

Help – I am becoming arrogant!

Not in these exact words, but that was essentially how a client put it when I advised her to strengthen her self-confidence. Excessive self-criticism was holding her back. As she reacted rather cautiously to my suggestion, I asked her what she feared might happen if she became more self-confident. “I would lose my self-criticism and, as a result, stop developing.” In saying this, she articulated a concern that, in my experience, many people share.

Peter Näf

Namely the fear of losing one's strength when developing its balancing counterpart. A self-critical person, for example, tends to see the glass as half empty and thus keeps developing continuously. If, however, she sees only her shortcomings and not her strengths at the same time, she develops a negative self-image. Yet it would be important to see the glass as half full from time to time and to be satisfied with what has been achieved.

The opposite extreme is just as problematic: those who see themselves only positively and never question themselves become arrogant.

Differentiation in times of extremes

One possible explanation for this fear is polarisation. People absolutize their perceptions and judge themselves and others in a one-sided way. They see only the positive or only the negative.

Those who know no nuances and perceive the world in binary terms must cling to their strength. In this way of thinking, the alternative can only be the opposite – in the case of self-criticism, arrogance. People thus identify with their traits and, in doing so, hinder their own development.

The personal environment often reinforces this tendency by reacting with irritation when, for

example, someone perceived as helpful suddenly starts to represent their own interests.

Too much of a good thing is always bad – strengths need to be contained. Creativity needs direction, otherwise it becomes fanciful; structure needs generosity, otherwise it turns rigid. Empathy without boundaries leads to self-loss, and unrestrained generosity to wastefulness.

Yin and Yang

What is the alternative to polarised thinking? Dialectical thinking. It acknowledges the tension between apparent opposites that are complementary. Depending on the situation, one trait or the other is called for.

With increasing experience – that is, when we have paid often enough for our excesses – we develop our personality and gain a more rounded character. By balancing the extremes, we become free: we have a choice in how we want to behave in a given situation. In our example: do I see the glass as half empty and, as a self-critical person, recognise an opportunity for development? Or do I see the half-full glass and allow myself, for the moment, to be satisfied with who I am and to celebrate my self-confidence?

The world is not just black and white. Personal development does not arise from an “either–or”, but from a “both–and”. Those who learn to differentiate between apparent opposites and to integrate them according to the situation gain inner freedom – not because they commit themselves to one side, but because they can choose.

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