

## Alternatives to Arrogance

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February 7, 2010

### An Ancient Afghan Legend

There was once a king who governed his country in a dictatorial and ruthless manner. He abused his subjects and harassed them with unjust taxes. He did little to improve their welfare; in his eyes they were all mere pawns without faces.

One day he was out hunting and chased after a gazelle. The gazelle was very swift, and led the king into unknown territory, on and on. The king was determined and would not give up the pursuit. Now he sees the gazelle and now he doesn't. He sees her for a moment in the distance, and finally loses sight of her altogether.

Disappointed, the king decides to go back, but because he has strayed so far he is no longer sure of the way. He is at the edge of the desert and without warning is caught in a tremendous dust storm that lasts for three days. He can do nothing but find shelter and wait, but when the storm abates, he is alone and lost in a desolate wilderness.

The king's face is now unrecognizable, covered with dust and distorted with fear and fatigue. His fine clothes are torn to shreds. Some nomads approach, and he announces himself as their king and asks for help. They don't believe him and laugh, but they do give him some food and directions so that he can make his way back to the royal city.

With great effort, the king makes the return journey, but when he reaches the gates of the palace his own guards do not recognize him. They take him to be a poor, crazed fool. From behind the gates, the king sees the substitute king—a mysterious spirit who has taken his place and is pretending to be him. The new king reigns just as he did—mean-spirited and arrogant.

Bit by bit the king learns to live in poverty. He manages, but never without the help of others. One day someone offers him water to drink; another day someone gives him food or shelter or work. And he, too, puts in effort. He helps whenever he can. Once he saved the life of a child trapped inside a house on fire. Another time he offered food to someone who was hungrier than he was.

Slowly the king came to understand that his subjects were people like him and that in life people must care for each other. He learned that life is more beautiful and interesting when we love and help one another. In the end, he realized that the

reigning king was an illusion created by the angel of humility.

The time had now come for him to return to his palace and resume his reign. But this time the king governed wisely and with greater compassion because he had learned a priceless lesson.

### Reflections

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Arrogance is behavior born of over-weening pride, an inflated ego, supreme confidence, or a sense of personal superiority. Synonyms include imperiousness, contemptuousness, haughtiness, and insolence. Timothy Tyson provides a nice image of arrogance when he says of a certain Baptist minister, "He is the only man I ever saw who could strut sitting down."

In the ancient Greek world arrogance was the mother of all sins, and it occupied a prominent place in many a tragic tale. We remember Oedipus, whose illusions of omniscience caused him to reject the counsel of those around him—the citizens of Thebes, his wife, and even the god Apollo's blind prophet Tiresias. Other powerful heroic figures in ancient Greek literature were also done in by arrogance: Creon, Pentheus, and, most notably, Agamemnon.

Agamemnon, as we remember, was the supreme commander of the combined Greek forces that waged war against Troy. So eager was he for personal glory that Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter in order to insure favorable winds for his fleet of battleships. The men under his command included near-invincible warriors like Achilles and Ajax, and the savvy strategist Odysseus, but Agamemnon evinced little respect for any of them. He refused to consider their advice, downplayed their accomplishments, and deprived them of their spoils of war. Although the Greeks emerged victorious, Agamemnon paid a steep price for his arrogance. Returning home he was murdered by his bitter and grieving wife.

*Hubris* is the word the Greeks used to describe the flaw that Agamemnon possessed—this god-like confidence in oneself and the overestimation of one's abilities. *Hubris* is characterized by a lack of appreciation for and understanding of one's limits—or even the recognition that life imposes *any* limits at all.

Most ancient cultures recognized the danger arrogance poses both for individuals and society. The Old Testament contains accounts of a succession of Israelite monarchs for whom this was a serious issue. From David to Uzziah, they all let power go to their heads and overstepped. He “became strong but then grew proud, to his destruction,” as the book of Chronicles puts it.

The ancient Chinese sage Lao Tse lived during a period of great turmoil. Various petty rulers within China were vying for dominance, unconcerned about the deleterious effect their violent, self-aggrandizing behavior was having on the citizenry. Lao Tse abhorred their arrogance and advocated a different approach. “A great nation is like a great man,” he wrote in the Tao Te Ching.

When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.  
Having realized it, he admits it.  
Having admitted it, he corrects it.  
He considers those who point out his faults  
As his most benevolent teachers.  
He thinks of his enemy  
As the shadow that he himself casts.

Gautama Buddha, too, was well-acquainted with arrogance. Although he had attracted thousands of followers and was revered throughout northern India, Gautama was resented by his younger cousin, Devadatta. The latter felt that the older man had outlived his usefulness and that he could lead more effectively. But having failed to persuade Gautama to retire and anoint him as his successor, Devadatta orchestrated a coup, after which he tried to impose stricter standards of behavior on members of the community. Unlike Devadatta, Gautama had never sought power for himself and had always said that what mattered was the *dharma*—the teachings—not the teacher.

Ultimately, Devadatta’s grab for power was foiled, but Buddhists regard it as a cautionary tale.

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Even a community of dedicated and well-intentioned monks would do well to guard against the “devils” of arrogance and over-weening ambition. Having made discernible progress in so many areas, humankind has yet to eradicate this destructive vice. The sense of superiority, the indiscriminate use of power, the overestimation of one’s own talents and intelligence are in ample evidence

today. One thinks of Alan Greenspan, who confidently remarked just two years ago that the American housing market was in fine shape. The boys of Enron who thought they were so clever until the company imploded, casting tens of thousands into poverty. Bernard Madoff’s ponzi scheme produced the same outcome. We could also point to Dick Cheney’s snarling self-righteousness or Pat Robertson’s condemnation of the Haitian earthquake victims, who surely deserved their suffering because of sin. And what about that eminent biologist E.O. Wilson, who in his book *Consilience* dismisses the insights of all prescientific peoples as “wrong, always wrong.”

What causes people to lose perspective and become so arrogant? Psychology points out that people who are fundamentally insecure tend to overcompensate by posturing and putting on airs. Perhaps Agamemnon’s sense of inadequacy next to Achilles and Odysseus caused him to act so arrogantly.

But that’s hardly the whole story. Success can also be significant contributor. We think of all those financiers, bankers, and real estate speculators who prospered during the housing boom. Having experienced so much good fortune, those who helped create the housing bubble came to believe they were immune to failure.

Certain mental biases develop when we “become intoxicated with our past success and fail to be sufficiently self-critical,” Jerome Groopman writes. One is know as *overconfidence bias* and the other *confirmation bias*. The first leads us to overestimate our ability to process information and project likely outcomes. The second causes us to discount or ignore contradictory data.

As novices, we have little cause for arrogance. Readily recognizing our lack of ability, we are eager to learn, willing to be taught. But as our skills increase, we tend to become less receptive, and those two biases begin to kick in. “Every step toward mastery,” Malcolm Gladwell observes, “brings with it the increased risk of mastery’s curse.”

Another factor to consider is what Parker Palmer calls “functional atheism,” which he defines as the tendency to take on more responsibility than is warranted. “If you want something done *right*, you have to do it yourself”—that’s how

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the functional atheist expresses himself. They alone are committed and competent enough to do the job. Even though they might *profess* belief in God, by magnifying their own importance, these folks function like arrogant atheists.

Lack of propriety is a third characteristic of arrogance. The quotation from Aldo Leopold in today's program provides a clue to what this means:

A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each strike of his ax he is writing his signature on the face of his land.

The woodcutter must never lose sight of the context in which he operates; he strives for the kind of holistic vision that transcends self-interest. If one harvests a tree only with an eye to selling its lumber, or burning it in the stove and does not take culture and ecology into account, he is acting arrogantly. Under the rules of propriety we are not at liberty to do as we please, but can do only what is permitted within a particular context. Thus, the good worker, Wendell Berry writes,

Loves the board before it becomes a table, the tree before it yields the board, loves the forest before it gives up the tree. The good worker ... thinks considerately of the whole process, natural and cultural ... and understands that a badly produced article is both an insult to its user and a danger to its source.

As I see it, the several factors that contribute to arrogance have one thing in common: an unwillingness to acknowledge that life sets certain limits. Arrogance will not concede that there are limits to U.S. power, to the growth of the economy, to the planet's ability to absorb toxins, or the soil's ability to produce ever larger yields. Arrogance confidently asserts that empirical science is powerful enough to solve every mystery, to successfully substitute human technology for natural systems, and to determine the future course of evolution.

From the time Columbus landed on Hispaniola, settlers in this hemisphere have impetuously pushed past existing limits. With deadly diseases and powerful weapons we quickly dispatched the native opposition. We occupied the frontier, whose riches created an illusion of everlasting plenty. With increasing wealth and power, America gained

enough confidence to engage in imperialism—capturing territory from Mexico, Spain, and France. Then, having successfully survived two world wars with our infrastructure intact, we were top dog, no longer accountable to anyone.

Out of all this success a national myth arose. Ours is an exceptional nation, with the unique ability to transcend any particular limit. This has become an indelible feature of the American character, Parker Palmer suggests. We tend to regard limits of all sorts “as temporary and regrettable impositions on our lives.”

So what if we don't particularly care for this attribute? What steps should we take to conquer or avoid becoming arrogant? Michael Carroll recommends, in the first place, the “practice of no credentials.” All the degrees, titles, awards, and professional success that have made you important—temporarily lay them aside and become just a person dealing on equal terms with other persons.

That's what John Coleman, a Ph.D. economist and president of one the central reserve banks of the United States, did. He'd been invited to join a small, elite team charged with developing federal financial policy. Although he felt comfortable in the company of experts, Coleman wasn't satisfied with abstract thinking and statistical analysis. “How are real people faring in the current economy,” he asked, and then went out to see for himself. Taking the time to “walk in other people's shoes” Coleman traveled the country incognito digging ditches, collecting garbage, assisting in hospitals, even living with the homeless—exposing himself to people, not just numbers.

“We should aspire to be a student of everyone,” the Buddhist teacher Shantideva once counseled, “for there is nothing whatsoever that is not to be learned by one who aspires to awaken.” Through the practice of no credentials one becomes more open-minded, receptive, and less prone to arrogance.

Openness to being taught requires humility, a character trait that also breeds tolerance and acceptance. Yet humility is a questionable virtue for many people, suggesting as it does a sort of meekness, timidity, and reluctance to claim one's own power. Too much humility, we fear, might inhibit the full development of our gifts and talents. As an antidote to arrogance, humility might be too strong a medicine, leaving us without sufficient confidence.

The moral philosopher Walter Kaufmann makes an interesting recommendation. Rather than treat humility as an independent virtue, fuse it with

ambition. Practice “humbition” he urges, and you will avoid becoming either arrogant *or* ineffective. Humbition keeps a person fully in touch with both their strengths and limitations.

And then, finally, there is *reverence*—a sentiment in which such qualities as awe, respect, care, loving attention, and openness to mystery all are present. People who practice reverence aren’t always obvious, but we certainly know when someone *doesn’t* have it. They are callous, treating other sentient beings as statistics or as interchangeable parts. Irreverent people tend to value only what serves their own immediate interests. They would rather exploit than nurture, speak than listen, push the envelope instead of exercising due care. Lacking reverence, human beings go “too far, too fast, too

thoughtlessly,” Paul Woodruff writes, at great cost to others and ultimately to themselves.

I doubt that many who are hearing this message would identify with Agamemnon, Enron’s CEO, or the former vice president. But arrogance is a vice to which anyone who has achieved mastery or enjoyed significant success is susceptible. That is why we should resist becoming so busy that no time is available for serious introspection. “If we ignore what is happening inside ourselves, Parker Palmer warns, “the shadow grows unchecked” until it comes to dominate our personality.

May we each strive to be the best we *can* be, without imagining that we are *better* than we are. A realistic perspective is always preferable to the illusions of arrogance.