

Anna Craft talk June 2021

Enabling Good Work in the 21st Century

I had the pleasure, the privilege of knowing Anna for well over a decade—it was a wonderful, life-enhancing experience. We met in 2002 at a conference in Harrogate—the conference had a simple title “Thinking”. And this was appropriate for Anna—she was always thinking, listening, probing, creating, reflecting, progressing in her understanding, sharing it with others.

It’s fair to say that we ‘hit it off’—finding many mutual interests. Increasingly, many mutual concerns. And it proved possible—it was perhaps easier then—to arrange for Anna to be a visiting Scholar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and at Project Zero, with which I have been associated for my whole scholarly life.

For four years, Anna commuted between England (London, Exeter) and Cambridge, Massachusetts. She became in effect, a member of our small and devoted research team—as we were focusing on intelligence, creativity, and –increasingly—on ‘good work’—striving to do the right thing in challenging circumstances.

Our families got to know one another—and indeed, one summer (I believe it was in 2003), Anna and her young family stayed in our home on Larchwood Drive, near Fresh Pond, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They even took care of Nero, our golden retriever.

Over the next decade, we remained in close touch—meeting in the US, in the UK, and no doubt in other places. We met at other conferences on “Thinking” and at other conferences, which did not have that lofty a name and aspiration, but where Anna was, as always, thinking and sharing. And indeed, with Guy Glaxton, we edited a book called Creativity, Wisdom, Trusteeship—three spheres which Anna probed and, in many ways, exemplified.

We complemented one another, I think—Anna was both more philosophically oriented (she had studied philosophy and kept up with relevant readings and writings in that discipline). And she was also more practitioner oriented than I am (she taught in school and in the Open University). I would like to believe that I helped her to formulate and articulate ideas in ways that could speak to both scholars and the general public. And our areas of disagreement—or at least differences in emphases—proved catalytic, at least for me.

In 2013, Anna was kind enough to come to Boston to the celebration of my 70th birthday and to contribute a wonderful essay for my Festschrift. At the time, we did not know that she was ill—at least I did not know—nor how little time she had left. Her death was a tragedy—her life was an inspiration.

I could easily speak at length about our work together. But I’ve been encouraged to talk about the ideas that Anna and I discussed in her last years—and to bring that work, up to date, so to speak. And so my topic for today is “Enabling Good Work in the 21st century”

Think of it as a “progress report” that I would have liked to share with Anne.

1. The story I want to tell begins in the middle 1990s. Three middle-aged psychologists—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Bill Damon, and I—were fortunate enough to spend a year at a retreat on the campus of Stanford University—The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. We knew that we wanted to work together on a project—we had applied to the Center as a trio—but we needed time, space, and freedom to reflect and to define a project.

SLIDES of PIs from the second set of photos in my memoir

Our initial interest: whether individuals could be both creative (a special interest of Mihaly and me) and humane or moral at the same time (Bill's area of expertise). Over the course of the year, we developed an empirical research project which we named—perhaps predictably—“Humane Creativity.”

Neither the name nor the Project itself had been adequately formulated. In the ensuing period we went back to the drawing boards (and to our word processors) and decided to study what we soon came to term “Good Work.”

In a nutshell, we were interested in how individuals in different professions thought about their work, and especially about the kinds of work and the kinds of workers that they most admired. To find an answer, we and our research teams (ultimately a few dozen researchers on five campuses) carried out semi-structured interviews (lasting an hour or more) with approximately 1500 individuals in nine different professions or lines of work.

SLIDE OF HARVARD TEAM also from the second set of photos in my memoir

From several perspectives, the project was quite successful. We learned a great deal about a range of professions. We wrote a summary book, as well as nine other books and numerous articles and reports. The work attracted some attention both in the United States and abroad. And, always important for scholars, it launched further lines of work that continue til this day,

SLIDES OF TEN BOOKS AND OF THE WEBSITE

No need to read all those books! I believe it's possible to summarize the principal concepts and findings with reasonable succinctness.

Good work has three intertwined properties: it is performed excellently; it is personally engaging; and it is carried out in an ethical manner. We think of these as a triple helix: On our analysis, work only qualifies as “good” if it exemplifies these three Es; otherwise, it is compromised in one or more ways.

SLIDE OF TRIPLE HELIX

2. Drawing now on the research in our own ‘good project’ work, I would add the following points:

*Good work is analogous to good citizenship. A good citizen is well informed (Excellent); cares about civic issues (Engaged); and strives to do what is best for the broader community (Ethical).

GOOD CITIZENSHIP SLIDE

SLIDE NEIGHBORLY MORALITY vs ETHICS OF ROLES

*It is useful to distinguish between the work of a growing child, and the work of an adult professional. In early life, one should strive for 'neighborly morality'—living up to long lasting and widely embraced standards like the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. The requirements for neighborly morality are not difficult to state—and few would quarrel with them—though they can be challenging to fulfill.

*In contrast, the adult professional is frequently—even constantly—confronted with difficult ethical decisions. These are conundrums that could not have been anticipated in Biblical times; they presuppose complex occupations; and they call for nuanced, profession-specific codes of conduct—the Hippocratic oath, the journalist's code of conduct, and the like. (The ethics of roles also envelopes the role of citizen, as mentioned before).

*In confronting difficult dilemmas, it is advantageous to have a method for considering options. We speak of the five Ds—definition, discussion, debate, decision, debriefing

SLIDE OF FIVE Ds

Expanding a bit, if one seeks to uphold ethical standards, one must recognize the existence of an ethical dilemma. Then, one defines the key issues, and discusses and debates them. Ultimately, it's necessary to reach a decision about that dilemma—and of course one seeks to make the decision, propose an action, that is effective and that can be ethically justified.

But one is not always on the mark—and so, some time after the decision has been made, one looks back, debriefs, and determine whether one can or should have followed a different course.

* We posit a normal developmental course for the ambit of good work. Envision a set of concentric circles. At first, in the tightest circle, one is concerned with one's own family; then, in succession, with neighbors and schoolmates; with colleagues at one's first job.

SLIDE OF RINGS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Many of us stop there. But others assume successively expanding rings of responsibility, which include one's profession as a whole, and in the broadest case, responsibility to the wider society .

There is no imperative to go beyond one's own work circle. But some individuals inevitably become leaders, even trustees, of the broader society, and of course the quality of their work—constructive, or, in the less happy case, destructive—may have very wide ramifications.

We can see such ramifications with clarity when one contemplates the world's experience with COVID19. Individuals with influence (physicians, lawmakers, business leaders) are constantly faced with such dilemmas—and while their decisions and actions may sometimes affect only a few persons, they may also impact a much broader swathe of society.

3 Until now, I have presented ideas which my colleagues and I developed primarily as scholars, researchers, conceptualizers. And indeed, that was the training—indeed the calling—that my colleagues (Mike Csikszentmihalyi and Bill Damon) and I had in the first part of our careers.

But each of us – as well as some of our colleagues and collaborators—elected to go beyond the usual confines of scholarship. And so, in the last 15 years, my colleagues and I have moved closer to the world of action, of practice—and accordingly we now operate under a broader umbrella—which we call, simply, The Good Project.

WEBSITE FOR THE GOOD PROJECT

In this vein, we've carried out several distinctive activities:

*We have made available materials that emerged from our initial study of Good Work. Specifically, on our website, users can access sample work dilemmas (the Good Work toolkit) and (our most popular item) the Value Sort. Also available are materials from other “Good Work” endeavors, such as the Good Play project (about the constructive use of digital media) and The Good Collaboration Toolkit (how individuals and entire organizations can work together effectively).

SLIDES TOOLKIT DILEMMAS VALUE SORT COLLABORATION

*We have created a Good Project curriculum—consisting of a dozen lessons that can be used – and adapted—at various age levels

SLIDE CURRICULUM (SEVERAL SLIDES)

* Recently we have begun to work with college students; we ask them to create ethical portfolios, where they report their own dilemmas and how they have dealt with them. Ultimately, we would like to create ethically-oriented course materials for the college or university level.

*We have initiated collaborations with individuals and groups in several countries around the world. Notable among these collaborations are our work with the Dutch Professional Pride Association, the India TGelf, the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil, and the Singapore Institute of Management. And we are developing a curriculum for educators who work with the Global Citizens Initiative—a program for talented secondary school students from around the world.

SLIDE OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

*To keep track of our own activities and to maintain contact with current and future collaborators, as mentioned, we have an active website thegoodproject.org This web site includes over 100 papers that we have written, as well as a regular blog—now over 50 contributions. We also have a newsletter that comes out several times a year.

SLIDE OF BLOGS and NEWS LETTER

4 . The complex terrain today –

The Good Project continues, even as the world also changes, often rapidly, sometimes quite dramatically. While most work in the natural sciences is not materially affected by political and economic events, such happenings are crucial, sometimes pivotal, in the world of human affairs.

Since the Good Work Project was initiated, over a quarter of century ago, there have been numerous powerful forces and trends in the world:

*The world has grown ever more inter-connected. Like it or loathe it, globalization is now an inexorable fact of life. And of course, the pandemic has brought that fact home to nearly everyone.

GLOBAL MAP

*The bilateral world—Communism vs Democracy—has now evolved into a multi-polar world

*At the same time, nationalism, and autocracy have renewed appeal and have attained power in many parts of the world

(I am resisting the temptation to show slides—alas, in these days, the list of autocrats is depressingly long)

* The accessibility and virality of social media competes with, where it has not already overwhelmed, traditional forms of news and communication; and, alas, fake news proves more viral than well-curated journalism

SLIDES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

* Neoliberal assumptions and guidelines undergird political, economic and educational systems and processes in many parts of the world—even as they have been subjected to ever deeper and fundamental criticisms (this was a particular concern of Anna Craft's)

ANNA CRAFT ON NEOLIBERALISM SLIDE

*Both the learned professions and the major institutions of our society have been severely disrupted. This is due to some extent to their own smugness and all-too-frequent self-dealing; but it's also due to the aforementioned powerful forces Some even wonder whether professions and institutions will survive, others wonder whether they deserve to survive.

SLIDE ON PROFESSIONS UNDER SIEGE AI

5. We've come along way since that bucolic year at the Stanford Center or indeed my first meeting with Anna at Harrogate. Many of our core assumptions have been severely challenged. We need to, we must search for Dry Land.

In large part, this is a challenge for education:

- *Educators, policy makers, at all levels need to value the nature and preservation of good work;

- *We need powerful examples, “existence proofs”—embodiments of professions and professionals that have worked well, that continue to work well, or that can be ‘repaired’ so that they work well again.

- *Equally, we need institutions (businesses, governmental agencies and non-governmental agencies) that functions effectively and in “good work” ways; universities, libraries, museums and the like—what has been termed civil society (though it's often difficult to discern the civility).

- *Moreover, we need sanctions—powerful ones—for individual persons, professions and institutions that fail to do good work, as well as prosthetics to help those that want to do better, going forward

- * The case for warranted knowledge/search for truth is fundamental—over the long run, good work is not possible in a world of fake news or of alternative realities

I close on a very personal note—admittedly a grand one. Though I am not myself religious, I don't see how the planet can be restored without a set of beliefs and practices that celebrate that best features of our species—individually, regionally, globally.

In my mind, there is little question that human beings can tackle and solve the great challenges of our time. This can only be done if we are willing to face the threats to the species—which now extend to our very survival. Thinking and research of the sort that our research group has done—and that Anna Craft carried out with such skill and vigor—will be essential. But it is far from sufficient.

Such scholarly work will also require linkage with beliefs and practices—the texts and the rituals that have animated the major religions of the world. Too often, those religions have struggled with and against one another. A truly global belief-and-action system needs to relinquish the struggle and find common ground—what was once God's work needs to become good work.

Thank you for your kind attention. It's been an honor to remember and to celebrate the contributions of Anna Craft,

