

## “Save Room For Humble Pie” by Dan Lillie

### Not My Proudest Moment

I'm going to tell you a story. Please don't judge me too harshly. Keep in mind, I was much younger; and I fully admit, this is not my proudest moment. I was driving, and I had just left my house. As I navigated my way out of my neighborhood, I pulled up to a stop sign where my small residential street crossed a higher-traffic street, and I had to wait for traffic to clear in both directions before I could go. While I was waiting, a car pulled up behind me. After a few seconds, the car honked at me. There was still traffic coming from both directions of the busy street. There was no way I could go. The car behind me honked again. Furious, I rolled down my window, leaned out, turned around, and with both arms fully extended, proceeded to *gesture* to the honking driver with both hands. When I turned back around, a clearing in the traffic had come, and I indignantly floored the gas pedal and sped away, still fuming.

Wait, there's more. As I picked up speed, I thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye, in the rearview. I scanned my mirror for what might have caused the flash of a movement I thought I saw. Not seeing anything obvious, I returned my eyes to the road in front of me. Then it happened again; a flash of movement in the rearview mirror. This time, I looked back quickly enough to see a shoe bouncing down the middle of the road behind me. Not just a shoe, my shoe; one of a pair that I had left on the roof of my car to free my hands so I could unlock the door. The two flashes of movement in the rearview, were the two shoes I had left on top of my car when I left my house. They were the shoes that were still on the roof of my car as I pulled up to a stop sign and waited to cross traffic at a busy street. They are the shoes that the driver behind me noticed, and wanted to let me know about by honking his horn to get my attention. What a thoughtful, helpful gesture. And I reciprocated with a gesture of my own. Two gestures, actually... Like I said, not my proudest moment.

In fact, this was an embarrassing and humbling moment. I was so sure that my interpretation of the moment was true, that the person behind me was honking because they were impatient. I didn't even question this thought. It just occurred

to me and I believed it. Really, it doesn't make much sense. Why would they honk for me to go when there was clearly traffic preventing me from doing so?

In hindsight, it's pretty clear that I was projecting my own impatience onto the honking motorist behind me. And my reaction to this assumption was not good, even if it was not especially harmful. But this, I think, illustrates the danger in reacting to beliefs we carry without examining them, and their source. When we act without knowing why, it is far more likely that we will do something we're not proud of. It is far more likely that we will do something that is harmful to ourselves or others. This is one reason why it is good to be humble.

### **Being Full (of Ourselves)**

With the Thanksgiving holiday approaching, I'm looking forward to gathering with family and friends around a table filled with delicious food. There will be turkey, of course, and probably ham. Definitely mashed potatoes; green bean casserole; stuffing; cranberry sauce; steamed veggies; salad. So many wonderful dishes! And I will probably eat too much.

Being full isn't a good feeling. It's pretty uncomfortable. And every year as I'm holding my empty plate, about to fill it with the delicious goodness in various casserole dishes and serving platters, I tell myself, "Ok, just go easy. Don't eat too much." Somehow, though, the pile of mashed potatoes ends up bigger than I intended, and there is one more slice of turkey on my plate than I really needed.

When it comes time for dessert, I don't even pretend. I know I'm getting three slices of pie; pumpkin, pecan, and chocolate; how do you choose?

It is always delicious; and yet, stuffed to the brim, I always, think, "next year, I'm going to show a little more restraint."

Just like when we over-eat, being full of ourselves isn't good either. Filling our egos with certainty and righteousness, having too much "knowing" and not enough "wondering" leaves us without room for curiosity, for uncertainty, and for the unknown; it leaves us without anywhere to put the delicious mysterious morsels that life offers us. We would do well to save a little room for humble pie. (Three slices, to be exact.)

The summer before last, I was selected to represent my seminary on the New Faces of Ministry Tour. My purpose on this tour was to drive across the Southwest and Midwest on a three-week road trip, meeting with congregations, schools, and service organizations about the connection between service work and ministry. On a stop at a college campus in Oklahoma, I found myself talking to members of a Christian student organization. They had set up a table in the student commons and were attempting to recruit new members, so I approached them and began a discussion. As they excitedly shared the many ways in which they were spreading the truth of the gospel, a thought occurred to me: where did their belief in Jesus begin? How far back could they trace their beliefs? Where did they originate from? So, I asked. Many of the students were confused by the question. Their understanding of Jesus and the Bible simply *was true*; it didn't matter how they knew it to be so. The question seemed irrelevant to them. It didn't make sense. All that mattered was their being right.

### **Beliefs Affect Our Actions**

In the song we just heard by Damien Rice, we are asked to consider just how dangerous self-righteousness can be when carried to its extreme: "and I have hated, I have lied/ been guilty and denied/ I've dismissed the ones who question me/ declaring I am right"

Our beliefs matter. Our theologies matter. It is not enough to know what we believe, to be able to articulate our ideas about what the divine is, or *if* the divine is; we must also look at why we hold that belief, exploring its origin and formation within ourselves; examining how it was planted, and how it has been cultivated. And we must be accountable for our theologies. Beyond understanding what and why we believe, we are responsible for knowing what our beliefs are capable of doing in the world; what we are capable of doing because of the beliefs we hold; we must know who they are affecting and how; and we must be willing to be held accountable for the results of our active theologies; for they are not beliefs, they are our identities, our selves. We must own our actions. We must own our theologies. We must own our identities.

And, we must hold them lightly.

Humility creates space inside us to allow for what we don't know; for uncertainty. It prevents the grip of ego and self-righteousness from gaining unwanted influence over us.

One definition of humility really resonates with me. It defines humility as "being open to the possibility that things are other than the way I think them to be."

"and I have carried on this war/ though no one wins an endless fight/ I have claimed that god is guiding me/ and killed to prove I'm right/ what if I'm wrong?"

What if I'm wrong?

What if the only justification I have for doing what I do is because God says so, and then it turns out that God doesn't exist?

This God cannot be an assumption. God can motivate me to act, but only with an awareness that this belief is influencing my actions. And, very importantly, I can not assume that the belief in God that I might hold (or disbelief in God, for that matter) is a belief that others should hold; or that others are expected to act the same way that I do. This applies to atheists too; they're not exempt from self-righteousness and ego. Remember, while there is no proof of God, God hasn't been disproven either.

In other words, humility means to acknowledge that your life experiences are true for you, and a basis for your beliefs; but they are not universal. To be open to learning about the experiences of others, to hear their truths and their stories; this is humility.

Humility also takes a certain amount of awareness and self-reflection. It requires an understanding of who we are, especially in relation to others. It requires that we recognize the power dynamics that exist between people, and upheld by systems. Humility requires that I recognize when certain voices don't get the same opportunity to speak as others. It requires that I recognize that just because someone's perspective isn't one I'm used to doesn't mean it isn't valid and true.

### **The Golden Rule vs The Platinum Rule**

In a TED talk called "Let's Revive the Golden Rule" Karen Armstrong says, "People have emphasized the importance of compassion not just because it sounds good, but because it works. People have found that when they have implemented the

Golden Rule... to do it all day and every day, you de-throne yourself from the center of your world, put another there, and you transcend yourself; and it brings you into the presence of what's been called God, Nirvana, Brahman, Tao...something that goes beyond what we know in our ego-bound existence."

I like her sentiment of transcending our egos to better connect with each other, our world, and perhaps even the divine. However, I'm not sure the Golden Rule is the most effective way to do this. I believe the Platinum Rule more appropriately captures what we are trying to achieve in our humility.

The Golden Rule is to treat others the way you want to be treated. The Platinum Rule, however, calls us to treat others as *they* want to be treated. See the difference? Rather than assume we know what is best for others, the platinum rule asks that we be humble enough to recognize the limitations of our own worldview; it asks that we don't assume our experiences translate to the lives of others. We don't assume that what we think, is what they should know.

I find that most people don't appreciate it when others force their perspectives on us; so why would we do that to others? This is a reason to be humble: to ensure we don't impose our beliefs on others. What if we approached each other with curiosity, rather than judgement?

### **Not If, but When...**

It's hard! When we *think we know* something, it is hard to hear that someone else's truth, knowledge, or experience contradicts our own. It's at these times when I hear Damien Rice's words in my head: What if I'm wrong?

In a community setting, like here at this church, we will all eventually be wrong. It's not a matter of if; it's a matter of when. Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, the pastor of House For All Sinners and Saints in Denver, addresses this in her new member classes. In her book *Pastrix*, she says of her new members, "This community will disappoint them. It's a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings. I then invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they'll stick around after it happens."

Rev. Nadia asks that when they are wronged, they stick it out.

Don't we take a similar approach, or shouldn't we? Don't we enter into relationships knowing that we are imperfect beings, one and all? That the covenants we make will be broken?

And, that our Unitarian Universalist tradition calls us to re-covenant. "Though you've broken your vows a thousand times... come, yet again, come." Come back into covenant, and come back into the beloved community.

So, why is humility a good thing?

Well, as we've already examined, a lack of humility can be embarrassing, and often, it can also be harmful. By fostering humility within ourselves, we can avoid some pitfalls that ego and self-righteousness bring about, and the barriers they create to cooperation.

There are also many more direct and personal benefits to being humble. A quick google search of "Why be humble?" turns up a number of articles providing reasons why we should adopt an attitude of humility:

Some of these articles focus on how humility improves our psychological and emotional well-being.

Other articles suggest that being humble has business and financial benefits.

Still other articles argue the moral and spiritual merits of humility.

And of course, being humble has social benefits as well; because, really, who enjoys spending time with a narcissist?

Indeed, there are many reasons to be humble; and perhaps the most significant reason is that we belong to one another. I have found that acting in the interest of others is often in my own best interest as well; especially when our actions aim to improve the conditions in which we find ourselves; because we all benefit from a better world.

Wisdom from the Talmud says, "Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." And to this, I add that no one has to do it alone; because, really, no one can. This is why we belong to one another.

And so, may we attempt to set our egos aside; to cultivate peace by showing empathy to our neighbors; to have a genuine curiosity in people, and in the world.

May we be of service to others; may we work for justice; and may we walk humbly wherever we may go.