

Calibrating our egos in our relationships and religion

Arend D. Lubbers *GVSU president emeritus and member of the Kaufman advisory board*

Introduction by Douglas Kindschi: Last week, President Emeritus Arend Lubbers shared with us his reflection on his life and the importance of calibrating one's ego. He described the calibration process and applied it to one's ambition. (To read Part I go to bit.ly/Insight-Lubbers) This week, he continues to explore the need to calibrate in matters of personal relationships and in understanding religion. He notes "I need to write my thoughts when I reach a way station. ... This essay offers some thoughts important to me on this late stage of my journey. Though they deal with essential issues for me, they may not for others. We are pilgrims on a life journey."

RELATIONSHIPS

There is a hidden aspect of the ego undetected by those expressing it. It is often found in marriages and other close personal relationships. We fall in love, personally and physically attracted. Usually such a state fulfills each individual's immediate needs without the awareness of the other's deepest feelings, motivations, or genetic or parental conditioning. Self-awareness in this instance does not necessarily lead to care for the other, even though there is an initial burst of affection. When the initial passion is banked, individual needs and priorities often cause an emotional eruption or simmering resentment. These problems are not the result of overwhelming egos, but of egos taking care of themselves without understanding for the other. If fortunate and capable of nurturing this initial love into caring about the other's self-fulfillment, a balance of egos offers one of life's happiest conditions. It takes work and depends on the calibration of both egos to a degree that meets their needs.

If a couple cannot reconcile their egos, our society offers divorce and an opportunity to try again. There is, however, the possibility of collateral damage with the divorce solution. Children not yet capable of fully understanding what has happened suffer the most. There can be a complex gathering of egos in a divorce situation. The final effect on each person may take years to be determined. To avoid divorce and its damage should be a priority, but may be an impossible distance unless ego is understood and managed.

Have you ever watched a person enter a large room, survey those assembled, and move directly to the one who is the most influential, wealthiest and celebrated? My professional and social life has afforded me the opportunity to observe such behavior many times. There is similar group behavior at conventions and large institutional meetings. Those who consider themselves the "in-group" gather in social situations and exclude others from their conversations. This need to be important by being with the important is one of the most transparent, bemusing, sometimes hurtful experiences of self-aggrandizement.

The ego always needs to be fed, and to prove to yourself that you are important is good nourishment.

Over the years, I have watched intently as successful and sometimes accomplished people attach themselves to another who has gained high public acclaim, power and wealth. They make themselves useful, they flatter, they ini-

tiate engagements and seek intimate conversation. Their self-esteem requires the friendship and wants others to know about it. By associating with power, they gain power. Once the attachment is made, its protection is a priority. Sometimes there is rivalry if another invades the territory. Usually the object, the person of importance, enjoys the attention and offers enough affirmation to the rivals to keep the peace.

This ego enhancement, especially among the already successful, possesses no virtue except a modicum in the genuineness of the friendship that may result. The foundation of the relationship, however, is the need to associate with wealth and power, not friendship. Does it reflect feelings of inferiority, superiority or both? I don't know.

Ego feeding as I have described is completely self-centered. There is no consideration of others when seeking it. Other relationships will be sacrificed for it. It is a sacrifice of self-esteem for a counterfeit self-esteem.

The Declaration of Independence claims all are created equal. This truth is summoned out of the goodness in our nature. We bring no feelings of superiority or inferiority to our relationships with others or our understanding of human intercourse of all peoples. We have no need to find importance in our associations, only cooperation, empathy and friendship. The life given to us is important enough. Our egos are an essential part of that life. The goodness given to us is the only useful tool available to calibrate the ego's uninhibited tendencies so that we may use it to express our will in the best ways. Our inability to escape our individuality is a dominant reality in our lives. We must take the blinders off our egos and observe, evaluate, check, fulfill and empathize when we can with the ego of others. The right degree of self-esteem, ambition, humility and caring are essential in calibrating the process.

RELIGION

As the human species evolved, the practice of religion evolved. Looking at the stars was enough to make humans aware that there was something in the vastness of the sky beyond their knowledge. On Earth, they were beset by many threats to their lives. In the search to know how they should live, to seek protections from what nature could inflict on them, and to learn how to manage the aggression that was their natural disposition, religion emerged to help them.

Religion brought the revelation that God is love, with its implications to love others as you love yourself, and to forgive the offenses against you. In my religion, Jesus is the messenger of that love and redeems us by it. His gospel has been around long enough for us to know that it works. When applied, it never seems to fail. But too often it has not tamed the human ego. Instead, the ego has its way with religion. Why is that? The ego's natural state is the search for complete control. Control requires knowledge, so all there is to know about religion and its promises is made known to the self. This subtle takeover of religion by the ego is undetected by those who fall victim to it. They feel assured in the truth as they know it. Many of them came to the truth through a dramatic experience. They are born again, and feel that some similar experience to theirs is

the only way to the redeemed life. They are often partially right. Their lives take on a more generous aspect. They can be bright, loving and positive. Their weakness is in their exclusivity. There is the only way, the ego's way. It is subtle. The ego has a way of tricking those who own it. It tricks them into making God in their image instead of the other way around.

A large number who observe this exclusivity turn away from religious practice. The hypocrisy as they see it is too much. They may or may not incorporate religious values in the way they live. Then there are some who are loyal to a church, a shrinking number in our society. Among the various people who want to live the goodness of life, the revelation of universal love as an ego check and fulfillment is their way to it.

The 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr held that we come closest to the truth in the paradox. For me, the paradox is holding and advocating beliefs while admitting their fallibility. Flooding life's paradoxes with love gives them sense and possibility. Humility is inherent. Here is one of the most important of ego calibrations. Our intellects and minds are given freedom to express with conviction. The expression is tempered by our admission that we cannot claim God-like knowledge to support them. While we act out, making experiences for our lives and a place for our thoughts, we invoke and feel enveloped by love, the spirit God has given to us. This is the way to unite our self-awareness to that of others, so difficult, yet so redeeming if we give it a try.

interfaith@gvsu.edu