

Rediscovering Humility

Small Groups: October 2013

Could humility be quickly becoming a lost virtue? Traditionally, humility has been seen as a prerequisite to the development of other virtues, such as kindness, honesty, loyalty, and compassion. Yet, today humility is spoken of less and less. A few years ago, Google released a database of over 5.2 million books written between 1500 and 2008. The database is easily searchable and since its release several researchers have measured the increase or decline in certain words. In a recent article, "What Our Words Tell Us," New York Times columnist David Brooks quotes research that shows that many words associated with moral virtue have been in decline. For example, the study showed that humility words like "humbleness" and "modesty" declined by 52% during the 20th century. (Unfortunately, words like "kindness" and "helpfulness" fared even worse).

Why would this be? Why the decline in interest in humility? First, take a moment to ask yourself, "What is the first thing that comes to mind when I hear the word humility?" Humility is often misunderstood. It frequently becomes associated with weakness, servitude, humiliation, or letting people walk all over you. With these mis-associations, it's no wonder why we might want to forget about it. However, true humility is not selflessness or weakness. It actually occupies the space in between *ish-ness* and *self-less-ness*. It is a virtue that helps balance an awareness of our own needs with a desire to understand and support others' needs. In this way, humility guards against both arrogance and self-denial. It supports both a healthy sense of self and respect and care for others that helps us to develop stronger and more positive relationships.

Another reason why humility might be falling out of favor is that it seems incompatible with many of our contemporary preoccupations, including social and economic status as well as an encouragement to material self indulgence. The Google book database also reflects these trends. Words that have grown in use over the century are ones associated with individualism, individual success and virtues most related to economic output. Brooks names a few of these including "I come first" "standout" "I can do it myself" "discipline" and "dependability." This trend doesn't surprise me. Our society prizes material and professional success and the practice of quickly satisfying every want we have. However, overindulgence and the pursuit of rank actually inhibits the development of humility, because it encourages us to be overly focused on ourselves, as well as judgmental about our position in relations to others. Humility, meanwhile, encourages a healthy appreciation for one's self and a desire to understand and be in good relationship with others.

Unitarian Universalist Minister, Forrest Church points out, the word humility shares the same root as that for human, humane, humanity and even humus (rich soil). It is a virtue that draws us to others, and actually can draw others to us, because humility requires an understanding of life's worth - including one's own worth.

By forgetting humility, we may be unwittingly replacing it with virtues and characteristics that increase our isolation and distance us from one another. This is why this month, we are looking at rediscovering humility, understanding it better and working to nurture it in our lives and community.

Yours,
Rev. Susan

Living the Theme: Engaging Humility

Use these exercises to reflect on how humility shows up in your life, and also how humility *needs* to show up in your life. Choose one of the exercises below to engage with and practice the work of rediscovering humility. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to practice humility and what you learned from the practice.

Exercise # 1 Do Good In Secret

“Do Good in Secret” is one of the rules for daily living from the Aikido branch that follows the teachings of Tohei Sensei. There is an aspect of humility that invites us to connect to, care about, even do good for others with no desire for recognition or appreciation. Find a way to do something nice for someone without them knowing you did it. Be creative. Think about ways you might be able to give a gift, offer support, or help someone without it being known you gave the gift. Reflect on how you feel in doing this. Did you miss being thanked? Did it feel differently to you to do it in secret? How?

Exercise # 2 Catch Yourself in a Moment of Arrogance or Self-Denial

Is it too much to say, we all have moments when we are too fond of our perspective, too assured of our abilities, as well as moments when we are too hard on ourselves and too dismissive of our goodness? Try to catch yourself in a moment when you believe yourself to walk on water, or to not be worthy of love. In what kinds of areas of your life (work, relationships, competition) do you see these thoughts or feelings emerge? What does that tell you? When they do emerge, do you try to self correct by telling yourself the opposite, or can you find a middle ground, owning your gifts, owning your own worth, while also seeing yourself as one among many in being gifted and worthy. Reflect on what happens in these moments? Write about if you wish, or ponder how to cultivate a balanced perspective.

Exercise # 3 How to Treat Yourself; How to Treat Others

Humility is about understanding the value of all life including your own. Treating other people, regardless of economic status, or profession, or ability – from the check out person, receptionist, homeless person, to your coworker or boss – treating each person with equal dignity and respect is a sign of humility. In a similar way, humility is marked by an ability to separate needs from wants. It grows when we don’t constantly give into our own whims. Pay attention to how you treat others, does it vary depending on who they are? Try interacting with a store clerk as if that person were your boss. Or, pay attention to how you respond to your own wants (as opposed to needs) and whims. Spend a day or a week trying to refrain from unhealthy or superficial indulgences.

Some Questions to Think and Talk About

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into - and break open - your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. Has your view of humility changed as you've grown older?

Does it mean something different to you now than it did 10 years ago? 20 years ago? Or how about even last year? And if it has changed, why? And maybe even most importantly, how has that change changed you?

2. Have you ever had a hard time drawing the line between humility and humiliation?

We all seem to understand that pride is the opposite of humility, but being a doormat is also the opposite of humility? Have you ever been seduced into believing that "staying small" or "sacrificing yourself" is virtuous? Who or what helps you learn that one can be humble and worthy at the same time? Or are you still trying to learn that?

3. Has humility ever been dangerous for you?

Humble people are honest about their flaws, but being honest about your flaws also leaves you vulnerable. Has your willingness to be self-effacing ever got you stomped on? Has your willingness to be meek ever resulted in you getting manipulated? What have you learned about the importance of being "selectively humble"?

4. Do think humility is different for men and women?

Are the costs or perceptions of humility different for one sex than they are for the other? What about the dangers? The rewards?

5. Are you happy with your ability to ask for advice or take criticism?

When was the last time you genuinely asked for advice or were truly glad for "constructive criticism"? And if you can't remember the last time, what's up with that?

6. Have you mastered the humility of withholding judgment?

In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey tells of being on a subway when a man enters with two rowdy, ill-behaved boys. Covey, with not so disguised frustration, asks the man why he doesn't address the boys' behavior. The man tells him that they are returning from the hospital where their mother had died the hour before. In this second, Covey's perception is widened and humbled. Have you ever wished you had the wisdom to humbly withhold judgment?

8. When you're hurting, do you humbly ask for help or proudly put on a smiley face and hide your pain?

No comments are needed; just reflect on the question...

9. Has your lack of humility ever made you miss out?

Whether it's dance lessons, learning to ski, risking a date or going back to school later in life, we all have things that we don't do for fear of "looking silly" or "lacking control." But one wonders if it's really worth the price?

10. Are both pride and insecurity obstacles to humility? Is one more of an obstacle for you?

In her article, "Humility: How Can You Have It?" Elizabeth Harrell says that both pride and insecurity present roadblocks to developing humility because they both reflect an unhealthy self-centeredness. What do you think? If you tried to develop more humility, would you have to build more self-confidence or more awareness of other's needs? Has this changed over time? Do you have a different answer in your personal life compared to your professional life, with friends compared to with family?

12. Our contemporary society praises and prizes the attainment of material wealth. It also encourages self-indulgence. We are not entirely free of these expectations. What are some ways in which we can reconcile these values and at the same time nurture and maintain a personal spirit of humility?

Recommended Resources

These are not required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

The best (man)* is like water.
Water is good; it benefits all things and does not
compete with them.
It dwells in (lowly) places that all disdain.
This is why it is so near to Tao.
- The Way of Lao-tzu, 8

“It is unwise to be too sure of one’s own wisdom. It
is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might
weaken and the wisest might err.”
- Mahatma Gandhi

Fullness of knowledge always means some under-
standing of the depths of our ignorance; and that is
always conducive to humility and reverence.
- Robert Millikan

The Reverend Barbara Wells ten Hove (UU)
learned about humility from her father:
“To be humble, he told me, was to remain teach-
able. Whenever we think we know it all, real humili-
ty reminds us to stay open and willing to learn.”

“Part of being humble is understanding that you
will make mistakes. Understand this, and under-
stand that everyone else makes mistakes, and you
will have a heavy burden lifted off of you.”
-eHow, Internet advice site

"All AA progress can be reckoned in terms of just
two words. Humility and responsibility. Our whole
spiritual development can be accurately measured
by our degree of adherence to these magnificent
standards." – Bill Wilson, co-founder AA

“Christianity, with its doctrine of humility, of for-
giveness, of love, is incompatible with the state,
with its haughtiness, its violence, its punishment and
its wars.” – Leo Tolstoy

“What does the Lord require of you? To do justice,
to love kindness and to walk humbly with your
God.” - Micah 6:8

First Humility

All systems of thought
that clog our minds with theories
that ignore this earth
are counterfeit.
Let us not endure
a slow poison of words
until our myths and inventions
and work and deeds
hide the source of life.

We are a people of words
and words are important
but the first humility
must be before this earth
which gives us life
sustains and feeds us.
Our earth has been photographed from the moon
and we have dipped our hands in the sea
walked over curved hills
listened to silence of forests.
Out of the earth we have come,
to ignore it is death.
It is to wager your life.
You bet your life
it is!

- by Rev. Sam Wright (UU)

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot
change, courage to change the things I can, and
wisdom to know the difference.”

– The Serenity Prayer, Reinhold Niebuhr.
(sometimes “knowing the difference” is a lot
harder than it sounds)

–Small Group Ministry Facilitator

"If you want to make God laugh, tell him your
plans." – credited to Woody Allen and other sources

“Humility: that state of grace wherein I know deep
inside that I am neither even the tiniest bit better or
the tiniest bit worse than anyone else.”

–Small Group Ministry Facilitator

“Level 5 leaders are differentiated from other levels of leaders in that they have a wonderful blend of personal humility combined with extraordinary professional will. Understand that they are very ambitious; but their ambition, first and foremost, is for the company’s success. They realize that the most important step they must make to become a Level 5 leader is to subjugate their ego to the company’s performance. When asked for interviews, these leaders will agree only if it’s about the company and not about them.”

- Jim Collins, author of Good to Great

“Ideally, the modest person values him or herself but is not preoccupied with self, is not self-consumed and is not full of self-pride. She is receptive to and respectful of others, experiences them as valuable fellow humans, and is non-judgmental in her dealings with them. She is present in the moment. This is made manifest by unpretentious, unassuming and genuine interaction with others that is not based upon preconceptions.”

- Small Group Ministry Facilitator

Living a life of humility is basic to living a life of sobriety, and I'm sure other recovery programs, too. The 7th step, especially, talks about it. Here are some (paraphrased) quotes from the readings on that step:

"To get completely away from our aversion to the idea of being humble, to gain a vision of humility as the avenue to true freedom of the human spirit, to be willing to work for humility as something to be desired for itself, takes most of us a long, long time."

"We saw we needn't always be bludgeoned and beaten into humility. It could come quite as much from our voluntary reaching for it as it could from unremitting suffering. A great turning point in our lives came when we sought for humility as something we really wanted, rather than as something we MUST have."

- Small Group Ministry Facilitator

If we take ourselves too seriously we can't be humble. To take ourselves so seriously means we are trying to hold onto permanence, to solidity, and we are resisting change. Finding lightheartedness in recognizing our own deficits is an antidote to shame. -Worship Associate

“One of the most important lessons I have learned by working in the sciences is how to listen. Whatever we think we may know, there will be more information out there to prove us wrong, fine-tune our understanding, or show us that we were working within an incomplete paradigm. To find the truth, to accept change and ambiguity, we must listen. Once we begin to listen to what our experiences and observations can tell us it becomes clear that we know so little. And that is humbling.”

- Worship Associate

“If we want to truly touch people and do the works of social justice we have to put behind a sense of elitism that sometimes comes with engaging in social justice or believing we know what is best. A sense of moral high ground is destructive to the practice of civil inclusion.” - Roger Fisher, “A Case for Humility”

“If we are to become our best selves we have to be humble enough to look at our deficits. Vulnerability and humility go hand-in-hand. Similarly, if we want to be the most effective at supporting other people we have to be humble enough to listen, to consider their viewpoints and consider that ours aren't the "best" or only ones. And this means no shortcuts - the journey to finding your best self is long. That too is humbling. Even once you recognize an area for development it takes time to develop and nurture it.” -Worship Associate

“You need humility in order to learn and grow. When I've taken an arrogant attitude (which can be a particular pitfall in talking about politics), I'm closed to others and to seeing how things could change in my life. It's hard to grow in wisdom if you can't see your pitfalls. But for me, seeing those areas that need improvement can devolve into self-bashing-- which is a kind of false humility. Like arrogance, beating myself up sets me apart from others rather than drawing me closer. The thinking is : I should be better than this--never mind that everyone else has similar struggles. The person who is living with true humility has the courage to look at her deficits but isn't paralyzed or mired in them.

- Worship Associate

Online Articles, Videos and Podcasts

Humility: How Can You Have It?

6 Results Of Developing Humility

By Elizabeth Harrell

http://www.lifescrypt.com/soul/self/growth/humility_how_can_you_have_it.aspx?gclid=COig3tnFgLMCFOSf4AodX1gAyw&trans=1&du=1&ef_id=e-pOYu8kmEQAAMOS%3a20121014124949%3as

What Our Words Tell Us

By David Brooks

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/opinion/brooks-what-our-words-tell-us.html?_r=0

A Case for Humility by Roger Fisher

Commission for Social Justice Educator's blog

<http://acpacsje.wordpress.com/2013/05/28/a-case-for-humility-by-roger-fisher/>

Movies

Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones

(2002 PG 142 minutes)

Searching for Bobby Fischer

(1993 PG 109 minutes)