

In this article, I will address the topic “A Challenge to Greatness.” The focus will be on the virtue of magnanimity as striving toward excellence. Over the years, I have come to a better understanding of magnanimity as a fundamental principle for developing spiritual wellness, personal wholeness, and a striving for excellence.

First, I will begin with a simple choice: Are you choosing to be an ordinary, common person or are you aspiring to be an uncommon person?

Hopefully, you want to be an uncommon person. Striving to be uncommon means, then, that you will have to do the uncommon things in life, those things that the common, ordinary person usually won't do. You see, it is not that they can't; it is rather that they won't. Likewise, it will be your *won'ts* in life, i.e., “I won't do that...,” that will always hold you back from becoming the uncommon, magnanimous man or woman you are called to become.

Coach Tony Dungy, former NFL player, former head coach of Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Indianapolis Colts, and member of the NFL Hall of Fame, analyst for NBC's *Football Night in America*, and a best-selling author, wrote a book titled, *Uncommon: Finding Your Path to Significance*. Dungy writes,

I believe that the imprint you are meant to leave on this world is not accidental or coincidental. Your life has been intentionally designed by God to have a uniquely significant eternal impact on the world around you.

Think about that for a moment — your life has been intentionally designed by God to have a unique and significant impact on everyone you meet, and many you never meet. What if we all lived our lives embracing that idea as true — what would our lives begin to look like? What would we attempt to do that we never would have attempted otherwise? What difference would we begin to make in the lives of those around us? What would our communities begin to look like?¹

You might want to re-read the above paragraph more slowly and let the impact of Dungy's words sink in. “Your life has been intentionally designed by God to have a unique and significant impact on the world around you.” That is being *uncommon*, *significant* and *magnanimous*.

For over 25 years, this concept has been for me in various stages of preparation as I attempted to discover and become the extraordinary person each individual is created to become. Yet something always seemed to be missing; that is, until I read the book *Virtuous Leader* by Alexandre Havard that introduced me to a virtue and a vice that is the defect of the virtue, which I cannot recall ever having heard previously. The virtue is “magnanimity,” and its vice, or defect, is “pusillanimity.” Over the next six months magnanimity just kept popping up in my readings; I began to figure out that God was telling me something: pay attention!

Havard, in the introduction to his book, echoes Coach Dungy's concept of *uncommon* and of being *significant*:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of an America in which a man would be judged “not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character.”
What is the “content of character?” It is virtue, or more precisely, the set of

classical human virtues — above all, magnanimity, humility, prudence, courage, self-control, and justice...It is my contention that leaders either strive to grow in virtue as surely as they breathe or they are not leaders. Life for them is a quest for personal excellence.

Virtuous leadership is for people who desire to have a grand purpose in their life. What purpose is grander than the quest for personal excellence?"²

Those men and women who *have a grand purpose in their life...quest for personal excellence* are uncommon men and women who will *make a uniquely significant, eternal impact on the world around them.*

Magnanimity, by definition, means “great-souled person,” one who is growing into the fullness that God created him/her to be, utilizing all one’s gifts and talents. The word is from the Latin, *magnus*, meaning large, great and *animus* meaning mind, soul. Havard describes magnanimity as, “The striving of the spirit toward great things.”³

Also, magnanimity is defined in *The GNU version of the Collaborative International Dictionary of English* as:

Greatness of mind; elevation or dignity of soul; that quality or combination of qualities, in character, which enables one to encounter danger and trouble with tranquility and firmness, to disdain injustice, meanness and revenge, and to act and sacrifice for noble objects.⁴

The Catholic Encyclopedia further states that magnanimity:

implies a reaching out of the soul to great things....aims at great works in every line of virtue, making it his/her purpose to do things worthy of great honor.”⁵

A magnanimous leader, therefore, has a sense of a grand purpose in his/her life, a quest for personal excellence, who aspires to be uncommon and make a significant impact on the world around him/her. This purpose or quest can be called one’s mission, vision, or vocation in life. Havard writes, “A mission/vocation is not something we invent or imagine. It is a special calling to do a certain thing and to be a certain way. It is what God expects of us. We need to discover what that is and correspond to it.”⁶

Properly understood, magnanimity is not being prideful but is firmly rooted in humility; it is all grace, a gift from God. Again, Havard writes, “Magnanimity generates noble ambitions; humility channels these ambitions into serving others.”⁷

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a magnanimous man, who was awarded the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize, once said, “I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who sought and found how to serve.”⁸

What a noble, magnanimous ambition that is; “those who sought and found how to serve.”

Pusillanimity, the defect opposing magnanimity, on the other hand, means “a small-souled person”; that is, one who settles for becoming less than God created him or her to be, usually out of fear or intimidation. What intimidates you? What are you afraid of? What is it that is

holding you back from becoming fully who God created you to be?

The American Heritage[®] *Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th Edition, defines *pusillanimous* as: “Wanting in courage and fortitude; being of weak courage; faint-hearted; mean-spirited; timidity.” The word is from the Latin *pusillum* meaning very small, petty and *animus*, meaning spirit, soul.⁹

A Google search on “magnanimity,” referenced a paper written by Dr. Rebecca DeYoung, who teaches at Calvin College. In it, she compares Aristotle’s and Aquinas’ accounts of the virtue of magnanimity specifically as a corrective to the vice of pusillanimity. Aristotle envisions the self-made man, one might sing, “I Did It My Way.” Whereas, Aquinas associates magnanimity with gratitude as a gift — true humility — and the need to magnify it, i.e., Mary singing her *Magnificat*, celebrating God’s giftedness in her life.

Dr. DeYoung, in her book *Glittering Vices*, writes:

Those affected by this vice [pusillanimity], wrote Aquinas, shrink back from all that God has called them to be. When faced with the effort and difficulty of stretching themselves to the great things of which they are capable, they cringe and say, ‘can’t.’ In short, the pusillanimous rely on their own puny powers and focus on their own potential for failure, rather than counting on God’s grace to equip them for great work in his kingdom — work beyond anything they might have dreamed of for themselves.¹⁰

In addition, Dr. DeYoung writes: “The key transformative feature of Aquinas’ account of pusillanimity and magnanimity is its acknowledgment of our fundamental relationship of dependence on God. Only an acknowledgment of our dependence enables us to grasp the true worth of the self and to live up to our full potential.”¹¹

Pusillanimity, as the defect of magnanimity, makes one settle for being less than God created a person to be. A pusillanimous man/woman has a cowardly spirit brought on by fear or intimidation. To return his/her gifts and talents unopened and unused is a sin. It is much like one who listens to the whispers of The Deceiver, “Look at you, look what you’ve done. You’re not worthy. You’re not good enough.” Have you ever listened to these whispers? That is the BIG lie, and why the Devil is called The Deceiver, the Father of Lies. In God’s eye, you are infinitely worthy. You are created “very good,” and even though at times you may not always act in such a great or noble manner, you can never lose your created goodness.

In the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas devotes Question 129 to “Magnanimity.”

“There is in man something great which he possesses through the gift of God; and something defective which accrues to him through the weakness of nature. Accordingly, magnanimity makes a man deem himself worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts he holds from God: thus if his soul is endowed with great virtue, magnanimity makes him tend to perfect works of virtue; and the same is to be said of the use of any other good, such as science or external fortune.

On the other hand, humility makes a man think little of himself in consideration of his own deficiency...Yet humility makes us honor others and esteem them

better than ourselves, in so far as we see some of God's gifts in them."¹²

We hear in the *First Letter of Peter* 4:10-11 (NIV):

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms...If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever.

Therefore, a person should not settle for simply being good when being called to greatness — to magnify the gifts and talents God entrusted to you.

The article, "Schooling the Young into Goodness" states:

Magnanimity is the virtue that habituates us in aspirations for excellence. Literally meaning to be of 'great soul' or 'great spirit,' magnanimous persons always aspire to what is best, always reach for what is truly excellent and worthy of their lives, and refuse to 'lower their sights' to less promising possibilities. ...Indeed, the magnanimous person knows that we grow as humans in the measure that we extend ourselves on behalf of some transcendent purpose...the virtue of magnanimity suggests that our fundamental error is not that we hope for too much, but that we settle for so little.¹³

It is helpful to think about that statement, "the virtue of magnanimity suggests that our fundamental error is not that we hope for too much, but that we settle for so little."

Just to be clear, this greatness of a magnanimous person means that he/she is a great-souled, great-hearted, generous, ennobling, dignifying person. It is not about fame, recognition, celebrity, status, or fortune. It is not in comparing oneself to another, not in competing with others, but, rather, in discovering God's unique gifts and talents in one's own life and how that life can be lived in its fullness — not settling for becoming less than God created one to be.

The greatness of a magnanimous person is also in his/her humility of service to and for others, reaching out and lifting others up, such as, many teachers and coaches do as a matter of practice. Many men and women who are truly magnanimous are not well known until late in life, or after they have passed on and people recall the legacies they left behind in the hearts and lives of others.

Dr. DeYoung reminds us:

Magnanimity is a wholehearted readiness to attempt the great acts of virtue to which we are called, however impossible or daunting the task may seem and however much the attempt may 'stretch' us.

[F]or Aquinas, this virtue and its operation are possible only through God's gift of grace — a gift for which we are dependent on a God who is greater and more powerful than we are. Magnanimity is thus fundamentally conceived in terms of vocation and stewardship: it is a response to God's call, and willingness to use his gifts....¹⁴

The challenge of this article for the reader is to understand that magnanimity is grounded in humility before God; to see one's life as a vocation, a calling, a deepening revelation of God's unique plan for an individual's life *given to none other*, a magnanimous man or woman who abundantly lives his/her life with a sense of mission, vision, vocation, and calling.

Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical Letter, "*Spe Salvi* – on Christian Hope" wrote, "Man was created for greatness – for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched."¹⁵

Magnanimity challenges each individual to grow into the fullness God created him/her to be, with one's own unique set of gifts and talents. It means to believe in yourself because it is God who created you with a lofty vision for your life, to have noble ambitions, to dream great dreams; simply, to believe you are worthy as a child of God and that you are created to do great things. This is a virtue that will stretch a person to become *uncommon, significant, and magnanimous*.

Magnanimity, as it turns out, is the lost virtue that, unconsciously, I had been seeking for over 25 years. It is the virtue underpinning so many of my programs and writings as well as my monthly quoteletter, "Apple Seeds."¹⁶ I just didn't know the right word, the virtue to name it until now.

Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States, said in his 1899 speech at the Hamilton Club in Chicago:

Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.¹⁷

Roosevelt's quote challenges each of person to personal greatness: "Far better it is to dare mighty things,...than to rank with those poor spirits who...live in the gray twilight..." Teddy Roosevelt was a leader who exemplified the essence of an uncommon, significant, magnanimous person. It requires stretching oneself to dare things mightily, challenging oneself to aspire to greatness. That is the perfect image of the inner struggles between settling for pusillanimity or aspiring towards magnanimity.

A while back, I had a chat with a Franciscan University alum who serves in the United States Congress. I asked him what he perceives as a major issue as he travels around and speaks. He said it is a lack of aspiration from today's youth. He replied, "They do not strive to achieve; they seem to simply settle for 'whatever' in life."

In other words, a magnanimous man or woman has aspirations, striving to make a difference, to achieve. Pusillanimous individuals, on the other hand, often just settle for less believing it is fate, or that they are not worthy of it.

Professor Abraham Maslow used to challenge students with these questions:

"Which of you is going to write the next great novel?" and "Who is going to be a saint like Schweitzer?" [We might add, the next St. Francis of Assisi?, the next St.

Teresa of Calcutta?, or the next Saint John Paul II?] For, if not you, who will?

Confronted with such big ideas, the students would only blush, squirm and giggle. Then the famed psychologist would assure them that he meant what he said. “If not you, who will?” he demanded. Each person could ask that question of themselves.

Every moment, God holds out a chance for each person to be more, to achieve more. Each moment, God gives us what we need to respond to that invitation. We have what it takes. Will we use it? If not us, who will? If not YOU, who will?¹⁸

Former Vatican Swiss Guard Andreas Widmer writes in the “Foreword” to his book, *The Pope and The CEO*, that St. John Paul II frequently challenged young people this way:

Don’t ever settle for anything less than the spiritual and moral greatness the grace of God makes possible in your life. You’ll fail; we all do. But that’s no reason to lower the bar of expectation. Get up, dust yourself off...keep trying. But don’t ever settle for being less than the noble human being — the leader and exemplar you can be.¹⁹

What a powerful message of encouragement from Saint John Paul II for each of us to hear personally: “Don’t ever settle for anything less than the spiritual and moral greatness the grace of God makes possible in your life. You’ll fail; we all do. But that’s no reason to lower the bar of expectation. Get up, dust yourself off...keep trying. But don’t ever settle for being less.”

I came across this striking quote from Pope Francis speaking directly to young people:

I ask you young people who are just setting out on your journey through life: have you thought about the talents that God has given you? Have you thought of how you can put them at the service of others? Do not bury your talents! Set your stakes on great ideals, the ideals that enlarge the heart, the ideals of service that make your talents fruitful. Life is not given to us to be jealously guarded for ourselves, but is given to us so that we may give it in turn. Dear young people, have a deep spirit! Do not be afraid to dream of great things!²⁰

In summary, Dr. DeYoung reminds us that “magnanimity is a wholehearted readiness to attempt the great acts of virtue to which we are called, however impossible or daunting the task may seem and however much the attempt may ‘stretch’ us.”

Those great-souled men and women who “have a grand purpose in their life, a quest for personal excellence” are uncommon men and women who will make a uniquely significant, and lasting impact on the world around them.

Finally, “don’t ever settle for being less than the noble human being — the leader and exemplar” God created you to be. “Do not be afraid to dream of great things!” Aspire to live magnanimously and it will stretch you into the individual God created you to become. For if not YOU, who will?



Notes:

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2. Havard, Alexandre, *Virtuous Leadership*, NY:Scepter Publishing, Inc., 2007, p.xiv.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. “Magnanimity,” *The GNU version of the Collaborative International Dictionary of English*, <https://www.wordnik.com/words/magnanimity>, accessed on August 3, 2021.
5. “Magnanimity,” New Advent, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15472a.htm>, accessed on August 3, 2021.
6. Havard, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, p. xviii
8. Schweitzer, Dr. Albert, GoodReads, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/74745-i-don-t-know-what-your-destiny-will-be-but-one> , accessed on September 21, 2021.
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10. DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk, *Glittering Vices*, Grand Rapids:Brazos Press, 2009, p. 9-10.
11. DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk (2004) “Aquinas’ Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence: A New Measure of Greatness,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers: Vol. 21 : Iss. 2 , Article 5*, <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol21/iss2/5/>, accessed on September 21, 2021.
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15. Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, “*Spe Salvi* – on Christian Hope,” para. 33, November 30, 2007, The Vatican, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html
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19. Widmer, Andreas, *The Pope & The CEO: John Paul II's Leadership Lessons to a Young Swiss Guard*, Steubenville, OH:Emmaus Press, 2011, p. x.

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