

Vanity

It crept back into mind during my last visit to the gym, mid-set as I watched my reflection during a final set of curls. My sleeves bunched up near my shoulders so I could start to see the veins in my upper arms. I liked how it looked, too much so. There'd been countless hours of my life, if not days, spent watching myself in the mirror doing that specific exercise, all the while its functional purpose unknown.

I let the sleeves fall back down my arms, and scanned the mirror for others giving themselves the same checkout. Most unapologetic was a mulleted man doing some pull ups shirtless at the opposite end of the gym, loving his physique. Every inch of the walls was covered with mirrors. He surely appreciated it. They motivated me, too, to do a few more sets if the "pump" hadn't yet hit. A positive effect, of the vanity I wasn't proud of. In the background I watched the gym manager inform the mullet man of the no shirt no service policy. With an angry sigh he pulled the shirt back over his head, letting it rest on his shoulders, still keeping his chest and stomach bare. He was committed to his vanity - unapologetic. I was a little jealous, but also felt some pity.

Vanity, defined. "Excessive pride in or admiration of one's own appearance or achievements" I'm not sure I agree with *excessive*. It's been top of mind lately - catching myself motivated by it like this and still judging others for the same.

Another example. I'm 26 now and still play at least two baseball games every weekend, sometimes four. But joy only comes from a multihit game, or just briefly for a runner caught stealing... nothing else. My friends have all hung up the cleats for good, and I'm left with a bunch of 40-somethings who just can't let it go. Their intensity is something I would've appreciated in the past, but now it feels a bit...*showy*. They carry themselves with a cringeworthy bravado, and yell at each other for not uncommon mistakes on the field. They're invested - their pride palpable after each win. Our bodies are all past their prime, mine maybe more recently than theirs, but the sport hurts us all the same. So as I stand there in the outfield waiting for some action I'm left with plenty of time to think, and lately I've been wondering, why is it we still play this game? My mind quickly goes defensive, drawing some distinction between me and them right away. It's clearly a prop to their egos, a demonstration of their masculinity (except when tears flow after big losses), an exercise for their unusual athleticism (for their age), and a good excuse to dress up in a cool costume (our New York Mets replica uniforms are cool to the diehard fan). The common thread there sure feels like vanity. But what about me, why do I play? I'm not that vain. I don't like the uniform - it's embarrassing getting asked if I play for the Mets on the train ride to every game. And I'm well aware my athleticism is on a steady decline. But my ego...I do feel a nice boost after a good day at the plate, and quite the low after a K looking. So maybe it's all the same...

But what, if anything, do I enjoy that doesn't give my ego a boost? Or the opposite, what do I dread for any other reason other than its threat to my ego? We like what we're good at, and dread what we're not. So when's it become *excessive*, and am I a narcissist?

Back to the definition. An alternative: “an often unjustified feeling of being pleased with oneself or with one's situation or achievements”. Basically just a substitution of “unjustified” for “excessive”, but still fairly subjective. To be vain then, the pride has to be over-the-top, unregulated, out of proportion. But who's to make that call? Odds are it's someone less prideful, meek or timid. They have *humility*.

So which am I? Overly pleased with myself or meek? Maybe both - two versions of self pulling hard from one another, tension between these two triggering this rumination in the first place. One version takes pride in its work and skips self-doubt, taking risks of all kinds. The other - shy, decidedly doubtful, not willing to go out on a limb. Worst of all, it's judgmental, hating vain for that *excessive* pride.

It's jealous, like me, of that mulleted man.