



Connected Learning

Greatness of Soul

August 24, 2020

This anthology has been prepared in draft form for use in a special seminar curriculum and are provided for private, non-commercial use in extraordinary times. Additional information about the seminar and this volume is available from The Aspen Institute, 2300 N Street NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20037.

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Other resources,

including daily meditations, periodic podcasts, on-line seminars and discussions, and occasional on-line conversations about this week's curriculum, are available at:

aspeninstitute.org/programs/executive-leadership-development/resources-for-living-and-leading/

How to Use this Curriculum

Connected Learning in Times of Confinement is designed to support people and their families, neighborhoods, organizations, and networks by building upon the Aspen Institute's unique expertise in facilitating meaningful conversations in a seminar setting.

We envisage a weekly curriculum that can be used in pieces, or all at once, or in various combinations. Our hope is that these readings and guidance will allow you and others to reflect on fundamental human questions in ways that nourish our hearts, minds, and fellowship in a time of confinement. A curriculum (from the Latin *currere*, to run) is a path, an exploration, not something to be mastered but an invitation to discovery and wonder. These materials are curated to intrigue and delight you, and we invite you to reflect upon them on your own, and to share them—with family, friends, neighbors, teams, networks. In this, the journey itself is the destination, a call to thought, dialogue, and action.

In a journey it is often helpful to have a guide, and in this curriculum you will find three guides:

First, the authors themselves—

we do not need to follow the authors, but we do well to understand what they are saying;

Second, guiding questions—

for each reading, there is a set of guiding questions designed for individual and collective reflection; they are not the only (or even most important) questions, but a way of getting started; these may be found at the back of the packet and are best read after you have read the texts;

Third, general guidance—

for each discussion, participants and discussion leaders may want to remind themselves of some best practices; these may be found at the back of this packet.

We invite you to share these readings widely and encourage others to engage in conversation. As you do so, know that fellow seminar graduates and their families, friends, and colleagues are doing the same. We all contribute to a global chorus of conversation about ideas worth sharing and acting upon.

**—Todd Breyfogle, PhD
Managing Director, Aspen
Executive Leadership Seminars**

About Aspen Institute Seminars

The Aspen Institute Executive Leadership Seminars Department drives change through reflection, dialogue, and action in service of a more free, just, and equitable society. We do this by: curating brave spaces of shared meaning which help people become more self-aware, more self-correcting, and more self-fulfilling; deepening participants' humane sensibilities and capacities for moral judgment through an examination of the humanistic traditions; establishing meaningful connections among diverse people and organizations in service of a better society.

For more information, including information about customized programs for companies and other organizations, please contact Kalissa Hendrickson, PhD, Director, at Kalissa.Hendrickson@aspennst.org or 202-736-3586. [Learn more.](#)

Philosophical Basis

The Aspen Institute starts from an act of faith in the humanistic tradition: one must be reflective in order to insure that all human activity – political, scientific, economic, intellectual or artistic – will serve the needs of human beings and enrich and deepen their lives.

The Institute believes in the value both of the “Great Ideas” of the past as well as the importance of the sometimes inelegant and highly controversial ideas of the present.

The Institute is dedicated to the fundamental educational value of dialogue for mature men and women from different nations and cultures -- intercommunications between people of comparable competence from various backgrounds and specialized fields of experience.

The Aspen idea recognizes that the processes by which persons learn and develop or change their ideas are not mechanical or even purely rational. As there is a mystery at the edge of human thought, so there is a magic about human relationships, and the magic we attempt to invoke in Aspen is that of the sheer beauty of this area of the Rocky Mountains.

With Erasmus, we hold that “nothing human is alien” to the inquiring purposes of the Aspen Institute. The Institute intends to be, in sum, a place of excellence and excitement where men and women of the finest qualities of mind and spirit from all walks of life in the United States and abroad can meet to learn from one another through serious discussion of and work on significant problems facing society and the greatest ideas which have been expressed throughout history and today concerning these problems.

—J. E. Slater, President, The Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1972

Readings

- 5 Aristotle, "Magnanimity, or Greatness of Soul"
- 7 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Kindness"

Magnanimity, or Greatness of Soul

by Aristotle

(385 BCE–323 BCE)

1 Greatness of soul seems, even from its name, to be concerned with great things, and let us first grasp what sort of great things it concerns. It makes [1123b] no difference whether we examine the characteristic or the person who accords with the characteristic.

5 He, then, who deems himself worthy of great things and is worthy of them is held to be great souled. For he who does this in a manner contrary to his real worth is foolish, and no one who acts virtuously is foolish or mindless. The person spoken of, then, is great souled. For he who is worthy of small things and deems himself worthy of them is moderate but not great souled, since greatness of soul resides in
10 greatness, just as beauty involves a body of great stature: those who are small may be elegant and well proportioned but not beautiful. He who deems himself worthy of great things while not being worthy of them is vain, though not everyone who deems himself worthy of things greater than he is worth is vain. He who deems himself worthy of less than he is worth is small souled—whether he is worthy of
15 great things or of measured things or even if, being worthy of small things, he deems himself worthy of still less. And most small-souled of all would seem to be the person who is in fact worthy of great things [but does not deem himself so], for what would he do if he were not worthy of so much?

20 The great-souled man, then, is an extreme in terms of greatness, but he is in the middle in terms of his acting as one ought, since he deems himself worthy of what accords with his worth, whereas the others exceed or are deficient [in judging their own worth]. If, then, he deems himself worthy of great things, while being worthy of them, and especially of the greatest things, he would be concerned with one matter most of all. Worth is spoken of in relation to external goods, and we would
25 posit as the greatest of these that which we assign to the gods, that at which people of worth aim, and that which is the prize conferred on the noblest people. Honor is such a thing, since it is indeed the greatest of the external goods. The great-souled man, then, is concerned with honor and dishonor in the way that he ought to be. Even in the absence of argument, the great-souled appear to be concerned

From Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Book IV, Chapter 3. Translated by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 75-80. The numbers and letters in square brackets appear in the original; these are the Bekker numbers for this portion of the text. Bekker numbering is the standard citation system used in modern scholarly editions of the works of Aristotle.

1 with honor, for they deem themselves worthy of honor most of all, in accord with
their worth. But the small-souled person is deficient in relation to his estimation of
himself and the worthiness of the great-souled man; the vain person is excessive
when it comes to himself, though not, of course, in relation to the great-souled man.

5 The great-souled man, if indeed he is worthy of the greatest things, would be the
best, for he who is better is always worthy of what is greater, and he who is best is
worthy of the greatest things. He who is truly great souled, therefore, must be good,
and what is great in each virtue would seem to belong to the great-souled man. It
would in no way be suitable for a great-souled man to flee with arms swinging or
10 to commit injustice: for the sake of what will he do shameful things, he to whom
nothing is great? And to anyone who thoroughly examines each characteristic, it
would appear entirely laughable if the great-souled man were not good. He would
not be worthy of honor, either, if he were base, for honor is the prize of virtue and
is assigned to those who are good. Greatness of soul, [1124a] then, seems to be like
15 a kind of ornament of the virtues, for it makes them greater and does not arise
without them. For this reason, it is difficult, in truth, to be great souled, for it is not
possible without gentlemanliness.

It is especially with matters of honor and dishonor, then, that a great-souled
man is concerned. And he will take pleasure in a measured way in great honors
20 and those that come from serious human beings, on the grounds that he obtains
what is proper to him or even less—for there could be no honor worthy of complete
virtue, but he will nevertheless accept it inasmuch as they have nothing greater to
assign to him. As for honor that comes from people at random, or small honors, he
will have complete contempt for them, since it is not of these that he is worthy. The
25 case of dishonor is similar, for it will not justly pertain to him. The great-souled
man, then, is, as was said, especially concerned with honors, but he will surely also
be disposed in a measured way toward wealth and political power as well as all
good and bad fortune, however it may occur: he will be neither overjoyed by good
fortune nor deeply grieved by bad fortune. For he is not disposed even toward
30 honor as though it were a very great thing, and political power and wealth are
choice-worthy on account of the honor they bring; at any rate, those who possess
them wish to be honored on account of them. But to him for whom honor is a
small thing, so also are these other concerns. Hence the great-souled are held to be
haughty.

35 But instances of good fortune too seem to contribute to greatness of soul, since
the wellborn deem themselves worthy of honor, as do those who possess political
power or wealth. For they are in a position of superiority, and everything superior
in point of goodness is more honorable. Hence these sorts of things render people
more great souled, since they are honored by some as a result. Yet in truth, only
40 the good human being is honorable, though he who has both goodness and good
fortune is deemed even worthier of honor. But those who possess such goods in
the absence of virtue do not justly deem themselves worthy of great things, nor

1 are they correctly spoken of as great souled: in the absence of complete virtue,
neither of these is possible. And people who possess such goods become haughty
and hubristic because, in the absence of virtue, it is not easy to deal with the goods
of fortune in a suitable manner. Although not in fact being able [1124b] to deal with
5 these goods and supposing themselves to be superior to others, they look down
on them, while they themselves act in whatever random way. For they imitate the
great-souled man without being like him, and they do this wherever circumstances
permit. They do not perform the deeds that accord with virtue, then, but they look
down on others nonetheless. For the great-souled man justly looks down on others
10 (since he holds a true opinion of himself), whereas the many do so in a random
fashion.

The great-souled man is not one to hazard trifling dangers and he is not a lover
of danger either, since he honors few things. But he will hazard great dangers,
and when he does so, he throws away his life, on the grounds that living is not
15 at all worthwhile. He is also the sort to benefit others but is ashamed to receive a
benefaction; for the former is a mark of one who is superior, the latter of one who
is inferior. He is disposed to return a benefaction with a greater one, since in this
way the person who took the initiative [with the original benefaction] will owe
him in addition and will have also fared well thereby. But those who are great
20 souled seem in fact to remember whatever benefaction they may have done, yet not
those that they have been done (for he who receives the benefit is inferior to him
who performed it, whereas the great-souled man wishes to be superior); and they
seem to hear about the former with pleasure, but about the latter with displeasure.
Hence Thetis too did not speak of the benefactions she had done for Zeus, nor
25 did the Laonians speak of those they had done for the Athenians but only those
they had been done. It belongs to the great-souled also to need nothing, or scarcely
anything, but to be eager to be of service, and to be great in the presence of people
of worth and good fortune, but measured toward those of a middling rank. For it
is a difficult and august thing to be superior among the fortunate, but easy to be
30 that way among the middling sorts; and to exalt oneself among the former is not a
lowborn thing, but to do so among the latter is crude, just as is using one's strength
against the weak. It belongs to the great-souled man also not to go in for the things
that are generally honored or in which others hold first place, and he is idle and a
procrastinator, except wherever either a great honor or a great deed is at stake; he is
35 disposed to act in few affairs, namely, in great and notable ones. He is necessarily
open in both hate and love, for concealing these things is the mark of a fearful
person, as is caring less for the truth than for people's opinion. He necessarily
speaks and acts in an open manner: he speaks freely because he is disposed to
feeling contempt for others, and he is given to truthfulness, except inasmuch as he
40 is ironic toward the many. And he is necessarily incapable of living with [1125a] a
view to another—except a friend—since doing so is slavish. Hence too all flatterers
are servile, and all lowly types are flatterers.

1 The great-souled man is also not given to admiration, since nothing is
great to him. But neither is he one to remember evils done him; for it does not
belong to a great-souled man to recall things with a grudge, in particular evils
done him, but rather to overlook them. He is also not one for personal con-
5 versation: he will speak neither about himself nor about another, since he does not
care either to be praised himself or for others to be blamed. Nor, in turn, is he given
to praising others. Hence he is not one to speak ill, not even of his enemies, except
where insolence is involved. When it comes to necessities or small concerns, he is
least of all given to lamentation and requests for help, since it is the mark of a serious
10 person to be thus disposed toward these. He is such as to possess beautiful and
useless things more than useful and beneficial ones, for this is more the mark of a
self-sufficient person. Also, slowness of movement seems to be the mark of a great-
souled man, as well as a deep voice and steady speech; for he who is serious about
few things is not given to hastiness, nor is anyone ever vehement who supposes that
15 nothing is great, whereas a shrill voice and quickness result from these things.

Such, then, is the great-souled man, whereas he who is deficient is small
souled, and he who exceeds is vain. Now, these people too do not seem to be bad
(since they are not malefactors), though they do err. For the small-souled person,
even though he is worthy of good things, deprives himself of those he is indeed
20 worthy of, and he seems to be in some way bad, as a result of not deeming him-
self worthy of good things, and to be ignorant of himself; he otherwise would long
for the things he is worthy of, since they are good. Nonetheless, such people are
held not to be foolish but, rather, timid. Yet such an opinion seems to make them
even worse; for everyone aims at those things that accord with his worth, whereas
25 the small-souled refrain even from noble actions and pursuits, on the grounds that
they are unworthy of them, as is similarly the case also with external goods.

But vain people are foolish and ignorant of themselves, and manifestly so;
for although they are not worthy, they try their hand at the things people honor,
and then they are found out. They deck themselves out when it comes to their
30 dress and appearance and things of that sort; they wish for the things of good
fortune and for these to be manifestly theirs; and they speak about these things, on
the grounds that they will be honored as a result.

But smallness of soul is more opposed to greatness of soul than vanity is, for it
both occurs more often and is worse.

35 Greatness of soul, then, is concerned with great honor, just as has been said.

Kindness

by Naomi Shihab Nye
(1952–)

1 Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.

5 What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.

10 How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

15 Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone

20 who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

25 You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
30 only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,

From Naomi Shihab Nye, *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Eighth Mountain Press, 1994), p. 42. Reprinted with the permission from Copyright Clearance Center.

- 1 only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
- 5 like a shadow or a friend.

Image of the Week



Wassily Kandinsky, *Yellow, Red, Blue* (1925)

Notes

Guiding Questions

The best questions arise from careful listening (to the author, oneself, and others), and from the spontaneity of wonder

Aristotle, "Magnanimity, Or Greatness of Soul"

- What does it mean, according to Aristotle, to be "great-souled"?
- How do we distinguish between "great things" and "small things"?
- In what ways is the great-souled person both extreme and moderate?
- Is greatness of soul ultimately externally or internally determined—i.e., defined by others or by oneself?
- What are the potential pitfalls of greatness of soul?
- What does greatness of soul mean in a democratic culture?

Naomi Shihab Nye, "Kindness"

- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
- Do you see a progression or logic in the poem's explication of kindness?
- What is the relationship between kindness and loss?
- Is kindness an expression of greatness of soul or its antithesis?

Wassily Kandinsky, *Yellow, Red, Blue*

- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- Does the image inspire you to great things? To kindness? Why? Why not?

General questions for the week

- What are the circumstances under which you feel "small-souled"?
- What things inspire you to greatness of soul? To kindness?
- What characteristics do you admire as especially worthy—in others, in yourself?
- What characteristics are rewarded according to the conventions of your culture?

Notes

Short Guide to Leading a Discussion

General Principles for Participants

- Read the text(s) to be discussed in their entirety (ideally twice)
- Make notes about what you understand, don't understand, agree or disagree with
- Focus comments and conversation on the ideas expressed in the shared text(s), not on outside
- knowledge
- Seek to understand your fellow participants, not to persuade them
- Be freely authentic and morally present
- Listen to the text, to others, and to yourself

General principles for discussion leaders:

- Hold the space for honesty and vulnerability: be honest and vulnerable yourself
- Ask questions, don't teach: the aim is shared understanding and meaning, not agreement
- Be attached to the conversation: avoid rigidly following your planned order of questions
- Make sure every voice is heard: don't move too quickly to fill the silence
- Start and end on time: end not with conclusions but with questions you're taking away

Format:

- Match the texts to the time allotted (*Each text can productively stimulate 20-40 minutes of discussion, and can be read discussed individually or together in one sitting, depending on the time available; it is better to end with more to be said, rather than straining to fill the time*)
- Begin with introductions:
 - name (if not everyone is well known to one another)

- what is on your heart and mind?
- the person speaking chooses the next person
- Set the frame:
 - remind participants to enjoy the gift of time and conversation by avoiding other
 - distractions
 - revisit the key general principles above
- It always helps to read a passage aloud
- Layer your questions: be patient, each layer builds upon the next
 - What does the text say? (sometimes we read the same thing different ways)
 - What does the text mean? (sometimes we interpret the text differently)
 - What does the text mean to me? (sometimes we apply the texts to ourselves differently)
 - What does the text mean for us? (we may have different understandings of what the text means for living in community)
 - What does the text mean for society? (we may have different approaches to what the text implies for action in society)

Some helpful tips to keep the conversation going (for discussion leaders and participants):

- "say more about that"
- "where do you see that in the text?"
- "how is that related to what N said earlier?"
- "do you think that's true?"
- "do others see it the same way?"
- "what did you see in the text that we haven't addressed?"



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