

**ESSAYS BY MEMBERS OF
THE CHRYSOSTOM SOCIETY**

Ambition

EDITED BY
LUCI SHAW **AND** JEANNE MURRAY WALKER

INTRODUCTION BY
SCOTT CAIRNS

A M B I T I O N

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The Chrysostom Society

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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EDITED BY

Luci Shaw & Jeanne Murray Walker



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AMBITION

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to those whose ultimate goal has been reached—
Doris Betts, Madeleine L'Engle, Keith Miller, and Robert Siegel

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Introduction

AMBITION? WELL, I'M ALL for it. Strongly in favor.

That is to say that I am strongly in favor of *genuine* ambition, which as far as I can tell comes down to a powerful and continuing desire to accomplish genuinely great things—or even, perhaps, to *become* a great thing, a genuinely great artist, a great poet, or a great *whatever*.

Bringing their greatly various experiences, estimable insight, and uncommon honesty to the matter, the contributors to the present volume have offered a detailed appraisal of this particular species of human desire, and they offer us a particularly useful understanding as to why so many of us may have felt ambivalent about ambition, *per se*. It is, after all, an impulse that can lead either to greatness or to ruin.



In a savory, writerly stroll regarding her own, personal experiences, an insightful discussion of technique versus vision, and a very profound “theology of daily living,” **Erin McGraw**’s perspicuity and even-handedness—“ambition as it relates to vice, and as it permits excellence”—posits, from the start, that ambition, *per se*, is a mostly neutral quality; the extent to which it is good or bad pretty much depends upon the goal—the *what* for which one is ambitious.

Bringing both her famous compassion and unwavering candor to bear upon the matter, **Luci Shaw** recounts her own ambivalence regarding literary accomplishment and acknowledgment, and offers a series of helpful observations from an array of authors as she settles on something of a test to determining the efficacy of one’s ambition: *does it serve?*

Emilie Griffin also presents—also with compassion, wit, and keen intelligence—an account of her own wrestling with the lure of “Fame,” as

she recounts the incremental manner in which most of us eventually come to terms with ambition and responsibility.

Calling upon the insights of Shakespeare, Alexis de Tocqueville, Machiavelli, and others, **Dain Trafton** moves to how his own confusions have stemmed from—on the one hand—his family’s pronounced respect for ambition and—on the other hand—his early exposure to what were ostensibly biblical condemnations of the same; he concludes with a narrative that contains a thoughtful commentary on the latter.

Eugene Peterson writes of the tensions between busyness and ambition, and draws upon the wisdom of certain literary authors who have helped him to recover and to retain a healthy ambition—paired with a mitigating humility—regarding the work before us.

Wrestling with the particular ambivalences that accompany the gender-specific challenges of a woman with ambitions, **Jeanne Murray Walker** attends to the further complication of one’s having ambitions—acknowledged or not—for one’s children.

With confident recourse to scriptural models and desk references alike, **Diane Glancy** provides something of an *apologia* for ambition. She is grateful for it, sees it as a gift. “I would have been wiped out,” she writes, “if it weren’t for ambition.” Even so, she appears to have blended that ambition with humility, a confidence in the One who has given her such gifts.

Gina Ochsner offers an entertaining appraisal of ambition’s insatiability, how one ambition—duly accomplished—nearly always leads to escalation of what one desires.

Finally, in a brilliant bit of bait and switch, **Bret Lott** presents a chastening reminder of how much more satisfying our ambitions—those we realize *and* those for which we still struggle—become when they take a back seat to gratitude, a deep sense of having been blessed.



As for me, I have come to think that the matter of our moment comes down to our responding with adequate energy to a *God-given* desire to become what each one of us is called to become, which is *holy*. That is, of course, an immensely grand ambition.

I’ll get back to that vertiginous aspect of our persons in a moment; for now, let’s account for some of our habits of thinking that ambition is something to be avoided, or something for which one must apologize.

Like most writers who have been involved for any significant length of time in “the writing life,” I’ve met a writer or two (maybe several thousand) in whom ambition appeared to be very acute, but whose ambition was—in my opinion—concurrently meager.

Some of those folks—it seemed to me—manifested what I took to be a colossal ambition for what turned out to be very small things. Some students or conference attendees, for instance, have wanted merely—even if they also wanted desperately—to *publish* something, thereafter, they wanted to publish *more*. Thereafter, they wanted to publish in better and better journals, or with better and better presses.

A number of them have wanted simply to be well known, and thereafter they wanted—so far as such things can even occur in the obscure world of serious literature—to be *famous*; when some had attained what most folks would have recognized as a respectable level of fame, many of them began to worry overmuch about the relative fame of others.

This indicates what I mean when I speak of ambition for small things, a vestige of “Grub Street,” a sign of untoward neediness. That is to say, such is *not* the species of ambition that I am holding up as laudable. On the contrary, I hold up this sort of self-aggrandizing disposition as a profound embarrassment. Not grand. Paltry.

So, back to what I would call the *right* sort of ambition.

More than a few of my poetry students have protested when I have said to them—as, frankly, I am fairly quick to say to *all* of them—that if they aren’t committed to writing *great* poems they really should get out of the way of those who are.

Some of those students, in fact, *have* been gracious enough to step out of the way. The others, thank God, have responded by appropriately raising the bar for themselves, having understood that this is *precisely* the required measure of our due efforts at poetry, or at fiction, or at any of our art forms: accomplishment, greatness.

Either we are called to greatness, or we are not called at all.

As it happens, I never tell my students that they must write great poems that week, or the next week, the next year, or anytime soon; I simply make it very clear that they must desire, *immediately*, to do so. I simply make it very clear that they must give their every effort at writing a poem precisely *that* kind of serious attention and precisely *that* kind of strenuous effort.



Again: ambition is only bad if it is an ambition for small things.

Ambition for *great* things is itself a *great thing*, an honorable thing, and worthy of those who are shaped in the image of God, those called to acquire His likeness. I would have to say that this sort of ambition is, itself, something of a gift.

And *that*, when all is put on the table, is precisely the point. That God Himself appears to be the One who has placed this desire into our hearts. He is the One who first shaped us in the likeness of Himself, and the One who has called us to grow into His very Image.

Relegated to the periphery over generations of Western theological parsings, *theosis* remains the very heart of our matter and is the essence of the very good news that is the gospel of Christ.

Saint Irenaus states that God “became what we are that we might make us as Himself.” Saint Clement observes that through obedience one “becomes a god while still walking in the flesh.” Saint Athanasios says, “He assumed our human flesh so that we might assume His divinity.” Saint Cyril avers that as we are called “temples of God, and even gods, and so we are.” And Saint Gregory Naziansus admonishes us: “Become gods for His sake, since he became man for our sake.”

The consensus of the fathers and the mothers of our holy Church has long embraced the good news that the purpose of His coming was not merely to save us from death, but to endow us with life, divine life, His life, endlessly becoming.

This is what I would call an exceedingly healthy ambition. Good journey!

Scott Cairns
University of Missouri