

COMMENTARY



PYTHIA PEAY

Power Proves Either a Vice Or a Virtue

As Americans prepare to vote in the upcoming presidential election, they will be exercising their power as citizens in the world's leading democracy.

In fact, power isn't just something we hand over to our elected politicians. However great or ordinary, most of us wield some kind of power, be it political, parental, intellectual, sexual, economic or religious.

Negative images of power, says historian Ori Soltes, a professor of Fine Arts at Georgetown University and director of the B'nai B'rith Klutznick Museum in Washington, D.C., stem in part from our vague sense of history. "We've seen enough 'Hollywoodizations' of history," he says, "to automatically link power with corruption."

Going nuts: Soltes, who has lectured on Western civilization in Rome and at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, says he is sometimes asked why so many Roman Emperors seemed to "go off the deep end."

Those emperors who abused their office, says Soltes, did so because once they tasted power, they found themselves hungering for more.

Seeking to find alternatives to authoritarian modes of wielding authority with more positive models of power, some thinkers have turned to pre-modern cultures for inspiration. For instance, feminist scholar Rianne Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*, uncovered evidence of a more egalitarian style of leadership in Neolithic cultures and in the ancient civilization of Minoan Crete.

Centered around worship of goddesses — rather than fierce warrior gods — these pre-patriarchal societies derived feelings of empowerment from kinship with people and connection to nature. Then, Eisler says, women and men ruled together in harmony.

In Eisler's view, modern-day movements such as feminism, environmentalism, conflict resolution and men's growing involvement in family life all are attempts to resurrect more cooperative styles of leadership that seek to empower others.

But where Eisler glimpses signs of a new narrative of power emerging, Soltes sadly concludes that we are doomed to re-enact the same story that has repeated itself over time.

Little change: As a civilization, he says, we have made enormous advancements in technology. But, "as a species we are still fighting about the same things our ancestors were four or five millenia ago — only now we have the ability at the flick of a wrist to destroy each other."

On a more hopeful note, however, Soltes says America represents a different kind of governance from any civilization that has come before, including Athenian democracy. In fact, he points out, "the very heart of the ideals embodied in our Constitution concern the right use of power."

It was George Washington, he says, who set America on its unique course of destiny by refusing to appoint himself king after his second term as president. Instead, Soltes reminds us, Washington stepped down and went back to his farm. It was an abdication of power that shocked all of Europe.

Historians since then have viewed Washington as similar to one of the early figures of the Roman Republic, Cincinnatus, who also retired to his farm following his career of public service. Soltes points out that in Washington, D.C., today there are statues portraying our first president as Cincinnatus, celebrating the image of the "soldier-farmer" who, instead of keeping power for himself, gave it up.

For those who think of power as only crude or destructive, it is inspiring to know that in the hands of a wise person — or society — power is ultimately a force that can effect great good for humankind.

Seeking bliss in a higher calling

By PYTHIA PEAY
RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

Happiness, like youth, is one of life's most sought-after treasures. Money, the perfect mate or travel to far-off lands are among the things we believe will provide the bliss we long for.

But happiness has much deeper roots. The original meaning of the word "happiness" stems from the Greek word "eudaimonia": the satisfaction that comes from fulfilling the soul's purpose, what we might label our higher calling. As philosophers like Socrates and Plato believed, the secret to a life well-lived rests in a person's ability to keep faith with their calling.

Jungian analyst James Hillman, one of contemporary psychology's more philosophically inclined thinkers, agrees. His new book, "The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling" (Random House), seeks to introduce themes of fate and destiny to a culture obsessed with psychological analysis of childhood neuroses and genetic predisposition.

Human beings, he says, are far more than the product of "nature and nurture."

Attending to one's higher calling, Hillman says, was once an honored way of life practiced across time and culture unfettered by economic considerations. He laments the fact that, for Americans today, "staying true to one's calling is the most difficult thing in the world."

In centuries past, for example, it was believed that each person was born with an invisible companion to foster awareness of life's purpose. The Romans referred to this spirit as a person's "genius." To Greeks, it was a "daimon"; to Christians, a "guardian angel"; to native peoples it was a "totem," or animal spirit guide.

How do we begin to heed the voice of our own unique calling? One way, says Hillman, is to read our life story "backward," with an eye to the mysterious workings of fate.

"Sooner or later, something seems to call us to a particular path," he writes. "You may remember this 'something' as a signal moment in childhood when an urge out of nowhere, a fascination, a peculiar turn of events struck like an annunciation — this is what I must do, this is what I've got to have, this is who I am."

For further insight into how destiny shapes individual lives, Hillman turned to the biographies of the famous. According to his "acorn theory" — in which each person is born gifted with the seed of a unique character — prominent individuals showed early

Studying the way this calling unfolds over the course of a lifetime, he says, allowed him to distinguish two patterns by which destiny is made manifest.

In the first pattern, he writes, a child "races ahead" to embrace his or her fate. Consider Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who by age 13 had already written concertos, sonatas and symphonies. Others, however, may shrink from fulfilling the demands of their genius. The Spanish bullfighter Manolete, for example, showed no sign of the heroic figure he eventually became, but was a sickly child who clung to his mother's apron strings.

Looking back on his own childhood, Hillman recalls failing penmanship because of his "blurred and blotted" letters. While today he may have been labeled as having poor hand-eye coordination, Hillman sees instead in this incident the precursor to his work as a writer.

"My writing was so crucial, so much a part of my own daimon that of course I had a resistance to writing in that nice, round script we were taught. In effect, my spirit was saying 'this is the most precious thing in your life, and it's going to be difficult to conform to school,'" Hillman said in an interview.

In fact, says Hillman, he was struck by the number of great people who had trouble in school. His research led him to a different view of the obsessions, failures and rages of children.

When the violinist Yehudi Menuhin was given a toy violin at age 4, he threw it on the floor in a fit of anger. This exemplifies, in Hillman's view, that a calling can be evidenced equally through a temper tantrum or a sudden display of talent. Because children bear within their small bodies "something invisible and terribly important," they become frustrated with the adult-sized dreams battling for expression within them, he says.

So rather than label children's misbehavior as "attention deficit disorder" or "poor impulse control," Hillman stresses the need for adults to recognize in youth's failings the stirrings of creative potential. In his book, he describes the impact of sympathetic mentors on writer Truman Capote, film director Elia Kazan and scientist Charles Darwin — all of whom had difficult childhoods.

For this reason, Hillman says he has written his book on behalf of children, and for those who work with them. Yet many adults who appear to possess all they need materially still wonder why they're not happy. For them, Hillman's new vision of the importance of every individual's higher calling may help stir the soul. †