



Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition

By Brian J. Mahan



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In the wise and often witty *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, Brian Mahan considers the question of how it is possible to create a meaningful spiritual life while living in a culture that measures us by what we have rather than who we are. Drawing on nearly two decades of teaching experience, Brian Mahan shares stories of personal struggle and triumph that demonstrate how those who seek meaning and purpose have recalimed their authentic selves by resolving the inevitable tension between personal ambition and spiritual vibrancy.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Do we all have "shadow governments of compassion and idealism"? In this odd, sometimes disjointed but always engaging meditation on the relationship between vocation and ambition, Mahan answers yes. Referencing Thomas Merton, Frederick Buechner, William James, Walker Percy and Leo Tolstoy, Mahan muses rather than argues, and ends each chapter with assignments gleaned from the college courses he has taught on this topic. For example, at the end of one chapter, he invites readers to hold a national press conference at which they attempt to rationalize an episode in their lives when they engaged in repeated self-deception leading to serious moral compromise. Each chapter and assignment leads readers, in one way or another, to examine the tension between the lives they would live governed by compassion, in complete harmony with God's calling, entered into via "epiphanies of recruitment" and the socially scripted, ambition-driven lives they do live. Pleasantly surprising is Mahan's light touch: he never resorts to heavy-handed homilies about how bereft conventional lives are, but rather invites readers to observe themselves living such lives, and to do so nonjudgmentally, with equal parts good humor, discomfort, acceptance and motivation to change. While encouraging readers to attempt mystical and imaginative exercises, Mahan ultimately avoids prescription. On the contrary, he ends by suggesting that ambition and vocation are not mutually exclusive, and that God delights in any and all attempts that flawed, inevitably ambitious people make to live according to their ideals.

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From [Booklist](#)

In a short book demanding a slow reading, Christian educator Brian Mahan challenges the American cult of success with its inevitable apotheosis of the triumphant self. Convening an improbable conclave of spiritual advisors--Christian devotionalists, psychological theorists, and modern novelists--Mahan invites readers to probe the origins and consequences of their personal ambitions. Again and again, our cravings for wealth and prominence betray our vulnerability to self-deception and alienation, as we rationalize choices that suppress our authentic impulses of benevolence and idealism. To help recover our suppressed aspirations, Mahan guides us through the tasks of "formative remembering" (What am I living for?) and "spiritual misdirection" (What is distracting me from my true aims?). Honest engagement with these tasks draws us into the paradox of deliberate self-forgetfulness and toward the joyous discovery of what Mahan calls vocation: the proper dedication of our unique talents to meeting the needs of others. A priceless book for readers whose march through success manuals has left them with only emptiness and cynicism. *Bryce Christensen*
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Review

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