our local industry
Seth Cable

There are fifteen levels to the University, ten above ground and five below. My wife works on
the tenth and highest level; I work on the third. Every morning, as I approach the south-eastern
entry, I imagine her watching me from far above, though she is rarely permitted near a window.

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"The thing is," I remind the students gathered around me, "even after several decades, none of
us really understand what we're doing."

"All our achievements are a series of happy accidents, and even when some intentional action
proves successful, the factors underlying that success are so often so tied to the specifics of
that time and place that the same tactic could never hope to serve again."

I advance to the next slide, titled 'Summary and Acknowledgements'.

"This is no doubt a disappointment to a few of you. But, if you are fortunate enough to attain a
position with some permanence, you'll be none the wiser for your suffering and perseverance,
and to anyone who comes seeking your guidance and grace, you'll really have nothing to give
beyond what I've already just said myself."

Some smile blankly and respectfully, but all are clearly upset at the deceptions that have led
them here.

"I'd like to thank the following names for their helpful remarks upon an earlier version of this
material..."

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I am confident in the value the University places in my labor. The importance of my unique
intellectual contributions to our renowned scholarly community has been reiterated numerous
times in general loudspeaker announcements from the Chancellor's compound, which lies
directly adjacent to the University proper.

All the faculty at our University have a deep and abiding affection for the Chancellor, whom
we lovingly refer to as 'Chungy'. I am not at all comfortable using that nickname. Beyond its
coerced familiarity, it has the flavor of some recherché ethnic slur. Nevertheless, the Chancellor
insists that we say it, and it seems to flow easily from the lips of my colleagues, even those who
I know to be ardent supporters of racial justice.

I still opt, however, to refer to him simply as 'the Chancellor', a practice that seems to cause
no small offense.

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I'm racing through the Student Concourse, towards the Elevator Sector, as quickly as my legs will carry me, eyes scanning for a down-trending unit. Although one is approaching directly ahead of me, my path is diverted by a meandering, darkly murmuring constellation of newly matriculated arrivals. At their head stands a pair of beaming upperclassmen, devoutly performing some rehearsed oration that goes largely unheard.

Forcing my way past, I appear at the mark just as the elevator doors open, and I recognize within a faculty peer: Not a colleague, and I don't remember her name, but I do remember that we served together for a year on the Committee for Student Innocence. Every meeting would open with her objecting to the very existence of the Committee, and it would end with her introducing a motion to change the committee's official designation to “Committee for Admins Eat Shit.” None of the rest of us could stand her at all, and so she was unanimously voted Chair for the following year.

I nod as I step in beside her and wave at the sensors. She draws an audible breath and greets me by name, which I sidestep by replying, “It's good to see you.”

“How are things on the third level?” she asks.

“As good as could be expected, I suppose.”

I notice then that she holds in her lecturing hand an unexpected object. “What’s up with the walkie talkie?”

“Ah, this thing? Yeah, I’m taking this down to Technology Services. It’s not... broadcasting correctly?”

“Huh. How so?”

Turning her face to the bronze doors, she raises the device to her forehead and flips a red toggle on its side. A warm tone radiates from the speaker facing me, followed by a low crackle that evolves into a human voice, captured mid-sentence:

“...But, more than any other notion committed to paper, the idea that's had the single greatest impact on mankind is the simple realization that we're destroying everything — ourselves included — and there isn't anything or anybody to stop it. I mean, you can just tell from how folks are driving these days that life no longer has any meaning. Just look at what we did to Gary Coleman! — ”

“Is that... you?” I ask.

“Well, it's my voice, but that's not any lecture I've given, or intend to give.”

“Oooh! That's not good!”

“Nope. And if they can't fix it soon, I'm going to have to entirely change my content-delivery method... Welp, take care!”
"You too!"

The elevator, however, continues to move for 15 more seconds, and we are forced to repeat our small farewells once the doors open.

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My wife carries a number of familiar plants into our apartment, and places them on our kitchen table.

"Aren't those from your office?"

"Yes," she replies. "I was told that I needed to remove them."

"Why? They look fine. They're beautiful."

"Rebranding. There's been a rebranding and these don't fit the new specifications for decorative foliage."

"But, your office isn't public space. What does it matter?"

"I work on level 10. Media releases are composed there, and my office is just down the hall from those of several Quarter-Provosts. It could end up on film, and so they included it – and me – in the rebranding."

"You're included in the rebranding? What do you have to do?"

"Nothing really. New jacket. Different shade of hair color. It's fine."

"Are we going to have to anything on level 3?"

"Do you have any media releases coming out? Like, ever?"

I shrug in reply, and then she continues, "Oh, one thing you are going to have to do soon is convert all your Learning Objective documents over to System 5."

"How do you know that?"

"It's my job to know that. Well, it is now, ever since everyone in Academic Documentation took the buyout. And everyone in Disciplinary Review. And everyone in Lesser Finances..."

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Due to an extraordinarily long introduction by one of my senior colleagues – merited naturally by the superior stature of its object – our guest speaker for this week has begun her presentation nearly 30 minutes late, and I am already desperately thirsty.
Despite long-standing and universally known professional convention, someone in the audience has already interrupted the talk with a question, which seems to have thrown the speaker into an extended reverie:

"So, yes, there are basically four schools of thought on why our Region has never been able to successfully self-govern... The most invidious of these is of course the opinion, so widespread in the Capital, that effective self-government is fundamentally incompatible with our traditional 'religion'. Of course, what exactly is intended the term 'religion' here is generally vague and unspecified, but it seems to encompass most of our broadly shared values, ontology, and historical perspectives. It is often stated that this 'religion' of ours has a pervasive undercurrent that disparages civic-mindedness and tolerance, while venerating sloth, indifference, selfishness, and short-sightedness...

"It goes without saying that those supposed offending aspects of our 'religion' are never precisely demarcated, nor is it ever explained why those portions of our knowledge inculcate such atrocious tendencies amongst our people..."

One either side of me, the graduate students are coding furiously.

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I am standing in the lowest level of the University, the Negative Fifth. There, housed in the northeast corner, adjacent to the Energy Distribution (ED) cells and Graduate Employee Union (GEU) offices, one can find the University Store and Hair Salon (USHS). It is the only location in the entire structure that sells greeting cards. I am perusing the aisles for an appropriate card to send my sister, who will be having her newest child soon.

In the subarea designated 'For New Parents', there is an image that catches my eye: a bare-chested Valkyrie mounted atop a rampant two-headed dragon. My sister sports a rather similar tattoo on her right cheek, and so I pull out the card to read its interior:

EVERY HUMAN AND EVERY HUMAN CULTURE CARRIES WITHIN IT A DREAM OF PARENTHOOD. IN ITS ESSENCE, IT IS A DREAM OF A TRANSCENDENT AND PERMANENT RELATIONSHIP A BOND THAT REDEEMS AND AN ACT THAT SHAPES POSTERITY. A VICARIOUS IMMORTALITY. AND, THE TRAGEDY OF THIS DREAM IS THE SIMPLE, CRUEL NECESSITY OF EACH OTHER'S OTHERNESS. THE FAVORITE SON IS YET ANOTHER EXTERNAL OBJECT, AND YOU'RE AS ALIEN TO ONE ANOTHER'S THOUGHTS AS ANY PASSERS-BY IN THE STREET. THE INORDINATE TIME SPENT TOGETHER DOES NOT GRANT PRIVILEGED ACCESS TO THOSE INNER DIMENSIONS, WHERE YOU BOTH REMAIN INELUCTABLY ALONE. AND, THIS BASIC HUMAN ESTRANGEMENT ONLY INCREASES WITH AGE.

I decide upon this and a 15 corona gift-card to Huckabeez, my sister's favorite on-line store for disguises. Ahead of me in line is a subgraduate, carrying two armloads of anti-diuretics and a box of latex gloves.
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While resting my eyes after lunch, I am reminded by its ringing that I have an office phone. After a few moments of searching, I pick up the speaker and immediately perceive the voice of the Half-Provost.

<You have Sarah Turden Sarah in your 54986 course, right?>

"Uhm... let me just bring that up... 54986... Sarah... Sarah Sarah Turden Sarah, yes. Why do—" 

<And what’s her current average?>

"Let’s see... oh. 67. Yeah, she didn’t participate in the final inspection."

<Is there any way for her to improve that score, before the averages are finalized?>

"I mean, I don’t... Not that I know of. Why are you —"

<With that score, she won’t graduate this cycle.>

"Oh... well, I mean, she can retake the course next cycle, right? Or substitute another? I’m afraid I don’t follow..."

Although nominally a five-year program, no one is ever required to leave the University merely for not having earned sufficient points. As long as one has sufficient space for debt, the required points can be earned over any number of cycles. Of course, however, individuals’ debt sizes can vary considerably, and this is most certainly a key factor limiting time-to-graduation.

<This student has to graduate this cycle. It’s a necessity.>

"A necessity?...Like, for me?"

<It’s a necessity for all of us.>

"Oh."

<Find a method for converting that average to a 70. If it requires adjustments to the other students’ averages as well, no one will trouble you about it.>

"Understood."

It was later confirmed to me by colleagues that the Half-Provost can be a fierce advocate for undergraduates, though few seek to understand the perplexing formula governing which cases are adopted.

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The University is located in a region whose coinage has long born the slogan “Education is Our Local Industry.” As with all things, time has eroded the truth of these words, as the chief
employer of this Valley has for several decades now been luxury tourism.

The most successful of those ventures are the mountain resorts, which bring tens of thousands of visitors annually to the towns and villages surrounding the University. These resorts owe their success not so much to their unique quality or amenities as to certain crucial developments in the social culture of the Capital citizenry.

Over the past half-century, it has become fairly essential for every Capital citizen to spend some portion of their early adulthood at leisure at one (or more) of these resorts. There, several important new rights of adulthood are administered, while young men and women knit together a fine network of interrelationships that will undergird their eventual careers in the City.

As the social and material importance of these resorts has increased, so (of course) has the competition between them. Each has grown exponentially over the past decade alone – doubling, tripling, quadrupling in size – their structures metastasizing over the ancient mountains. Having long exhausted the local workforce, these resorts now draw in laborers from far outside the region, many from overseas, who submit to (frankly) gross exploitation under the thin promise of eventual permanent employment.

And, as the sizes of these resorts have grown, so (naturally) has their expense. Indeed, it is now basically unheard of for any citizen of the Capital to actually pay outright for the privilege of enjoying their spaces. Instead, young men and women are expected to register for any number of competing ‘Payment Plans’, which serve to finance and facilitate these essential experiences. Naturally, a seedy and little-mentioned symbiosis has evolved between the resorts and the companies that manage these Payment Plans, and it is becoming increasingly common for the payment schedules agreed to under these plans to prove unrealistic, spelling the ruin of many citizens, even some well into their full adulthood.

Consequently, though the mountain resorts remain our chief industry, all these aforementioned factors conspire to create a most unsettling mood throughout them. I admit to spending a brief time myself at one of the more economical ones (which I still have yet to pay down in its entirety). I found there that the first enchanting moments quickly dissolved, revealing beneath a churning bath of frenetic anxiety. Even at this more modest resort, all the guests had placed such importance upon their visit – and had impoverished themselves so severely to achieve it – that they strained to elicit a forced joy out of every second. Every minor pleasure was met with a fusillade of nervous confirmation from all around that everything was “so nice” and “well worth the expense”. At the same time, this very anxiety would lead most of the guests to behave unforgivably towards the staff, who were themselves responsible for the fine amenities they so anxiously praised. However, I also learned through conversation that the staff, in turn, were remarkably cruel to each other, a cruelty that was fed by a profound resentment – of the guests and their youthful ignorance, of their superiors and their broken promises, and of their own colleagues’ resentments against them.

During my entire time there, I never truly felt that I was on sabbatical. The whole thing was misery.

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