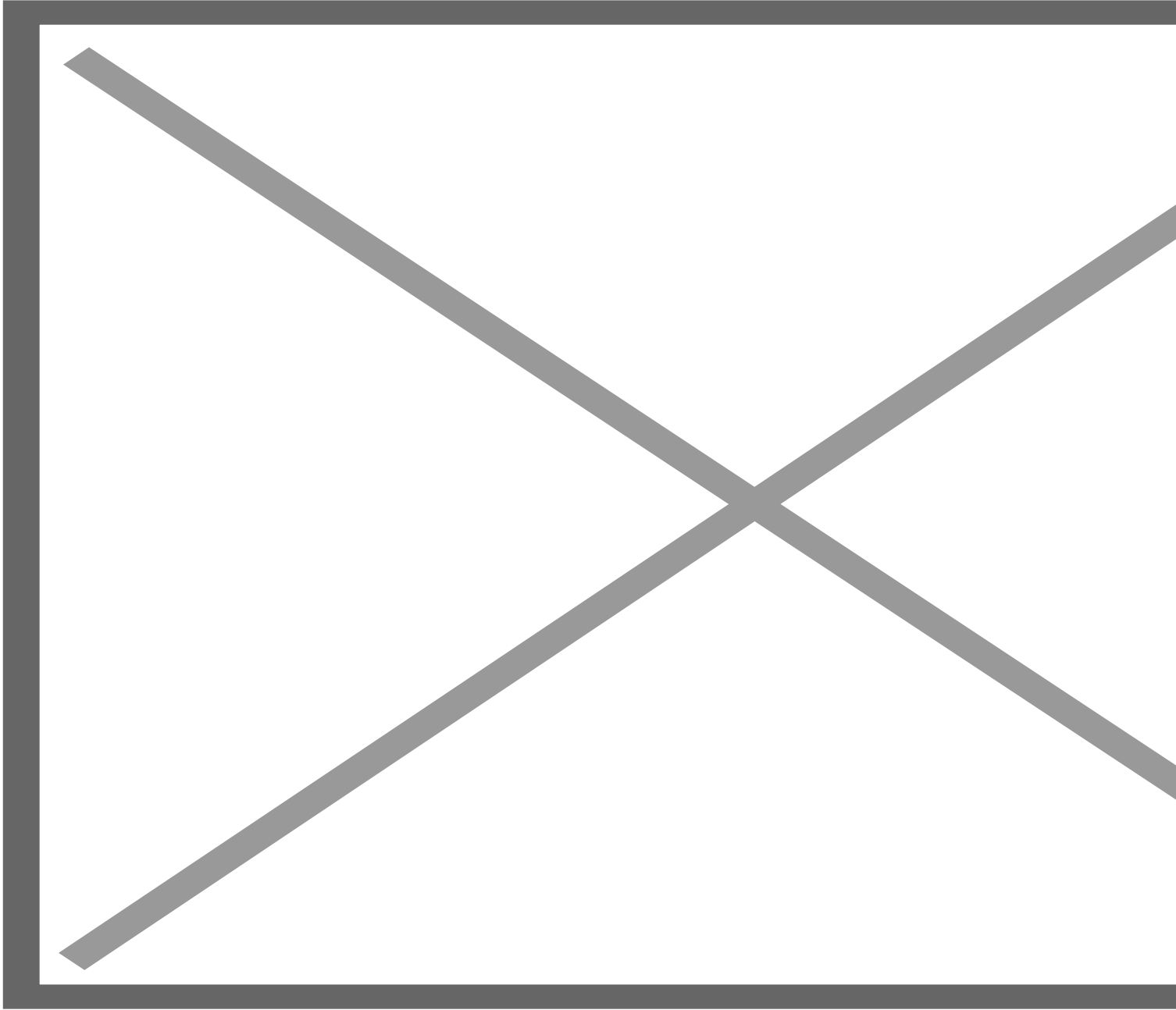


Other people's greatness

I want to be like David Lynch. And my pastor. And my wife. But there aren't enough hours in the day.

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue

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Century illustration

Like many people, I am obsessed with self-improvement. The fact that I can then turn around and examine my obsession with the eye of a cultural critic—that I can lob epithets at it, such as “capitalist” and “Calvinist” and “productivity culture”—doesn’t reduce the obsession one bit. No sooner do I see a form of human excellence in action than I start to wonder how I could acquire it for my own skill-hoard. This sounds normal enough, maybe, and even laudable, except that many forms of human excellence are incompatible, and human beings are supposed to make choices rather than trying to have everything.

I admire, for example, the community pastor at my church, who schleps without ceasing. I love people who schlep. (I schlep as little as possible, and always with a barely suppressed air of martyrdom.) She fills the holes created by other people’s slipups and incompetencies—organizing meal trains, leading children’s worship, administering the Eucharist—and never seems to break a sweat, and yet she also doesn’t have that annoying impersonal quality that omni-competent people often manifest. You can actually have a conversation with her in which she is genuine, present, and vulnerable. How admirable! I would love to be more like that. I could help so many people I care about.

I would also like to be more like David Lynch, who was my favorite living film director until (cursed day) he died. He was a monk for his art, living in a self-hypnotizing set of routines that allowed him to see the monstrosity and beauty of human life with a child’s clarity and to then share that vision with a precision and accuracy and care that only adult discipline can manage. He was so personally genial that even his ex-wives still speak well of him. If I were more like David Lynch, the quarter-finished novel in my Google Drive might be finished, and it might even be good. It might change lives or make them seem more vivid and worth living, as *Twin Peaks* and *Mulholland Drive* and even *Eraserhead* have done for me.

But you see the problem. My pastor friend must be, above all things, conscious, must flex the muscles of executive function, whereas David Lynch famously spent a lot of his time half-conscious, meditating transcendently. That’s how he reached those depths. There is not enough time in the day to be both of these people, and though the world would encourage us to be partisans of one or the other—to scorn my pastor’s work as impermanent or to scold Lynch as another male ego—the world would be impoverished by either person’s absence.

But I am not done admiring human qualities. I also admire George Orwell, who, not content merely to write against fascism, ran off to Spain and almost died fighting it. He then almost died a second time because the militia he happened to have joined fell out of favor with decisionmakers in Moscow, to whom controlling the left side of the Spanish Civil War was more important than whether that side actually won. I believe that I am willing to take a bullet for my political convictions, but I don’t go actively seeking to do so, as Orwell did. Then he wrote *Homage to Catalonia* about it—his finest book. What a balance of the active and contemplative life!

He was not much of a husband, though, and he had some complexes about being a Real Man, which came out in his famous (and homophobic) strictures against W. H. Auden, another person who I would very much like to be. Orwell scorned Auden as an armchair leftist, unwilling to get his manicured hands dirty.

The reason that I admire Auden is that I think he wrote some of the best poetry about what it feels like to be a Christian in modernity, and he did it all as a pre-Stonewall gay man (not remotely celibate), and he did it while leading a secret life of charitable expenditures and quiet behind-the-scenes kindnesses. Usually, we find out that a writer whose vision of the world seems particularly humane was living a debauched and even cruel secret life. With Auden, the debauchery and, sometimes, cruelty—the jealous rages and sordid affairs with less-privileged men—are right on the surface, along with the pettiness and egoism that his poetry mercilessly dissects. But when you dig you find out that he was also, haltingly and imperfectly, trying to live in imitation of Christ, giving lavishly and secretly to charity. Most of us can’t be outright saints, and what Auden achieved is certainly the

next best thing: to put the badness out where everyone can see it and to keep the goodness close to the chest.

I could go on. I admire Jack Reacher and St. Francis, Superman and Batman, Joanna Russ and Robert Hayden, Marilynne Robinson and Angela Davis. I used to admire Noam Chomsky, till he turned up in the Epstein files. More than any other person I know, I admire my wife, Ashley, whose academic career has combined humble schlepping with deep thought and good writing, to a degree that people rarely pull off.

There are simply so many ways that human beings can be wonderful, and I am stuck over here, admiring all of them, covetous of all of them. Maybe that's what it means to be a writer.