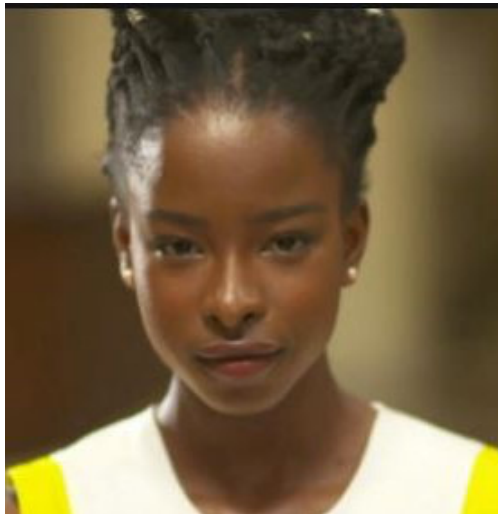


Gravitas: It's Not About You

It's a few days after Biden's inauguration, and I'm struck by two examples of gravitas. One, a 22-year-old poet. The other, a 68-year-old law professor. One's eyes shine secretly with an ever-present sense of purpose. The other's eyes glow quietly with the contentment of a life lived with purpose. One has just entered the world's notice. The other has just departed. Both know the honor, dignity and joy of purpose. Both can help you change gravitas from a vague concept to a daily "prayer in action."



Amanda Gorman (CBS news)



Debra Rhode (Bruce Forrester/Stanford News Service)

Prayer. It's a tricky subject, because there are so many variants to how it's done and why it's done. But here's one that I like. It's an old African proverb that former Congressman John Lewis often mentioned: "When you pray, move your feet." It's about doing something to effect change, to make a better world, a better you, a better anything. Presence, charisma, star-power, gravitas—we acquire these through daily practice of doing something to make our Being grow through conscious Becoming.

There's no set formula. Amanda Gorman's picture above was taken two years ago—two years before the world was captivated by her gracious, yet commanding, poise. Debra Rhode's picture appeared in her [New York Times obituary](#) a few days before Biden's inauguration—and after a lifetime transforming the field of legal ethics (particularly gender bias in the legal profession). Debra had an inexhaustible commitment to that transformation, teaching at Stanford for more than 40 years and publishing dozens of books—with two more books in the publishing pipeline.

Amanda and Debra have very different paths, but look in their eyes and you will see a similar strength of commitment, purpose and mission. It's gravitas in its best, least ego-driven, meaning.

Too often words like gravitas set us up for failure because we're looking for a simple, straightforward definition that comes complete with a step-by-step recipe for gaining that gravitas. Words can help, and words can harm.

The Power of “Fluffy,” the Dustmop

I hate the word “gravitas.” Over the years, I’ve heard people toss the term around as if they know what it means—and presuming that we all know and share that same meaning. Words like gravitas have an elusive power, a mystery that courts misperception. That mystery can keep us at arm’s length, never letting us feel we get it.

“Fluffy” was like that.

Decades ago, I met a woman who lived in a Manhattan apartment with two mountain lions she had raised since birth. (I met the bobcats, too!) Paula was a wild animal trainer who had worked with circuses, zoos and Broadway shows. These two bobcats saw Paula as “mother.” She had a dustmop—one of those old-fashioned stringy things—that she would whisk around the apartment. And the two lion cubs were TERRIFIED by all the swirling sudden shakings of the dustmop. Paula named it “Fluffy.” If one of the bobcats started doing anything wrong, Paula would shake the dustmop, saying, “Don’t get Fluffy angry!” And the bobcat would race back to its cage and cower in a corner. That worked for many years.



“Still Hunt,” (1883) by Edward Kemeys, Central Park.

Then one day, Paula came home and one of the bobcats was lounging in the kitchen with a self-satisfied smile...and bits of yarn hanging out of its mouth. He had killed Fluffy.

It’s time for all of us to kill Gravitas.

Oddly enough, many of us can spot it instantly, but only in some strikingly noticeable examples. More often, we tend to confuse it with stentorian displays of ego and thinly-veiled anger. Instead of starting

with some recipe for acquiring gravitas, let's see if we can't find out a bit about what it is, and what it isn't.

Is It Gravitas or Is It Ego?

Let's start by getting away from words altogether. (Apologies, Amanda and Debra!)

Instead, let's observe two different ways to hear an overture from one of Bach's orchestral suites.

JS Bach, Orchestral Suite #3, D Major, BWV 1068, "Overture (Grave – Vivace)", Mainz Chamber Orchestra, Günter Kehr conductor

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=978z730TXvA>

It's probably best if you stand while doing this exercise. The first 3½ minutes are very grand and powerful. It would make for a great entrance of royalty, a king, to an important occasion. The two different ways to hear it have to do with whether you—as the royal personage—assume the music is about you or about the kingdom for which you are only the figurehead, the steward of its safekeeping.

Stand, eyes open, and first listen to the music as a "salute" to you. Put your hands about eight inches out from your torso with palms facing you and slowly move them up and down your torso, as if the music is filling you up.

When you hear the music repeat (at about 1:40), extend your arms out in front at about waist height with palms facing outward. Now feel that the music is flowing through you and out to the world or the assembled people at this royal occasion. Feel that the music is about the greatness of the kingdom, the honor and dignity of your mission to protect and defend the kingdom. ("Kingdom" is simply a metaphor for whatever honorable endeavor, mission or quest to which you have dedicated yourself.)

With each of these ways to hear the music, try to observe closely what happens to your eyes, face, chest, and Being. The first way is all about ego, pomposity, puffed-up with pride. That's what many kings and politicians usually do. Here are some particulars you may observe:

- Your chest swells, but it gets constricted, gripped within the physical body skin.
- Your jaw hardens and lifts slightly (probably on the right side), giving your mouth a slight self-satisfied smirk.
- You feel a slight heaviness just below your eyes—a thickness filled with "winning," "smiting your enemies," suspicion and, behind all that, fear.

The second way—*letting the power flow through you* instead of trying to keep it—you may observe:

- Your chest opening up, "bursting" with enthusiasm
- You breathe more deeply and easily; a buoyancy lifts your spirits
- Your face and eyes light up, and your upper eyelids seem to get larger and full of joy
- Courage, Will, Persistence, facing challenges—all of it becomes less heavy and effort-filled

The result of the second way is to place the grandness, the importance, the gravitas into the mission and out of you. That, in turn, gives you the quiet wisdom and satisfaction of being in service to something greater than yourself.

That's what shines forth from Amanda, Debra, and anyone who cherishes honor and worthiness above self-aggrandizement. By the way, the second half of Bach's Overture (after 3:28) is marked *Vivace*—lively! This is the part where you go forward with joy and purpose on your mission. If you try to do that after hearing the *Grave* section as an ode to your ego-glory, you'll resent the forward motion: it will feel as if no one appreciates you, that people aren't paying enough attention to you.

Here's one stanza from Amanda Gorman's poem, "The Hill We Climb."
*We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it,
Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy.
And this effort very nearly succeeded.
But while democracy can be periodically delayed,
It can never be permanently defeated.*

And here's a quote of Debra Rhode from Clay Risen's January 18, 2021 obituary in *The New York Times*:
"Enduring satisfaction," she writes, "is most often a byproduct of participating in worthwhile activities that do not have happiness as their primary goal. Ultimate fulfillment comes from a sense of remaining true to core ideals and principles, and of using life for something of value that outlasts it."