

ROUNDTABLE @ROUNDTABLE

## More Noble Exercise

Jonathan Edwards didn't preach the Protestant work ethic—he wanted more time off.

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IMAGE: Lath operator machining parts for transport planes at the Consolidated Aircraft Corporation plant, Fort Worth, Texas, 1942, [Library of Congress \(https://flic.kr/p/4jz9mW\)](https://flic.kr/p/4jz9mW).

Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts” is one of several poems Robert Lowell wrote about the colonial-era New England preacher, who was a maternal ancestor of his. Poetry published it in 1962. The choicest parts come at the end, where Edwards bemoans having been offered the presidency of Princeton University.

“I am contemptible,/stiff and dull,” Lowell’s Edwards explains, paraphrasing [an actual 1757 letter \(http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1/Page\\_cxxiv.html\)](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1/Page_cxxiv.html) to the university’s trustees. [Jonathan Edwards \(http://laphamsquarterly.org/contributors/edwards\)](http://laphamsquarterly.org/contributors/edwards) felt his talents would be best used in the leisure and quiet of a backwoods parsonage, where he would be free to work out the intricacies of his next book—one more intermingling of Enlightenment reason and Puritan faith.

Why should I leave behind  
my delight and entertainment,  
those studies  
that have swallowed up my mind?

It is taken as true to the point of cliché that American culture rests on the strenuous embrace of the “spirit of capitalism,” which [Max Weber \(http://laphamsquarterly.org/contributors/weber\)](http://laphamsquarterly.org/contributors/weber) famously attributed to Edwards’ own Calvinist tradition. We work ourselves to death for the wealth that demonstrates our being chosen for the better part of the afterlife. But Edwards’ testimony of Edwards attests to where capitalism and Calvinism might part ways.

Edwards came theologically to his reluctance about Princeton. His writing and preaching—although best known for fire and brimstone—repeatedly celebrate well-used leisure as a way to glimpse the kingdom of God. He expected that, with technological progress, people would experience such glimpses with increasing frequency. “There will be so many contrivances and inventions to facilitate and expedite their necessary secular business,” he wrote concerning the Christians of the future, “that they will have more time for more noble exercise.” He found a foretaste of this in the piety of his wife, Sarah Pierpont. According to Lowell:

So filled with delight in the Great Being,  
she hardly cared for anything—  
walking the fields, sweetly singing,  
conversing with someone invisible.

In a sermon Edwards once advised his hearers, “Labor to get thoroughly convinced that there is something else needs caring for more than this world.”

Edwards’ letter to the trustees suggests he feared the worldly entanglements of running a university. He calculated, for instance, that the expense of keeping a household worthy of the office “will not well consist with my ability.” After complaining so

