

ONE

The Maelstrom of Mediocrity

The Maelstrom, a tidewater whirlpool in the Lofoden Islands off Norway's northern coast, has been widely known for centuries for its strength and dangerous current. Since it poses a threat to ships, Edgar Allan Poe described it with great imagination in his celebrated short story titled *A Descent into the Maelstrom*.¹

Poe's narrator is led to a high cliff on Helseggen mountain overlooking the Maelstrom by a man who survived a traumatic experience in this vicious vortex that swallows ships, animals, and anything else in its path. During a fishing trip, he and his two brothers encountered an awful storm that damaged their boat, washed the younger brother overboard, and pulled the survivors into the dreaded Maelstrom. The boat spun around and around, slowly descending for about an hour, with the man tightly grasping a ringbolt in the deck. The older brother at first stood at the back of the vessel holding on to a water cask so he would not be swept overboard, but he then suddenly moved toward the man and pried the ringbolt from his fingers. The older brother then used the ringbolt to secure himself. Aggravated by his brother's selfish action, the man took his place at the water cask.

As the descent into the abyss continued, the man noticed the movement of the current and various objects that were floating around them—a fir tree, wrecked ships, furniture, and barrels. He suddenly remembered that sometimes objects would wash ashore near Lofoden undamaged because they were in the current at exactly the right time and floated up to the surface when the whirlpool calmed down. He observed that the cylinder-shaped objects descended slower than the rest. With this knowledge, he tied himself to the water cask that his brother had left behind, tried unsuccessfully to get his brother to do the same, cut himself free from the sinking boat, and jumped into the raging waters. The plan worked, as his barrel's shape slowed its descent. He helplessly watched as his brother and their boat descended to a watery grave at the Maelstrom's bottom.

Eventually, the man and his barrel began to rise from the depths during the whirlpool's calming period. He surfaced and was rescued by fellow mariners who acknowledged that his hair had changed from black to white but refused to believe his tale. The man does not expect the narrator to believe it either, for he ends the story with these words: "I can scarcely expect you to put more faith in it than did the merry fishermen of Lofoden."

Christian ministry, by its very nature, is *countercultural*, and yet the dominant culture shapes our work more than we would like to admit.

Nowhere is this more evident than in our growing acceptance of underachievement. Slowly but surely, we are being swept along in the maelstrom of mediocrity—a strong and dangerous current that keeps us from rising up to maximize our God-given potential.

You do not need a special gift of discernment to see what is happening throughout the land. When the late TV anchorwoman Jessica Savitch received an honorary degree from Columbia College back in 1983, her challenge to the students included the following assessment of the way things were at that time:

As a reporter, I have had a chance to observe people at the top of just about every field. And it makes no difference if they are male or female, black or white, old or young, the people I observed succeeding are those who have been taught or who teach themselves to strive for excellence. The pleasure comes from knowing you have done a job the best way you know how. It seems to me, however, in our modern society that there is very little done these days in pursuit of excellence. But whatever there is, it stands out for its rarity.²

If excellence was rare in 1983, it is even rarer now. Mediocrity is mainstream. Its waters transcend all human categories—race, nationality, gender, occupation, socioeconomic class, and so on. According to data collected by the Gallup Organization, less than 30 percent of American workers are *fully engaged* at work; 55 percent are *not engaged*; 19 percent are *actively disengaged*, meaning that they are not only unhappy at work but also regularly share those feelings with colleagues. Furthermore, the longer employees stay with the same job, the less engaged they become.³ My hunch is that you have at least one of the actively disengaged in your church, easily identified during worship services by folded arms and a facial expression that says, “Preacher, bless me if you can!”

Those who try to excel in the workplace are certainly going against the flow, and their behavior is disdainfully labeled schmoozing or kissing up to the boss because it shows up the average worker. Americans do not want mediocre performance in surgery, but we seem to accept it in almost every other field.

This cultural phenomenon should not surprise anyone, considering the well-documented lowering of academic standards in our nation’s

schools. Unsuspecting kids step into the shallow, subtle currents of educational mediocrity with little or no thought of where the waters may lead them. Alarming test scores reveal that most U.S. children are underachieving, because at all ability levels they lag behind children in many European and East Asian nations. Perhaps even more disturbing is that our own expectations have slipped far below what they used to be.

Outside the classroom, our youth are inundated with the “slacking is cool” message from pop music, television, movies, and ads. Teens who take responsibility are labeled geeks, nerds, and other less-flattering terms; they soon become the objects of ridicule and harassment. Eager to gain acceptance from the in crowd, many gifted young folk settle for less than their best. The waters are rising and swirling.

“A descent into the maelstrom” could continue in college, as academic-performance lessons learned in elementary and secondary schools are often reinforced there. Most major universities now award a significantly diluted bachelor’s degree. Can you believe that many university English majors are no longer required to read Shakespeare or Chaucer! Grade inflation at our colleges and universities gives new meaning to the term “higher education.”⁴

It’s no surprise that underachieving students usually become underachievers in the workforce. We know them well; they are our church members, friends, relatives, and neighbors. Many of these would-be climbers showed great promise in the formative years but somehow got caught in the cultural undercurrent and settled for professional mediocrity. They can be identified by one or more of the following tendencies:

- Inconsistent or insufficient effort
- A lack of real engagement
- Ambivalence in decision making
- Lack of follow-through
- Disorganization
- Inability to reach goals
- A tendency to quit things just as one begins to achieve success
- Procrastination
- Involvement in jobs and situations that demand less than one’s capabilities

- A paralyzing fear of failure

We have no problem identifying underachievement in others. As you perused the list of tendencies, names of colleagues, friends, and family members probably came to mind. Perhaps you were saddened by thoughts of what might have been. But what about you? Did you see yourself there? To recognize these potential-inhibiting patterns in your own life is to take the initial steps of the joyful journey into a more fruitful ministry. Remember, you do not have to be sick to get better.

It is much easier to recognize underachievement than to understand its underlying causes. In *Your Own Worst Enemy* (the first book devoted exclusively to adult underachievement), Dr. Kenneth Christian sheds light on this subject by describing 12 “self-limiting styles,”⁵ presented here in summary form:

- **Sleepers:** A style seen most often in those from families or communities without models or traditions of high achievement. Sleepers lack accurate information about themselves, the extent of their talent, and ways to express it. A lack of support, opportunities, and guidance often play a role in the failure of sleepers to make early contact with their possibilities, as does a parental preference not to spoil or inflate them.
- **Floaters/coasters:** Aware of their abilities, they see opportunities, and often are even pursued by others, but rarely act on their possibilities. Some are temperamentally hesitant and slow to participate; others can be emotionally withdrawn or indolent and lacking in ambition. Their chief characteristics are passivity, lack of initiative, and disengagement.
- **Checkmates:** Have multiple but contradictory ambitions and feel hopelessly immobilized. Checkmates are often perfectionists who unconsciously fear change and arrange their lives so as to make change virtually impossible.
- **Extreme non-risk-takers:** Focus totally on minimizing risks in their lives; avoid situations in which they could possibly fail; gravitate toward occupations, relationships, and activities that do not present serious challenges or reflect their real interests.

- **Delayers:** Make postponing major decisions and commitments their central theme; procrastinate; miss deadlines; postpone the onset of adult life, and drift, evading permanence, engagement, and seriousness; sample many things superficially.
- **Stop-shorts:** Aware of their abilities, stop-shorts entertain ambitions and make significant progress but firmly hold back from reaching their goals. Their arrested progress is often related to a fear of completing a life step or of taking on some role that will be the outcome of fully realizing an aim. They take course requirements but do not complete the thesis, get a certificate but do not embark on the related career, finish law school but never pass the bar, suffer writer's block and fail to complete the novel.
- **Self-doubters/self-attackers:** Block their success by holding high standards they feel they can never possibly meet and for which they seldom strive; emphasize their own faults and failings; often feel that any personal accomplishment was a fluke. They avoid demands and expectations out of a fear of failing.
- **Charmers:** Have good intentions but are inclined to use their engaging interpersonal abilities as a substitute for effort; often use a disarming sense of humor to diffuse criticism when they let things slide; develop a pattern of unreliability.
- **Extreme risk-takers:** Energetic and impulsive, they limit their success by habitually taking unnecessary risks; would rather fail in a blaze of glory than succeed through patient effort.
- **Rebels:** Aggressively strike out at the world and resist authority; unwilling to conform; suspicious of what they feel are others' attempts to exploit or control them.
- **Misunderstood geniuses:** Build a life around the notion that their talent sets them apart from others and that their lack of success is due to the misunderstanding, jealousy, and incompetence of others; use excuses; say their ideas are not mainstream or are too advanced for others to understand them; are temperamental.
- **Best-or-nothings:** Highly talented people for whom success comes easily or not at all; will not participate, if they cannot be the very best at something; progressively drop one activity after an-

other; narrow their lives down to a few activities at which they clearly excel.

Your Own Worst Enemy is a must read for those who are serious about breaking the habit of adult underachievement. Filled with persuasive case studies, it offers scholarly yet practical advice for breaking through the barriers that keep us from approaching our potential. A radio interview featuring Dr. Kenneth Christian became the catalyst for this book, and since there are so few people writing on the subject of adult underachievement, I have drawn extensively from his groundbreaking research. Yet my primary focus has remained on the somewhat unique factors related to underachievement in the pastoral ranks—the subject of the next chapter.

I would be remiss to omit attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) from any discussion of underachievement, since the term consistently appears on the lists of symptoms for both of these conditions. Unfortunately, many of those who have been diagnosed with adult ADD or ADHD were labeled as lazy, slow-learning, underachieving, problem kids—a heavy burden to bear when you already know that you have disappointed yourself and others. Prescription medications and professional counseling may assist these folk in focusing on the task at hand, increasing their productivity, enhancing their relationships, and relieving the load of false guilt.

Now before looking further at underachievement, I want to say a brief word about its opposite—*overachievement*. Predictably, this term has been popularized amid the maelstrom of mediocrity. You often hear it in connection with men like Jim Leonhard and Buddy Marston. But what does the word actually suggest? Can a person really achieve more than he or she is capable of? Of course not. *Overachiever* is a misnomer; yet, we have applied it to people who achieve more than they *should*—that is, more than others expect of them. I theorize that the average Joes and Janes of the world are quick to label the maximizing person an overachiever because it implies an impossible level of performance, thus excusing the mediocrity in their own lives.