

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# To live the right kind of life, we must calibrate our ego

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

The president emeritus at Grand Valley State University shared with me the following reflection on his life and the importance of calibrating one's ego. For 25 of my 28 years as dean at Grand Valley, I had the privilege of working with Don Lubbers during his 32 years as president. I continue to consider him a friend and mentor. His advice and support on the Kaufman advisory board has been most valuable. It is my honor to share this piece as an Interfaith Insight. *Douglas Kindschi*

Calibration is a scientific term used to describe fixing, checking or correcting the gradation of an instrument that measures something. To calibrate is to see that the object doing the measuring has the proper level or combination of what it needs to be effective or even function.

If we allow ourselves to apply calibrating to human behavior, it leads to interesting speculations.

Probing the ego and consciousness itself offer ample opportunities. Ego is defined as the self: the individual as self-aware. The possibilities for self-awareness are limitless. Our self-awareness establishes our place in society and determines how we react to people and situations. The words derived from ego — egocentric, egoistic, egotistic and egotism — have negative connotations. In the evolution of the species' self-awareness, not all has gone well.

The one positive derivative is ego-ideal, describing a healthy condition for those who are fortunate to have loving parents or parent substitutes. In our universe of the self-aware, it is admitted that not all is ideal. The fault lies in the individual's attempt to exalt itself as a first priority and diminish others without concern.

All points to self-awareness unchecked will lead to selfishness and self-infatuation.

Does that imply John Calvin got it right in propounding his doctrine of total depravity? Perfection eludes us all, yet there is a feeling of goodness in the ground of our being that under the right emotional and physical conditions can be summoned. If that goodness remains latent, we see self-centeredness and superiority flaunted by CEOs who win at money games, arrogant academics, controlling parents, amoral politicians and disaffected racist followers of a demagogue. The latter group is the conglomeration of single egos coming together in the same cause only for selfish interests.

In ancient times and more recently, the search for a society that allowed goodness to have a chance led to democracy. It's messy and requires people to check their egos through compromise if they want to share in the pie that power has baked for them. It does not always work.

The ego's aggressive grab of power interferes but egos can mix by modulating, as they should, for the good of all. Democracy is a complicated high form of social calibration.

In totalitarian societies, self-awareness is held in check by autocrats. Survival dictates that boundaries be placed around self-expression. When some cannot be restrained, their expression is met with exclusion, imprisonment or death. Even then, the ego bubbles up in a myriad of situations.

The reader may question the exploration of calibration as a concept to adjust ego. We know the effects of selfishness and unselfishness, of love and hate, of self-absorption and generosity of spirit. Isn't seeking the better of these alternatives enough in the struggle to live the good life?

Over the years, as my self-awareness sharpened from experience, reading and contemplation, I began to think more deeply about the forces shaping my life. Fortunately for me, my parents' love and nurture gave me an advantage when I began making choices about belief and profession. Though I followed in their train, thoughts about Jesus' admonition that we be born again, born of the spirit, persisted.

We cannot ride along on the good and bad of our experience. Each ego must come to terms with itself. Avoidance only leads to trouble. Commitment to control the ego is personal and necessary if the right spirit is to pre-



**Arend "Don" Lubbers, president emeritus of Grand Valley State University, led the school for 32 years before retiring in 2001.** *MLive.com file*

vail. Some make it with a high level of consciousness, others with more of a gut feeling. Where responsibilities for those with mental and environmental limitations rest is beyond the scope of my present thought.

For me, it has been an evolving process as I seek to understand and live the right kind of life. As I tried to manage ambition, relationships and religion, the idea of calibration occurred to me. Though I think determinists have ideas worth consideration, I invoke my belief that there is a goodness dependent on us to summon. In the summoning, it is important to understand virtue and apply it correctly. I have observed what I believe to be the wrong dose of virtue bringing consequences that undermine it. For those of us who use our minds to think about issues I have described, we must find our own way.

## AMBITION

Though I never felt the pressure to succeed in a profession, it was assumed by me and all around me that I would.

When professional success comes early, the ego is not properly calibrated for it. Even when past teaching keeps one from boasting or prideful public demonstrations, the ego basks in personal satisfaction. The ego likes to take credit. Often, to a degree, credit is deserved. Yet if one has curiosity and interest in the pursuit of truth, revelations will come as thoughts move in the mind.

One conclusion is that individuals have not made themselves. They are given a genetic code not of their making and born into an environment not of their choosing. The implications for the ego are evident. How we think, how we perceive, what we do are shaped by factors before the assertions of the ego begin. The ego emerges along with those factors that create the human being.

When incorporating this understanding, the successful individual takes satisfaction in achievement knowing that what took place before self-awareness is largely responsible for it. The individual does not seek to curb the ambition that drives towards success. If ambition does not consume the ego, the time has come to use ambition correctly. To do this, the virtue of humility becomes an ingredient.

The right dosage is important. Too much may result in a life of denial of ambition and ongoing penance which is not necessarily useful in modern society. The right amount of humility does not discredit the satisfaction with what ambition has produced, and it directs ambition to include the welfare of others. This is the right calibration.

*Part 2 will continue next week as President Emeritus Lubbers reflects on relationships and religion.*

*interfaith@gvsu.edu*