

Ambition

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All my life I have struggled with dyslexia. Although as a child I loved books, and I dreamed of writing a book myself one day, some of my teachers told me that I had no writing skills. Still, with the help of computer spell checkers, eleven years ago I published a small book on wedding services. In the history of book publishing my book is a minor book. Yet for me it was as though I had successfully climbed Mount Everest. I wanted to find the teachers, who had been critical of my writing, knock on their door, give them a copy of my book and say “see, you were wrong.”

From this experience I came to believe that ambition is a good thing and should be encouraged. Now when young people tell me their dreams for their life, I try to hold back from the temptation to tell them about the barriers they will face. I do not say, for example, “NASA is cutting back on its budget for astronauts.” Instead, I say, “If you are willing to work very hard to achieve your ambition, you have a chance to be successful.” I say, “If this is what you want, and you are willing to work hard, go for it!”

Having dreams is healthy. Working to achieve goals is healthy. This morning, if you are dreaming about the possibility of a new job or a promotion, I encourage you to send in your résumé. If you have a longing to get a PhD, apply to graduate school. If you have always wanted to write a book, it is time to get started. If you are single, and you see someone this morning who attracts you, (and is also single) strike up a conversation. Go after the things that interest you and excite you.

Of course, it is important to be ethical as well as ambitious. Consider for example the story of an ambitious man who was born in South Carolina February 27, 1951, only one month after I was born in Arizona. His father was an insurance adjuster and his mother a high school Spanish teacher. Until he was eighteen, his ambition in life was to play guitar. However, during a summer college internship with Senator Strom Thurmond he got hooked on politics. He picked the topic of political campaigning as his doctoral thesis at the University of South Carolina.

This man had two ambitions he wanted to achieve before he was forty. One was to manage a winning presidential campaign. The other was to become head of the Republican Party. In 1978 he was the chief strategist in Senator Thurmond’s successful reelection fight in South Carolina. Two years later, at the age of twenty-nine, he directed Ronald Reagan’s South Carolina presidential primary victory. During President Reagan’s first term he was a deputy political director at the White House. In 1984, while I was serving a small congregation in New England, this man who was my own age was serving on the staff of President Reagan’s reelection campaign. After the election, he became a partner in a political consulting firm. In 1986 at the age of thirty-five, he became the director of George Bush’s bid for the Republican presidential nomination. He was a great fan of professional wrestling. He decorated his office with pictures of Confederate generals. The political figure he regarded with greatest reverence was Richard Nixon. He bragged that he never traveled without copies of two books: Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and a Chinese book called *The Art of War*.

His name was Lee Atwater. This week hearing and reading the political news of the campaigns of Kerry, Bush and Nader, I remembered Lee Atwater. I thought of him not as a symbol of cruel, nasty, unscrupulous ambition, but instead as an example of someone who eventually learned ethical ambition. Let me explain.

In 1988, after winning the Republican presidential nomination for George Bush, Lee Atwater planned a negative campaign against Michael Dukakis. The issues he focused on had little to do with the business of the presidency, but they made effective politics. Atwater was a genius at appealing to the anxieties of the white middle class. He made the same points repeatedly:

- Dukakis had vetoed a bill mandating the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools.
- Dukakis was against the death penalty.
- Dukakis opposed prayer in public schools.
- Dukakis had stood up for his state's program of weekend passes for convicts, even passes for murderers serving life sentences without hope of parole.

No one of these attacks seemed to draw much blood, but the cumulative effect was dramatic.

It was a mean campaign. Someone even spread unsubstantiated rumors that doctors had treated Dukakis twice for depression. For Atwater, his ambition to electing the man he thought was the best candidate, justified the means.

In January of 1989, at the age of thirty-eight, Lee Atwater became the national chair of the political party he had led to victory. He had accomplished the two ambitions he set out to achieve before he was forty.

When he was not at work, Atwater worked out regularly in the weight room at the downtown Washington YMCA. At the "Y" he arranged to replace the usual piped-in aerobic disco music with tapes of his own rhythm and blues jam sessions with B. B. King and Isaac Hayes. Even his harshest political critics agreed that Atwater's rhythm and blues music was excellent.

Fourteen years ago, on March 5, 1990, Atwater was speaking before a fund raising breakfast. He was telling the group how the campaign picture of Dukakis riding around in a tank made him look like Rocky the Squirrel when suddenly the entire left side of his body started to shake uncontrollably.

Doctors hospitalized him for treatment of a brain tumor. They implanted tubes containing massive doses of radioactive isotopes directly into the tumor in the right lobe of his brain. Following Norman Cousins' prescription, Atwater watched videotapes of films such as the *Three Stooges* and W.C. Fields' film *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break*. On April 16, 1990, his wife gave birth to their third child.

Dramatic events like a serious illness can cause us to reexamine our lives. Lee Atwater began to research religion. He questioned a Catholic friend. He asked a Rabbi to explain the Jewish idea of God and talked to a dream therapist about a recurring nightmare. In the dream he jumped off a cliff into the ocean. He always woke up before he hit the water. The therapist suggested the dream was about the inability to face death. Atwater wrote:

I found myself reaching out to fellow patients in ways that surprised me. I arranged for food delivery to a poor family I met [in the hospital]. A group of young black kids came to visit their pal, a gunshot victim, and I talked to them about what is important in life. Both times, I felt someone else drawing me into the arena,

someone else speaking my words for me—followed by a sense of accomplishment I have never felt before.

Atwater asked a member of his political staff to do some unusual research. He told the staff member to find out if a common thread exists in all religions. After researching the question, the staff member reported that one constant does appear in all religions, the Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you.”

In the summer of 1990 Lee Atwater started to write a series of private apology letters. In January of 1991, Lee Atwater published an open letter. He wrote:

In 1988, fighting Dukakis, I said that I ‘would strip the bark off the little bastard’ and ‘make Willie Horton his running mate.’ I am sorry for both statements. The first for its naked cruelty and the second because it makes me sound racist . . . Mostly I am sorry for the way I thought of other people.

Some people treated Atwater’s apology with cynicism. I think it was an authentic letter. His encounter with his own mortality burned away his early ambitions and replaced it with a new ambition: the desire to follow the Golden Rule.

Until his illness Lee Atwater had followed the utilitarian ethical principle that says “Do whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people.” Atwater sincerely believed that the policies of the first President Bush were better for the nation than the policies of Michael Dukakis. This is the focus of most national political debates. In this election year President George W. Bush and Senator Kerry are each trying to answer the question: “What actions, what policies will produce the greatest good for the greatest number?”

However, back in 1990, faced with a critical illness, Lee Atwater started to take much more seriously another ethical rule, the Golden Rule. He started to test his actions by putting himself in other people’s shoes and imagining how it would feel if he were the recipient of his own actions.

While I think ambition is good, I think the Golden Rule needs to temper ambition. We temper our ambition with a feeling of respect and love for other people. In ethical ambition we do not win by cheating. We play by the rules, and we expect that others play by the rules also.

Also I want to add that while I think ethical ambition is good, failure is a factor in ambition. If you follow my advice and pursue your dreams, you must be prepared to experience failure. I have saved in a box in my office the thirty rejection letters I received more than two years, before I found a publisher for my book. If we strive to achieve our dreams, sometimes people will reject us, and this is not easy.

Furthermore, while ethical ambition is good, we need to temper our ambition with respect for our physical, spiritual and emotional health. In a book called *Ambition in the Ministry* a colleague writes:

The last thing that high-strung, workaholic, career-driven suburbanites need is a high-strung, workaholic, career-driven pastor. Families suffering under the anxieties brought on by their materialistic drive for success do not need their compulsive behaviors applauded by spiritual leaders.

When I was starting out in the ministry, intensely striving for success, an older colleague reminded me that no one had ever taken over the world starting with the Unitarian Universalist Association. While I did not stop striving for success, I tried to keep my striving in perspective.

I remember the story of a woman who loved as her hobby to climb mountains. She took joy in the experience of reaching the top and being able to look around three hundred and sixty degrees at the world below her feet. However, one day she was walking up a mountain with friends and she realized that she did not have the strength to make it to the top. Disappointed in herself, she finally told her friends to go on without her while she stopped and rested and awaited their return back down the trail. She said that she sat alone in the quiet of the day looking out at the green valley, and slowly began to feel peace and contentment come over her. She had done her personal best, and that was enough.

Lee Atwater died the first week of April 1991. I want to end the sermon by reading a few words he wrote a few weeks before his death.

“The ‘80s were about acquiring—acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn’t I trade for a little more time with my family? What price wouldn’t I pay for an evening with friends? It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions . . . can learn on my dime.

“I’ve come a long way since the day I told George Bush that his ‘kinder, gentler theme was a nice thought, but it wouldn’t win us any votes.’ I used to say that the President might be kinder and gentler, but I wasn’t going to be. How wrong I was. There is nothing more important in life than human beings, nothing sweeter than the human touch. . . . I am still no big fan of organized religion . . . [but] now I have a little better sense of God.”

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All quotes by Lee Atwater are from “Lee Atwater’s Last Campaign,” by Lee Atwater with Todd Brewster, *Life* magazine, February 1991. Additional information about Atwater was gathered from other magazine articles and from the book *The Quest for the Presidency, The 1988 Campaign*, Peter Goldman and Tom Mathews.