



About Us | Subscriptions | Advertising | Search Powered by Google™

- Spirit
- Ideas
- Life
- News
- Blogs (new)

[Home](#) / [Life](#) / The avatar's advantage

Get email updates from uuworld.org!

Learn about our RSS feeds.

The avatar's advantage

Cast your goals in mythic terms to make a lasting difference.

By Tad Waddington
Summer 2008 5.15.08

Sooner or later every thinking person asks the immortal question: How can I contribute to the world?

There are many answers to this question. You can run errands for your elderly neighbor, pick up litter in the park, or leave a generous tip for your footsore waiter. While these activities are important, they point to the limits of the question. Imagine that cars always speed near a recently cleaned-up park, and that it's only a matter of time before a child is killed. You could contribute to the world if you were to stand by the road and wave a flag at the speeding cars to encourage them to slow down, but your contribution would stop the moment you stopped waving the flag. Or you could post a sign that says, "Slow." For this to be a contribution, however, drivers would have to read and heed the sign. The sign is ineffective, because the speeders might be driving too fast to see it. Being a thinking person, you decide to change the nature of the equation. You get a speed bump installed. The speeders slow down, and the kids are safer.

So the question isn't just: How do you contribute? The question is: How do you make a contribution that lasts? Unfortunately the solutions to most of the world's problems aren't as easy as installing the occasional speed bump, so the question becomes: Given that the world is big and complex, how do you make a lasting contribution? In other words, how do people like you and me achieve not the ephemeral, but the enduring; not the trivial, but the significant? Part of the answer is to seek the avatar's advantage.

As a business consultant, I help people find effective ways to add value to their organizations. I draw inspiration from Greek philosophy. For example, Aristotle believed that things had four causes, one of which is the final cause. The final cause is the why of a thing, the sake for which it is done. The final cause of a brick is a cathedral. The final cause of a car is that it helps you get from here to there.

The goal you are trying to achieve is your final cause. It can be from the outside in or from the inside out. With the outside-in, you observe a problem in the world and seek to solve it. Noah Webster published his dictionary as a way to create a common language that would unify the people of the early United States. The inside-out approach starts with some form of excellence and seeks to apply it to the world. You create a beautiful painting and hope that it inspires people. The final cause is future-oriented. Think of the people who built cathedrals in the Middle Ages; they worked a lifetime on a project they would not live to see completed.

The final cause provides a valuable motive force. To get the most out of it, I recommend a conscious mythologizing of your actions. Exaggerate your intentions. Why? Much is said about ancient Greek civilization and how its philosophy gave the West a boost through the ages. While this may be true, there was, I think, something else going on. The ancient Greeks personally—viscerally—gave a damn. Intangible events were not mere abstractions. You didn't become wise with age: wisdom was a gift from Metis. You did not merely have second thoughts: Athena grabbed you by the hair and shouted in your ear. For the ancient Greeks, it was *personal*. They had skin in the game. As for me, I do not merely exercise: I battle Sloth. I do not weed dandelions: I lead a backyard safari. I don't struggle with self-doubt: I fight a fire-breathing, lion-headed, serpent-tailed chimera. I don't hope to be creative: I try (unsuccessfully) to seduce the muse Polymatheia.

Imagining a gargantuan final cause helps impart a heroic quality to your actions. *This is*

[Printer friendly version](#)
[E-mail this article](#)



(Robert Neubecker)

RELATED RESOURCES

[Lasting Contribution.](#)
Companion website for the book.
(lastingcontribution.com)

[Lasting Contribution: How to Think, Plan, and Act to Accomplish Meaningful Work.](#) By Tad Waddington. Agate B2 Books, 2007. (Amazon.com)

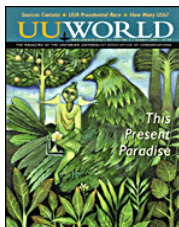
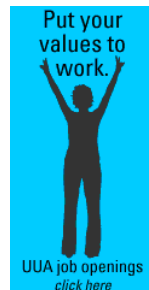
RECENT ARTICLES

[Congregations helping other congregations](#)
Aiding another congregation gives 'sense of supporting a larger vision of Unitarian Universalism.' By Donald E. Skinner

[The call of self](#) Finding my path when the choices I made in my twenties didn't work out. By Manish Mishra

[The stages of rest](#) Four stages of burnout and recovery as the church year draws to a close. By Doug Muder

ADVERTISING



[Current Issue](#)
[Previous Issues](#)



www.uua.org

the avatar's advantage. An avatar is the incarnation of a deity in human form. The final cause entails *embodying* the idea of the thing you seek to cause. You become its avatar, a process that is necessary because ideas enter the world as hatchlings. They cannot live without care and feeding. They feed on sacrifice and action. You give life to them through your love and work. Freud said, "Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness."

For example, in the 2001 Tour de France, Lance Armstrong and his closest rival, Jan Ullrich, were riding shoulder-to-shoulder. In such a fiercely contested race, I expected them to take advantage of *every* opportunity to win. Then Ullrich crashed. Armstrong pulled over and waited for Ullrich to get back in the race. When asked about this, Armstrong said that he couldn't imagine taking advantage of the situation: the etiquette of the sport *demand*ed that he wait. Later Ullrich, in the lead, reached back to shake Armstrong's hand. On the one hand, Sportsmanship inspired their actions. On the other hand, their actions gave added life to Sportsmanship itself.

In short, the avatar's advantage involves creating an effect that takes on a life of its own, an effect that embodies the spirit of the contribution you seek to make. We give ourselves to an idea and it returns the favor.

The avatar's advantage works through a process that the philosopher John Searle calls "constitutive rules." Constitutive rules describe how lower-level entities count as higher-level entities. How? Searle said, "One way to impose a function on an object is just to start using the object to perform that function." Cooking dinner for somebody is an act of courtship if you say it is (and it isn't if you say it isn't). You impose a function (meaning) on an object (dinner) and begin to use your actions as the process of courtship. The final cause of washing your baby isn't just a clean bottom. It counts as a way to show that you love the child. Picking up litter in the park counts as a contribution, because you aren't only cleaning the park, you are setting an example for others to follow. In short, your actions can count as contributing, in part, simply because you say they do. (Think about the freedom and power this implies.)

Making a lasting contribution is a challenge. The difficulty of accomplishing the task is why it is important to have a final cause of mythical proportions. See yourself as a hero in a story and every obstacle, rather than setting you back, can draw out greater qualities of your character as you rise to their challenges. A final cause of mythic stature gives you the moxie, thechutzpah, the pluck you need to achieve your lofty goal.

Religion scholar Mircea Eliade observed that for people to have meaningful lives they must cast their lives into a narrative, a story, a myth. For example, because I love my family, I want to make sure they have enough food to eat and a place to live, so I, alas, must work for a living, which means that I have to drive to work. This means that I have to keep my car maintained, which means that I have to call to make an appointment with the service department. The receptionist puts me on hold and I am stuck listening to music that is dull enough to lull a young otter to sleep. Even though attending to the insipid music is a fifth-order derivative from my prime desire to take care of my family, my putting up with it is motivated by my deepest values. Knowing this makes tolerating it, well, tolerable.

The final cause embodies your values. It gives motive force, because it comes from what you hold most dear. The stronger the value, the greater the power of the final cause. Picture Martin Luther: "Here I stand." The more clearly articulated the value, the better you can embody it through action. As the *end* goal, the final cause is, paradoxically, the *beginning* of how to make a lasting contribution. It motivates the entire process and raises your mundane actions to a higher level.

Adapted with permission from [Lasting Contribution: How to Think, Plan, and Act to Accomplish Meaningful Work](#), © 2007 by Tad Waddington, published by Agate B2 Books. See sidebar for links to related resources.

[More Spirit...](#)

[More Ideas...](#)

[More Life...](#)

[Contact us](#) | [Privacy policy](#)

UU World Magazine | 25 Beacon Street, Boston MA 02108 | (617) 948-6108
© 1996-2008 Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. All rights reserved.