

## A DEEPER KINDNESS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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In the play titled *The Bacchae*, written 2,500 years ago in ancient Greece, the playwright Euripides describes an epic struggle between a man named Pentheus and a god named Dionysus. Pentheus, the mythological King of Thebes, represents the Athenian ideal of rational order and restraint. Dionysus, the god of ecstasy and madness, represents the state of nature – a world of libertine excess. As Euripides recounts the ensuing battle between Pentheus, with his civilizing constraint, and Dionysus, fueled by libertine excess, Euripides weaves a cautionary tale about the dangers of unrestrained hubris.

Euripides writes, “Mouths that run unchecked, lawless and senseless, end in disaster. But a life lived in peace with good sense holds family together, stays unshaken. The sky dwellers, the heavenly powers, may be far away; but they are watching us. Wisdom? It’s not wise to think of ourselves as better than we are; we are human, and our time is short. Men who aim only at greatness will eventually not possess even what they have now. This, I believe, is the life of men whose judgment is foul: they are insane.”

Today we use different terms to describe men who become obsessed with their own greatness. But the tendency of some men to view themselves as self-made and thus to inhabit a worldview that is blindly self-referential has always been seen as a character defect.

Donald Trump’s boast about his ability to get away with doing anything he wants to any woman he wants has rightly created a political firestorm. “When you’re a star they let you do it,” Trump says in a conversation with Billy Bush recorded in 2005. “You can do anything.”

In the aftermath of the release of the tapes, some of his former endorsers have unendorsed him, some of his former supporters have spurned him, and the odds of him winning on November 8 have fallen to a new low. Meanwhile, Trump remains mostly unrepentant and continues to insist that he cherishes women and wants to help women in ways no one else can.

This comes as no surprise, of course — both the lack of repentance and the insistence that he’s the best, whatever the domain of human experience. When Trump wants to consult a savvy advisor, he consults himself. When he wants a knowledgeable perspective, he talks to himself. Whether the matter concerns women, or business, or real estate, or politics, he’s the best. He can do anything.

Except that he's not, and he can't. Those of us whose experience has been tempered by reality have come to realize that there's something deeply wrong with Trump's claims. He's not the best ally women have ever had. He's not the best business owner Wall Street has ever known. He's not the most in-tune politician ever to stand before a crowd. These realities appear obvious to everyone — even, I would wager, to his most ardent supporters. But if they're obvious to Trump, it's not yet apparent.

In spiritual terms, the process of closing the gap between the person we imagine ourselves to be and the person we actually are is known as repentance. It begins the process of redemption, which means to buy something back. Spiritually speaking, you buy back your authentic self by living in light of the truth about yourself.

As Trump's political juggernaut initially began to move through the political landscape, we wondered whether Trump would eventually begin to reel in his braggadocio. Especially in the wake of his doubling down about the Billy Bush tapes, Trump seems increasingly unlikely to do so.

In Zoe Williams' column last Sunday in the Guardian about what happens when alpha males run politics, she talks about why this line seems like more of a red line than other lines Trump has previously crossed. She says, "The misogyny revealed on these tapes... is a new category: broad, sneering, violent, encompassing every woman unprotected by her age or ugliness, it is a particular cocktail of revulsion, contempt and savagery."

By revealing these attitudes, she says, the tapes "put Trump in the realm of the irredeemable. Until now, he occupied that particular spot as the pre-redemption character in a feel-good movie. Maybe he was racist because his jet-set lifestyle had never supplied him any Mexican or Muslim friends; he was sheltered, but one day, like Clint Eastwood in the movie *Gran Torino*, he would move in next door to a family of immigrants, and realise they were just as hard-working as he was. Or his daughter would have an unwanted pregnancy, and he would realise that life was complicated. Some collision would occur between his worldview and the world, and he would be forced to re-evaluate."

After all, she says, there's no shortage of women in Trump's life: daughters, wives, employees, adversaries, even a mother. And yet, she adds, "nothing — in all that contact, over all those decades — has led him to think of us as people; nothing has shaken his conviction that we're a different species, to serve a purpose, whose personal and intellectual attributes are no more important than those of a horse.

She concludes, "There is no story arc for this man, no journey; he can get no better, and we already knew that he could get no worse. So his narrative is broken. He can no longer be the anti-hero of his own film; he can only be the villain in somebody else's."

The challenge alpha males face throughout their lives, Euripides argues in his play, is to balance the civilizing constraint imposed by other people and the world around them with the libertine freedom championed by the individual. Human beings —

and especially alpha males — need both structure and creativity, both order and inspiration, both self-discipline and freedom. The moral center of the play appears in the following line, which is chanted by the chorus: “Wherefore, I say, accept, accept: humility is wise; humility is blest.”

Humility comes when time and circumstances force us to recognize that we are not the best. It comes when we realize that we cannot do anything we want. Humility is the lesson that failure tries to teach us.

In his poem titled *A Blessing For Failure*, the contemporary Irish poet John O’Donohue, who died in 2008, writes:

*But the light that comes after rain  
Is always fierce and clear,  
And illuminates the face of everything  
Through the transparency of rain.  
Despite the initial darkening,  
This is the light that failure casts.  
Beholden no more to the promise  
Of what dreams and work would bring.  
It shows where roots have withered  
And where the source has gone dry.  
The light of failure has no mercy  
Of the affections of the heart;  
It emerges from beyond the personal,  
A wiry, forthright light that likes to see crevices  
Open in the shell of a controlled life.  
Though cruel now, it serves a deeper kindness,  
Wise to the larger call of growth.  
It invites us to humility  
And the painstaking work of acceptance  
So that one day we may look back  
In recognition and appreciation  
At the disappointment we now endure.*

The light of failure emerges from beyond the personal, the poet says. It comes when cracks appear in the shell of a controlled life. It comes when things begin to fall apart. We are forced to recognize, sometimes by circumstances that we can only describe as cruel, that we are not ultimately in charge of our lives or our destiny. We are fragile and contingent creatures, our presence on this earth fleeting and ephemeral. Whatever we have built will someday crumble. Whatever we love will someday pass away. In light of these enduring realities, humility is wise, humility is blest.

But the challenge in the meantime is to accept the cracks and crevices in the lives we try very hard to control. The challenge is to accept our flaws and our failures, our stumbles and our shortcomings. These deficits, the poet says, though they may seem cruelly imposed, actually serve a deeper kindness, because they give us an opportunity to become wise to the larger call of growth.

During the recent celebration of Jewish High Holy Days, I was reminded yet again of the central role that repentance and renewal play in the Jewish faith — and indeed, in all of life. The arc of repentance and renewal gives hope to the narrative of our lives. Especially at our Yom Kippur service here on Tuesday evening, I was also reminded of the time when one of history's greatest alpha males, the Israelite King David, responded to the light of failure.

As the story is told in the Hebrew Bible, King David one day saw a beautiful woman named Bathsheba bathing on the roof of a home near his castle. He responded to what he saw by sending for her and taking her into his inner chamber. Her husband, a soldier named Uriah, happened to be away at war.

When Bathsheba turned out to be pregnant, King David conspired to conceal his role. He ordered Uriah to return from battle and go home to his wife. When Uriah refused the comforts of home out of loyalty to his fellow soldiers, King David angrily sent him back to the battle front and secretly ordered him placed in harm's way. Shortly after Uriah was killed, David married Bathsheba.

In the wake of King David's transgressions, the prophet Nathan reportedly went to him and confronted him. Because of David's heinous sin, the prophet said, God would deny David the right to build the temple in Jerusalem. It would be given to his son Solomon instead.

In response, King David wrote the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm, which serves as the unstated moral underpinning of the Yom Kippur service. King David begins with this cry: "Forgive me, Lord, in your mercy; in your great love blot out my sin. Lighten the weight of my offense; free my mind from its burden. I am deeply conscious of my guilt; my sin is almost unbearable. My heart is breaking with remorse and the shame of what I have done."

Later in the psalm, King David opens the door to his own redemption. He pleads, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

The light of failure, the poet says, serves a deeper kindness. It makes us wise to the larger call of growth. It invites us to humility and the painstaking work of acceptance.

As the story is told, King David responded to the larger call of growth. In the case of Dionysius in Euripides' *Bacchae*, he never was able to respond — to hold in check his unrestrained hubris. He ended up self-destructing, which is why the *Bacchae* turns out to be a tragedy.

As to Donald Trump, he certainly isn't dead politically, though his behavior appears increasingly self-destructive and the odds of him becoming president appear

increasingly long. Whether or not he will eventually respond with humility to the larger call of growth remains to be seen.

For my part, I hope he does. If Donald Trump ever became truly repentant and truly humble, he could actually do a world of good for the people he has spent his life treating with disdain: women, minorities, people who aren't superficially attractive, and so on. He may not become the best ally they've ever had, but a man of his wealth and fame could help turn the tide.

And God knows the tide needs turning. Life on planet Earth is far too brutal for far too many people. Our calling as people of faith is to respond with a deeper kindness, inviting ourselves and each other to humility and growth. It is to offer a new narrative – one of redemption and renewal. It is to extend the moral arc of the universe and bend it toward justice. To this calling, we commit ourselves.