delusion of greatness (a rant written in the middle of a class)

claire wang (pls feel free to comment! and give suggestions for edits!)
Now a blog post: https://clairebookworm.substack.com/p/delusions-of-greatness

Recently I've been thinking a lot about how we are told we are meant for great things. In some of the communities I'm in, they always tell us that we are exceptional, smart, different— all while that is obviously not true. I don't think many students take it to heart; we do enter a room with more confidence, join a discussion with the belief that we probably know what we're talking about, etcetera. This may be a good thing, but it has kind of hurt me as well (?). I've felt that I *can* do great things, that I am *meant* to do so—in fact, it is almost a moral negative if I do not. In the other communities I'm in, like Hack Club, RSI/research communities, and rationality circles... everyone seems to have this shared view that they are meant to impact the world. Having a deep belief in someone is meaningful and can motivate them to grow and learn for themselves, but at some point, I think it cripples the way you explore the world. In fact, according to The Atlantic, parents aren't supposed to tell their kids they are smart (*thanks, Phosra*).

As a friend commented on my draft, many places actually don't tell students this. In fact, they actively seem to avoid this? Instead, they go with the strategy of framing themselves as a group of people who "love math" or "love art." This seems to be such a better approach, and I wonder why more people don't do this. A good comparison is between places like my high school Andover, which tell us that we're going to do "great things," vs. communities like Hack Club, which frame their members as people who "love making and creating things." In the words of my commentator (*s/o Agniv*): "This is weird to me because of the imposter syndrome it would naturally breed. I believe a saw a statistic where many freshmen at top colleges got imposter syndrome, and that negatively affected them."

As an example, now that I'm soon to be graduating from high school, I've noticed a lot of people choose majors in topics they are already good at and are not willing to start from scratch again for fear of being the worst in the room. *(Apparently, there's a LessWrong post that talks about this —thanks, Sammy!)* We're so used to being seniors who run clubs, have done research in fields, have worked with experts, or have had wonderful grades that we have become almost too risk-averse. And this isn't just the idea of being too scared of failing a class or something: I see this also in not being willing to explore new fields or to join a club or organization with the knowledge that you are likely the "worst" in the room. It's my *egotistic need* to want a career that will be societally important — instead of finance, I *should* work as a researcher or entrepreneur. I've criticized people who believe that it's okay to donate some money they have but stick to a job that I see as fundamentally "bad" because it wastes the potential of that person: for example, someone extremely talented at math and cs deciding to work in finance as opposed to doing some notable research that can better humanity.

A lot of the times when we talk about this struggle to adults, we're told to "just don't compare ourselves to others," but that feels nigh impossible. And I don't think this becomes some shortcoming of myself (or others), but rather because we're kind of wired to compare ourselves, and at times, it can help us a lot. In addition, as another friend commented (Uli!), we "have a bad habit of focusing only on internal solutions while ignoring external ones like changing their environment." How do we stop this? And sorry, this post is kind of surfacing a billion different micro-questions that can take ages to answer—not quite a singular delve into one thing most other people do!

Watsky wrote this in his song *Tiny Glowing Screens Pt. 2*:

> *There's 7 billion 46 million people on the planet*
> *And most of us have the audacity to think we matter*
> *...*
> *If we could see the context of the universe in which we exist*
> *And we could see how small each one of us is*
> *Against the vastness of what we don't know*
> *No one would ever audition for a McDonalds commercial again*
> *And then where would we be?*

This form of large-minded view of the world is kind of annoying in hindsight? Like, if I hear myself sometimes, I find myself sounding almost pretentious about it. When I'm thinking about what's good for all of humanity, I'm stuck in this delusion that anything I ever do can have that sort of greatness. One might argue that having big dreams is good, but I don't think this is quite that simple. It's a delusion that I, uniquely, am important and that I uniquely am equipped to do something. I'm not quite sure if this individualism is just me (if so, oops! maybe im the problem), but I feel like I've seen this in many people, that they are uniquely the only person "conscious" or "aware" of the world, and everyone else is just dead robots focused on some meaningless goal. It makes sense: we are only ever aware of our own life experiences and thoughts; we do *not* know the thought processes of others, so how do we ever develop a sense of empathy that sees the humanity in someone else? How do we develop a delusion of greatness for *everyone*, a community or group, rather than a constant cycle of me, me, me? *(ayo, another LessWrong post, this time from Agniv?)*

This might also manifest into a fear of exploration: a general inability to be "humbled"—to see that they are wrong and to take it well and not avoid such experiences in the future. For those who do not take being wrong well, they choose to altogether avoid new contexts because they'll likely start from the "bottom of the ladder." This is somewhat apparent in how people choose majors—they choose something they're comfortable being good at, or something that doesn't require them to be the best of the best to do well. I've been working on avoiding this and instead allowing myself to grow from these situations. I think I've made good progress as I get to know more and more people who share this mindset! :)

When I sent this to another friend, he sent me this article (tangentially related, but trust me it does), which said:

"*My hope is that, after reading all this, you can see yourself as a person first and a founder second. As a person, you should have a right to dignity, to authenticity, to freedom and the pursuit of joy and love. These are more than just ideals. They are the essence of our humanity, owed and due to every single person. They are the things that were steadily erased from me throughout my time as a founder, and things our society desperately needs more of. In our own individual lives, they are things we should always have a say in—or fight to have a say in. I hope you can stop thinking of everything in your life in terms of instrumental value to your startup. I hope you can balance your desire for historical significance with the actual lived lives of you and the people who care about you. I hope you don't have to experience a complete breakdown to think through all this.*"

Sometimes, I want to ask people who I perceive to have done some amazing things if they are satisfied with what they have done. For example, someone who's founded a big influential nonprofit that has

changed my life and many others' lives: I wonder if he thinks he's fulfilled his goals and dreams. In the same way, I wonder if I'd be fulfilled in the same way if I was him — is this something I want for myself, or is this only someone I look up to but do not want to become? I asked a friend of mine if he'd feel fulfilled if the current project he was working on succeeded, and he said *no*, that he'd just want to move on to the next thing. When does this rat race end? Can it ever end without us making drastic changes to how we approach our goals? When asked who my role model is, I sometimes struggle to find someone I'd want to emulate, someone who I'd appreciate being.

Two or three years ago, I wrote a tiny creative writing piece for an English class, and in hindsight, I think it was a way for me to express the worry I have about this: https://www.clairebookworm.com/posts/great-things.

"*When she was a young girl, everyone around her oohed and ahhed and said she was bound to do great things. The girl's paintings covered the wall of her beige-colored bedroom, and she felt she was better than Van Gogh, "borned in 1853 in the Netherlands," as she matter-of-factly told everyone that entered her room, her beautiful Buckingham Palace. […] She spends all day doodling in her notebook waiting for someone to find her and take her to the "great things" she was going to accomplish, but it's been five years, and no one has approached her yet. […] And she is the Space Shuttle Challenger, her fame blowing up almost exactly seventy-three seconds after December 25, and now everyone is saying she is doing the great things she was bound to do, but she can't help asking herself, is she really?*"

[A note: I think when we're younger, the world is so much smaller—hear me out—because we don't know the context of our abilities compared to others. And so, we begin to believe in ourselves up until we find ourselves surrounded by people who are "better."]

To Us Former Prodigies, MV: *Creepy Nuts / かつて天才だった俺たちへ【MV】*

https://twitter.com/meaning_enjoyer/status/1650130635397414912?s=46&t=8hDsm_rOHMAm1Ni0IhTqLw



nihilism disrespecter
@meaning_enjoyer

my biggest enemy, the number one vice that has fucked up my life, has been a desire to feel special and important

9:32 AM · Apr 23, 2023 · **9,568** Views

10 Retweets **2** Quotes **275** Likes **39** Bookmarks



Tweet your reply

Reply



nihilism disrespecter @meaning_enjoyer · Apr 23

i am now torn between two paths: indulge it to exhaustion and achieve some moderate fame, or try to suppress it and live a humble, happy life

or a hybrid

12 1 53 1,659

✨ Random Things ✨

- I'm running AngelHacks 3.0 as a partnership with Hack Club! It'll be a 24-hour game jam in Boston in Late May and is open to all gamers, coders, artists, storytellers, musicians... and if you're not in Boston, we have 3 satellite events too: Los Angeles, Bay Area, and Toronto. More details to come, but please feel free to register here: https://airtable.com/shrK2lcYQVjHLKNf4. We're also struggling to find an overnight venue in Boston, so if you have any contacts, please let me know!
- I will also be an RSI counselor this summer, and I'm so excited to be torturing the new generation of Rickoids (RSI Broads?). If you're looking for a summer intern too, I'll be in Boston! :)
- Over spring break, I was at WARP, the Winter Applied Rationality Program. I met some of the coolest people ever, took some classes that really, uh, *updated my priors /s*, and spent many hours nerding out over things I probably don't actually understand. I super recommend :D.
- A few weeks ago, I was at Horizon, a partnership between Hack Club and the Girl Scouts of Greater NYC. This was so fun—I taught generative art to some really amazing girls, met some inspiring women in the industry at the dinner afterward, and explored the city! We also took many Polaroids and crashed the Girls Who Code event as well.
- Some books I've recently read: *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi, *Crying in H-Mart* by Michelle Zauner, *Three Body Problem* by Cixin Liu, *Godel Escher Bach* by Hofstadter (still), *Games: Agency as Art* by C. Thi Nguyen, *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac
- Concerts/music teehee: I saw Snarky Puppy and Cory Wong in concert! This is why Boston is amazing tbh. I'm also seeing Watsky soon.