Unfinished Business

By Richard A. Kauffman
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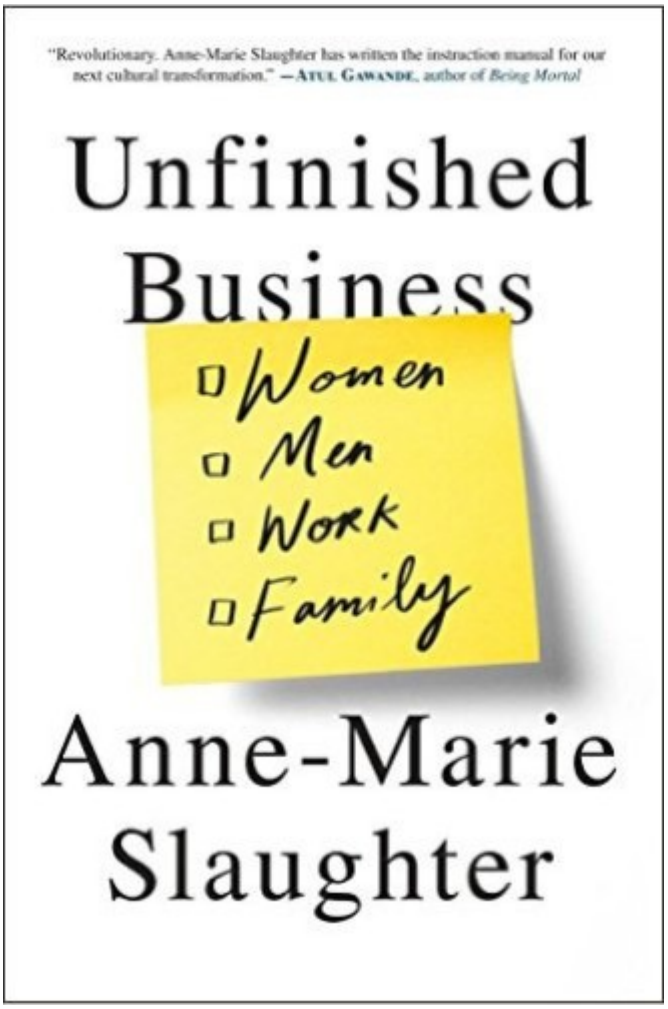
In Review



Unfinished Business

by Anne-Marie Slaughter
Random House

Lee Kravitz loved his job as editor in chief of *Parade* magazine. But like his ancestors before him, he was a workaholic. Most of the men in his family worked until they died, usually from heart attacks in their early 60s.

When he was at home his mind was still at work. His wife complained that he was never there for her. One of his 11-year-old twins was afraid to approach him. What's more, he had become alienated from his boss, and was working in a field—journalism—that was going through drastic changes, including extensive job losses. One day an executive met him in the hallway and told him he no longer had a job. The conversation lasted less than a minute.

With time on his hands, Kravitz began to reflect back on his life. He realized that he had a lot of regrets, especially about the relationships that had gone bad or had ended due to neglect. Instead of beginning the search for a new job, he decided to spend a year making amends and trying to reconnect with people who mattered to him. He interpreted what he was going to do in religious terms: it would be a form of atonement not unlike Yom Kippur, which he enjoyed observing in his youth.

The most heartrending stories involve reconnecting with family members. He visited his Aunt Fern, whom he adored as a child. She had been hospitalized years earlier for mental illness and largely forgotten by the rest of his family. He tried to get his father and an uncle communicating with each other again—they were nursing grievances against each other going back to their childhood.

Kravitz attempted to make good on a promise to supply a young Kenyan boy's impoverished village with a library, and he visited a high school buddy who had converted to Greek Orthodoxy and co-founded a monastery in California.

Kravitz slips into self-indulgence at points, but profiles of some remarkable characters

in his life save the book from total self-absorption. Chief among these is Father F. Washington Jarvis III, an Episcopal priest who was headmaster and philosophy teacher at the private high school Kravitz attended. Under Jarvis's tutelage, Kravitz read Camus and Rand, Buber and Frankl, and became convinced that the search for meaning in life begins with the realization that we all will die someday. When Kravitz reconnects with this mentor, he is teaching at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale.

While Kravitz appears to be a secular Jew, he has a capacity for pondering religious questions. During his visit to Jarvis, Kravitz admitted that he does something like pray to someone or something that he increasingly calls God. But he doesn't know if what he's doing could be called prayer. Jarvis wisely told him to stop denying his impulse to pray. "Prayer is our deepest human instinct," Jarvis said.

> It begins with the recognition that we are weak and need help. There is so much in life that is beyond our control. So we have to offer up. That's what prayer is: the crying out, the offering up of the mess we're in.

Kravitz's story about unfinished business, part of the human condition, is a cautionary tale for all of us. As he puts it,

> Even when you're not aware of it on a day-to-day basis, your unfinished business weighs down your soul. Then one day, when you least expect it, it makes itself known.

It makes itself known if you're lucky, that is, and you're aware enough to notice. What you do about unfinished business in your life is up to you.