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BLAND AMBITION

Matriculation Convocation Address

by
Richard Warch

President of Lawrence University

Lawrence Memorial Chapel, September 24, 1981

My title, candor compels me to confess at the outset, has all the markings of a groaner. And just as H. L. Mencken noted that the progression from George Washington to Calvin Coolidge was a sure refutation of the theory of evolution, so also some of you may posit the transition from Miguel de Unamuno to John Dean as a singular sign of the erosion of my literary taste. I have counted, but have not read, the 402 pages of Dean's confessions and revelations. Frankly, my interest is not in what the blurb writers hailed as "this devastatingly candid best seller" or in Dean's "personal tragedy." Rather, I have modestly bowdlerized his title because I want to explore the various emanations of its central term: ambition.

The word and concept are familiar enough. Ambition is defined as the inordinate desire for preferment, honor, superiority, power, or attainment. In our everyday parlance, however, we are likely to use the word in a more general sense to mean our aspirations for our personal as well as our collective futures. Ambition is, in that regard, a forward-looking sensibility, one with which we anticipate the future and posit our place and purpose in it. We all have and assume that others have ambition in this sense.

Ambition, then, is common enough. But what is it? And what can it be? In its most exalted meaning, of course, ambition can be understood as one of the most peculiar human attributes. Along with other qualities, it separates us from other organisms and natural phenomena. "All things work exactly according to their quality, and according to their quantity," wrote Emerson; "attempt nothing they cannot do, except man only. He has pretension: he wishes and attempts things beyond his force." Captain James Cook, for example, had such Emersonian pretension. "I. . . had ambition,' he said, "not only to go farther than any man had ever gone before, but as far as it was possible to go."

Desiring to go "as far as it was possible to go" is a grand and stirring ambition. It is, in Emerson's terms, to wish and attempt things beyond one's force. Examples of such ambition may be rare, but according to the great mathematician G. H. Hardy, they should be the norm. A person's duty, Hardy claimed, a young person's at any rate, is to be ambitious. Ambition, he went on, "has been the driving force behind nearly all the best work of the world." "Good work," he said, "is not done by 'humble' men."

Certainly we can accept and applaud ambition thus described. And we can cite numerous examples to suggest that such ambition has indeed produced great work, major accomplishments, and worthy hopes. Who can quarrel with ambition of this sort? Well, perhaps none of us can, but nevertheless we are hard pressed to locate this sensibility among us today. Who feels ambition as the driving force to do great work to be a duty? Where do we find ambition as Emerson or Hardy defined it? The fact is, I believe,

that ambition is a rather unpopular character trait these days and indeed that ambition is something most of us eschew rather than embrace. Perhaps this is particularly true in an egalitarian society in which we feel that it is either impossible or inappropriate to aspire to rise above our fellows. But even if that offers a partial explanation, it is also true that ambition's reputation as more of a vice than a virtue has roots in our cultural heritage.

There are many sources for this notion, but among the more prominent may be England in the age of Elizabeth. Many scholars have interpreted that period as an age of ambition in which the political and social arenas were crowded with grasping men and in which the popular mind was satiated with images of what contemporaries called "the aspiring mind." Here was a time when ambition reigned unfettered, though not unchecked, and in which moralists shuddered at the rampant displays of extravagant ambition that assaulted them on every side. Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great was the representative man:

> ...he was never sprung of human race,
> Since with the spirit of his fearful pride
> He dares so doubtlessly resolve of rule
> And by profession be ambitious.

Ambitious Tamburlaine, seeker of power, "that fiery thirster after sovereignty," was the imaginative exemplar of the preoccupations of the age. And while some men celebrated him and his real-life confederates, others recoiled from them and sought to condemn and warn of their raging aspiration. Shakespeare's fallen Cardinal Wolsey, speaking to Cromwell in Henry VIII, reflects this view:

Mark but my fall, and that that ruined me.
Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition:
By that sin fell the angels; how can man then
. . . hope to win by it?

Lucifer, Elizabethans reminded each other, was ambitious. Ambition, Shakespeare argues, is a sin.

We have, perhaps unwittingly and uncritically, inherited this assessment. Thus, we identify ambition as some kind of personality disorder, a kind of arrogant and aggrandizing sensibility that distances the individual from the group; notions of superiority, of overweening drive, of unwholesome pre-eminence, even--pace John Dean--of evil and sinister designs are the attributes we often associate with ambition of this order. And therefore what is invoked in us are feelings of alienation rather than emulation. Better to keep ambition tame and domesticated than to be guilty of such grandiose and extraordinary aspirations.

Even if we do not take the position that such ambition is in itself evil, we may believe that it can only lead to disappointment and trouble. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" may be an aphorism to which we pay occasional lip service, but deep down we feel that nothing ventured, nothing lost and so we venture nothing. We may here take our lesson from Francis Bacon, who saw quite clearly this consequence among the aspiring Elizabethans. "Ambition," he wrote, "maketh men active, earnest, full of alacrity, and stirring . . . if they find the way open for their rising, and still get forward . . . but if they be checked in their desires, they become secretly discontent, and look upon men and matters with an evil eye." Such a man suffered

from melancholy, an affliction of the malcontent, and, wrote Robert Burton in his book on Anatomy, "so long as his ambition lasts, he can look for no other but anxiety and care, discontent and grief . . . madness itself, or violent death in the end." Hegel made a similar point: for men of ambition, he argued, "their whole life is labor and trouble . . . . They die early, like Alexander; they are murdered, like Caesar; transported to Saint Helena, like Napoleon." If such be the consequences, what virtue or value has ambition?

On the one hand, then, we foreswear ambition because it seems too grandiose, too sinister, too power-grasping, too dangerous for others, too anxiety-ridden for self. Few of us would admit to harboring ambition in this sense and most of us would condemn any of our contemporaries whom we thought so inclined. But the negative connotations of ambition do not end here. There is another version of this sensibility that affects us and in some ways is the more homegrown and insidious. Ambition, we find, cannot only be corrupted by its excesses but by its diminution.

Observing the democratic United States during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that "the first thing that strikes a traveler in the United States is the innumerable multitude of those who seek to emerge from their original condition." But what truly struck Tocqueville was the corrolary observation that for Americans "ambition is ardent and continual, but its aim is not habitually lofty; and life is generally spent in eagerly coveting small objects that are within reach." Tocqueville's verdict on this topic has a chillingly contemporary ring:

> I confess I apprehend much less for democratic society from the boldness than from the mediocrity of desires. What appears to me most to be dreaded is that in the

> midst of the small, incessant occupations of private life, ambition should lose its vigor and its greatness; that the passions of man should abate, but at the same time be lowered; so that the march of society should every day become more tranquil and less aspiring.

That, it seems to me, aptly describes bland ambition. It is an ambition of men and women for whom, as Tocqueville put it, "the present moment alone engages and absorbs them."

There can be little doubt that the situation in these United States today is much more Jacksonian than Elizabethan. We are confronted on every side by forces and factors that militate against those ingredients of risk, adventure, and hope that accompany great ambitions and that nourish those attributes of caution, timidity, and fear that undergird bland ambitions. The march of society, and therefore of those of us who make up society's parade, is certainly less aspiring. Inflation, prime interest rates, budget deficits, and the dismal recent performance of stocks and bonds define the climate in which we find ourselves. Concerns about energy costs, food prices, and geo-political stability form the context in which we contemplate and plan our futures. Little wonder, then, that as individuals and as institutions we become preoccupied with matters that are rarely lofty, usually small and near, certainly present. We wonder about the survival of our institutions, about the security of our positions, and about the sensibility of our career goals. Thus we adopt--again individually and institutionally--defensive postures, seek to protect rather than to project our interests, look for harbors of safety and surety as havens from the tempestuous sea of uncertainty in which we are tossed.

These aspects of our situation must be acknowledged even as they are lamented. We may well resent the fact that we are ofttimes made to feel more like victims than actors. In the past few years we have witnessed the grinding halt and perhaps the first struggling signs of reversal of the revered American legacy of progress. Now many people talk not about achieving more but of holding on to what they have, even of doing with less. Fear of slippage has replaced expectation of advancement as the dominant sensibility. And while President Reagan strives mightily to combat what he perceives to be the causes and effects of the current situation, the rest of us are consigned to live in that situation and to be shaped by it.

For Lawrence, this situation takes its toll in myriad ways. Basically, however, the problem takes the form of various discontinuities between the expectations that many students bring with them to Lawrence and the expectations awaiting them at Lawrence. The bogey-man--maybe the straw man--of this dilemma is, of course, what goes under the all-encompassing rubric of vocationalism. That is certainly the case nationally. John Sawhill, president of New York University, tells an anecdote about a conversation he had with a bright student who impressed him with her knowledge of moral and social philosophy. When he asked her why she was majoring in business instead of one of the humanities--an area in which she had obvious interest and talent--she replied, "How else can I get a job?" Sawhill's evaluation of this episode is short and bitter: "This student's ambition reflects what has gone wrong in higher education today. Once considered an essential enterprise for the improvement

of American society, higher education has become the handmaiden of successful career planning, spurning both creative teaching and the rigorous pursuit of knowledge."

When students and colleges conspire together to permit the preoccupations with occupations to become the motivating principle of higher education, they are, in Mortimer Adler's words, giving priority to the urgent rather than the important. And to the extent that we allow that set of concerns to shape our enterprise, we are all--students, faculty, administrators alike--being victimized by a prevalent emanation of bland ambition. Let me not be misunderstood: I find nothing troubling or surprising in the fact that Lawrence students find questions of career and vocation to be vexing and vital. Lawrence students--and students at other liberal arts colleges--have been ever thus. But when these questions become the major questions, and when our response to them becomes the major justification for our reason for being, then those who ask the question, those who give the answer, and the community of learning of which both are a part become demeaned and diminished.

Liberal arts colleges, from their inception, have been pre-vocational institutions. But their genius and their glory is that they do not offer a prescriptively vocational curriculum and that they derive their special character from their attention to the individual as person rather than as soon-to-be wage-earner. Put another way, what the liberal arts college does well--indeed, does very well--is not to prepare the student to do some particular job but to equip him or her for the world of work. Lawrence fosters and furthers the student's preparation for postgraduate work even if it does not presume to tell him what that work should be.

But that is not all. While the university recognizes that one of its functions is to permit the individual to develop those competencies--in analytic thought, in quantitative literacy, in cogent communication, in linguistic facility, in artistic expression--that represent a life-long investment in self, it also has another agenda. And this larger agenda, which includes vocation but which ultimately subsumes it, consists of ambitions for its students. These aspirations are better experienced than described, but they are posited on the conviction that no matter what the current situation may be, no matter what the future may hold or bode, no matter what vocational puzzlements or predelictions a student may have, each of us ought to seek personal fulfillment and self-realization and each of us ought to become informed and involved participants in the affairs of our civil polity and of our world. For whatever else will be in store for each of you, you will have lots of leisure time and you will be citizens. In short, Lawrence seeks to nurture your private and public self. And this nurturing goes on not only in the classroom, the laboratory, the studio, and the faculty office, but in the residence halls and through the activities and actions of LUCC and other student organizations.

In these several ways, then, the university transmits its ambitions for its students to its students. And these aspirations are indeed lofty, distant, and future-minded. Lawrence is concerned with and prizes your intellectual energy and inquisitiveness, your system of values, your critical intelligence, your clarity of expression, your mastery of ideas, your emotional maturity, your social conscience, your sense of responsibility. And therefore, should you

evidence contrary attributes and attitudes--in the guise of being laid back or mellowed out, of worrying chiefly about grades, of avoiding reputedly tough courses, of refusing to speak out in class, of displaying indifference to the quality of our collective life, of seeming to go through here unscathed by the nature of our enterprise--the university, usually through the person of one of your professors, will resist you. Your bland ambition will be confronted by the university's larger aspirations. And that resistance, though it may come in the form of a provocative remark, a challenge, a critique, even a rebuke, is born not of resentment but of care. For liberal education has as its motivating principle the hope that our individual and social lives will not be mindless, vacuous, and routine, but purposeful and rich in content and meaning.

We ask not that you become the Tamburlaine of your generation. But we certainly hope that you do not become its Babbitt. We do aspire that for you ambition will be directed toward accomplishment and achievement rather than aggrandizement and arrogance. We believe--and we invite you to discover--that the fundamental ambitions are autobiographical in the most profound sense and social in the most global sense. Who you are to be and become and what your nation and world are to be like are questions that should engage you.

They should engage you not as idle distractions or daydreams but as central ingredients of that self-discovery that is one manifestation of liberal learning. To ignore such questions and to disdain to quest for answers, to permit them to be overshadowed by the "small, incessant occupations of private life," is to miss the

governing ambition of liberal education. Know finally, therefore, that Lawrence is not just prologue. The nature of your presence here in the final analysis is not preparatory but permanent. The university is not a sanctuary from what is "out there" but is of a piece with the whole, albeit a special piece that seeks to embody qualities and foster attitudes that will enrich and ennoble that whole. The privilege of being here is that you may be touched by that spirit. Do not let "the mediocrity of desires" deny you that chance. At Lawrence you will be challenged to work hard, set and meet standards, develop taste and judgment, master analysis and argument, discern truth and falsehood, discriminate between beauty and ugliness, appreciate excellence and achievement. You will test yourself. You will come to know yourself. And you will emerge more literate, more competent, more confident than when you came. You will have the attributes--even if only the first glimmerings of the attributes--of a realized self and an engaged and committed citizen. Such is Lawrence's ambition. Let it also be yours.

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