Ego is another one of those personal landmines discussed previously. While being absolutely integral to who we are, excessive ego or conceit can be a pitfall. It is generally caused by a combination of enthusiasm about yourself and ignorance about the conditions around you and it either ruins people or causes them to ruin those closest to them. It makes for toxic leaders and poor followers who care only for what personally benefits them and their pursuit of self-gratification by any means. You can hear it in how they communicate, particularly when “I” and “me” dominates their vocabulary. Whenever bad things happen, it is always someone else’s fault, never their own. Some have

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1 This is the title of another of my favorite books by Ryan Holiday, *Ego Is the Enemy* (New York; Portfolio, Penguin, 2016).
2 In Freudian psychiatry and psychoanalysis, the term *narcissism* denotes an excessive degree of self-esteem or self-involvement, a condition that usually points to emotional immaturity. “Narcissus,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 3 July 2022.
even said that egotism is a disease that makes everyone sick except for the person with the disease.³

Many call this condition arrogance, and it is certainly a poor path to follow. Greek classical dramatist Aeschylus claimed that “all arrogance will reap a harvest rich in tears. God calls men to a heavy reckoning for overweening pride.”⁴ The challenge is that, in many cases, the harvest of tears come to others instead of the one who is arrogant, especially if they are in a leadership position. This is because the true requirement for leadership is selflessness, meaning that the leader places the interests and welfare of their subordinates before their own. When this is not the case, it becomes painfully obvious to all except for the leader in question.⁵

One of the most well-known cases in history where ego ruined the career of a general and nearly resulted in the loss of the Union cause in the Civil War involves the general mentioned in the previous chapter—George B. McClellan. Prior to the Civil War, he graduated number two in his class at West Point in 1846, excelled in his position during the Mexican-American War in 1846–48, was appointed an observer to represent the U.S. Army during the Crimean War in 1853–56, then resigned his commission to become the president of the Ohio and Mississippi River Railroad in 1857. When the Civil War started in 1861, he returned to service and, due to his previous record, was appointed a major general. While the main Union Army was in the process of losing

⁴ This quote was frequently used by John F. Kennedy. Evan Thomas, Robert Kennedy: His Life (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000), 286. Aeschylus was known to have written 76 plays but only 7 survive: The Persians, Seven Against Thebes, Suppliant Women, The Oresteia Trilogy (Agamemnon, Libation Bearers or Choephor, and The Eumenides), and Prometheus Bound. See Herbert Weir Smyth, trans., Aeschylus, Loeb Classical Library vols. 145 and 146 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926).
⁵ See the leadership foundations presented in Leading Marines, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 6-10 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2019).
the first battle of the war at Bull Run, Virginia, in July 1861, McClellan won a couple of minor fights in what is now West Virginia and looked great by comparison with those leading other Union forces. As a result, he was called to Washington, DC, by President Abraham Lincoln and given command of all Union armies in August 1861.⁶

Initially, things went exceptionally well; he reorganized a beaten and demoralized army and developed it into an efficient fighting machine. People referred to him as the “Young Napoleon,” and both the army and the press loved him.⁷ Unfortunately, it all went straight to his head. McClellan was openly disrespectful of the president and in letters to his wife, he portrayed himself as the savior of the Union with all the public praise being just what he deserved. He was vain and extremely sensitive regarding his reputation. He was also terribly slow moving and cautious. In other words, he was the proverbial lamb leading an army of lions. When he finally got the Union Army moving in the late spring of 1862, despite great numerical and material superiority, they lost a series of battles around Richmond (the Seven Days’ Battles from 25 June to 1 July 1862) and then retreated to Washington.⁸

During this period, he blamed the losses on everyone but himself. At one point, in a raging telegram to the War Department that sought to deflect any blame from himself for the losses the army had experienced, McClellan said that he would do his best to save the army from destruction despite the best efforts of the secretary of war and the

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⁶ For a quick history of McClellan’s life and career, see “Timeline: George B. McClellan (1826–1885),” Library of Congress, accessed 11 August 2022; and MajGen George B. McClellan, McClellan’s Own Story: The War for the Union, the Soldiers Who Fought It, the Civilians Who Directed It, and His Relations to It and to Them (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1887).


⁸ “Timeline: George B. McClellan (1826–1885).”
In September of that same year, his forces captured the plans of the Confederate Army, and he had a very good chance to beat them at the Battle of Antietam in Maryland on 17 September. Because of the advantage he held, he moved faster than usual, but his normal cautiousness only resulted in a drawn battle and the Confederate Army escaped to Virginia without being destroyed. This proved to be the final straw for President Lincoln, who fired McClellan in October. He was sent home to New Jersey awaiting

orders for further service that never came. He ran against President Lincoln in the 1864 presidential election and lost badly. As a military professional, it is hard to read about McClellan because he was so consistently arrogant, disrespectful of the president, and, in the end, incompetent as a fighting general. Maybe the saddest part is that McClellan had so thoroughly convinced himself of his own importance that he never realized how his ego ruined his chance at greatness. He only had himself to blame.

So how does one avoid this relatively common pitfall? Well, it is not easy for most because it seems that people are on a journey using the self-focused “I am the center of the universe” mentality of the very young, to one that realizes that we are all in this life together and the previous mindset leads nowhere fast. As with the professional attitude referred to previously, some people figure this out early, but many never do. According to Rick Warren, “True humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less.” Easy to say, but very hard to do, of course. Maybe what we should be seeking here is magnanimity, which is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as a loftiness of spirit enabling one to bear trouble calmly, to disdain meanness and pettiness, and to display a noble generosity. Striving to be magnanimous would be a great place to start.

Mother Teresa strikes me as someone who had these concepts figured out and lived them out in her life every day. For example, consider her work in India, where the remnants of an iron-clad caste system are still in existence today. In many cultures from the past, a person was

11 “Timeline: George B. McClellan (1826–1885).”
13 Merriam-Webster, s.v. “magnanimity (n.),” accessed 11 August 2022.
born into a certain caste or social class, and this dictated what their life experience would be from birth. There was no climbing from one caste to another, and the different castes most certainly did not mix. India is much less caste-conscious now, but there are enough remnants evident in their society to still be problematic for many. This is particularly true of the “untouchables” (from Sanskrit for Dalit or broken/scattered) who were and are the lowest social class. You have not seen completely destitute and desperate people until you have seen (and smelled) the slums of places like Mumbai and Calcutta. The 2008 movie *Slumdog Millionaire* gives a good depiction of this as the main character and his brother are untouchables.\(^\text{14}\) Mother Teresa, a nun originally from Hungary, founded the Order of the Missionaries of Charity in 1948 and spent the majority of her life working with sick and dying untouchables in the slums of Calcutta. Her life’s work earned her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.\(^\text{15}\) She is widely admired and quoted, but perhaps the following fits this chapter best:

> These are the few ways we can practice humility: To speak as little as possible of one’s self. To mind one’s own business. Not to want to manage other people’s affairs. To avoid curiosity. To accept contradictions and correction cheerfully. To pass over the mistakes of others. To accept insults and injuries. To accept being slighted, forgotten and disliked. To be kind and gentle even under provocation. Never to stand on one’s dignity. To choose always the hardest.\(^\text{16}\)

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After she died, the Catholic Church started proceedings to determine if she should be declared a saint. To all those she ministered to in Calcutta, or who met her personally and benefited from that knowledge, she was already considered one. She was officially canonized on 4 September 2014.17 Genuine humility is attractive and admirable, es-

especially when compared with egotism, which is one of the biggest detractors. Motivational author E. C. McKenzie believes that “the emptiest man in all the world is the man who is full of himself.”

We must be careful not to take humility too far though. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, ego is essential to all human beings. The sense of self is what helps us make sense of the world and our place in it. It helps us to take on board and integrate daily life experiences and use them to build the person we believe ourselves to be. Deepak Chopra and Rudolph E. Tanzi talk about this phenomenon in *Super Brain* and offer a caution at the same time:

Once new experiences have registered on the brain, your ego assimilates them. You are the *I* to whom new things are happening, adding to a storehouse of pleasure and pain, fear and desire that has been building up since infancy. Knowing that the brain's remodeling is always having an effect is important, even though your ego gives the illusion of constancy.

The ego is absolutely necessary for this function of integrating all kinds of experiences, but it is prone to go too far. *Egotism* is the common term for extreme self-centeredness, but that is not the issue here. Everyone is caught in a paradoxical situation with the ego. You cannot function without one but making everything personal can turn into ego delusion. “I, me, mine” overrides every other consideration. Instead of having a point of view and strong personal values (the good side of the ego), the egotist winds up defending his biases and prejudices just because he holds them (the bad side of the ego).

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Understanding this is particularly important for the profession of arms. Before his death in 1977, author and professor of philosophy at Colorado College, J. Glenn Gray, spent a lot of time as a foot soldier on the battlefields of Europe during World War II. He wrote about his reflections on what motivates soldiers to do amazing things in *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959). In it, he describes the contrast between friendship and comradeship, which wraps this chapter up well: “Nothing is clearer than that men can act contrary to the alleged basic instinct of self-preservation and against all motives of self-interest and egoism. Were it not so, the history of our civilization would be completely different than what it has been.”

Personally, this means that members of a cohesive fighting group subordinate their egos and desires to those of the group. They focus on accomplishing the mission and taking care of each other rather than it being a situation of every person for themselves. When you have a tight-knit group like this, they are unbeatable in any endeavor.

**Questions to Consider**

1. Who is the most genuinely humble person you know or have read about?
2. Can you focus on those around you more than on yourself?
3. What does it mean to be truly selfless?

**Suggested Further Study**


This movie is very well done and offers a look at what life is like in India for the less fortunate.

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I found this book to be amazingly profound in the author’s observations about what makes people do what they do for others in extreme circumstances.


She was another amazing person who made such a big difference where it was needed the most—the slums of Calcutta.


A good book for those trying to develop their own personal philosophy of life.