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Dear Colleague:

The Italian short-story writer Natalia Ginzburg says that there was a time when she concentrated on "gray, squalid people and things" to write about. She sought out "a contemptible kind of reality lacking in glory." One day, in her town, she saw a "hand-cart being pushed through the street and on it was a huge mirror in a gilded frame. The greenish evening sky was reflected in it." As she stopped to watch, she felt preternaturally happy and had the impression that "something extremely important had happened." Ginzburg tried to introduce that image into one of her stories, but could never quite succeed. Nevertheless, this brief encounter with the gilded mirror convinced her that unless she occasionally introduced a touch of splendor into the lives she portrayed her realism was untrue to experience.

The above comes out of a collection of Ginzburg essays called The little Virtues. What she actually advocates turns out to be something different, for she writes: "As far as the education of children is concerned I think they should be taught not the little virtues but the great ones. Not thrift but generosity; not caution but courage and contempt for danger; not shrewdness but frankness and a love of truth; not tact but love for one's neighbor and self-denial; not a desire for success but a desire to be and to know."

These great virtues are like blasts of fresh air, or a sudden visitation by gods and goddesses from the past that temporarily eclipses the shabby moral facilitators of our time. Generosity, courage, and frankness (especially frankness) were once identified with the nobles. Perhaps for this reason, we of bourgeois descent tend to harbor a resentment against their typically imprudent thrusts. They are also pagan virtues. I don't associate them with, say, Christianity. Now, thankfulness or gratitude is a religious virtue. Judaism and Christianity both teach that it is good to be thankful. But this religious virtue is as passé as the pagan ones. In a world whose moral language is chokeful of "entitlements" and "rights," there is less and less room for gratitude--for someone like Teresa of Avila who confessed that she was so thankful a person she could be bought with a sardine.

Best wishes,

