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Taking Stock

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TAKING STOCK

Practical men tell us it's a good idea from time to time to check our assets against our liabilities. Today we are long on technical knowledge, short on courage. For light on hard topics like courage I like to start with a ray of ancient wisdom.

Aristotle was a practical hardnosed scholar and no-nonsense teacher. He wrote the first textbooks for a dozen academic disciplines including physics, biology, logic, psychology and political science. Although time has passed him by in some fields, a recent winner of a Nobel prize for genetic research said that the award should rightly go to the old master from whose treatise on embryology he lifted some of his prize-winning ideas on sperm chemistry.

Skeptics may chuckle about that, but in the area of moral philosophy, Aristotle's preeminence endures. In the field of military ethics, Aristotle is one of the few writers who actually spells out the qualities that one rightly expects to find in the heart of a warrior, whether a fighting man of the 5th century B.C. or of World War III.

The exemplary moral virtue of a military man, says Aristotle, is courage. Because it is a moral virtue, involving feeling and well as reason, one achieves it by avoiding the pitfalls of excess (rashness) or defect (cowardice). In this way Aristotle introduces his concept of moral excellence—the mean. The mean doesn't signify "moderate" or fence-sitting, but rather the center of a target,

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avoiding on the one hand gutlessness and on the other show-off irresponsibility. Endurance is a major component of the classical Greek concept of courage. Aristotle's teacher, Plato, defined courage as "endurance of the soul." Although the Greeks acknowledge the value of the single brave thrust or audacious dash, their hero was more often the man who "hung in there" when the going got tough. Both Plato and Aristotle specified that courage had to be exercised in the presence of fear. Aristotle described courage as the measure of a man's ability to handle fear.

A correlative of courage is the ability to deal with failure. Just as a military leader is expected to handle fear with courage, so also should we expect him to handle failure with emotional stability—another way of saying endurance of soul. I'm not talking about the leader being a "good loser"; I mean his ability to meet personal defeat with neither the defect of emotional paralysis and withdrawal nor the excess of lashing out at scapegoats or inventing escapist solutions. (Faced with monstrous ingratitude from his children, King Lear found solace in insanity. The German people, swamped with merciless economic hardships, sought solace in Adolf Hitler.)

Humans seem to have an inborn need to believe that in this universe a natural moral economy prevails by which evil is punished and virtue is rewarded. When it dawns on trusting souls that no such moral economy is operative in this life some of them come unglued. Aristotle had a name for the Greek drama about "good men with a flaw who come to unjustified bad ends"—tragedy. The control of tragedy in this sense is the job of education. The only way I know how to handle failure is to gain historical perspective, to think about men who

have successfully lived with failure in our religious and classical past. When we were in prison we remembered the Book of Ecclesiastes: "I returned and saw that the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise nor riches to men of understanding, nor favors to men of skill, but time and chance happeneth to them all."

Today the statement that life is not fair has drawn ridicule. But it's true nevertheless. For that interpretation of a good man's defeat I prefer the original poem of the Book of Job—the way it was before some ancient revisionist historian spliced on a happy ending. The story of Job goes a long way in explaining the "Why me?" of failure. That God can allow evil to be visited upon upright and honest men is something we must be prepared to deal with.

How does one handle failure? One can develop or learn that special kind of courage that can prepare us for the occurrence of failure and diminish its worst effects. Historical perspective allows us to assess within the framework of the past the relative importance of injury and disappointment—even a misfortune that may seem cataclysmic and the end of the world. Measured historical perspective will allow an optimism of hard work to grow. That's my definition for a studied outlook born of knowing that failure is not the end of everything, that a man can always pick himself up off the canvas and fight one more round.



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