

Comedian Provides Good Reminder That We Are More Than Our Jobs

In today's society, many people tie their identities primarily to their jobs. They are what they do.

After all, that's what our schools have taught us to be. The stated goal of America's education system is to make students "college- and **career**-ready." It's quite the reversal from Western education's classical roots. As historian Henri Marrou [has pointed out](#), "Classical education aimed at developing men as men, not as cogs in a political machine or bees in a hive."

Egalitarianism followed by economics in American society has now extended to women and mothers this tying of identity to one's work outside of the home. In 1945, [only 10% of mothers](#) with children under the age of six held or were seeking jobs. [Today](#), 76% of mothers with children under the age of five work full-time outside of the home.

But every now and then something shakes us out of our assumed occupational identities, and reminds us that our purpose as human beings involves something beyond what we do from 9 to 5 each weekday.

Comedian Jim Gaffigan has recently provided many people with this reminder.

Last year, he and his wife, Jeannie, [decided not to continue with](#) *The Jim Gaffigan Show*—which they co-wrote and produced—because it was taking too much time away from their "most important project, [their] five children."

More recently, Jeannie was diagnosed with a life-threatening brain tumor, which prompted Jim to consider ending his

successful stand-up comedy career to stay at home with his children (the tumor has since been removed and she is now recovering). [In his own words](#):

I would say that there was, like, a good week and a half there where I was like, "Okay, so I'm retiring from stand-up comedy because I don't want to outsource my kids to be raised by someone else." I had a conversation with my manager, and I said, "Look, I just want you to know," and I had a conversation with Jeannie like, "I'm not interested in, 'Jim goes off and does his thing and sees the kids on Mondays.'" I wasn't about to do that. So there is something about where we stand today, where the stand-up's not important, and not only did I almost lose my wife and writing partner, but I was sitting with the reality that I probably wasn't going to go on.

I remember I reached out to some people that had dealt with tragedies and had lost a spouse, and they had one kid. They were just like, "Just get a nanny!" We have five kids and we already have three nannies. During the time when Jeannie was in the hospital—I was a mediocre dad beforehand, but I was like, "There's no way that I could return to stand-up." It's just the sheer number of parenting tasks, and not wanting to outsource it.

Giving up a career is one thing. But it's especially difficult for Americans to imagine a celebrity turning his or her back on Hollywood to opt for a less visible life. The philosopher Blaise Pascal famously said that "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." But in what Christopher Lasch called the ["culture of narcissism,"](#) it seems that many of humanity's problems stem from the inability to live an existence without constantly being seen and approved of by others.

But as Jim [told students](#) at a commencement speech at Catholic

University of America last year:

“Remember happiness is not found in accomplishments, income, or the number of Twitter followers you have. True happiness is found in family. Living for each other, sacrificing together...”

My friend, Fr. Matthew Baker, tragically died two years ago in a car accident, leaving behind his wife and six children. On the card at his funeral was a quote from the Russian Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky that he would frequently quote:

“What shall pass from history into eternity? The human person with all its relations, such as friendship and love.”

Another Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas, [says](#) that a person is by definition a “being in relation.”

It’s a point that bears constant reminding: We are more than the functions we perform. We are persons.