

Feet of Clay

by Bill Herbst

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Everyone has feet of clay. *Everyone.*

As an organized religion that has strayed far from the teachings of its origin, Christianity has gotten a lot of things wrong, but one thing it got right is that we are all sinners. If you're a human being, you're flawed and fallible, not just capable of doing wrong, but certain to do so.

That applies not only to every living human being, but also to all the dead ones from the past, including Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed, not to mention George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The same is true for every movie star and Nobel Prize winner, and for every teacher, friend, or lover you've ever had. It's true for you and me.

And yet, we humans like to imagine that some of us are, if not completely perfect, at least above reproach and are (or should be) exempt from criticism. In our minds, we transform these chosen people into paragons of virtue. We ignore or deny their inevitable failings and erect monuments to their supreme goodness, putting them on pedestals, sometimes just in our minds and hearts, but often — too often — in the town square. That might be OK were it not so clearly false, and it might be acceptable were it merely harmless and not so obviously toxic.

The tendency among us to engage in this particular deluded fantasy (as well as many others) is probably inevitable. I'm not sure how completely I'd attribute it to the neural hard-wiring of "human nature." Some, but I doubt that biology could be the sole factor in our engaging in this delusion, since so many other elements of our individual and collective lives seem to me likely contributors.

Whatever reasons we offer to explain this behavior, I think it's high time we stopped doing it. Yeah, I know, fat chance. Still, it's worth discussing.

Might it be possible for us to find a way to celebrate people for their goodness without whitewashing (either inadvertently or intentionally) their dark sides? Odds may be slim, but it behooves us to try to find a way to do so. How we collectively celebrate people now (with rewards of money, fame, and positions of power) isn't working to correctly honor them, and it sure as hell isn't serving us.

By fictionalizing people — especially famous ones — as entirely above rebuke and beyond critique, we rob them of their humanity. We expand and reduce them simultaneously, twisting them into caricatures. Essentially we deify them, pretending that they're gods. That's damned foolish and altogether unseemly. Children may do this, but adults? As I wrote at the beginning and will keep repeating, *everyone has feet of clay*. In addition, by denying the fallibility and failings of our supposed saints, we set an impossible standard for anyone who comes after. In effect, we set the bar way too high.

This results in social pressure for everyone else to present themselves (falsely) as equally flawless, which leads eventually but inevitably to their being found out through revelations about their problems, peccadilloes, and many mistakes of judgment or behavior. Once publicly revealed, such downfalls from grace are then presented and seen not as evidence of people's humanity, but scandalous secrets damning their characters. We then proceed to knock them rudely off the very pedestals upon which we formerly elevated them. This used to happen for a lot of celebrated people after they were dead, sometimes long after. Nowadays, given the accelerated speed of our world, it happens more and more while people are still alive and kicking. Either way, the real embarrassment is on us more than them.

An entire industry has arisen — called "public relations" — to craft false images for individuals and groups (including corporations and governments) that present them in the best possible public light, not only to promote their success, but also to discourage any possible negative scrutiny. We market and advertise people and groups as if they were consumer products — "brands" — extolling their virtues and why we should "trust" and "buy" them. Then, inevitably, a counter-industry arises to dig up dirt on those very same people and groups in order to besmirch their artificially-purified or puffed-up good names and elevate competitors to take over their places of honor.

The whole sorry business is an exercise in madness. And yet, this is the culture we live in, not just here in America, but in pretty much every society. That tendency toward self-aggrandizing promotion may have been less well-developed in ancient times, but it certainly existed back then. When humans lived in small kinship bands of hunter-foragers, all the members of the band knew each other, and it was more difficult to create a false image of perfection that convinced others. Not that people didn't try anyway, but it was harder to pull off. In modern civilization, however, we don't know everyone, so the creation and maintenance of images promoting our presumed infallibility and overwhelming goodness constitutes major expenditures of our time and energy. If we spent more time simply doing good rather than trying to look good, we'd accomplish a lot more.

Looking good is largely what “credentialing” is about — certification of one’s value in some particular or specific marketable dimension that “proves” to people who don’t know us personally that we’re qualified, trustworthy, or expert. Sure, going to Med School is part of the necessary training to become a doctor, but it’s also running the gauntlet of acceptance into a rarified club and thus being granted permission to practice medicine in the culture. Want to succeed in the marketplace? One way is by acquiring some credentials. That’s among the most basic functions of social institutions, to grant credentialing. Sometimes it’s valid and reliable, sometimes not.

Another way of achieving the same end is by word of mouth. Need a plumber? Ask your neighbors if they know any good plumbers. Word of mouth carries both the benefits and liabilities of personal relationships. The upside is that you might trust your neighbors more than someone you don’t know. The downside is that their recommendations are still just their opinion. We all know what opinions are like — everybody has one (hint, hint) — and that pitfall applies pretty much equally to your neighbors and an average rating of 4.5 for a thousand customer reviews of a product on Amazon.

Neither credentialing nor word of mouth are entirely fail-safe as trustworthy recommendations, but they tend to be more reliable than the slicker methods of self-promotion attempted through impersonal marketing and advertising. Those thousand customer reviews on Amazon are likely to be sullied by at least some larceny — companies that hire posters to write false reviews. The same applies to “Likes” on social media. Nonetheless, vicariously garnering the personal experience of others has its uses.

Not that marketing doesn’t work. It does. A print or video ad for landscaping, new floors, or pest removal that is presented with a nice logo, a cute jingle, or a catchy slogan carries considerable weight in convincing potential customers. Heck, every trick in the book to make oneself or a product look better than others tends to work and is routinely used. Nothing is too crude or obvious. Remember the old days 40 years ago in the Yellow Pages where companies named themselves AAA-Whatever just to get their phone number to be first in line at the top of the listings?

Heck, we can go all the way to the personal level of “dressing for success.” That’s what fashion and make-up are all about. Think the massive industries promoting fitness or diet are about health? Think again. Maybe that’s true for some people, but not most. What they’re about is making yourself look good to others who don’t know you. (As an aside, exercise equipment is marketed based on the implied promise that just buying it will make you fit.)

All this burnishing of one’s public self-image is an extension of our insistence on fantasies of perfection and infallibility to convince others of our value. Sure, we

could take out “insistence” and suggest instead that it’s just people playing by the agreed-on rules of society, but I think it goes somewhat beyond that.

So, I have two modest suggestions. First, *Let’s stop putting people on pedestals*, which would avoid our shooting them off later. Instead, let’s start celebrating people by acknowledging that they’re terrific *in certain ways* and in spite of whatever their inherent frailty and foolishness may be. That way, we temper our expectations and minimize the whiplash of “*Oh, he’s so great!*” followed by “*Oh, he’s such a despicable asshole.*” We might nickname that the “Bill Cosby Syndrome,” although we could use about ten thousand other names. *(Please understand, I’m not lobbying for letting anyone off the hook, particularly Bill Cosby. What he did was criminal and perverse, and the man deserves some serious comeuppance. Still, his compulsive crimes were hardly unique and well within the bell curve of screwed-up human failings.)*

Second, *do not trust any marketing or advertising*. Keep in mind (and never forget) that the people doing the advertising are trying to sell you something. They want your money or your vote or your approval or your permission. They may even want your love. All of which might be fine, since the possibility exists that what they’re telling or showing you could be true.

Remember, though, the old adage, “*If it looks too good to be true, it probably isn’t.*” In other words, *don’t buy a pig in a poke*. Don’t be easily convinced by a good sales pitch, however it’s shaped and whatever it’s about. Decide for yourself, and then only after checking out whether what’s being hawked is real and true, something you’ll like and not regret later. No, we can’t always know that in advance — not with products, not with news, and not with people — but it might help anyway to maintain at least moderate skepticism.

And while you’re being skeptical about one thing, keep in mind that you should probably be equally skeptical about its opposite as well.

Most of all, don’t believe that anyone is perfect. No one is. *Everyone has feet of clay.*

I’m aware that the chances are probably zilch for what I’m advocating here actually taking hold and making any sort of difference in the collective. I’m just saying my say because it’s on my mind, especially now, as we swim through this endless sea of lies and bullshit. Life is hard enough these days without the extra suffering of unnecessary betrayal and further disappointment.

Protect yourself by remaining mindful.