would. You have been sold a false bill of goods and are sick of pretending otherwise.

You might think burnout would primarily affect those on the older end of the age spectrum. Yet the phenomenon first went viral in relation to millennials, who at the time had hardly been in the workforce long enough to be wrung out. Young professionals, it turns out, are just the tip of the iceberg. High schoolers feel burned out, their parents feel burned out, teachers feel burned out, artists, shopkeepers, candlestick makers—you name it. No matter the date on our driver's license, the majority of us feel like someone five years from retirement.

It's easy to blame smart technology and social media for our collective burnout, but the problem runs deeper than the tools we've used to get there. Anne Helen Petersen, the journalist who put the term on the map, notes that "deep down, millennials know the primary exacerbator of burnout isn't really email, or Instagram, or a constant stream of news alerts. It's the continuous failure to reach the impossible expectations we've set for ourselves."[5]

Impossible expectations, in this case, translate to the expectation of across-the-board excellence. We may pay lip service to our failures in public, but even those weaknesses must be vetted so as never to cross the line into impropriety. Confessions of cluttered bedrooms and administrative snafus are relatable; confessions of berating your children or casual bigotry, not so much.

These expectations aren't always related to achievement. They apply just as much to what people refer to today as *emotional labor*. Author and pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber talks about her emotional circuit breaker getting overloaded by gutting headlines. She

5. Anne Helen Petersen, *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (New York: Mariner, 2020), 177.

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surfaces the pressure that many well-meaning people feel in the age of Twitter not only to care about every wrong but also to let everyone know how much we care about every wrong and what we are doing to help. And if you don't say something, that silence can indicate complicity.

There may be real urgency to the causes we encounter, but taken together, the burden is too much for any single person to absorb, let alone address in a meaningful way. In Bolz-Weber's view, the only possible result is breakdown: "I just do not think our psyches were developed to hold, feel and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day."[6]

She then counsels, in true low anthropology fashion, that it is okay to focus on one fire at a time. Despite what the voices inside and outside may insist, finite human beings cannot do everything, nor should we try.

The problem of burnout is in large part a problem of anthropology. Burnout derives from the inflated assumptions we carry about what we and other people are capable of. It derives from the ways that our employers perpetuate and profit off these assumptions. When we fail to live up to those "impossible expectations," we suffer not only the pain of falling short but also the sense that there's something uniquely wrong with us. No surprise, then, that a burned-out culture is a culture of despair.

Turn It Down

The first time I lived on my own I was twenty-four years old. My job involved a lot of car travel, and my supervisor insisted I live somewhere central. He suggested New Haven, Connecticut, home

6. Nadia Bolz-Weber, "If You Can't Take In Anymore, There's a Reason," *Corners* (Substack newsletter), August 17, 2021, https://thecorners.substack.com/p/if-you-cant-take-in-anymore-theres.

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of Yale University. A town full of people my own age sounded appealing, and it had easy access to the interstates and was not far from where my brother was living in New York. I had heard good things about the pizza too.[7]

I set about trying to find an apartment—without a roommate for the first time in a decade. It was exciting! That excitement dimmed a little after it became apparent that Yale dominated the rental market in town. Those not associated with the institution had to make do with spots off the beaten path, most of which had seen better days. Undaunted, I signed a lease on a place within walking distance of one of the better-known pizzerias. A small building, about eight units.

All went well for the first couple weeks. Then, one fateful weekend, a new tenant moved in upstairs. Cindra, ten years older than me, had just gotten out of a bad relationship. She wasn't super friendly, but that was fine. This was an apartment building, not a dormitory.

The first time her music woke me up at 2 a.m. I put a pillow over my ears and kept sleeping. I assumed she didn't realize how thin the walls were. The second time it happened, I thought about banging on the ceiling but resolved instead to say something the next time we bumped into each other. About a week after that, I got my chance. Running into her at our comically overflowing mail station, I made a crack about how many furniture catalogs does one building need. No smile. Oh well. I launched into the issue at hand, telling her I was a huge music person but was wondering if midnight was a reasonable cut-off point.

She stared at me blankly, muttered something, and walked up the stairs. That night the music was louder. This went on most nights for the next six months. Twice more I tried asking her to turn it down, and I spoke with the landlord, as did another tenant, but nothing changed. I started sleeping during the day and

7. All of which turned out to be true, thank God.

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eventually found another place to live. It was a baffling "welcome to the real world" experience.

Looking back, I can see that Cindra taught me an important lesson. I had never met someone so impervious to reason (and cornball charm). She knew full well that her music kept me up. I told her many times and begged her to adjust the volume. It did not change her behavior one bit and, indeed, seemed to make it worse.

If the assumption is that people are in control of themselves, then Cindra must have been trying to offend me. That is, if human beings are essentially reasonable, the fact that Cindra kept blasting electronic dance music left only two possible explanations: she either had a screw loose or was consciously mean. She was either pathological or evil. In either case, I could only conclude that she must be a different kind of person from me—a bad actor.

In this way, a high anthropology sets us up for division. When confronted with seemingly irrational actions—"How could they let their teenager drink so much?" or "Why does my boss continue to micromanage when everyone in the department keeps resigning?"—we shake our heads in disbelief. These are things *we'd* never do. A high anthropology prevents us from identifying with the other, especially at their point of dysfunction. And there is usually a point of dysfunction. The parents are insecure and desperate for their child to love them. The boss is so invested in his work that he takes other people's mistakes personally. And so on.

A more modest view of human nature looks for alternate explanations. It understands that all of us sometimes act in ways that defy good sense. Given the right circumstances and influences, we too might be cranking the dial on a Tuesday night. The real question is do we have enough imagination to dream up what might motivate *us* to do something like that (besides insanity or malice)?

Let's give it a try. Maybe Cindra was still reeling from that bad relationship and found the silence lonely. Maybe those were the hours when she couldn't stand to hear herself think. Maybe there were substances involved. Maybe she took one look at me and I

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reminded her of people she'd been deferring to her whole life and she could no longer stand it. None of these explanations would have made me want to stay in the building, but they certainly would have mitigated my contempt.

In the same way, an inflated estimation of human nature capsizes love for one's neighbor. If you assume that people are basically levelheaded and evenhanded, they will exasperate you when they make odd and self-defeating decisions instead of virtuous ones.

Neighborliness is a somewhat innocuous area. The same dynamic applies when it comes to debt, substance abuse, or relationships. Confusion and disappointment at another person's behavior lead to judgment, judgment leads to anger, and anger leads to antagonism. Before you know it, the world has quietly divided into two groups: the honest, sensible people "like me" and the ignorant and foolish ones "over there." The bifurcations multiply the further we travel from humility. We may even grow bitter at the world for its failure to conform to our notions of propriety.

As a mentor of mine once quipped, "There are two types of people in the world: those who think there are two types of people, and the rest of us."

The Like Button

If low anthropology accounts so adeptly for the way we act and feel, why do most of us seem to embrace a high anthropology? Possibly because, before a high anthropology isolates and confounds people, it flatters them. A high anthropology attributes to human beings a baseline of prudence in our decision-making and goodwill in our relationships. Give people reliable information and ample opportunity, and all things being equal, they'll do the right thing. Again, when things are going well, this is an easy view to hold. But when other people refuse to act in such a way as we believe they should (i.e., like us), that's when real problems begin.

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Look at Justin Rosenstein. In 2007, he left his position as a product manager at Google to work for Facebook. While there, he pioneered a new feature for the social media giant: the like button. Thanks to Rosenstein and his team, you could now give a thumbs-up to photos or posts that struck your fancy or could encourage your friends without needing to comment. These casual interactions would glue us together by fostering excitement over all the happy things going on in each other's lives.

What the engineers failed to foresee was that the like button would transform the platform into a popularity contest in which users could now compete for the tally-able approval of their peers. The like button, in other words, introduced a precious yet poisonous commodity—quantifiable affirmation—that would put erstwhile friends at odds with one another (and themselves). Flattening your personality into the one or two characteristics you think others will deem most likable doesn't just insulate you from them, by the way; it also fosters envy and self-recrimination.

You know how it works. Post a picture of yourself in an exotic locale, doing something daring, and the likes come fast and furious. Post a zinger of a headline—the more incendiary the better!—and attention spews forth. Soon you have both middle schoolers and their grandparents living according to the response they're able to garner online. This turns tragic when bullying behavior that never would have been risked or tolerated in person prompts offline acts of violence and self-harm.

In the 2020 documentary *The Social Dilemma*, Rosenstein explained, "When we were creating the like button, our entire motivation was, can we spread positivity and love in the world? The idea that, fast-forward to today and teens would be getting depressed when they don't have enough likes or it could be leading to political polarization was nowhere on our radar."[8]

8. *The Social Dilemma*, directed by Jeff Orlowski (Boulder, CO: Exposure Labs, Argent Pictures, and the Space Program, 2020), Netflix, https://www.netflix.com/title/81254224.

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Sadly, the team's operating anthropology was so high that the liabilities, which now seem obvious in hindsight, didn't even occur to them. They assumed that their tool would be used for what they intended. If there had been one person in the room with a *slightly* more realistic estimation of human nature, someone who could appreciate the overpowering and often sadistic allure of social approval, the mental health of a generation might have been different. The stakes are far from fictional.

Divided We Stand

Likes on Facebook are small potatoes compared to the tribalism they exacerbate. Once upon a time, our deepest divisions had to do with religion and nationality. Today, our chief antagonisms fall along political or ideological lines: progressive versus conservative, Republican versus Democrat, mainstream versus independent, Gen Z versus, well, everyone. The fervor runs hot on each side, with rhetoric occasionally erupting into in-person fisticuffs. Each camp paints the other not as misguided so much as nefarious, even evil.

This sort of division cannot take root without a high anthropology. After all, high anthropology allows people to hold their convictions—about the world, about themselves, about others—with an ironclad certainty unavailable to those who embrace a thoroughgoing fallibility in human affairs.

Such certainty, whether from the left or the right, is rooted in a rational view of other people and ourselves. *We* have the right information; *they* have fake news. *We* trust the science; *they* believe lies. We are so convinced that different information will change people's minds that when they don't agree with our carefully crafted Twitter rant, we assume they must be willfully idiotic.

Again, a low anthropologist seeks alternate explanations beneath the antipathy. They are curious about other people's views and attributes beyond willpower and conscious thought. Then

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they turn the interrogation upon themselves, recognizing how the same process is at work in the eye of the beholder.

Thus, those with a low anthropology can be 99 percent sure that something is right and true, but never 100 percent—which is sometimes the difference between taking up arms and not. That is to say, a low anthropology injects even our most heartfelt conclusions with humility. Per Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's aphorism, the line between good and evil runs through every human heart—not between demographics.[9] Anyone who tells you different is ignoring essential evidence from their own life.

While politics may be our most prevalent fault line, it is far from the only one. There's millennial versus boomer, north versus south, urban versus rural, privileged versus poor, college educated versus working class, religious versus secular, to say nothing of the heartbreaking tensions between racial and ethnic groups that seem to escalate with each passing year.[10] You don't have to be a meteorologist to discern the cloud of acrimony hovering over an increasing portion of our common life. And we know what it consists of. Just think of the last time you blocked someone on social media and why.

The more urgent question today has to do with what, if anything, might span the gap between us and them. Or is that project doomed from the start? Are our discrepancies, whatever they may be, simply too deep to overcome?

Most calls for unity appeal to our better angels. We assume that what binds me to you is a common desire for peace, or success, or happiness, or beauty. Maybe we believe that we share a uniquely human capacity for altruism and that the right leader with the right vision could leverage that capacity, galvanize disparate groups, and heal our fractures. Or perhaps we appeal to a

9. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2020), 168.

10. Admittedly, it sometimes appears that politics has absorbed all these divisions into an ultimate us-versus-them.

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shared value or trait to bring us together. Real women have curves. Goonies never say die. Or maybe we seek to unite around a common cause. Or settle for solidarity around shared affinities and tastes (#KISSarmy4life).

These strategies can be effective in the short run. But I wonder if they run out of gas over time because they ignore something fundamental about how people actually connect. They ignore that the most lasting and transformative bonds between individuals are almost always sealed through weakness rather than strength, suffering rather than flourishing, vulnerability rather than nobility. If high anthropology alienates us from one another, maybe low anthropology can bring us together again.

But don't take it from me. Countless people can attest to this. My friend Ashley, for example.

A Consolation You Could Believe In

This is going to be a disaster was my first thought upon walking into the building where Ashley was scheduled for group therapy. Ashley is a self-described actor-screenwriter-activist with all the attendant piercings, and from the looks of it, the room was full of buttoned-up retirees, almost exclusively men. I'm pretty sure one of them was a former judge. Her presence lowered the average age by a solid fifteen years.

I had known Ashley since adolescence. We'd witnessed several peaks and valleys in each other's lives, this latest episode being a tragic case in point. A DUI on its own would have been rough: license taken away, picture in the paper, court fees she couldn't afford—the whole nine yards. Now, being forced to rely on friends for rides so that she could sit in a dingy room once a week with these old-timers just felt cruel. I was glad I could serve as moral support.

As with so many single moms, Ashley's chief concerns in life were mostly related to childcare and making ends meet. The men

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occupying the other chairs, meanwhile, I assumed were mainly worried about their 401(k), or third marriage, or tee time at the golf course. At the very least, I doubted they'd appreciate her "eat the rich" tattoo.

The court had mandated group-therapy sessions instead of Alcoholics Anonymous, so Ashley would just have to grit her teeth and get through it. Fast-forward two months, and boy was I wrong. We were having coffee, and she was telling me how much the group had changed her life. All those fuddy-duddies, it turned out, had stories to share, the kind that would make your jaw drop to the ground. The more she heard, the less alone she felt. That judge guy had completely torpedoed his reputation in a bender that had sent him to prison. The day before we met up, he had brought her a bunch of sausage he'd made after his latest hunting trip. Ashley is a vegetarian but had been genuinely touched by the gesture. I guess he had no one to share with other than the folks in the group.

I wondered aloud if she had simply been charmed by the novelty of the situation. Perhaps there was something exotic about becoming friends with a bunch of senior citizens.

"You might think so, but actually the opposite is true. I don't think I've ever felt so understood," she said. "What we have in common is a wake of broken promises and bad decisions. I don't have to edit my story or worry about impressing them. It's *such* a relief. I look forward to it every week."

Ashley smiled when she said that last part—the first time I'd seen one on her face in months. If there was hope for her, maybe there was hope for all of us. The hope that a low anthropology affords.

In summary, then, how we view human nature has a tremendous bearing on our experience of the world and ourselves. Competing anthropologies simmer under even the most mundane moments of our lives, bubbling up in times of crisis to both positive and negative effect. A high anthropology breeds perfectionism,

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anxiety, and burnout in our lives and isolation, confusion, and resentment in our relationships with others. A low anthropology forges sympathy, clarity, and reconciliation out of the bonds of finitude and limitation.

Author Francis Spufford articulates this dynamic poetically when he introduces readers to the emotional logic of Christianity in his book *Unapologetic*. He writes:

> A consolation you could believe in would be one that didn't have to be kept apart from awkward areas of reality. One that didn't depend on some more or less tacky fantasy about ourselves, and therefore one that wasn't in danger of popping like a soap bubble upon contact with the ordinary truths about us, whatever they turned out to be, good and bad and indifferent. A consolation you could trust would be one that acknowledged the difficult stuff rather than being in flight from it, and then found you grounds for hope in spite of it, or even because of it, with your fingers firmly out of your ears, and all the sounds of the complicated world rushing in, undenied.[11]

This is why any discussion of theology, who or what God is, must begin with an accurate appreciation of who we are—in other words, an accurate anthropology. Anything else is white noise.

Certainly, this proved to be the case in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The primary resistance Jesus encountered came from those with a high opinion of themselves and their own goodness. Their self-righteousness became one of the principal targets of his preaching. Meanwhile, those whose illusions about themselves had been punctured by life flocked to him. Time and again, Jesus refused to close religious doors in their faces, to such an extent that it provoked grumbling—and later murderous disdain—among others whose facades of righteousness remained intact (see, e.g.,

11. Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 13–14.

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Matt. 9:10–11). For whatever reason, reprobates and outcasts were able to see Jesus for who he was: not a threatening presence but a comforting one. And it made all the difference.

Which is to say, Jesus probably would have been a hit in modern-day China.

Fellowship of the Untrustworthies

Lao Duan was just trying to buy a train ticket when it happened. After selecting the destination on the drop-down menu, he entered his payment information and clicked the purchase button. But what occurred next was far from usual. A window popped up saying that the transaction could not be completed because the purchaser had been put on the "untrustworthy list."

Lao Duan is not a character in a George Orwell novel or a *Black Mirror* episode. At the time, he was a forty-two-year-old coal worker living in the Shanxi province of China. A few years prior, the Chinese government had introduced a social-credit system. Instead of relying solely on financial history in issuing a credit score, this system also considered the sorts of things people bought and how they treated their neighbors. Internet activity would apparently be factored in at some point too.

Duan had accrued sizable debts when the market for coal had collapsed a couple years earlier, but this was the first he'd heard of any list. He soon found out that his credit cards had all been frozen. Driving through town a few days later, he spied an electronic billboard with his face and name on it. "This man is untrustworthy," the sign said. It then scrolled to the next name and face.

One day, as he watched the untrustworthies cycle through the display, a face appeared of someone he knew, a fellow coal worker. As the weeks went by, more and more former colleagues appeared on the list. And so Duan decided to call a few of his fellow untrustworthies and invite them out for dinner. Soon, friendships blossomed. Speaking to an NPR reporter, Duan claimed that these

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were the only people he felt relaxed around. Everyone else, he said, scoffed at them for being on the list and resented seeing their smiling faces at restaurants that they felt should be reserved for responsible citizens.[12]

While the list caused the "trustworthy" to separate themselves from others, it brought the *un*trustworthies together in what can only be called fellowship. If success breeds competition and burnout, then failure breeds camaraderie, possibly even love.

12. Stacey Vanek Smith and Cardiff Garcia, "What It's Like to Be on the Blacklist in China's New Social Credit System," NPR, October 31, 2018, transcript, https://www.npr.org/2018/10/31/662696776/what-its-like-to-be-on-the-blacklist-in-chinas-new-social-credit-system.

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