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Creating Good Work

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I'm an economist. Usually that puts people off, even academics. Taught economics in a stilted, equation-thick manner, they often think economists are bright and clever and understand complicated things that they don't. Although I have managed in my scholarship to write broadly, in plain but powerful language, I had forgotten how to *think* broadly. Until the month I spent at Bellagio.

I planned to write a brief for radically altering economic development policy and practice, a project I called Creating Good Work. I perennially struggle with the narrowness of my discipline's approach to economic life and its impoverished normative underpinnings—that equity and possibly stability matter, but above all, efficiency. But over twenty-five years of writing journal articles, reviewing others' work, and judging grant proposals and promotion cases, I had become enmeshed in the specialized language and conventions of my field.

As month-long residents at Bellagio, we are asked to present our work to others. The first few of these were riveting for me. Sid Strauss, an Israeli professor of child development and education, gave a powerful presentation on teaching as human activity. He joined complex notions from psychology with experiences that we had all had, as learners and teachers, to make his case. I went back to my 11th century tower desk and began to ask myself deeper questions about work than I had planned.

One evening, Irish artist Patricia McKenna presented slides of two very political projects. In one, she invited people in a small rural town to bring in letters from and objects that had belonged to people who had emigrated. These she hung on the walls of an old vacant house. In another, she collected dirt from each of Ireland's counties, north and south, and piled them separately on a spacious gallery floor as metaphors for soldiers who had been lost in the Troubles. The earthen piles were so much alike, and yet so very distinctive. I went back to my tower, thinking about how to bring values and politics more centrally into my research.

Even the playful evenings left their imprint on my writing. Wendy Woodson, an American professor of theater and dance, entrapped me into playing four-handed improvisations at the piano. This stretching of my capabilities, I found, could be replicated in my study!

And these weren't one-time encounters. Because we dined together three times a day, I found myself probing the motivations and thought processes of my various colleagues. And listening deeply, and productively, to their expertise.

The month at Bellagio initiated the richest period of intellectual struggle for me since my dissertation. I tackled tougher subjects in economic development than I had been willing to before and drank more deeply from multi-disciplinary work. Whereas economic development focuses crudely on job creation and pay levels, I began thinking about work more holistically. About economic security and working conditions. About work flexibility and satisfaction. Even more fundamentally, about whether jobs offer workers a chance to serve and produce something of value. About human contact and respect. About cooperation versus competition.

The project has since taken several directions, including a book, *The Distinctive City*, to be published in 2009 by Cornell University Press. The values vector became my 2006 Roepke Lecture at the annual American Association of Geography meetings: "Why Can't We Talk About Values in Economic Geography?" The room was packed, and the feedback tremendous. Younger scholars have since felt more empowered to assert normative values in their research designs and writing.

Because of the close and extended collegueship with artists at Bellagio, I subsequently committed myself almost entirely to research on the cultural economy, focusing on artists rather than arts organizations or industries. I have interviewed more than 200 musicians, writers, and visual and performing artists, profiling many of them in my monographs, *The Artistic Dividend* (2003), *Artists' Centers* (2006), *Crossover: How Artists Build Careers across Commercial, Nonprofit and Community Work* (2006), and soon, a study of Native American artists' access to space and resources. I am beginning to write a deep critique of how arts and cultural policy are configured in the United States, based on my experiences with artists and other members of the arts community as well as my reading works of arts and cultural critics and scholars.

The international reach of collegueship at Bellagio quickened my hunger for working beyond the domestic scale. I have since given creative economy lectures before diverse audiences in Europe, Japan, China, and Australia, and have taught and engaged in joint research on the cultural economy in Brazil and South Korea, all using an artist-centric lens.

This work, which has introduced me to intellectuals working in arts and cultural fields, is a wholly unexpected dividend from my time at Bellagio. For me personally, it has created good work. Challenging, satisfying, being of service (both in the academy and outside of it), and replete with engaging human contact.