



JOUSTING WITH HUMILITY

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Those of us of a certain age may remember the musical and movie “Camelot”, about the legendary King Arthur. There is a scene early in the story in which Arthur introduces the great French knight, Lancelot, to Guinevere, his queen. Lancelot has traveled across the Channel to join the Round Table, and is full of idealistic enthusiasm. He is also quite full of himself. He goes on at length about the strength and skill he will bring to the challenge, and about the number of knights he has bested in battle and in tournaments. Finally, Guinevere arches an eyebrow and asks, “Tell me, Sir Knight, have you jousted with “*Humilité*” recently?”

“Have you jousted with humility recently?” A good question. We in America don’t particularly care to joust with humility. We tend to equate humility with humiliation and want nothing to do with it. Humility is for losers, and we prefer winners. In America, we celebrate individual accomplishment and individual responsibility. It is very much part of who we are.

But we have taken it to an extreme, a crazy, insane extreme. We have gone beyond celebrating individual accomplishment to celebrating “celebrity” itself. We celebrate people who have succeeded in becoming famous, in very effectively calling attention to themselves. We have traded the model of the strong, reluctant hero for the shameless self-promoter. There are so many examples in our pop culture. Consider, for example, all the so-called “reality” TV shows, like “Survivor” and “The Apprentice”, that are exercises in elimination. The meek may inherit the earth, but not the island or the boardroom. These shows are popular; apparently we don’t care for humility but do find humiliation amusing, so long as it is happening to someone else.

Even in team sports, celebration of the individual has become the norm. A guy will sack the quarterback or catch a touchdown pass and then prance around posturing to make sure everyone knows and shows appreciation and respect.

Now, I don’t want to exaggerate. It is true you hear athletes thanking God for a victory (but I don’t think that is real humility; maybe if they thanked Him for defeat. I’d love to see a guy drop a pass in the end zone, and then point to the sky and make the sign of the cross. “Thank you, God, for taking me down a peg.” Can you imagine the outrage? Our God is for winners, thank you very much.)

Humility isn’t totally lacking. Those of you who follow basketball know that Steve Nash was this year’s NBA MVP because of his passing and playmaking, for making his teammates better, and by all accounts he is quite a decent fellow. We seem to appreciate true humility when we see it, but we don’t do much to nurture it. Humility requires a person to feel that he or she is not so very important, but that does not thrive in a society that glorifies the individual.

Now, celebrating true accomplishment is fine with me. I don’t want to diminish the importance of individual recognition and reward. I am, in fact, an American, and this is the culture I grew up with. I don’t want to be Japanese, and be defined and limited by societal obligations.

As an aside, I recently learned that Japanese has two interesting words that illustrate this cultural difference. “*Tatemae*” is the reality that everyone professes to be true, even though they might not privately believe it. Its opposite is “*honne*”, the reality that you hold inwardly to be true, even though you would never admit it publicly. It is fascinating that they have words for these things; apparently the way an individual sees himself in relation to society is very different in Japan than it is here.

Social obligation or individual initiative? It is all a question of balance. But I think our society is imbalanced. In fact, in many ways I think we are bug-nuts crazy.

So what? Well, if you lose your balance, you fall. That is true of individuals and of societies. If you lose your balance, you fall. A good, healthy sense of humility helps you keep your balance. It is at the root of many of our seven principles. We say that we value the “inherent worth and dignity of every person”, “acceptance of one another...”, “... the use of democratic processes...”, and “respect for the interdependent web of all existence...” All these things have at their core two fundamental realizations that each of us needs to come to:

“Other people are not, and need not be, like you,” and
“The way you see the world is not the only way to see the world.”

Those sound trite. But, in fact, it is not natural to believe these things. It certainly does not come easily. The natural thing is to believe that the world you know is the way the world is, should be, and always will be.

“The way you see the world is not the only way to see the world.” All of us know that at some level. But to know it in your gut usually requires life to hit you up side the head and tell you to pay attention.

In the mid 1970’s, I was in the Peace Corps in Malaysia, which is a Muslim country, Toward the end of my first year, in late December, I was visiting some friends in the village across the river from our town, and we started talking about Christmas and Jesus. First, they told me about their traditional story of Jesus’ birth, which is quite different from what appears in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. In the Koran, Jesus is born to a virgin, Mary, but there is no mention of Joseph the carpenter, nor any mention of the inn and manger legend. On the contrary, the Koran describes that Mary retreated from her people, went outside the city, and gave birth to Jesus underneath a remote date palm tree. The tree miraculously provided nourishment for her during the labor and birth.

It was something of a miracle that I was able to get the gist of that with my limited Malay, but certainly it was very interesting. Then I tried to do justice to the King James Version. I was a science teacher and knew that vocabulary, but had no idea what the word was for “manger.” But I fumbled my way through. And they listened politely and, indeed, found it interesting. And suddenly it struck me forcibly that they were listening to me with a sense of anthropological condescension, (which is exactly how I had been listening to them.) “So that is what Christians believe. How quaint.” I couldn’t help feeling indignant, even though I didn’t believe the stories myself anymore. They were the stories I had grown up with, and they were still true to me in a

way that their stories never could be. Their truth was myth to me, and mine was myth to them. To see my attitude reflected back to me somehow allowed me to sense the walls around my mind, the walls that usually remain invisible. It was humbling. Not humiliating. But humbling in the sense that it helped me really understand that the way I see the world is an accident of birth.

There is another way that the world hits us up side the head and teaches us the necessity of humility. Each of us eventually learns that “You aren’t in control.” However much we want to be (and, by God, in multitasked, continuously connected, and over-scheduled America we think we ought to be), the fact is that whatever control we have is tenuous and temporary. We all know this, but maybe not yet in our gut. But we will. My work is with cancer treatment. We treat about 100 patients each day, and none expected or wanted to be getting radiation therapy for cancer. It wasn’t part of the plan. Sometimes when you joust with humility you get knocked on your butt.

Accepting your limitations, especially your own mortality, is very important to your mental balance. It is also at the root of many religious attitudes. Muslims append the phrase “*Insha’allah*” to any statement about the future: “God willing”. Indeed, Muslims, Christians, and Jews all counsel to “put your trust in the Lord”. I like the aphorism that I first saw at a Jewish summer camp, which I later found to be attributed to St. Augustine: “Pray as though everything depended on God; act as though everything depended on you.” Humility doesn’t mean giving up; but it does let you off the hook of unrealistic self-importance. That is a Truth that can set you free.

Buddhists have a different take, and suggest that our individual selves are not only limited, but illusions; that in some way, we are all connected to a greater whole, or at least could be. You know what the Buddhist said to the hot dog vendor? “Make me One with Everything.” So the Buddhist paid with a twenty and asked for change, to which the vendor replied: “Change comes from within.”

I have never experienced the falling away of my personal boundaries, but I have felt a bit of what Rudolf Otto called the “*Mysterium Tremendum*.” It comes to me sometimes when I am out in the forest, listening to the wind in the trees, hearing sounds that go on whether or not I am there.

There was a particular incident I recall. I was out hiking with friends on a mountain ridge, with the ground falling away on either side. It was afternoon, and a thunderstorm had passed over and moved on down the valley to one side. The sun was on the other, and as we looked down on to the falling rain below, the sunlight broke through the clouds behind us and shone upon the falling rain, creating a beautiful rainbow. As we stood there admiring, suddenly there was a whoosh! – a hawk swept by, not ten feet from my head, and dove down into the valley. It made no sound except for the wind in its wings, but it startled us all. As we watched, it soared down into the valley below, under the arch of the rainbow. It was stunning. At times like that I feel my presence to be completely incidental, and accidental. Life is such a gift.

There was another time, several years ago when my son was about 11. We lived in Michigan, he was in Scouts, and each winter we traveled up state to a camp with a dorm and kitchen. After dinner, we’d bundle up and walk through the woods and fields in the snow to a hill on the property where the owners had put out lots of inner tubes, and the boys would have a fine time

tubing down the hill. This night there was just a bit of a moon, but the stars were bright, and the reflection off the snow made it easy to see. As you might expect, after a while the boys tired of going down one by one and decided to make a train. They got the longest adult (me) to plop down on one tube and stretch out arms and legs to hold as many tubes as possible together. Boys piled on as I lay on my back, head slightly downhill, looking up at the sky. One more boy jumped into the middle, straddling my hips, and as the whole mass began to slide down the hill, he threw back his head and let out whoop! This is the picture I remember, looking up from below: a boy in an instant of joy, full of life, shouting with delight, and behind him – stars! Distant, uncaring, unknowing; stars that were there thousands of years before and will be thousands of years hence. A boy – and stars. Stars last; boys don't. And part of my brain said "You won't last either, but as long as you do, remember this."

My son was part of that mass. He is 26 now, and getting married next weekend. Stars last, boys don't. I have lots of feelings about that, humility being one of them.

It seems that one role of religion is to help us cope with being small and brief in a world that is big and long lasting. Belief in an afterlife helps, or in an over-arching "Purpose." Even those of us without such religious sensibilities need to come to terms with these things, and doing so requires authentic humility.

So, what does this mean for us at UUCP? What is the take home message, the action item?

We have a lot of challenges ahead of us: new ministers and construction chief among them. We will have different ideas of how to proceed. Reasonable people will differ with each other. Let's make sure we do it reasonably. None of us is all that important.

We really need to be "in community" with each other.

We need to be open to each other.

We need to celebrate our individual contributions.

We need to trust each other.

And we need to cut each other some slack.

I have no doubt that we will come through in fine shape. *Insha'allah*.

We need to remember that humility and human come from the same root; so jousting with humility is a fight none of us can avoid.