

MAKING DO WITH LESS EGO

By Michael A. Schuler

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AN ANECDOTE

From Marcie B. (Montreal, Canada)

In the last seven years I have left a well-paying job to raise my children; moved from Georgia to Quebec; survived breast cancer; and begun a new career as a yoga instructor. I'm happy with my life, but I sometimes lose sight of my accomplishments, especially when I compare myself to others.

A woman in my book club is a self-proclaimed over-achiever. She has a successful career, three lovely children, a handsome, supportive husband, a gorgeous home (and a vacation home) and plenty of money. All before turning forty.

At our recent book club meeting, this overachiever talked about her career problems. She'd interviewed for a high-ranking television job but knew that she wouldn't get it, and this had her in a funk. Her story sparked a spirited discussion about careers. When I didn't speak up, the overachiever asked how my yoga teaching was going. I said I enjoyed it, though I hadn't started charging for classes yet.

I felt like a loser. The sense of competitiveness ruined what I hoped would be an intimate evening with friends. I'd like to blame the overachiever, but I know it's my own definition of winning that keeps me from enjoying life.

AN INSIGHT

From Charlotte Joko Beck, *Everyday Zen*

Our drive as human beings is not to appreciate the perfection of the universe. Our personal drive is to find a way to endure in our unchanging glory forever. That may seem ridiculous, but that's what we're doing. And that resistance to change is not attuned with the perfection of life, which is impermanence. If life were not impermanent, it couldn't be the wonder that it is. Still, the last thing we like is our own impermanence. Who hasn't noticed the first gray hair and thought, "Uh-oh." So a battle rages in human existence. We refuse to see the truth that's all around us. We really don't see life at all.

Our attention is elsewhere. We are engaged in an unending battle with our fears about ourselves and our existence...

What we want out of life as we live it is that others reflect our glory. We want our partners to ensure our security, to make us feel wonderful, to give us what we want, so that our anxiety can be eased for a little while... The funny thing is that our friends are not fooled by us; they see exactly what we are doing. Why? Because they are doing it too. They're not interested in our efforts to be the center of the universe. Yet we wage war ceaselessly...

From the point of view of the self I've described - the "small self" - meditation practice can only be hard, because steady practice annihilates the small self, and the small self isn't interested in that one bit... But there is another side to practice. As our small self dies - our angry, demanding, complaining, maneuvering, manipulative self - a real reward appears: joy and genuine self-confidence. We begin to taste what it feels like to care about someone else without expecting anything in return. And this is true compassion. How much we have depends on the rate at which the "small self" dies. And as it dies, here and there we have moments when we see life for what it really is.

** REFLECTIONS **

The Academy Award winning film *Chariots of Fire* depicts a group of world-class runners preparing for and competing in the 1924 Paris Olympic Games. It is one of my all-time favorites, not least because I myself spent many years as an amateur competitive runner. Yet today I can still vividly remember running the 86th Boston Marathon, hearing the strains of that movie's theme song pumping from loudspeakers along the route, and feeling a surge of returning energy just as I was about to hit the wall. That was the year of the film's release, the year it was the Academy's surprising choice for "Best Picture."

Although I no longer run competitively, *Chariots of Fire* still intrigues me. In particular, I admire the way in which it skillfully weaves together the stories of two very different athletes - **Eric Liddell** and **Harold Abrahams**.

Liddell, a Scotch Presbyterian and aspiring missionary is a gentle yet determined spirit deeply committed to his faith, his family, his friends who unqualifiedly accepts his physical talent as a gift from God. "When I run," he famously proclaims, "I feel God's pleasure." Although his awkward running style is almost comical, Eric competes with

incredible determination and humility. Articulate yet unpretentious, he preaches and leads a life of service and servanthood. "None of this is about me," he insists. "It's all about God."

Apart from their phenomenal leg speed, **Harold Abrahams** and **Eric Lidell** could hardly be more different. A secular Jew whose parents migrated to England from Eastern Europe, **Harold** longs for social legitimacy. Less than proud of his lineage, he craves the respect of his peers at Cambridge University and, more generally, of England's upper crust. Even as he tries desperately to prove himself, **Harold** resents and occasionally rebels against the social code of the British aristocracy, and lives uneasily as a "marginal" man.

Running for **Harold** is all about him - his ability, his discipline, his need to "be the best" in order to gain the acceptance and respect he longs for. One gets the feeling that if he fails to win an Olympic Gold Medal, **Harold's** psyche will crumble, his life will unravel. He even concedes as much to his girlfriend, who firmly but lovingly tells him to "grow up." After all, it's only a footrace.

But, of course, it's not. Winning for young **Harold** is everything. His identity, his aspirations, his self-concept all hinge on crossing the finish line of the 100 meter dash first. If **Eric Liddell** epitomizes the ego-less competitor, **Harold Abrahams** is a man governed and determined by personal ambition.

Should we, then, label **Harold** an egoist and laud **Eric** for his liberation from the need for personal glory? The skill with which it treats the moral and psychological complexities of these two men's lives largely accounts for the film's power. Although **Eric and Harold** are differently motivated, in the end each wins our admiration.

But if **Harold** is, in fact, an egoist, what does that mean? What does that label imply and is it necessarily something to be frowned upon?

We need to acknowledge at the outset that the word "ego" can appropriately be used both positively or pejoratively. On the one hand, most mental health professionals would agree that a healthy ego, a strong ego, is indispensable to human happiness and well-being. There are two respects in which this is true.

First, each and every one of us needs a capable, functioning ego just to get along in the world. In classical Freudian psychology, the ego is that part of the personality that, as **Mark Epstein** puts it, "modulates our sexual and aggressive tendencies." Bereft of a sound ego,

the emotional and instinctual energies of the Id will be accorded free reign. In other words, a rational **Dr Jeckyl** is always needed to curb the excesses of the **Mr. Hyde** that lurks within each of us. "Conscious disciplining of the mind and body" is a primary task of the Freudian ego," **Epstein** comments. Technically, and from a strictly psychoanalytic point of view, then, the ego is virtually indispensable.

Related to but not identical with this notion of ego is another which is equally positive. When the individual evinces inner security, when they can accept their flaws and still feel worthy, when they learn from their mistakes and are resilient, when they feel capable and are able to overcome obstacles, when they possess a dependable sense of life-purpose - when all these qualities are present we declare that the ego is in good shape. Or, to use the current buzz-word, that person is said to have high self-esteem.

Now the fact is, most of us could benefit from more rather than less of these ego attributes. The weekend deportment of many an undergraduate at leading American universities would seem to suggest undeveloped powers of self-governance. Madison's perennial debates over the **Mifflin Street Block Party** and **State Street Halloween Bash** are representative of the age-old struggle of the ego to impose some basic discipline on the id. We've got a problem when students complain that they can't have fun unless the id is allowed to run amok. But it is one thing to be sensibly uninhibited and quite another to be drunk, rowdy and out of control.

And when we come to consider self-esteem, the problem is even more pronounced. I have alluded in the past to an encounter several years ago between the **Dalai Lama** and a group of prominent Western psychologists. In the course of their discussion, one therapist commented that many of his patients suffered from "self-loathing." The **Dalai Lama** was taken aback and couldn't understand how so many affluent Westerners could despise themselves. He asked others in the room if they agreed with their colleague, and they all concurred. As psychologist and Buddhist scholar **John Welwood** remarks:

The Western self is riddled with inner divisions - between self and other, individual and society, mind and body, spirit and nature, or the guilty ego and the harsh, punishing superego - divisions that were mostly unknown in the ancient or traditional cultures.

As a result, many Westerners suffer from what has become the...emotional plague of modern civilization: **Ego weakness**. The lack of a grounded sense of oneself and one's place in the world shows up as self-hatred, insecurity and self-doubt.

The ego, then, is an essential component of the personality, and any suggestion that health and happiness would be improved if our egos were less developed and less active shouldn't be taken seriously. Our instincts and impulses need to be mastered. In most instances, the individual's sense of worth and agency ought to be reinforced.

Nevertheless, the term "ego" has other, more problematic connotations and in certain respects it is appropriate to "make do with less of it".

In the first place, it's one thing to possess the sort of ego that is essential to a stable personality, and quite another to be egocentric. Individuals who exhibit inordinate self-concern, who habitually "look out for Number One" and who are largely unresponsive to other people's needs, interests and ideas have a problem. They are, as the **quotation** at the top of your program suggests, the sort of people whose energy is devoted to the endless project of self-advancement, self-enhancement and self-display. They take pains to hide their flaws and avoid responsibility for their failures. Other people are typically treated, knowingly or unknowingly, as means to their own selfish ends.

Egocentrism can manifest itself in strikingly different ways. Some who knock themselves out "doing good" crave attention just as much as the person whose behavior is more transparently selfish. Think of volunteers you know who make sure others know just how dedicated, hard working and indispensable they are. **John Welwood** comments:

People with a dependent personality structure, who try to gain approval and security by pleasing others, often perform unstinting service...in order to feel worthwhile... Such people use service or spirituality to make themselves feel special or important, while imagining they are working on liberation from self.

Paradoxically, such egocentrism is usually the sign of a weak or unhealthy ego. We complain that people who demand attention, or who act superior, have "big egos;" but the fact is, the opposite is often true. Persons who are

unsure of themselves and who feel fundamentally unworthy, unlovable and alienated exhibit grandiose behavior. **Harold Abrahams** is a good example. Ego-centrism arises when the individual over-compensates for a weak and unsteady sense of self.

The foregoing is not meant to suggest that every overtly ambitious, self-enhancing act indicates an out-of-proportion ego. In another interesting film, *The World's Fastest Indian*, New Zealander **Burt Munro** works alone for 20 years perfecting a motorcycle with which he hopes to shatter the world speed record for bikes with a displacement of less than 1000 cc's. Asked about his motivation, **Burt** says, "All my life I've wanted to do something big, bigger than the next fellow."

This sounds like the statement of an egomaniac, but **Burt** doesn't strike us as insecure or pretentious in the least. He's a single-minded eccentric who attracts friends and wins supporters purely by dint of his stubborn dedication and disarmingly honest personality. "Spiritual teachings about selflessness," **John Welwood** insists,

Don't mean that people should...not let themselves shine...We need to distinguish between genuine expressions of power, joy and celebration and ego distortions like grandiosity and conceit.

Neither **Burt Munro** nor **Eric Liddell** need the fame they achieve except as it complements their sense of mission or calling. Having come of age in close-knit communities, the products of loving families, at home in their culture and sure about their purpose in life, **Eric and Burt** feel fundamentally secure and satisfied. They allow themselves to "shine" but aren't driven to "be" anything more than they already are.

The psychologist **W.D. Winnicott** would say that **Eric and Burt** were both nurtured in a good "holding environment":

a context of love and belonging that contributes to a basic sense of confidence and to overall healthy psychological development.

Unfortunately, many children in our own fast-paced, hyper-competitive, stressed-to-the-max modern world are denied the proper "holding environment," which may explain the increased prevalence of egocentrism, adult narcissism and lack of empathy. It appears that when people are appropriately loved and affirmed - not fawned over,

spoiled, appeased or placated - their egos will develop properly and stay in proper proportion.

The good news is that even if we weren't raised in a particularly positive "holding environment," by building ego strength we can gradually become less egocentric and, as a result, more content. West Coast writer **Anne Lamott's** early life was, by her own admission, a royal mess. Poor self-image and fear of failure tripped her up again and again. But **Lamott** worked hard at her issues, and in middle-age she writes:

I love my life more, I'm so much juicier. And as that old saying goes, "It's not that I think less of myself, but that I think of myself less often." And that feels like heaven to me.

Lamott has learned to acknowledge her flaws and limitations without apology, and to celebrate her achievements without haughtiness. So can we.

And eventually, as we work at analyzing and disassembling the facade that we've created as a substitute for genuine inner strength and personal acceptance, we may make another important discovery: that the discrete ego, the "little self" (as **Joko Beck** describes it) belongs to and reflects a "big self" as comprehensive as life in general. With this profound insight we recognize how mutable, insubstantial and impermanent this entity known as "I" really is, but how bountiful and beautiful is the capacious self in which the "I" resides and to which it belongs. In relation to the "Big Self" the private ego seems utterly insignificant and ceases to be our primary concern. The poet **Mary Oliver** offers a better description than I can and with her words I will close:

Once, years ago, I emerged from the woods in the early morning at the end of a walk and - it was the most casual of moments - as I stepped from under the trees into the mild, pouring-down sunlight I experienced a sudden impact, a *seizure of happiness*... I made no struggle toward it; it was given. Time seemed to vanish; urgency vanished. Any important difference between myself and all things vanished. I knew that I belonged to the world and felt comfortably my own containment in the totality... No vision, or anything extraordinary at all, but only a sudden awareness of the citizenry of all things within one world: dust, thrushes and finches, men and women. And yet it was a

moment I have never forgotten, and upon which I have based many decisions in the years since.

CLOSING WORDS

"Too Busy" by David Budbill

Have ambition and ego ruined my life?
Where have my easy days gone?
If only I had a monk friend to wander off
Into the mountains to visit.
If only I were so idle I had time to visit him.
If only we could while away the day drinking tea,
Playing flutes and talking.
If only, as the moon rose,
My friend could point the way home
Through the mountains with the night's sky lantern
To light the way.
If only I were happy with only that.

