

Laughing at Our Egos: A Gratitude Practice

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As you all know, I spend a little time on Facebook. Sometimes it rewards me abundantly. A couple of weeks ago, I saw an interesting post. The drawing was of a surgeon operating and the text had him saying, “I removed your ego and it turns out that’s what was clogging your reality.”

We might laugh at this, but if you’re like me you laugh a bit uneasily. What do you mean, remove my ego? I need my ego! You leave it right where it is, thank you very much!

Well, don’t worry, we are not talking about removing anyone’s ego today. But what if our egos do clog our reality to some extent? What if our egos actually get in the way of us living the ethical lives we want to live? Should we do anything about it? Surgical removal is out of the question, but what if we occasionally demoted our egos for a bit? That’s what I am proposing today, and what I am specifically proposing is that we laugh at our egos at strategic moments. I’ll begin by discussing what I mean by “ego” and then talking about what I mean by laughing at our egos and how we might do it. I’ll go on to consider what moments might count as strategic moments to laugh at our egos, and will close by reflecting on how laughing at our egos can be a great practice in cultivating gratitude for all the good we experience that is not about our egos.

What do I mean by our egos? Not what Freud had to say, but something more general, casual, and intuitive. I mean by my ego my sense of self as I experience it and the needs and wants of that self as I experience them. When we say that someone is egotistical, we usually mean that they are wrapped up in themselves. When we say someone’s got a big ego, we mean that the person cares only about number one. So, if we are completely invested in our egos it’s going to be harder to make consistently ethical decisions.

You may remember that we began this series talking about the value of quieting our minds. Our egos are problematic in part because they operate as part of our monkey minds, the crazy, scampering, apparently uncontrollable thoughts that make our minds so loud most of the time. After all, what exactly is going on in our minds when they are in monkey mode? Here are a few examples: How am I going to get all this work done? What does she think of me? I can’t believe I said that awful thing yesterday. I have to remember to pick up eggs after work and I’m sure I’ll forget if I don’t write it down. What if I need antibiotics for that cough I have? They don’t appreciate me enough at the office. I, I, I. Me, me, me. So much of what we think about so much of the time is, well, ourselves. Such thinking does not lead to a quiet mind, but I think the good news is that when we quiet our minds, we quiet our selves a bit too. We are not at the front and center of our thinking when our minds are quiet because nothing is.

Similarly, when our egos are at the center of our thoughts and priorities, it’s simply harder to imagine and practice interdependence because interdependence means putting someone else ahead of ourselves. If we are caught up in our stuff, as we so often are, how are we going to focus on the potential wants and needs of other people, who we may not even know or ever meet? If our imaginations are directed only toward ourselves, how can we imagine the larger interdependent web, of which we are a part?

Hopefully I've now convinced you that there are reasons to stop focusing on ourselves for a bit from time to time. But how on earth can we do this, given how deeply it goes against our impulses? I think there are two answers. First, there are times when the universe makes clear how ridiculous our egos' chokeholds on us are, and in those moments, we are simply invited to laugh – at ourselves, at our pretensions, at the very idea that we are in complete control of our lives. In those moments, which might be moments of wonder and awe, or which might be moments of difficulty, our only options are laughing or crying. If we really feel that we can choose between them, we might as well choose laughter.

A month ago, a tree in our yard fell in a great windstorm. It damaged our house and the neighbor's house and destroyed the fence in-between. We were at home when it happened, and after we came out of our initial shock, we realized several things. First, no one had been hurt by the falling tree – no person, no pet. Not even a squirrel, which is a miracle all on its own. Second, neither of our houses sustained structural damage, though both sustained a fair amount of cosmetic damage. Third, dealing with insurance companies is insanely complicated, and you don't get to choose the nature of the interaction. They have rules. You play by their rules.

Would it have been better if the tree hadn't fallen at all? Of course. Are we unbelievably lucky that no one got hurt? Absolutely. If the angle of the tree's fall had been different enough, any number of people and pets would have been hurt or killed. Is it amazing that neither house sustained structural damage? Sure. Our contractor estimated that the tree missed causing structural damage to our house by six or seven inches. That's all. And is it unfortunate about the way insurance companies work? You bet.

But here's the larger point: as challenging as that falling tree was, it was also a great occasion for me to laugh at my ego. Do I think my life and my world is really under my control? Ha! A tree with undiscovered insect damage and a huge wind and a couple of insurance companies put that to rest. Do I believe all my planning will actually work out the way I intend it to? There's a guffaw. We had been working on paying off some old debt when the wind hit the tree. That might just have to slow down now. So much for planning. Do my good intentions count for anything? As they say on Facebook, I'm laughing out loud. We had been planning to befriend our neighbors, who had just recently moved in, and while they have been very gracious about things, we'll see how long that continues if we have insurance struggles. The point is, my ego doesn't run the world. It doesn't even run my life. And maybe that cosmic joke calls for the kind of response most jokes do.

So how exactly did I laugh at my ego? First, I got frightened, then depressed. Then relieved about the lack of injury and structural damage. Then I said to myself, Amanda, the universe is apparently having a rough day and taking it out on our tree. Sorry, universe. Have a better day tomorrow. And I laughed. Really. Not because anything was funny but because what else was there to do? My sense of control, so substantial in my own head, so large in my own experience, isn't deserving of worship after all. A tree fell right on my sense of control and knocked off some of its shingles. My ego the emperor has no clothes. I shake my head, say wow, I didn't see that coming, and resolve to see my ego for what it is: limited to the inside of my skull.

But it isn't only external situations that afford us opportunities to step back from being completely caught up in our agendas. Sometimes it's a practice we can choose to carry out. At the very moment when I am most full of myself, if I'm conscious of feeling that way, I always have the option of stopping, taking a breath, and saying, who am I kidding? I'm not that important. Most people in the world will never know who I am. I sit on the toilet the exact same way everyone else does, I was born of mucus and blood, and I will die at some point. And this is a practice that any of us can cultivate, using whatever words are most meaningful to us as often as they help us get a sense of perspective on our lives.

Now, I see this as a humility practice, not a humiliation practice. Humility comes from the word "humus," or earth, and being humble means staying appropriately close to the ground from which we come. Humiliation is the experience of being knocked to the ground from a distance. It's hard to be humiliated if we are already close to the ground. It's much easier to be humiliated if we are on our high horse. If we make fun of ourselves before anyone else, it's not humiliation. It's humility. It's simply an honest accounting of the truth that reality is not reducible to my ego.

When should we laugh at our ego, stepping back and putting our lives in perspective? As I suggested before, there are times when it is simply the best option in the face of an external situation. But I think there are also strategic moments when we can choose to laugh at our egos as an ethical practice. These moments tend to happen when we need to make a quick decision about which course of action to take. Do I look out for number one or do I look out for the interconnected web of all existence, of which I am just a very small part?

As with quieting our minds and being prepared to think interdependently, laughing at our egos is a way to tip the balance of our decision toward taking care of others, not just ourselves. If we think, I have to look out for myself. No one else will. It's really important that I get whatever I'm seeking right now because I have to have it no matter what, it's no surprise that we'll look out for number one. But if we say, I am a small part of something much larger and my ego doesn't have to be the loudest voice in the room, we might make a different decision. We might make a sacrifice, or do something good for someone else, or put our energy on the side of social justice even if it's a hassle. This may not come easily to most people. It certainly doesn't come easily to me. But it might come just a little easier if we give our egos a good talking-to.

Albert Nolan, a South African Dominican priest and theologian, has written that "Nothing sidelines the ego more effectively than a grateful heart", which leads to the idea that laughing at our egos can be a gratitude practice, not merely a way to improve our ethical decision-making. As it happens, I have a daily gratitude practice. Every night I post one or more things about which I am grateful on Facebook. And it's true that sometimes my ego is caught up in that gratitude, because there are days when I am grateful for something I was able to accomplish. But there are many nights when I can report that I am grateful for something that has nothing whatsoever to do with my ego: friends, family, pets, getting to have a good job, beautiful weather, the very fact that the damage to our house from the tree falling wasn't worse. There are a great many good things I experience that are not about my ego.

I think all of us could probably say the same. Consider today's reading, UU minister Gene Pickett's "We Give Thanks this Day." Once it became clear that this would not be a

Thanksgiving weekend sermon, I contemplated removing this section and changing the reading but decided against it. When exactly is it a bad idea to give thanks? Never, really. So, let's revisit the reading from before in a new way. As I read all but the last line of it, keep track: how many of the items in the reading are about our egos? Here goes:

“For the expanding grandeur of Creation, worlds known and unknown, galaxies beyond galaxies, filling us with awe and challenging our imaginations we give thanks this day. For the fragile planet earth, its times and tides, its sunsets and seasons we give thanks this day. For the joy of human life, its wonders and surprises, its hopes and achievements we give thanks this day. For our human community, our common past and future hope, our oneness transcending all separation, our capacity to work for peace and justice in the midst of hostility and oppression we give thanks this day. For high hopes and noble causes, for faith without fanaticism, for understanding of views not shared we give thanks this day. For all who have labored and suffered for a fairer world, who have lived so that others might live in dignity and freedom we give thanks this day. For human liberty and sacred rites, for opportunities to change and grow, to affirm and choose we give thanks this day.”

So how much did this gratitude reading focus on our egos? Not very much, right? It's mostly about things that are bigger than our selves, from the expanding grandeur of Creation to the many who have improved our world. It's not that we don't have a place among these gratitude-inducing phenomena. We do. Our place is to give thanks. And we give thanks from within our egos. But when we focus on that for which we are giving thanks, we aren't focusing on ourselves. We aren't obsessing over our shopping lists, our relationships, our work tasks, how much we weigh or any of the many other projects of the ego. We are getting beyond ourselves and outside ourselves.

Treating ego demotion as a gratitude practice also has an ethical component. We are more likely to make sacrifices willingly if we do so in a spirit of gratitude because then they feel just slightly less like sacrifices. This is a small example, but when I am feeling grateful for Phoebe and our pets, I am much less grumbly about going shopping. I may not exactly be grateful to carry heavy bags of dog food but I am happy to provide for Max and Butterscotch. And those long supermarket shops are more palatable when I think about Phoebe's phenomenal cooking, something for which I am always grateful. On a larger scale, if I am grateful for the many ways that working-class people improve my life, I am more likely to get involved with the justice struggle for their well-being. Each of us could probably come up with many such examples.

So, the real question is, will we choose this way of engaging life? Will we, at least from time to time, lay that ego aside for a few minutes to make larger commitments? Will we cultivate gratitude for all that is our life? Will we work toward a planet transformed by our care?

I hope we do make these commitments to the best of our ability. I hope we give our egos vacations and give ourselves to the larger world when we can. For I am convinced that this is how that world we long for will come into being: through choices made by many people, at many levels, to care at least as much about others as we do about ourselves. May it come to be so. Amen, and blessed be.