

12@12

3 Reasons We Hate Ambition & 3 Reasons to Get Over It

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It seems as though ambition has taken a hard knock as of late. Recently *Today Show* host Savannah Guthrie was asked whether she was ambitious, she responded by saying, “I would say no. I hate the word. I think it’s impolite.” Clearly in her mind, being thought of as ambitious is a negative thing and something to avoid. Guthrie’s perspective is kinder than one writer who declared that ambition is a mental illness. Or how about a meme I saw of grizzly eating a salmon with the words, “The journey of a thousand miles sometimes ends very, very badly.” Not exactly a positive view on ambition! And notice what happens when the word ambition becomes an adjective. It might be used positively if we are referring to a young child, but what about when we speak of one that is 30, or 40, or 50 years old? In that case, when we say that he or she is an ambitious person more than likely it points to something negative. But why is that? Why are we suspicious of it? Why do we loathe it? Let me offer a few suggestions.

We Have Seen Ambition Go Awry

The first reason we might hate ambition is perhaps the most obvious, we simply have seen ambition go awry. Ambition in large measure is neutral from a moral standpoint. It is not good or bad. It is nothing more than the desire for some aim to come to fruition and the drive to get there. But it does not take us long to think of a list of very ambitious people that have brought nothing but pain and suffering to the world. Think world leaders like Attila the Hun, Napoleon or Hitler. Religious leaders like Jim Jones or David Koresh. Business leaders like Bernie Madoff or Kenneth Lay. Athletes like Lance Armstrong or Tonya Harding. Who wants ambition when it takes people’s lives, steals their money, cheats to get ahead, and watches people be abused along the way? No wonder people like Savannah Guthrie hate the word. Who wants to be associated with that? If that is what ambition is all about, we do well to hate it.

Ambition Measures Us Publicly

But while ambition gone awry is the most obvious reason ambition is problematic, it is certainly not the only reason. Even if we are willing to

say ambition is not necessarily bad, there are still reasons we might find ourselves hating it. For example, we might find ourselves hating ambition because it places us against a public measuring stick. Let's suppose that I brought a scale with me today. And further that the scale was hooked up to the overhead screen so that one's weight was displayed for all to see. Would you be willing to come and stand on the scale? Some of you might; others would find the back door. Now let me extend the scenario. Suppose instead I that invited each of you to stand up today and say, "By the end of this summer I will weigh such and such." And then each month you came back to 12@12 there was a public weigh-in to see how you did. How many of you would opt for that? Probably not many. We may want to lose weight. We may even go about it, but we want to keep our efforts under wraps because we don't want our efforts to be subject to outside scrutiny. But here's the rub when it comes to ambition: ambition more often than not means making public just what we are trying to accomplish. We have to tell our family that we are going back to school to finally complete that degree. We have to tell our boss that we are aiming for such and such a sales goal. We tell our employer and our friends that we are leaving in order to start our own business. And once we make such a declaration, even if it is without any bravado, we are on the hook. To a greater or lesser extent, we will be measured by whether we attain our goal or not. And frankly, many of us would rather not be measured. We hate the thought of it. And so we do away with ambition all together. We say, "I won't aim for the stars, because I don't want others see me fail if I don't get there."

Ambition Reveals Our Complacency

The third reason we hate ambition is a bit darker. It is self-protective like the second reason, but it brings others down in the process. It goes like this: you sit in an office. You have been doing what you are doing for many years. You punch in. You punch out. It's not particularly satisfying but it's not very stressful either. Then someone new comes into the office. They've got ideas. They think there are ways to do things better. Ways to be more productive. They see ways your unit can contribute in bigger and better ways to the company as a whole. It will take some hard work, but it can be done. From an objective standpoint, such ambition ought to be embraced. And yet you find yourself wanting nothing to do with it. To be blunt you have become complacent. And

the last thing you want is anyone coming in and making you get out of your chair. And so you begin to loathe ambition. You even say so. You say that the new guy or gal is too ambitious and ought to get off their high horse and just do what everyone else has been doing for the last umpteen years.

As you can see, this isn't too pretty a reason for hating ambition. When people cheat and steal and kill to get what they want, we may have good reason to hate ambition, but when we hate it because we are afraid it will measure us, or worse yet, because it is a mirror to our complacency, our hatred moves from proper moral indignation to petty self-protection. So, yes, there are reasons to hate ambition, but not all of them are good. In fact, it seems to me that getting rid of ambition is not a good move at all. And to that end, I want to shift gears now and share with you three reasons we ought to get over any disdain of ambition that might linger in our minds.

Every Success Is Rooted in Ambition

To explain the first reason we ought to get over it, I want to share with you the story of Griffin Furlong. Griffin just finished up his sophomore year at Florida State University. Two years ago he was the valedictorian of his high school. Of course he was a standout student, but every school has a standout student. What makes Griffin's story special is that his mother died when he was 6 and since then his family has spent a great deal of time on the streets and in shelters. Just a month before graduating from high school he found himself on the streets again just weeks before finals and AP exams. In his valedictorian speech he said these words, "It's amazing what you can do with your life when you have motivation, ambition and most importantly, a purpose."¹ There is no way that Griffin does what he does without having a goal and giving his all to get there. This, of course, should be of no surprise to any of us because behind any substantial kind of success we will most certainly find ambition. It does not matter if it is world leaders like Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill, social change agents like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Teresa, or athletes like Steph Curry or LeBron James, you will find ambition behind their success. If we want success in anything we do, we simply cannot do without ambition.

We Need the Crucible of Ambition

The second reason we need to get over our arm's-length attitude towards ambition is because we need the crucible of ambition. To explain this point, let me make clear that ambition is not about wishing for something. It is about the drive to get something done. Almost everyone wishes for success in one form or another. They want to be successful in their work. They want to be successful on the field. They want to be successful in their community efforts, or even in parenting their very own children. But wanting something doesn't do much to achieve something. To achieve, there needs to be a drive that says, "I am going to put in the blood, sweat, and tears to get there." And when we go down that road—the road of ambition—we are very likely to come up against our own boundaries of persistence, creativity, discipline, and determination. But that's a good thing, because those boundaries can be moved. We can become more persistent, more creative, more disciplined, and more determined than we ever thought possible. Ambition puts us through the fire, and it's a fire that's good for us. The biblical writer of Hebrews said, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." We need ambition, because we need to be trained by the discipline inherent with it.

We Were Made for Ambition

The third and final reason we need to get over our disdain of ambition, is that we were made for ambition. I have had the pleasure of seeing all four of my children grow up to be wonderful people, and along the way there were all kinds of learning phases. One of those most obvious phases of learning occurred early on in their first 18 months. When a baby comes out of the womb, they seem like helpless creatures, but they are less helpless than we think. They are full of ambition. Put a newborn next to his mother's breast and he goes after it. Lie a little one on a changing table and soon she will grab anything that is in reach and throw it to the ground. Give a child a handful of months, and lay him on his back. He will flip himself over and squirm across the floor to reach the object that is across the room. And then there is the crawling and standing and walking phases. We do not give our kids extensive courses in how to make all that happen. It is their ambition that makes it happen. They were born with ambition.

In the opening chapters of the Bible, the creation of humankind by God is described. And we are told that after creating men and women, God blessed them and said these words: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” These are God’s first recorded words to humanity. He doesn’t tell them to sit around and soak it all in. He doesn’t tell them to stand to the side so that he can make everything happen. He tells them to get after it. To take care of the creation he made and exercise leadership over it. You see, God made us for ambition. He made us to climb mountains. He made us to build great things. He made us to keep taking that next step as wobbly as it might be. Oh it’s true, we can do all those things in ways that God is not too pleased with. To be honest, ambition is rarely pure. It is often mixed with selfish aims and motives, but so also is the lack of ambition. And so we must not throw out the baby with the bath water. We must hold onto ambition because we were made for it.

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¹Rhema Ellis, “[The Power of Ambition: Homeless Valedictorian to Attend FSU](#),” NBCNews.com (June 4, 2014).