

The Pedestal Effect¹

Mothers' wisdom: *Never speak ill of the dead. (They can't defend themselves) If you can't say anything good about a person, say nothing at all. (Don't be a carrier of gossip)*

Statues are erected in societies so that future generations might remember the benefits that particular people have given to us. Likewise, some buildings are named after the worthy – grandstands in sporting arenas bear the names of past stars.

The intent is that the memory of their fine achievements will live on, long after their actual lives. People will ask who those people were. Researchers will explore the great deeds that helped shaped our view of society. There will be a permanent place in the history of our culture.

It is **very laudable** that society should acknowledge and admire the exceptional people who have advanced the world that we live in.

We also like to award our current citizens for their contributions to society – in the Arts, in sport, in advancing world knowledge, for bravery in the military or police forces or in the general public, for community leadership, for caring for others less fortunate ... that list goes on. It's an official societal expression – beyond just saying, **'Thank you!'** ... an important part of **adding names into the public narrative**.

We even have a calendar of appreciation ceremonies (Australia Day, King's Birthday, New Year Honours) where we acknowledge contributions.

In short, **culturally, we like to acknowledge citizens' achievements beyond the norm, to express gratitude for what they are doing and have done.**

Memorials, perpetual awards at national and international level, museums, art galleries ... pre-nominals (like Knighthoods) or post-nominals (like AC, MBE) become part of a person's official name. University qualifications (like BSc, MA, Dr, Professor) are used in conjunction with a person's work authority.

Some religious orders proclaim sainthoods, sporting orders induct stars into Halls of Fame, social groups have presidents or other grand titles, politicians with ministerial responsibility are called 'Honourable'.

Generally, wise older people may be casually respected as Elders, whose advice is worth hearing. The implication of such gradations of honour is ... that people with such acknowledgement **require some degree of reverence.**

We put them on pedestals of admiration ... as inspiration.

¹ The pedestal effect refers to the phenomenon where individuals, particularly public figures, are elevated to a status of admiration, only to face backlash and resentment when they fail to meet societal expectations.

How much of it is deserved?

The critical questioner may well ask, ‘Were these people perfect? Were they not ever flawed humans ... who made mistakes like the rest of us?’

To what extent should their memory be revered?

Maybe the praise is justified for the exceptional things they are acknowledged as achieving. **But perhaps not ... for everything in their lives.**

We laud professional footballers as gladiators of their sport ... and then we are disappointed if they are not paragons of virtue outside sport or in later life.

Because then, they have **fallen off that pedestal of ‘perfection’.**

Now, take a narcissist, for example – a person who may really value collecting medals and awards because it feeds the need for ego to be stroked.

Indeed, ‘important’ people with large amounts of money or social power may well ‘influence’ (even ‘purchase’ or ‘claim’) awards of community prestige (eg knighthoods, naming rights, medals, fellowships, prizes ... **even statues**).

But such self-praise is no praise, at all. (*More Mothers’ Wisdom.*)

That is easily seen by most of the thinking public to be **a meaningless abuse of influence** to appease a particular insecure perpetual need for gratification – the delusion of power – sycophantic genuflection – ‘entitlement’.

It is the obsessive ‘collector syndrome’² of the power of possession.³

Should that person be on a pedestal?

No doubt, examples will come easily to mind.

So, while acknowledging that **most community awards are actually based on merit against selection criteria**, how many are procedural symbols or titles ... more for serving time or to make acquaintances proud by association?

Sometimes, being there ... and doing well through difficult situations is very worthy of praise. If that is the community understanding – no problem.

So, what does the pedestal really mean?

We have statues from earlier eras being defaced because the person on the plinth paid for that honour at the expense of slaves who produced the much-vaunted wealth ... or because the person’s roles actually made the plight of the vulnerable and vanquished even worse. **The statue is then ... the**

reinforcement of a victor’s public narrative.

The dominating culture **wants** that particular story to be remembered. It is used to **persuade** later generations ... perhaps to **satisfy** powerful narcissism.

² Read *The Napoleon Curse*. <https://jimreaywriter.net/the-napoleon-curse/>

³ <https://www.bridgestorecovery.com/blog/look-at-me-attention-seeking-behavior-as-a-symptom-of-psychological-distress/>

There are statues of leaders and ‘Gods’ from earlier times which are collected in museum storerooms because they are no longer venerated as they once might have been. **It is important that they are preserved as historical records. It is about education – about facing past attitudes.**⁴

We have had eminent entertainers who have had **knighthoods** and **national honours revoked** due to later revelations about the abuse of the vulnerable. **But destruction of history, like burning books, is not the standard of a thoughtful civilised society.**

We need to be able to understand the thought processes of the past ... to inform us today. *Several examples would come swiftly to mind.*

Then there is the ‘*tall poppy*’ effect where talk shows, PR companies and the media build up an image to an audience of admirers ... for large amounts of money. Only for the same mechanisms to tear down the image at a later date to feed the need of the next ‘*flavour of the time*’ – **the sensation industry.**

So, what’s the problem?

Should we be engaging in honouring and awarding our citizens for their services and achievements ... beyond the call of their normal life occupations? **Most probably, ‘Yes’.** These people are usually inspiring and they open opportunities for others in society to aspire.

Should the honouring follow a prescribed calendar of annual events that sets out to find people to award? **Probably, ‘Yes’** – to acknowledge the cultural importance of respecting the ‘shy’ successes that contribute to society ... but, through humility, would never self-nominate.

What form should the legacy of the awarding take? Recorded in the cultural narrative on plaques, on memorials, in official records in libraries and museums? Should they be **literally** up on pedestals or on named buildings or ... rather recorded in the proud cultural narratives of national storytellers?

How are statue decisions made? **Where** will a statue be displayed in public view, in perpetuity? Or **whose** statue will be declared to be an obsolete relic of a past culture that can gather dust in a museum storehouse?

For example, how many statues or images of Hitler are on public display?

At one point in time, such portraits were everywhere in Europe – as influencers of that particular controlling public narrative. There has been a whole new world order in the decades since Hitler. Now, such images are only available in

⁴ “Education without courage is like a wax statue - beautiful to look at but bound to melt at the first touch of a hot stuff.” – Mahatma Gandhi

history books, documentaries and museums. They are reminders of horrific events in the relatively recent past.

Many statues of the past are of kings and queens or military people or explorers who fit the narratives of expanding colonial times. Apart from queens, and ancient goddesses, **how many of those statues were of women? Check it.**⁵ **Even today, on average, it would be around 5%, world-wide.** Yet, the world population is around 50% women. Is that a reflection on the value of women or their achievements ... or was it a **priority narrative of the ruling groups** of past times. *You know the answer.*

Statues are not the main recognition method today – although statues of women **are** increasing in sporting and artistic arenas. In progressive cultures, the emphasis for awards is still on merit, including actively searching for more gender and racial balance – not a cultural priority of earlier times. **Statuettes**, trophies and perpetual halls of fame have taken over as the award priorities. The **merit priority** tends to ensure that recipients can be selected irrespective of gender, race, belief system, social classifications ... It is not perfect but it is surely better than wealthy donors getting their names up in lights **without verifiable merit.**

So, in terms of **the pedestal effect**, we need to have the understanding that an accolade **acknowledges expertise and attainment** as a socially valid measure of admiration. That person **doesn't need to be revered** as any virtuous paragon or expert on things **beyond their demonstrated excellence.**

We **don't need to pull down or burn** edifices of the past. We need to **understand why** they were erected.

Likewise, there is **no need for offensive images** or emblems of past cultures to be *'right in the faces of the public'* – **provoking animosity or unwelcome memories.** Rather we need to keep such objects available in libraries or museums as learning reference to inform the future.

By all means, **admire people** of our current culture as **outstanding role models in their areas of expertise** but don't expect them to be perfection in **everything.**

"Pedestals aren't safe...one wrong move and a nasty tumble is sure to follow. Humility is a great grounding tool." – Sanjo Jenday

⁵ <https://statuesforequality.com/pages/women-statues>