



Neighborhood Unitarian
Universalist Church

Spirituality of Humility

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This is one of my favorite sayings: "There is no limit to what you can accomplish, as long as you don't care who gets the credit." When I looked up on-line who the saying is attributed to, it's fitting that I found at least eight people who said some version of it: Emerson, Truman, Kennedy, people like this. A month ago, I set about asking folks for stories that exemplify this saying for today's sermon about humility. Humility is April's worship theme of the month.

I asked my family, I asked friends, I looked for stories on-line. I didn't find any stories though. It finally dawned on me, that no, of course I'm not going to find stories about people not taking credit, because the whole point of not taking credit is that you require no notoriety and therefore do not go down in history.

Other than the usual suspects, people like Jesus, Gandhi, and Rumi, it's hard to find stories of humility about ordinary people. What *is* humility, anyway? I've often thought it's hard for religious liberals to define humility, but perhaps it's hard for anyone. As someone on our staff commented, "I know it when I see it, and I know it when I don't see it." The people I asked for stories were quick to say, no stories of humility come to mind, but I sure do have stories of people with NO humility.

If you watched the Olympics a few months ago, who could forget the arrogance of Russian ice skater Evgeni Plushenko, and his response to winning Silver, or, to not winning the Gold. On the medal platforms he had the audacity to step up to the gold level platform for a moment, and then he invented and awarded himself the 'Platinum Medal' on his web site. The American Gold Medalist, Evan Lysacek, by contrast, showed his humility when he was interviewed by Bob Costas: He said, "My goal of this Olympic Games was to come in and have two great performances, and to surpass my personal best score . . . Whatever happened, whether I won a medal or not, I was going to be 100% satisfied with my experience here in Vancouver."

I remember I was so impressed with Lysacek when I saw that interview, and it made me think of what a strength humility can be, paradoxically, in the context of competition. But I was grateful to Lysacek too, for showing the world that we Americans are not all as arrogant as much of the world must think us to be. When Stephen Colbert was asked in an interview, "How do the Olympics rank among patriotic events?" the answer of his Comedy Central character illustrates what I mean: He said, "Number one: Winter Olympics. Number two: Summer Olympics. Third would be Fourth of July. People say America doesn't make anything anymore. We still make war - that's a growth industry for us. But we can't go to war with every country all at once. The Olympics gives us the opportunity to do that."¹

The Olympics epitomize the rampantly competitive world we live in, and as the population grows, it only seems to get worse. I worry about what our young people have to face, and how it affects their character. Where and how can they learn that humility is actually one of the best leadership skills you can have? It encourages me greatly to see some of the teenagers who grew up in this church, like Ellen Smrekar in the Big Saturday video, show that she understands this cardinal concept of leadership - that we accomplish so much more as a group than as individuals.

Such understanding goes to the heart of a healthy ego development, and I'd like to spend some time explaining what I mean by that. To do so, I'll need to go off in what may seem like a very different direction.

Since I'm short on other people's stories today, I'm going to have to share some of my own story, and it might make turn a little red, and that's okay. It would be humbling enough to tell you I'm an AA member, but perhaps it's an even deeper exercise in humility to admit to being an AA drop-out. I started going to AA meetings in Spring of 2002, during my second year of Seminary. There was actually a joke in my Seminary that if your life doesn't turn upside down while you train for ministry, you're probably not the real deal. I took that to heart, and admitted to being an alcoholic,

¹ *Rolling Stone* Issue 1098 February 18, 2010, p. 28

that my life had become unmanageable, that I was ready for something new. In the years that followed, I learned so much. I learned about myself and my family, I grew up a lot, I learned how to take responsibility for myself, and best of all, I learned all about humility. I did not, however, learn how to stay sober for the rest of my life, and I finally decided that wasn't really what I wanted.

I have so much respect for the 12 steps, and it's of great comfort to know that my people are always there for me should I need to return. Meanwhile, I continue to use many of the tools I learned to use there, and as I said, the best tool is humility.

Humility has as many dimensions to it as interpretations. But it's become the foundation of my ministry. It's ironic, because Unitarian Universalism is quite fond of the many dimensions of self-reliance, of putting faith in the individual to address life's challenges, and to learn how to live best. But I've found that self-reliance and the needs of the ego are easy to get mixed up. The less I rely on myself, and the more I acknowledge that I'm only a small part of something far greater, the better off I am. The more I seek the wisdom of others and the wisdom of God, the more I acknowledge that I have much, much more to learn, the safer and more at peace I feel.

My faith in God is really a function of humility. Paradoxically, I feel empowered when I ask for God's will to be done before my own will. I still say the 3rd Step prayer every time before I speak from this pulpit. I say it in my head,

God, I offer myself to thee, to build with me and to do with me as thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I may serve by thy Power, thy Love, and thy Way of Life. May I do thy will always!

There are many other ways I call on humility for ministry, especially in the development of programs and leadership. But I'm conscious of not wanting a sermon on humility to be all about me. Here is a wonderful Taoist interpretation of leadership by the father of Taoism, Lao-Tsu:

"A leader is best when people barely know that she exists. Less good when they obey and acclaim her. Worse when they fear and despise her. Fail to honor people, and they fail to honor you. But of a good leader, when her work is done, her aim fulfilled, they will say, 'We did this ourselves.'"

Humility is recognized as one of the ten principles of mindful leadership by Michael Carroll. In his book *The Mindful Leader*, he writes, "When we are humble, no experience is beneath us, no colleague is unworthy, no moment does not merit our full attention. Because we are humble, we do not pick and choose - savoring only the tasty parts of life and leaving the rest for others. We are willing to experience the entire situation directly and work with every detail.

Ironically, [he goes on] when we are willing to drop our pretense . . . we also see others' nakedness as well, which is very organic, raw, and penetrating. To a great degree, all of us don costumes to conceal our vulnerability - to cover up our humanity - and we often do not want to be seen. We feel we have warts of all kinds that should be kept under cover. But for mindful leaders, our humility introduces us to the nakedness of social exchanges. The new sales rep scared to make a mistake, the taxi driver proud of his new cab, the brash creative director overselling her idea, the gracious business owner, the swaggering lawyer - our humility savors each nuance thoroughly with fresh and unclouded eyes, and everything is evident and appreciated."²

Dropping our pretenses does take courage, and it's part of that healthy ego-development I mentioned before. Humility is about knowing who we are, warts and all. We can't *show* who we really are until we *know* who we really are. This often takes work, like the 12 steps take work. While the predisposition toward alcoholism, in my family and in myself, might seem like a pretty big wart, I've come to accept it as part of my story, as part of who I am. In other words, I forgive myself for having flaws, for being human. Forgiveness is a very important aspect of humility, and it's the basis of Christian thought, that we can forgive ourselves because God forgives us.

² [The Mindful Leader](#) by Michael Carrol, 2007, pp. 143 - 144

But it's this kind of thinking that can make religious liberals' skin crawl: we're not forgivable because God says so, we're just plain forgivable! Again, it's the *function* of humility that matters. What counts is that we find a way to forgive ourselves and love ourselves, just as we are. What matters is we find a way to know ourselves well enough that we appreciate who we are: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Because when we do, we find that we don't have to prove ourselves to anyone, and that makes humility a snap. Not having to prove yourself is a great gift of humility, but it is only the beginning of what spiritual gifts humility has to offer us.

The next best gift humility offers you is that, truly knowing yourself, you know how damned lucky you are. How fortunate you are to have the gifts, the talents, and blessings that you have in this life. I am humbled by all that I have: an amazing family and a terrific church community to serve. And I'm continually impressed that people who have much less, much less than any of us, can often see better than those with a lot, how very blessed they are, blessed to have what they do have.

If we wanted to get uber-spiritual, we would think about how humility is about knowing that no one is beneath you, that we're all children of God. Unitarian Universalists by and large are most comfortable expressing this idea through our First Principle: that we acknowledge the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. The Buddhists express it by identifying the self as an illusion, that the ego is an illusion that imprisons us.

Nurturing and growing our humility is really the key to great freedom. But we're still not to what, in my mind, is *the* greatest gift of humility. It is this: knowing how blessed you are is what enables you to take notice that so many others are not as blessed, and that *this* is why it's so important to be of service in the world. To have real awareness and compassion, and to really *want* to help others and be of service is *the* best gift of humility.

Sometimes we want to be of service so we look good, so others can see how good and virtuous we are. That's when we want credit for our good deeds. But we are truly doing a good deed when we don't need the credit, when notoriety has nothing to do with the change we are trying to create in the world, with the problems we are trying to solve, one problem at a time.

To be of true service doesn't mean you have to be like Mother Theresa, or Gandhi, or Martin Luther King. This isn't about sainthood. There are countless ways we can become better people, thereby improving the world. For instance, you can become a better person simply by becoming a better listener. This is the last thing I will say humility is about: humility is about being a good listener.

We have some very wise elders in this church, and I got to meet with one of them in her home this week. She told me that a theologian once said that God is found when two people are really listening to one another. That's a definition of God that religious liberals can live with, because we like to do a lot of talking. But we listen best when we acknowledge that no one is beneath us, no person or circumstance. We listen best when we know we still have a lot to learn.

Religious liberals are also doers, and Big Saturday is a good example of the kinds of service projects we like to do. My favorite part of Big Saturday is that we don't go to a school to beautify it by ourselves, we go together with the whole community: with the teachers of the school, the students, the students' families and neighbors, and many others. Big Saturday is full of leaders who don't need the credit, and because of this, there is no limit to what can be accomplished.

We can say the same thing about this church: Neighborhood Church is full of leaders who don't need the credit, and that is why we as a church community continue to serve each other and the larger community of which we are a part, year after year.

Are you a leader? Every one of us is a leader because we have to lead ourselves. The good news about humility is that it's anything but a lonely enterprise. As they say in AA, being honest about who we really are requires another human being, someone to listen. Let us find those ears and let us be those ears.

May our many manifestations of leadership grow ever mindful, that our humility and service to the world manifests infinitely. There is no limit to what we can accomplish.