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OPINION

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Be Careful About What You Want

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When you cover politics as I do, you find yourself around a lot of highly ambitious people. I don't mind it. In fact, I like ambitious people. They're energetic, trying to achieve big things, taking a big bite out of life. Their burning drive gives them the stamina they need to pursue their dreams year after year, and stamina is a vastly undervalued superpower if you want to contribute something to the world.

But, of course, ambition is both a blessing and a curse. Ambitious people are also more likely to be ruthless, manipulative, status-obsessed and so focused on worldly success that they become hollow inside. "Macbeth" is a play about a man who becomes a slave to ambition — that insatiable, destructive beast — which hardens, isolates and destroys him.

So the million-dollar questions are: How can you marshal ambition's energies without being consumed by its insatiable demands? How do you live a driven life, seeking to achieve great things, without becoming a jerk?

Some sages say: Don't even try. You can't control ambition, so you should renounce it. Die to self. Abandon selfish desires and offer the world a pure and selfless love. This advice is not as unrealistic as it may seem. I've known many people who live utterly generous lives — serving the poor and the weak with great love without clamoring for applause. Their lives are wondrous to behold.

Unfortunately, many of us, and I include myself here, can't seem to achieve that. Sad to say, my altruistic desires alone are not powerful enough to drive me through the hard labor required to do anything of note. If I'm going to get through the arduous work of, say, writing a book, I need to put my egotistic desires at the service of my loftier desires. I start the book hoping it will be helpful to people, but to propel me to work on it for years, I also need my name on the cover and the ego-pleasing possibility that readers might think I'm clever. In other words, if I'm going to be really driven, I need to harness both selfless and selfish motivations. I don't scorn mixed motives; I live by them. I think a lot of us live this way.

Abraham Lincoln is the patron saint for those of us who hope to live well, even in the grip of ambition. Lincoln's law partner reported that "his ambition was a little engine that knew no rest." And yet one of Lincoln's major speeches, the Lyceum Address of 1838, was about the danger of overweening ambition, and you get the impression he was very much worrying about his own.

Lincoln rode to the White House on that drive, but at every step along the way, you see him wrestling with his ambition, as if he were wrestling with a dangerous dragon. He was trying to ride his ambition to great heights without being consumed and corrupted by it. This struggle with your own ambition is a perilous enterprise — like Jacob wrestling with the angel.

I find I can better understand this struggle with the dragon of ambition if I break it down into five constituent struggles:

The struggle between craft and reward. In his 1941 novel, “What Makes Sammy Run?” Budd Schulberg describes a belligerently self-centered and ambitious man who makes it big as a screenwriter in Hollywood. The crucial fact about the main character, Sammy Glick, is that he doesn’t care at all about the craft of screenwriting; he only cares about the fame and money it can bring. So, he plagiarizes, steals other people’s ideas, takes shortcuts, is delighted by a script that makes money even if it’s mediocre.

That’s a crucial distinction: How much are you driven by the intrinsic desire to be good at what you do? How much are you driven by the desire for extrinsic rewards like money and fame that being good can bring you? And most crucially, what is the ratio between these two motivations? I’d say if your intrinsic commitment to the craft isn’t dominant, by say 70-30, you’re on morally perilous ground. If you’re just doing it for the money and fame, you’re going to cut corners. You will lack a sense of calling and a true commitment to the vocation, and your lack of intrinsic passion will show up in your work and life.

The struggle between gift love and need love. In his book “The Four Loves,” C.S. Lewis observes that some of our loves emerge from a fullness and some emerge from a void. If somebody poured great love into you as a child and you want to pour great love into your neighbors, colleagues and products, that is gift love. Lewis gives the example of a character called Mrs. Fidget as an example of need love. She seems to be devoted to caring for her family. But she’s always boasting of her own sacrifices. She’s manipulative and controlling. She’s trying to fill a hole in her own heart, so her love is self-centered, not other-centered.

Gift love is essentially delighted with the world; need love is voracious, insatiable and laced with a fear of failure. Gift love fosters human connection; need love bends a person in on himself, and leads to isolation. If you’re wrestling with your ambition, it seems important to ask: From where does my ambition flow, from a sense of abundance or a sense of hollowness? People whose ambition is fueled by resentment (Nixon and Trump) are fueled by need love.

The struggle between excellence and superiority. Some people’s longings are noncomparative. If they are good at something, that satisfaction is its own reward. Other people’s longings are primarily competitive. It’s not enough for them to be good; they need to be better than. They need to come out on top of someone else.

Since we’re such nice people we’re going to tell ourselves that our longings are noncomparative. But despite these noble assertions, I notice there’s an awful lot of competitive striving for superiority in the world.

Our entire meritocracy is built around the striving for superiority. It's not that you're good; what matters is you're ranked higher, you got into a more exclusive school. The social media world is a world of vicious ranking and comparison. A survey of almost 200 sociologists found that about half expected to become one of the 10 most important sociologists of their time. Not just good, but better than.

The world of noncomparative striving can be a world of mutual respect. On the other hand, a desire for superiority is zero-sum, nasty and drenched in envy. As the Yale theologian Miroslav Volf writes in "The Cost of Ambition," "Frustrated striving for superiority often seeks relief in the form of aggressive self-deception in which the superior is cast as morally deficient, arrogant and oppressive." It's not enough that I be built up; others must be torn down.

The struggle between high and low desires. The quality of your ambition will be shaped by the goal you're ambitious for. As philosophers down the ages have noticed, if you hunger for power you will always feel powerless and fear treachery; if you hunger for approval you will always have to be people pleasing; if you hunger for money you will never have enough; but if you hunger for understanding, your world will always be filled with wonders; and if you hunger for God, you will be hungering for perfect love itself and your hunger, I believe, will be purified by that love.

We all instinctively know that some desires are morally superior to others. The longing for true friendship is higher than the longing for popularity; the longing for community is higher than the longing for a Porsche. And yet there is a perversity in each human heart that sometimes turns us into idolaters — that induces us to worship the lesser substitutes our culture tells us to worship rather than some ultimate good itself.

We want to love and be loved, which is a noble ambition, but we think we can get them by looking good, being in the know, being popular with the in crowd. Idolatry is an ultimate longing for a finite thing. Like all addictions, this form of miswanting demands more and more of a person, while offering less and less.

Be careful what you love, St. Augustine warned, because you end up turning into what you love. Moral life, he continued, is about getting your loves in the right order and wanting what is higher.

Finally, the struggle between ambition and aspiration. Ambition is the desire to rise higher in the world. Aspiration is the desire to become a better person in the world. The former is about social mobility, and the latter is about inner transformation.

As you can tell, I applaud ambition, but aspiration sounds a lot more important. It takes courage to build the kind of relationships you've never experienced before, to cultivate the kind of virtues you've never possessed before. The world doesn't applaud

you as much when you devote yourself to the inner sanctification rather than to outer impressiveness.

Aspiration demands that you renounce the merit badge life. After a few wasted years in college, Walter Kirn was stripped down to a place where he was tired of trying to get ahead; all he wanted to do was learn. He writes in his book “Lost in the Meritocracy”: “Alone in my room, congested and exhausted, I forgot my obsession with self-advancement. I wanted to lose myself. I wanted to read. Instead of filling in the blanks, I wanted to be a blank and be filled in.”

As I was finishing this column on the train, I got a nervous text from my wife. She’s launching a big project, and she was about to send a mass email announcing it to the world. She mentioned that her ambitions for this project were clashing with her quietist desires to be a private person out of the spotlight. That sounds like exactly the kind of healthy internal struggle I was at that exact moment trying to describe. Professional success often comes from being wholehearted, from moving unreservedly after one goal. But the people we admire are often divided against themselves, burning hot with some ambition while trying to transcend the flames.

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