

Feeling anxious and underappreciated? Maybe stop trying to be great

Joe Humphreys Unthinkable

Avram Alpert's new book makes the case for a 'good enough' life

Arthur Schopenhauer believed you had to choose between two things in this world: solitude or vulgarity. You can see his point. Either step back from society or compromise yourself.

The world is imperfect and trying to carve out a career, or social status, requires daily trade-offs. Getting ahead typically means reconciling yourself with the values of the marketplace.

Writer Avram Alpert was confronted with this dilemma recently when reflecting on his goals in life. At different times, he wanted to be a rich stockbroker, a famous athlete, an acclaimed author and a globetrotting professor — and, while he has come closer to achieving the latter than the others, "it hasn't made me any more satisfied or happier", he says.

"I think that's because, while all of these different goals have different values attached to them, they share the basic aspiration: to become a member of the elite, sitting atop a social pyramid."

The answer, he believes, is not to go full-Schopenhauer and opt out of society entirely but rather to lower the bar. Instead of seeking "greatness" aim for "good enough".

Alpert borrows the idea from the

British paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott who coined the phrase the "good enough" parent in defence of the imperfect. In *The Good-Enough Life*, Alpert applies the measure to work, relationships and politics. The idea is not to lower expectations but to have a realistic view of what is achievable, while questioning whether the world itself is "good enough" in terms of how society operates.

With admirable frankness, he writes: "I cannot help but want my book to receive recognition and awards, because my getting one of the few jobs available in my field depends on it. I'd rather sit atop a crumbling pyramid than get crushed at the bottom. But if these are the only options for intellectual work today, then our situation is far from good enough."

Obsessing about greatness, he argues, "has given us an epidemic of stress, anxiety, inequality and ecological damage". He explains further as this week's Unthinkable guest.

Have human beings always put pressure on themselves to be great or is it something this generation is particularly anxious about?

Avram Alpert: "It's hard to generalise. Certainly many cultures across time and space have encouraged some form of greatness — be that economic or heroic or political greatness. Some human groups have not. One famous example is the Ju/'hoansi people of the Kalahari Desert, who hold so steadfastly to egalitarian social relations that the tendency in response to a great act — killing a giraffe to feed others, say — is met with mockery and light derision to keep the hunter from getting a big head.



■ Only so many can win awards: There is always more talent than available recognition. PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

"Many societies today have in some sense 'democratised' greatness and suggested that anyone can compete for a spot at the top of the hierarchy. But of course, you can't actually democratise greatness; power and wealth are by definition relative goods.

"What we've created is a system that promises possibilities it can't in fact deliver. There is a perpetual contradiction between actually-entrenched hierarchies and our democratic and egalitarian impulses. And this contradiction produces somewhat endless anxiety."

How does the scramble for 'positional goods' generate stress? And is lowering your ambitions the only way out of it?

"Positional goods are all those perks beyond the material economy: things like attention, recognition, status, leadership positions, and so forth. At least in theory, it is perfectly feasible to have a much more

egalitarian material economy. But how to have an egalitarian positional economy, that's a very difficult matter, because there are inherent limits to status and attention.

"There are many brilliant writers and scientists who, because of various life circumstances, will never wind up fully developing their talents. And of those who do, only so many can win awards or rise on the best-seller lists. There is always more talent than available recognition.

"We need general knowledge of the fact that there are always more talented people than there are positional goods in a society, and that those who get some of them are not necessarily the best. We might then build that recognition into our award and attention systems by thinking about how to redistribute these things.

"Rather than lowering our personal ambitions, I would suggest re-channeling their energies: how can you work with

others to help make a world that recognises the virtues and capacities of everyone?"

"Politically, we might try more participatory democracy. Businesses might think about more co-operative or rotational leadership structures. Award committees might focus on unnoticed talents and not give the same person reward after reward.

"Socially, we might find meaningful ways to recognise different kinds of contributions to society like by those who are caring and decent as much as intellectual or entrepreneurial.

"In a good-enough society, you might still scramble for a little more recognition, but you would know that not getting it doesn't make you a failure; that getting it doesn't make you more valuable than others, and that, whatever side you fall on, you will live no more and no less than a decent and meaningful life."

How much is 'good enough' in terms of material wealth or luxury? Is, for example, taking more than one overseas holiday a year too much?

"The 'good' part is important. In a good-enough world, it's not just that your basic needs would be met, but that you would actually have a decent place to live, exciting food to eat, good quality health-care, and, yes, leisure time. One of the points I make in the book is that we currently are so skewed toward the few that we don't really know what a fully good-enough world that makes decent lives for all could look like.

"Perhaps the increased social cohesion, trust, and participation — all central elements for innovation and wellbeing — could lead to remarkable breakthroughs. Of course, we don't live in that world yet.

And in our current societies, these questions are tricky and dynamic.

"Cost of living varies dramatically, so no number for 'enoughness' is exact. Nor is this really up to individuals. Your taking or not taking a vacation doesn't really change the economic structure. A billionaire could give away all their money tomorrow, but it wouldn't put a dent in inequality.

"The better thing to do might be to strategically invest in groups or organisations or projects that are fighting for decency and sufficiency for all. Or just pay a roughly equal wage in your company — and if you are a public company distribute stock options evenly — and don't become a billionaire in the first place."

What are the political implications of a philosophy of 'good enough'? Is it revolutionary or conservative?

"I think there is a lot of overlap across the political spectrum about good enough in terms of values. Conservatives and progressives tend to agree about things like humility, co-operation, basic human decency, dignity, leisure, not having people starve or go without care, and so forth. So the basic good-enough philosophy is rather universal.

"Where there tends to be more disagreement is in two empirical areas. One is economic: do we need inequality in order to grow the economy enough to the point of having abundance for all? And the other is political: can one nation achieve decency for itself while others fail? And I think both questions have been answered empirically, and the data backs up the progressive position."

The Good-Enough Life by Avram Alpert is published by Princeton University Press