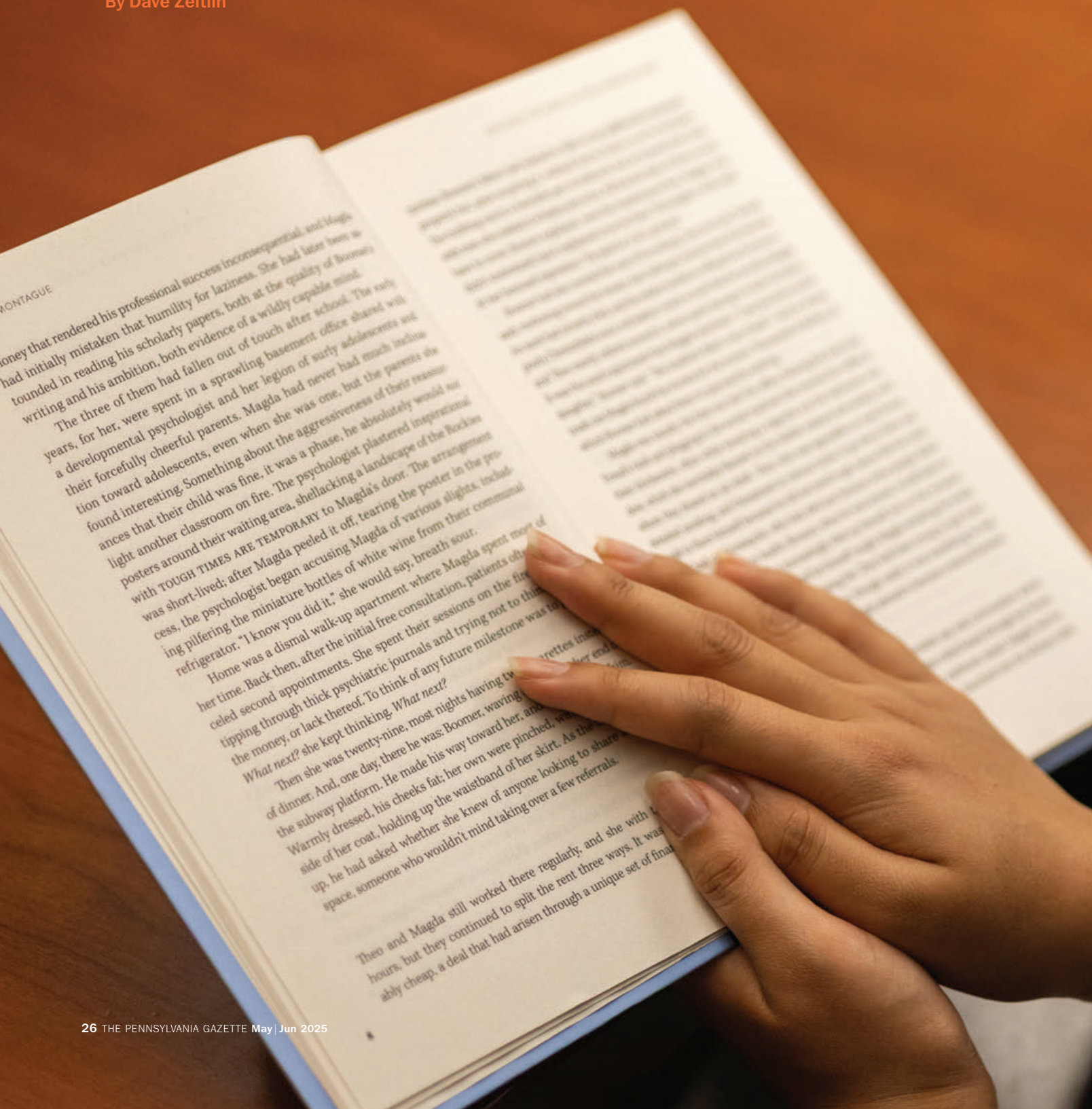
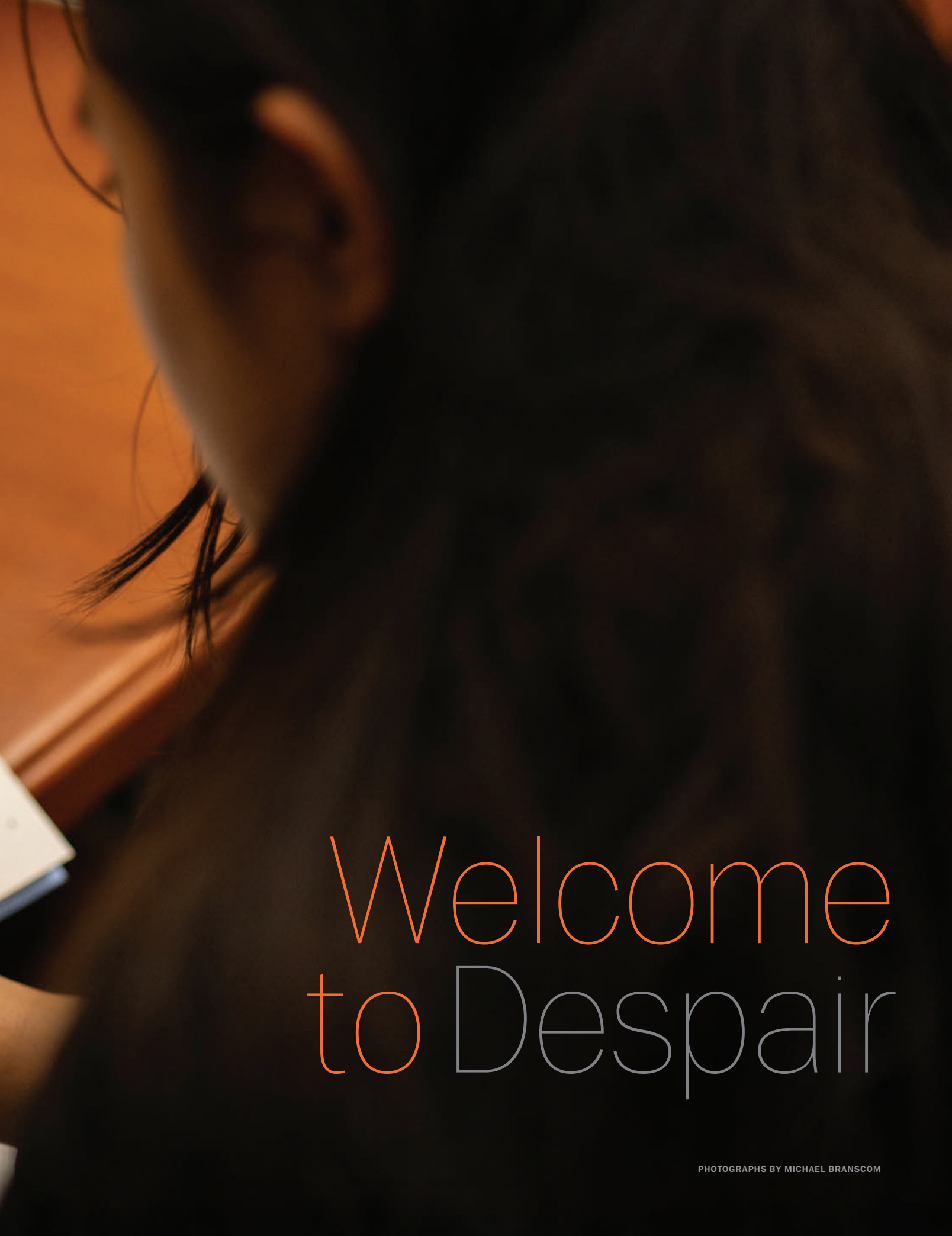
Through his unorthodox courses, religious studies professor Justin McDaniel is training Penn students how to immerse themselves in literature, disconnect from their phones, build lifelong bonds with classmates … and prepare for the inevitable emotional pain life will bring.

By Dave Zeitlin





Welcome to Despair

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL BRANSCOM

Wharton senior Ryan Ghose was hanging out with friends at the Mill City Museum in his hometown of Minneapolis over winter break when he glanced at his phone and saw an email. He read the subject line, "Welcome to Despair," and immediately had one thought.

"Oh, fuck."

His next instinct was to text people the news but, since he was about to go inside a museum exhibit, had to put his phone away. "And I was like, *Great, the class has already started, I guess*."

The class—a religious studies course called Existential Despair ["Gazetteer," Mar|Apr 2018], taught by Justin McDaniel, the Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Endowed Professor of the Humanities—is "kind of like this mythological part of the Penn education," Ghose says. The select few who get in—41 this semester, out of more than 400 applicants—enter Cohen Hall at 5 p.m. on Monday evening and don't get out until midnight, sometimes later. Upon arrival, they trade their phones for a book, which McDaniel introduces to the students with a lecture, exercise, or skit. They then spend the next five or so hours silently reading the same book in its entirety, spread out in small groups across five different rooms in the building. Once they're done, the final hour is reserved for a deep discussion of the book, in a pitch-black classroom, "to encourage intellectual reflection and emotional vulnerability through an in-depth study of the way people cope with existential despair," as the course description puts it.

The course satisfies no core curricular requirements. There are no grades. No syllabus. No tests. No outside reading. No homework. No phones or computers. No research papers—though most students end up writing personal reflections of the literature in an online discussion board during the week. "I have no learning outcomes," McDaniel says. "I do not care what they learn. All I know is that they're reading about 3,900 pages, on average, of really good literature and having intense conversations about it."

Ghose, naturally, was apprehensive. What exactly had the marketing major, bound for a New York consulting job after his May graduation, gotten himself into? "There was definitely the concern that I really hadn't sat down and read a book for four years," he says. "If I'd gotten through any books, it was piecemeal and very slowly. So the fact that we were going to be stuck in these books, I was not confident in my reading comprehension or my speed reading. My brain was built for spreadsheets over these past four years."

He wasn't alone. His classmate Daniel Babalola had been an avid reader in middle school and high school, particularly of fantasy series, before being "swept up by the pre-professionalism" of Wharton and focusing instead on books on private equity and consulting. "So making that shift to reading books purely about the human experience has been interesting for me," says Babalola, who had been initially nervous about his ability to keep pace in the class. He's also involved in several clubs, including one that he founded that recruits Penn students to provide tax services to Philadelphia residents, so giving up a phone "that's always buzzing" for seven hours was another source of trepidation. But that part of the experience has been "surprisingly liberating," he says, and he's since adopted the habit of going dark at other times. Ghose agrees, noting how he "wanted to train my brain to get less addicted to my phone."

Like Ghose, Babalola is following a traditional Wharton path after college, with a product management job lined up at a financial services company. But both wanted to experience something new before graduating—and had time in their schedules during their final semester of college. "I thought it was quite eccentric and unique, because I've never heard of a seven-hour class before," Babalola says. Ghose, who's minoring in theatre arts and is a member of the Mask and Wig Club, adds that he's always had the desire to "explore an unconventional education" at a University that allows him such a privilege. "And this is certainly different from my Finance 101 class," he says.

Ghose and Babalola aren't the only ones coming to Existential Despair from finance class. Other Wharton students are taking the course too, as are undergraduates from Engineering, Nursing, and the College of Arts and Sciences. McDaniel has no criteria for acceptance into the course, other than "being different from the last person I interviewed," the professor says. "I want some really reticent people. I want some serious readers. I want some engineers and nurses and [students studying] finance and philosophy. I want it all over the place." In his interviews with students hoping to get a spot, he doesn't ask about their background. Instead, he has them read a poem in his office, because "I want to see how you read," he explains. "I want to see how you talk about it. And I want different personalities. What you say about the poem doesn't matter." Students also fill out applications in the hallway, answering offbeat questions like "What's the difference between a bell and a whistle?" and "What's the funniest thing you ever said?"

Babalola had no idea what to expect when he emailed McDaniel about the course and was invited for an interview, where he immediately clocked the professor's "amazing office" in Cohen Hall, filled wall to wall with books (and a couple of bottles of liquor). Looking at the application questions, Babalola felt like "you were meant to spend a tiny bit of time being the most impulsively creative person you can think of," he says, adding that "something about interviewing for a class definitely makes it feel more rewarding when you get in."

Ghose recalls "being very open and not shielding my thoughts" during his chat with McDaniel, at one point veering into a tangent about the TV show *Futurama*. "I think he was more fascinated by my willingness to just say what was on my

A student sits in the hallway to read during Justin McDaniel's Monday night Existential Despair class. That's also where students answer the professor's offbeat application questions to try to land a coveted spot in the course.

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mind and how I was feeling," says Ghose, who after the initial shock and fear of getting a spot in the course, felt his nerves dissipate when he read the first few pages of the book that was assigned the first class in January: *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado, the former Abrams Artist-in-Residence at Penn. "The moment it mentioned queer trauma on the fourth page, I was like, *This is gonna be great*," says Ghose, a queer student who holds a leadership position at the Wharton Alliance, an LGBTQ pre-professional organization. "From there, I could not tell what time it was. I was just really invested in the book."

Now, Ghose has learned to appreciate even the most challenging aspects of the course—like sitting in a chair for several hours straight on the days his reading group doesn't snag the "most coveted" reading spot on a comfy couch in a lounge. (Sometimes, he'll "stand up and lean against a doorway to keep myself awake and engaged in the book.") He also appreciates how the discussion in a dark room "makes it feel like you can say anything," and that listening to classmates is like "uncovering a mystery behind how people think and react to the books." And the bonds he's forged with classmates has been a bonus—from pre-class happy hours to continuations of the classroom conversations on their post-midnight walks home up Locust Walk. "It feels like you're almost in a big ocean of darkness, and no one's really active on campus," he says. "And you kind of just walk through it and you feel a little special. You're like, *No one in these buildings knows that I just had this life-changing experience*."

More than anything, Ghose has grown to appreciate his "very candid and very challenging" professor, who's a "funny character to watch in class" yet continually challenges his students to "rethink how we've approached our education at Penn, our involvements at Penn, what we care about in life, and how we feel when things don't go our way and we experience these bouts of despair."

"I feel like every class," Ghose says, "is a study of the books, a study of yourself, and a study of him."

Photo by Michael Branscom

Facing page: Justin McDaniel sits by a window in his office—in what his students call the "crying chair" because if they need a break from the world they can ask to sit in it, no questions asked, and McDaniel will leave the room.

Standing in front of a packed audience in Irvine Auditorium's Cafe 58, it's easy to see why Justin McDaniel captivates a class. He's introspective, funny, self-deprecating, and prone to tangents—including an unexpected digression, during an Arts and Sciences' Knowledge by the Slice talk in late January, on fencing.

While making a point that high school students today are more interested in building an extracurricular-laden resume for college admission than reading a book for pleasure, McDaniel exclaims, "Do you really think there's actually this many people interested in fencing? Fencing is the only sport in the Olympics that's never had an injury—and it's the only one with swords! If it wasn't for the Ivy League, fencing would not exist."

The religious studies professor, who teaches courses on Buddhism and Southeast Asian studies and has written several books on those subjects, had a similar bout with anger and frustration years earlier when he lit into his students for giving him blank stares when he mentioned authors like Carson McCullers and Toni Morrison. If even Ivy League students "aren't reading these books—and I'm not talking obscure authors here—then what are they doing with their time? We're training them in so many things extremely well—from linguistics to biology to mechanical engineering to nursing. That's awesome. But there has to be more. There has to be a kind of wondering and a wandering, a kind of pulling apart, a kind of struggling."

Other professors across the country have noticed a shift in students' reading aptitude. An October article in the *Atlantic*, titled "The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books," opens with an anecdote about an Ivy League freshman telling a professor that she had never been required to read an entire book in high school.

For McDaniel, it's an alarming trend that goes beyond reading—and includes a lack of knowledge about "art and film and just basic stuff." The professor says he rarely sees students at any of the museums on campus, or taking in a show at the Annenberg Center, or attending a talk by a Nobel Prize winner. "American college kids are the only consumer group in the world that wants less for their money," he says from his office a few weeks after his Knowledge by the Slice talk. "I know you have time. I see you lingering at lunch. I see you sitting in the library, texting." McDaniel doesn't want to sound like he's up on a high horse. He wants students to have fun and party and understands the addictive nature of technology. "I've wasted a ton of time myself," he says. "It's so easy to reach for a cell phone to play a game or to look at YouTube or Instagram or whatever you do. And that makes it that much harder to read a book."

Powerful literature can be an "instruction manual," a way to cultivate the "emotional sophistication" people need to gird themselves against despair and help a loved one through tragedy.

After going on his literature rant a little less than 10 years ago, a pair of students came into his office to make sure he was OK—and asked for a list of great novels to read. McDaniel was reluctant because he figured they might do what he'd seen other students do: "read the first three pages, google the rest of it, and then use it as a bludgeon against friends to show how relevant you are." Or maybe they'd read it over the course of a semester, dividing it into small bits until "the emotional resonance is gone, eaten up by all the distractions that have happened in between the pages of the book."

But when the students insisted they were after a different experience, McDaniel hatched a plan. He'd take away their phones and they'd have to read a book in the Cohen Hall library, for about eight hours on a Saturday. He handed them each a copy of the 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates, went back to his office to do work (while checking in on them from time to time), and "just assumed there'd be drool on the pages," he says. "Absolutely not." They finished and what followed was the "single best conversation I've ever had about a book in my life."

That's how he came up with the idea of Existential Despair as a course. But he knew he needed some ground rules. He determined that students could never know in advance what they'd be reading each week (to rein in the "blowhards" prone to googling and blustering throughout a class discussion) and that there would be no autobiographies or self-help books, "because students already read inspiring stories about business leaders and tech leaders and medical leaders," he says. "I'm not against them but I don't want a book club where you're told how inadequate you are. I didn't want to feed this mentality here of '*achieve, achieve, achieve*.'" Instead, he wanted his students to "read for the sake of reading—not to learn how to be better than the person next to you." And he wanted the books to be about grief and heartbreak, parenting and childhood, sickness and emotional pain, addiction and faith.

Around that time, McDaniel roughly calculated that something like 16 percent of a person's life is spent at work. And while elite schools at Penn are adept at training students for that portion, "what are we doing with the other 84 percent? How are we going to deal with a family member getting sick? How are we going to deal with loss of jobs? How are we going to deal with personal failure? How are we going to deal with loneliness? These are the things that will actually take up more time in your life." Powerful literature, he insists, can be an "instruction manual," a way to cultivate the "emotional sophistication" people

Photo by Michael Branscom

need to gird themselves against despair and help a loved one through tragedy.

"There's something about slowly reading a book over five hours, cover to cover with no distraction—that I didn't know before but now I really do," he he adds. "Sitting-with those emotions or sitting with boredom or sitting with stress or sitting with sadness, it helps you work through it. It's almost like a physical exercise. And I think there's a difference between that and a film clip or a podcast or an article when you can be doing so many other things."

McDaniel launched the experimental course in 2017, before petitioning a University course committee to approve it on a permanent basis. He met a little resistance, mostly regarding how to assess an almost entirely participation-based class, "but I think I argued it well and it was approved," he says, adding that he's always gotten latitude to build nontraditional courses from an "administration that has been so supportive."

"We have intensive writing courses, so why can't we have an intensive reading course?" says McDaniel, noting that the 17 novels students read in his class is "maybe 10 years of literature" for most people. "I've made lifelong readers," he says of his students who've continually impressed him with how they "connect the books together and pull out quotes in a really beautiful way" in their discussions and writings. McDaniel—who's writing his own book about the course, called *This Will Destroy You: Learning to Face Existential Despair Through Literature,* set to be released in summer 2026—has been equally charmed by how they "cannot wait to shut that phone off" when they get to class each week.

"They're amazing," he says. "You unleash these kids … and they are bright, actually. They're just not given the chance."

Several years before launching Existential Despair, McDaniel created an even more unconventional course designed to help students detach from technology and become more mindful and aware of others: RELS 3560 Living Deliberately ["Gazetteer," Sep|Oct 2012]. Known colloquially as the "monk class," the Penn Global Seminar concludes with a trip to Thailand, after students "experience monastic and ascetic ways of living … involving restrictions on dress, technology, verbal communication, and food," per the course description.

The course spawned from McDaniel's own experiences living like a monk during his 20s, in a remote Buddhist monastery in Thailand, where he had gone to volunteer and teach English. "It was a beautiful life," he says today. "You know, I ate about 400 calories a day. I slept less than three hours a night. And I was happy every day. You think I'm happy every day here?"

Rather than try to explain how slowing down and limiting his choices "made the world seem smaller and more manageable and more welcoming and more beautiful," he aimed to recreate some aspects of it. Or put another way: "Can we not just learn *about* religion? Can we learn *from* religion?" He initially created a version of the course at Ohio University almost 25 years ago and then brought it to UC Riverside, where he taught before joining Penn's faculty in 2009. At Penn, the "monk class" has grown in stature and lore, only being offered every two or three years to 14 students out of a waiting list that can top 300.

Kamber Moss C'17 had heard "random whispers about it" throughout his time at Penn but only applied when his girlfriend (and now wife) Sarah Pilger C'17 brought it to his attention. Out of the hundreds to apply, he got in but she did not—which meant they couldn't touch or talk to each other for the final month of the semester when students gave up their phones and were instructed not to speak or touch others. Before that, students in the course must limit the number of words they speak each day, instead writing letters to loved ones and journaling every 30 minutes from the time they wake up to the time they go to bed.

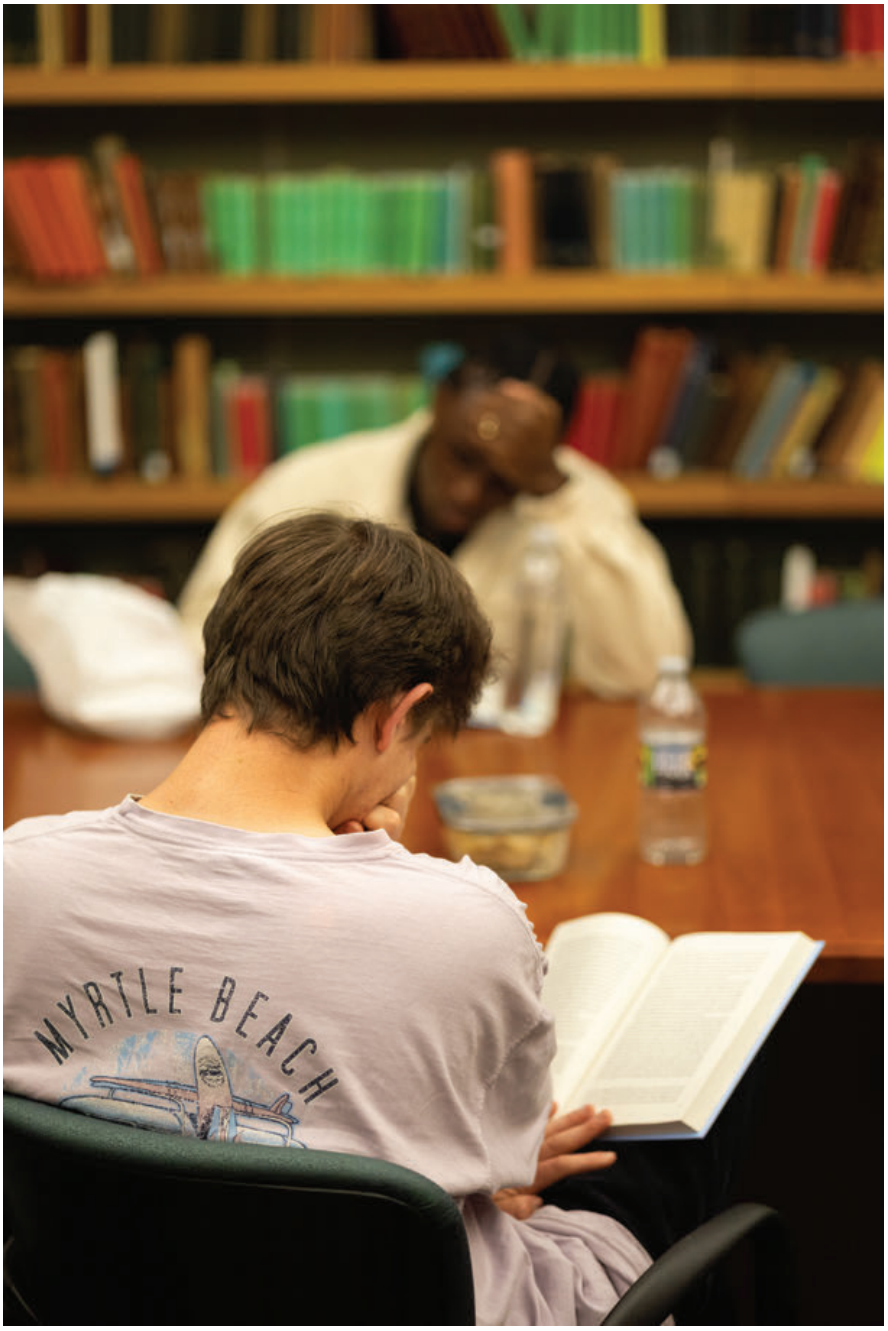
Moss recalls McDaniel reading his journal and determining that he needed more music in his life. So the professor instructed him to take a taxi down to a jazz cafe and just listen to music for two hours. McDaniel also thought Moss needed more female friends, so he had him walk around the Philadelphia Zoo with a friend of his girlfriend just to listen to her and take notes. "I think it's probably easier to open up with somebody who can't say anything back," says Moss, who found more "depth" in the relationships he forged without the distractions of external stimuli.

As for giving up his phone for a full month, that "became the most freeing and easiest thing," says Moss, who today works in software sales at a tech company in Los Angeles. "The first two or three days, you're kind of patting your pocket and reaching into your pocket, but after a couple of days, you honestly stop thinking about it. And it just forces you to be present. It's honestly really, really pleasant." Moss still has the occasional urge to throw his phone away and he recently ordered a Light Phone, which is designed to be used as little as possible. But "it's a constant battle," he says. "We're all addicted to this shit."

McDaniel knows that locking students' phones in his office and telling them not to speak for a month can be considered extreme. Because they can't even talk in other classes, they need permission from all their professors, whom McDaniel says have been "99.9 percent fully supportive." And sometimes, he'll need to remind students that it's OK to break their silence vow—like the one who wouldn't speak to a nurse despite spiking a 104-degree fever, and the two who were approached by police when McDaniel sent them to an unfamiliar neighborhood to draw what they saw. "Cops thought they were casing the place," he laughs. "I got a call from the police station saying, 'They gave me this number and you'll vouch for them.' And I was like, *Talk to the cops*. Students take this very seriously."

McDaniel proudly notes that almost all his Living Deliberately students have

Students make use of several rooms throughout Cohen Hall to focus on reading during the seven-hour class.



She enjoyed even the "grim and bleak" part of the discussions on despair that "shook my being," sometimes staying past midnight or recounting that week's class with her roommates until the sun came up.

either maintained straight A's, or improved their grades across the board, and that some professors have told him that the silent students become more engaged in class as a result. And when they move on from Penn, McDaniel says they "gain so much more satisfaction in their jobs because they know why they're doing it" and have learned to "start to pay attention to others."

Yet given the limitations to how many students he can take for Living Deliberately, it made sense for him to develop Existential Despair, which is "more digestible for the masses," as Moss puts it. Beatrice Karp C'22 had heard about McDaniel when she was applying to Penn, from a cousin who told her about "some monk dude that teaches cool courses." She would have loved to take Living Deliberately had it been available to her (because of the travel component, it was paused during the pandemic), pointing out that she tried in college to fast and break away from her phone on Sundays. Instead, she settled for taking a Buddhist film course with McDaniel and Existential Despair in the fall of her senior year—which had a huge impact on her and, she says, "wiped [the] slate clean" regarding her career trajectory.

Calling McDaniel "the counterculture to the hustle culture at Penn," Karp appreciated how his course reintroduced her to the "lost art" of reading novels and how "one of his main points was that you don't have to read things just to extract information and better your life—it's OK to get lost in a story and not learn anything new but just ingest something beautiful." She enjoyed even the "grim and bleak" part of the discussions on despair that "shook my being," sometimes staying past midnight or recounting that week's class with her roommates until the sun came up. And she came away from the experience "ready to take on the world as a young person"—which for her meant deferring a corporate consulting job in cybersecurity to travel solo to Hawaii and then to Tuscany, Italy, where she ended up starting an olive oil company (see sidebar).

The big lesson she took away from Existential Despair was indeed bleak—but unexpectedly liberating. "I just felt like, *Wow, life is nothing, and it doesn't matter what I do*," she says, echoing one of the

Photo by Michael Branscom

conceptual underpinnings of Buddhism. "But upon graduation, it was awesome, because I felt, *OK, nothing matters. What do I do if there's no inherent roadmap?* And it actually became a very empowering, uplifting message, because the question was: what do you do in the face of nothing? And I think the answer is that you love. So that was my takeaway—that nothing matters but we should love one another anyway, and your life should be about uplifting others."

When McDaniel was seven or eight years old, he was at a bar with his father, doing his homework and minding his own business. Suddenly, his dad came over and angrily asked why he hadn't greeted or said hello to the man sitting alone at the next table. "No one goes to a bar to drink alone," McDaniel remembers his father telling him. "It is much cheaper to drink at home. You go to a bar to be recognized." That moment stuck with McDaniel, whose dad would continue to drive home that lesson throughout his childhood, often to the point of embarrassment by striking up conversations with strangers any time they were in a bar, or on a bus, or traveling. "He hated loneliness," McDaniel says of his late father—a large man with a gentle heart who he notes didn't have much schooling or any kind of career. "He just found people fascinating. He never talked about himself. He used to say, 'I give people the gift of my own mediocrity. Around me, they seem really impressive.'"

McDaniel also learned about the importance of compassion, kindness, and friendship growing up religious. "I was largely raised by priests and nuns," he says. And later, when he lived in the monastery, he discovered that for Buddhist monks, "mindfulness is something that is done in the community" and "your individuality becomes less important than your awareness of others." Now he tries to pass on those lessons about fostering community, often in unexpected places, to his own children and to his students. When he selects the roster for his courses, "I'm kind of Breakfast Clubbing it," he says, betraying his vintage via a 1980s movie reference. He looks to bring together opposites to forge lasting bonds, people who he thinks might need each

From Existential Despair to Unlikely Entrepreneurship

Beatrice Karp came to Penn aiming for a career in computer science, but also bent on taking full advantage of the University's liberal arts offerings. So the Science, Technology & Society major was open to a class like Justin McDaniel's Existential Despair. Its countercultural credo was part of the appeal. "I realized early on in my Penn career that there was a lot of interesting energy on campus, and everyone was super bright—and I noticed that a lot of people were channeling it into things like finance or accounting," she recalls. "And that's great, but I sort of had these questions. I felt like I had the golden ticket: I'm at this amazing university, and I feel like I can do a lot of things, and I want to just take a second to figure out what that may be." In short, Karp was trying to answer a thornier question than which programming languages to learn or how to land her first job. What she wanted to know was: "How should I live my life?"

McDaniel characterized Existential Despair as "the class for people in their 50s going through their midlife crisis, but taken now when you're 21 and deciding things," she says. "Wouldn't we rather be aware of the possible fears and regrets now?"

Karp plunged into that murky realm with abandon, and emerged with an unexpected revelation: existential uncertainty, even existential meaninglessness, could be a catalyst for self-realization.

"A lot of our studies with Buddhism focused on the nature of reality itself, underscored by the book *Self-Portrait in Green*, where a single character was a different person in every chapter, and no one was quite sure which perspective was correct," she says. It was an unsettling thought. "In everything I do, I could argue against myself and be aware of five different ways they could have been done," or even perceived—and the ultimate meaning of any of them was unknowable if not illusory. Yet if reality was so malleable and contingent, then creating a new one was only a matter of will. At least that's how it seemed to Karp. "The intense questioning and despair ignited a life of action taking and no regret."

After graduation she deferred a cybersecurity consulting job for one year, and ended up in Tuscany, where she worked a six-month stint in agrotourism. Then she lived in a communal house in Hawaii overseen by an ex-Silicon Valley entrepreneur who reinforced much of what she'd absorbed from McDaniel. "There were many monastic features, such as ringing a bell at the start of a meal, eating in silence, and waking up at 5 a.m. every day to meditate together," Karp recalls. "And his message to me was: 'Do things that make sense. If you think an idea is not possible, you are just not creative enough.'"

After returning to New York and giving corporate cybersecurity consulting an honest go for a year, she followed a hazy intuition back to Italy to take part in the autumn olive harvest. That's where something clicked. When the farmer began pressing the olives she'd helped pick the same day, Karp was enraptured by the oil that spilled into his vat.

"It was bright green. I'd never tasted anything like it. It felt alive. And I said, 'Why is it so green? And how much are you selling this for?' And he laughed at me and said, 'Bea, we are not selling this oil. We live in a small village and everyone makes the same oil, and we don't have the money or the infrastructure to get it to a city like Florence—never mind the United States."

That only spurred more questions. What if she could help him and his neighbors get FDA approval? What if she could navigate exportation and importation? Karp's father was a chef and her mother had helped launch a luxury

other in their lives. One example is Nery Rodriguez C'23 and Christina Volpe C'24, who have become best friends despite being "completely different from each other," says McDaniel. "It makes me feel good because it's so easy to slip into our myopic silos of news listening and conversation having. We generally seek out what is comfortable, which is understandable. But universities should be about uncomfortable conversations and intellectual challenges." He's been thrilled to see many more Living Deliberately and Existential Despair alumni remain close (one couple who met in a class even got married) and he believes the bonds formed in his classrooms—across schools and majors and backgrounds—will "sustain them through the inevitable tragedies of life and that they will have always have someone they can turn to."

Volpe calls her relationship with Rodriguez the "purest form of friendship" in part because she didn't even know her name until a few months after they met (silently) in Living Deliberately in the fall of 2022. (McDaniel assigns monk names to students, who in turn call him "Ajahn," a Thai and Lao term that means "teacher.") Volpe was the only junior in the course, taking it during the first semester she was actually on campus. When she started at Penn two years earlier, campus was closed due to COVID-19 and in her first year she took a virtual Happiness and Despair course through the Integrated Studies Program for Benjamin Franklin Scholars. That's where she first encountered McDaniel, who taught the "despair" portion of the course (which Volpe describes as a "smaller version of Existential Despair") and changed her college trajectory.

"What McDaniel does is he teaches you how to be a person, which I think is becoming a more and more important function of college these days," Volpe says. "It's how to be a person first and not just a bot in the industry of the society that we've created. He always says, 'I'm not concerned about teaching you facts. I'm trying to teach you how to deal with when your parents die because that's when people break.'"

Volpe was particularly inspired by one of the books assigned, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh, and

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water brand. She had sources of knowledge and help. What if she broke the traditional mold of olive oil marketing—notorious for dilution, counterfeiting, and overstretched shelf lives—and went direct-to-consumer with single-grove extra virgin olive oil pressed the day of harvest and delivered within weeks?

The upshot is Bea Olive Oil (beaoliveoil.com), whose first two batches—450 bottles of unfiltered *olio nuovo* from the Siena hills, and 1,200 filtered bottles from an estate in Chianti—were air-freighted to New York shortly before Christmas 2024. Each label bears an inked fingerprint of the farmer who raised the crop, and Karp feels invigorated by a mission to support them by introducing American customers to the authentic article that captivated her.

She regards the product and the process as inseparable. "It's a three-week turnaround time because I'm there picking, pressing, bottling, and labeling alongside the farmers, literally giving it to the Milanese truck drivers, and then picking it up with a U-Haul myself at 2 a.m. back in the US. I take a huge hit on cost from expedited air freight from Italy. But if the offer really is the highest quality olive oil straight from the farm, as I experienced and was inspired by, then that's what we're doing."

In a blind tasting of five extra virgin olive oils—ranging from a basic Bertolli to a special cuveé from the French producer Nicolas Alziari—Bea's filtered Chianti bottling stood out for its assertively herbaceous aromatics and peppery finish. Its freshness was indeed striking. It was hard to avoid thinking that coaxing customers to pay $75 for 500ml would depend on getting them to regard olive oil in a totally different light than most are accustomed to doing. But Karp is energized by the challenge. And recently she actually revised her prices—upward, to $85.

"I'd never tasted anything like it. It felt alive."

"We're doing things like selecting olives that are more expensive because they're higher in polyphenol content. And when I said that to the farmers, they laughed at me, and they said, 'Bea, don't do that! This is a waste of your money, and Americans don't know the difference! And I said, 'You know what? I know the difference, and I'm going to teach them.'"

"I'm aware that in selling very high-quality olive oil, the margins are not going to deliver, probably ever, what a corporate job would," she concedes. But having dedicated herself to the enterprise full-time, she adopts a simple attitude: "I have to get creative, and I have to find a way."

However it works out, she's grateful to the professor whose unconventional course set her on an unpredicted but soul-satisfying path.

"Justin McDaniel single-handedly has changed the course of my life more than any other human outside of my parents and immediate family. That guy rewired my mind. He made me look at the nature of reality and understand that nothing is quite real, and everything is a system that you can see through and change—and everything is a creation.

"I'm not sure that he knows how much his students really run with what he says," she adds. "But wow, best class I've ever taken in my life."—*TP*

Photo courtesy Bea Olive Oil

took time off Penn as a sophomore because of it. McDaniel's advice to her during her sabbatical: Do nothing. Don't try to gain knowledge. And, when you return, consider taking Living Deliberately.

Volpe, a STEM-focused student who will begin medical school later this year, recalls the confusion of her other professors when she explained the speaking restrictions of Living Deliberately. "My molecular biology teacher was like, *OK, just do your work, I guess. But this is going to be hard for you.* And I was like, *Yeah, that's the point.*" Although living like a monk while adjusting to campus life for the first time was indeed a challenge, it also helped her experience the world in a new way. When you walk down Locust Walk without listening to music or a podcast on your phone, she says, you notice little things. The trees. The squirrels. The classmate who looks like they're having a bad day. "Instead of living inwardly," she says, "you start to live outwardly. You get good at actually listening to people."

Soon, Volpe and Rodriguez began to listen to each other. After emotional conversations during their trip to Thailand, where the students explored temples and monasteries in Bangkok and more remote parts of the country, she and Rodriguez talked about "deep grief" in her high-rise dorm when they got off the plane—"the moment our friendship began," Volpe says. The two friends, who also took Existential Despair and two other McDaniel courses during their time at Penn, continue to have long talks, with Volpe often jotting down ideas into the Notes app before calling Rodriguez.

Rodriguez has similar discussions over FaceTime with Beatrice Karp and another former classmate. "We just speak about aimlessness and boredom and nothingness," Karp says, "which is hard to come by in a world of young hustlers in the city." For Rodriguez, who has a finance job at Microsoft in New York, "the friendships cultivated" was the most valuable thing she got out of the four classes she took with McDaniel. It's not something she expected when she started college, when she was focused on her economics major and statistics minor and mostly scared to step too far out of her comfort zone—until registering for McDaniel's Gods, Ghosts, and Monsters religious studies course. "Religion isn't something that I grew up with, so I wanted to explore it while I had the chance in college," she says. "I didn't think my brain would have been able to function at its most optimal level if I was just always taking econ and stat."

Still, Rodriguez was nervous about taking both Existential Despair and Living Deliberately, the latter of which especially terrified her. McDaniel, though, helped put her at ease, at one point saying that "people think that taking this class is hard when in actuality, it's the things we do every single day that are much harder," Rodriguez recalls. "It is so much harder to talk constantly, to feel like you always have to input your voice and insert yourself into something. It's so much harder to be constantly worried about the five classes you're taking and multitasking."

A student once told McDaniel that his course is about "the art of single tasking," which he loves. Rodriguez, though, says that one of the "most shocking pieces after taking Living Deliberately was how easy it is to just fall back into the same routines" of madly toggling between competing priorities and mindlessly scrolling on your phone—which she tries to avoid, having learned to embrace the concept of boredom. She's also been reading more—50 books per year is her goal, despite the long hours she spends at work—thanks to the Existential Despair course, which also taught her that she doesn't always have to strive to do the next best thing or get the best jobs out of college. Echoing the sentiments of her classmates, she says McDaniel "was more concerned about when we reach an age when we're lonely and we have many more things to think about that are more serious."

Now almost a decade removed from his undergraduate days, Kamber Moss thinks about McDaniel's teachings often. "I never had a class where a teacher or professor spoke so openly and freely," he says. "We should have more of these classes that challenge us and our own behaviors, versus just the traditional education. I really feel the core of what he does is make an impact on people's lives—and what more could you really ask for from going to college?"

Beatrice Karp agrees and notes that with all the negative rhetoric currently surrounding higher education, "the point of college for me was to expand my mind and have access to some of the greatest minds in the world"—like McDaniel, who she says pours all his emotions into his lectures. "He'll cry and he'll yell and he'll sweat and he'll pace around."

Christina Volpe calls McDaniel "the definition of the perfect teacher" because of how available he is to his students and how "he will make time for anyone that needs it." Now taking time off before starting med school, she's harnessed McDaniel's lessons into giving her mind a break and doing random acts of kindness for friends—and she believes his teachings will be "invaluable to patient care" as she pursues a career in medicine. "He's not just a good teacher; he's a good person," she says. "And he actually cares. He acknowledges that he's only in your life for a short time, but in the time that he is with students, he's trying to get them to a place where they'll be able to cope with these huge things later in life. And that is the best gift that I think anyone could give someone in college."

McDaniel downplays his own role, noting that he's "hardly teaching anything" and, aside from picking good literature for Existential Despair, tries to remove himself and let students reach their own epiphanies. But he certainly spurs them on. When a student came to him after her father had died (not long after McDaniel's own father died), the professor walked with her to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, propped her in front of his favorite

The light in McDaniel's Cohen Hall office remains on long after other professors have gone home for the night.

Photo by Michael Branscom

painting (a Frederic Edwin Church painting of the mountains of Ecuador), and told her not to move for the next two hours. On the way back to campus, he told her she didn't have to say anything—but she did anyway, opening up about her dad. "For the rest of her life, when she's at a bad moment—and she'll have many bad moments in her life—she'll know the museum's there," McDaniel says. Another time, to prove a point about how "overwhelmed by choice" we can be, he asked students to go home and count all the shirts they owned. When one student was shocked to find out he had 300, he ended up giving away "like 90 percent of his clothes," McDaniel says. And then there was the student who surprised him perhaps more than any other—a cocky, muscle-bound guy who put his feet up on McDaniel's desk during an interview and complained about not being able to go to the gym every day while taking Living Deliberately. Having more time to fill, the student started doing math on paper, something he had loved in high school but had pushed to the side while studying at Wharton. By the end of the semester, he switched to become a math major, got a PhD at Yale, and now does cybersecurity—all because he had to occupy his emptied hours. "Sometimes students will continue meditation or the eating restrictions, but that's not really my concern," McDaniel says. "My concern is if they find something in silence that they lost, or that they never would have discovered."

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For the current students taking Existential Despair, they aren't sure yet how McDaniel might shape their lives once they move on from Penn. Daniel Babalola, who calls the course a "once-in-a-lifetime, one-of-a-kind experience," hopes to become "purely and uniquely authentic," which he will carry on into a "business world where authenticity is often manufactured."

And Ryan Ghose believes that the special camaraderie that's already forming with his classmates will last forever. "There's a certain element of allure that being in the class has, and you can't really explain it to other people who haven't been through it," he says. "And so, I'm sure I'll be trying to explain it and understand it for the rest of my life."