

YOUR CREATED GOODNESS:

Developing and Improving a Positive Attitude
and Healthy Self-Worth

• A Concept for Spiritual Wellness •

Discovering and embracing a sense of one's own created goodness is an underlying principle for developing spiritual wellness, as well as for personal wholeness. Before coming to an understanding of *created goodness* I experienced lack of confidence, doubts and struggles, especially growing up with a father whose comments generally might be summed up as "You're dumb, stupid and a jerk." During my formative years, I have no recollections of my father providing encouragement or words of assurance, though I admit my memories might be skewed. But those hurtful words of my father, especially during my 20s to mid-30s, encumbered my growth in ways that I did not really understand at the time. They were playing always in my head and too often led to self-sabotage.

So how did I come to this understanding of created goodness as a concept for spiritual wellness? Fortunately, in the first year of my formation as a Franciscan friar for the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis of Penance, a senior friar encouraged me to write down in a journal those things that I read and heard that I considered important enough to remember, those thoughts that had "rung my bell," so to speak. He said, "Someday you might want to use them in a homily, or a retreat, and you won't remember what it was, or where you got it from." That was some of the most profound advice I'd been given. I started writing in journals, and so far, have over fifty-five volumes of hand-written quotations, stories and illustrations gleaned from books and articles.

This article has been in preparation for over twenty years as I developed the concept of created goodness to use in retreats, conferences, workshops and homilies. However, until the fall of 2009, I felt it wasn't ready to be written; something was missing. That is when I read a book¹ that introduced me to a virtue and a vice, or defect of the virtue, which I cannot recall ever having heard before. The virtue is magnanimity, and its vice, or defect, is pusillanimity.

GREAT-SOULED PERSON

Briefly, magnanimity means "a great-souled person," one who is growing into the fullness that God created him or her to be, utilizing all of one's gifts and talents. It is from the Latin, *magnus*—large, great; plus *animus*—mind, soul. The *Oxford*

*English Dictionary*² defines magnanimity as “Great in courage; nobly brave or valiant. High-souled; nobly ambitious; lofty of purpose; noble in feeling or conduct....nobly ambitious spirit. *Now rare.*”

Whereas, pusillanimity means “a small-souled person” or one who settles for becoming less than God created him or her to be, usually out of fear or intimidation. The *Random House Webster’s Dictionary*³ defines pusillanimity as “lacking courage or resolution; cowardly; faint-hearted; a cowardly spirit.” It is from the Latin *pusillus*, very small, petty; plus *animus*, spirit, soul.

CREATED GOODNESS

The biblical basis for an awareness of one’s created goodness comes from the *Book of Genesis* (1:27, 31 RSV): “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them....God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good....”

What a principle to discover as one’s own personal giftedness! Do you realize that you are created in God’s own image and likeness, and that God said you are very good—not just okay—but ***very good?*** Did you hear that? This is your created goodness—discover it, embrace it as your own.

I implore you to take this personally, repeat it out loud:

- *I am* created in God’s own image and likeness;
- *I am* created very good;
- *I am* created to do great things—*great things*.

Consider for a moment, how long would you stand in front of a mirror repeating this counsel until you actually believed it? By the way, this comes from the end of chapter 1 in the Book of Genesis; until you figure this part out, don’t read chapter 2, everything thereafter is based on embracing this personal discovery.

Likewise, we read from the Gospel of John (10:10 NIV), “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” A magnanimous man or woman abundantly lives his or her life with a sense of mission, vision, vocation, and calling.

There is an old Jewish-Christian tradition which says:

God sends each person into this world with a special message to deliver,
with a special song to sing for others, with an act of love to bestow.

No one else can speak my message, or sing my song, or offer my act of love. These are entrusted only to me. According to this tradition, the message may be spoken, the song sung, the act of love delivered only to a few, or to all the folk in a small town, or to all the people in a large city, or even to all those in the whole world.

It all depends on God's unique plan for each person. To which we might add: The greatest gift of God, one would think, is the gift of life. The greatest sin of humans, it would seem, would be to return that gift, ungrateful and unopened.⁴

Your created goodness is about embracing God's unique plan in your life: to discover the special message only you can deliver, to learn how to sing your song of life.

THE LOST VIRTUE

Magnanimity, it turns out, is the lost virtue that unconsciously I was seeking for over thirty years. It is the thematic virtue underpinning so many of my motivational programs—*Your Created Goodness, Dare Mighty Things, A Challenge to Greatness, Encourage One Another*, as well as, my monthly quoteletter *Apple Seeds* (www.appleseeds.org). I just didn't know the right word, the virtue to name it until now.

Magnanimity challenges you to grow into the fullness God created you to be, with your 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, you must believe you are worthy as a child of God, and created to do great things.

Pusillanimity, on the other hand, as the defect, the vice of magnanimity, makes you settle for being less than God created you to be. A pusillanimous man or woman has a cowardly spirit brought on by fear or intimidation; to return your magnanimity unopened and unused. 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." 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," even though at times you may not always act in such a good or noble manner.

SELF-WORTH

In my thinking, I see an epic difference between self-esteem and self-worth. Self-esteem primarily focuses on “How I feel about myself,” whereas self-worth focuses on “How I value myself as worthy.” Your created goodness, your magnanimity, does depend on your feelings about yourself, but even more so, it is discovering and embracing that you are valued, that you have worth.

In the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas devotes Question 129 to “Magnanimity.” In Article 3, Reply to Objection 4: Aquinas writes:

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.⁵

Performing a Google search on the topic of “magnanimity,” I came across a paper written by Dr. Rebecca DeYoung. In it she compares Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s accounts of the virtue of magnanimity specifically as a corrective to the vice of pusillanimity.

Dr. DeYoung writes:

Pusillanimity means ‘smallness of soul;’ its ‘faintheartedness’ shrinks back in the face of challenge and difficulty. Its main effect is inaction: we neglect to develop our talents and fail to stretch ourselves toward the fulfillment of our potential. If you are sure you can never achieve anything worthwhile, much less something great, then why bother even to try?⁶

Regarding “shrinks back in the face of challenge and difficulty,” Aquinas writes in the *Summa Theologica*:

...pusillanimity makes a man fall short of what is proportionate to his power, by refusing to tend to that which is commensurate thereto....Hence it is that the servant who buried in the earth the money he had received

from his master, and did not trade with it through fainthearted fear, was punished by his master (Matthew 25; Luke 19).⁷

Pusillanimity, therefore, is a fear-filled defect of the fainthearted that causes men and women to bury their gifts and talents. The pusillanimous, it seems, cringe from their own greatness more than from their own littleness; they are more afraid to let their own light shine than they are of the looming darkness.

Dr. DeYoung continues:

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....⁸

Discovering one’s created goodness and embracing one’s magnanimity is a process of blossoming in abundance. There is a gradual unfolding of gifts and talents as you mature through life. At the mythical age of twenty-one, all one’s potential gifts and talents do not suddenly appear. Reflecting back over my own life, I’ve become aware that about every ten years or so new gifts or talents begin to emerge, while others may wane.

A STRONGER HOPE

Quite some time ago I came across the poem called “Prayer of Spring” by Trappist Fr. Charles Cummings, OCSD:

I live with a stronger hope for the possibilities that lie hidden within things, situations, and people.⁹

What a powerful verse! What are those possibilities yet within you, your spouse, your children, your siblings, your students, your employees, your neighbors, your teammates? How do you give yourself and others a “stronger hope” to discover those gifts and talents, to discover “the possibilities that lie hidden”?

I GOTTA BE ME...

Bob Thaves, the creator of the “Frank & Ernest” cartoon strip wonderfully illustrated embracing one’s created goodness in the cartoon he penned for September 5, 1995. It features one of the characters looking straight at the reader. The caption to the left of the character reads, “I gotta be me—”, while the caption to the right continues, “...everybody else was already taken.”¹⁰ Each one of us “gotta be me.”

“Magnanimity, as Dr. DeYoung makes us aware, “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.”¹¹

This passage brings to mind an event that captivated my attention during the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, Utah. The theme for those games was *Light The Fire Within*.¹² The event was the cross-country 4x10km ski relay that had one of most exciting finishes in recent Olympic memory. A little history, first. Over a ten-year span—1992 to 2002—Norway and Italy battled it out for supremacy in what would be classified by many as the “marquis” cross-country skiing event. The distance of the race is 40 kilometers, with four skiers each skiing 10 kilometers. Winning is measured in tenths of a second.

In the 2002 Games, Norway edged out Italy with a final surge. Racing from behind, the Norway skier laid back on his skis and stretched his boot across the finish line, winning by 0.3/sec.¹³ The announcer mentioned the on-going rivalry, so I did an Internet search and found that at the 1994 Lillehammer Games, Italy out-sprinted Norway, the reigning king of the sport, and came in first by 0.4/sec.¹⁴ At the 1998 Nagano Games, Norway finished first, beating Italy by 0.2/sec.¹⁵

Photo-finishes are spectacular! They also highlight the fact that magnanimity in sport, as well as in other arenas of life, requires stretching ourselves more than is convenient and comfortable. Phil Sanders writes:

‘Reach!’ The word means to stretch. It implies an inconvenience. It involves movement. You can’t lean back, relax, get comfortable and then reach. To reach means you must give up some of that comfort—at least for the moment.

Reaching involves a little extra effort to get to something you want. How much extra energy you are willing to spend depends on how badly you want what you’re reaching for. The more it means to you, the farther you are willing to stretch. You might even stretch until it hurts.¹⁶

It's a law of nature that the hand cannot grasp any farther than the arm is willing to reach. How far are you willing to reach in your life? And, if you have a significant goal, a burning desire, you will be amazed at how much farther you are able to stretch than you previously could reach. So, I ask, do you have a significant goal, a burning desire that stretches you to grow into your fullness?

The 2002 Winter Olympic Games theme, *Light The Fire Within*, reflects what Rev. Kenneth Hildebrand implied when he wrote:

Strong lives are motivated by dynamic purposes; lesser ones exist on wishes and inclinations. The most glowing successes are but reflections of an inner fire.¹⁷

How does your life reflect this “inner fire?” Does it strengthen your life and inflame you with purpose and meaning—your vision, mission and calling?

ACRES OF DIAMONDS

Discovering one's created goodness, embracing one's personal magnanimity and reflecting one's own inner fire is superbly expressed in my favorite classic American essay, “Acres of Diamonds.” Rev. Russell Conwell re-told this essay many times over the fifty-seven years of his public life. This version is a brief adaptation from the full text:

When going down the Tigris River many years ago an old Arab guide whom we hired up in Baghdad told this story about a wealthy farmer Ali Hafed who lived not far from the River Indus.

He said that Ali Hafed owned a very large farm with orchards, grain fields and gardens. One day there visited this old farmer an old Buddhist priest, who sat by Hafed's fire and told him that ‘A diamond is a congealed drop of sunlight.’ The old priest told Hafed that if he had a handful of diamonds he could purchase a whole country, and with a mine of diamonds he could exert the influence of their great wealth.

Ali Hafed became discontented with his lack. He said: ‘I want a mine of diamonds!’ So he lay awake all night, and inquired of the holy man, ‘Will you tell me where I can find diamonds?’ The priest said, ‘Diamonds? What do you want with diamonds?’ ‘I want to be immensely rich,’ said Ali Hafed, ‘but I don't know where to go.’

‘Well,’ said the priest, ‘if you will find a river that runs over white sand between high mountains, in those sands you will always see diamonds.’ Hafed sold his farm, collected his money, left his family with a neighbor, and away he went in search of diamonds. He traveled far to the south, to the west, up mountains and down into valleys without so much as finding one diamond. Finally, deep in despair and frustration, Ali Hafed cast himself into the incoming tide, and he sank beneath its foaming crest. Hafed died a broken and poor man.

But the story does not end with Ali Hafed. For one day, the farmer who had bought Hafed’s land led his camel out into the nearby river to drink, and as that camel put its nose down into the clear water of the stream he noticed a curious flash of light from the sands of the shallow stream. Reaching in, Hafed’s successor, pulled out a black stone having an eye of light that glimmered with all the colors of the rainbow. He took that curious river stone into the house and put it on the mantel and forgot all about it.

Some time after that, the same old priest who told Ali Hafed how diamonds were made, visited Hafed’s successor, when he noticed a flash of light from the mantel. He exclaimed and said, ‘Here is a diamond, here is a diamond! Has Ali Hafed returned?’

‘No, no; Ali Hafed has not returned and that is not a diamond; that is nothing but a pretty stone; we found right out here in the river.’

Examining the rock more closely, the holy man became even more animated. ‘But I know a diamond when I see it,’ said the old priest; ‘that is a diamond! Where did you say you found it?’

Then together they rushed out to the river, and stirred up the white sands with their fingers and found a larger diamond, then another, and more diamonds, large and small. Actually, the land, which Ali Hafed sold to pursue his fortune elsewhere, turned out to be acres and acres of diamonds. And thus, said the guide to me, were discovered the diamond mines of Golconda, the most magnificent diamond mines in all the history.

Conwell reflected, ‘Had Ali Hafed remained at home and noticed his own river that runs over the white sand between high mountains, or dug in his own fields, he would have had acres of diamonds. For every acre of that old farm, yes, every shovelful, afterward revealed gems which since have decorated the crowns of monarchs. Your diamonds are not in far-away

mountains or in distant seas; they are in your own back yard if you will but dig for them.’¹⁸

Discover your own “acres of diamonds,” recognize your created goodness, and grow into the fullness for which God created you. Magnanimity is a process of discovery that continues throughout a lifetime—to grow into the fullness God has uniquely created for you, and only you.

REACH—STRETCH—SOAR!

The prophet Isaiah (40:31 NIV) challenges each man and woman, “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” That is a powerful thought to consider, your destiny is to “soar on wings like eagles.” I frequently present to students, “You were born to soar with eagles; not to peck or cluck with chickens. Eagles do not fly in flocks, you only find them alone or in pairs. Chickens, though, cluck and peck and stick their beaks in the dirt, and you know what we do with chickens.”

But I caution you, for it seems that every time an eagle raises its wings to fly someone will put an arrow to the bow. Like in Psalm 11:2 (NIV), “For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart.” Likewise, every time a man or woman begins to develop into their fullness, someone will attempt to shoot them down. Know this, and know it well, that an eagle can soar higher than any arrow can fly. *Reach—Stretch—Soar!* This is your destiny.

SING YOUR SONG

The widely acclaimed Christian author Max Lucado writes, “There are things only you can do, and you are alive to do them. In the orchestra we call life, you have an instrument and a song.”¹⁹ Only you can deliver to the world the special message entrusted to you, and only you can play your instrument, or sing your song in the orchestra of life. No one else can do it for you, and if you won’t, who will? For then your song of life will never be sung, and the great symphony of life will be less resounding without your part having been played.

I recall a challenge Professor Abraham Maslow posed to his students:

‘Which of you is going to write the next novel?’ and ‘Who is going to be a saint like Schweitzer?’ [We might add the next Blessed Mother Theresa, or St. Francis of Assisi]

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. We could each ask that question of ourselves.

Each moment, God holds out a chance for us 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?²⁰

In summary, 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.”²¹

So, I exhort you to *Reach—Stretch—Soar!*

Endnotes:

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20. Cavanaugh, "If You Won't Who Will," *Sower's Seeds Aplenty*, 45.
21. DeYoung, "Aquinas's Virtues."