



# Horizons Journal

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix

October 2013



## Rediscovering Humility

Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray

Is humility quickly becoming a lost virtue? Traditionally, across many religions, humility has been seen as a foundational virtue, necessary 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. There is actually some concrete evidence of this change.

A couple of 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 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Unfortunately, words like “kindness” and “helpfulness” fared even worse.)

Why would this be? Why the declining 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?” Do you think of it as a positive characteristic?

One difficulty with humility is that is an often misunderstood virtue. It frequently becomes associated with weakness, servitude, 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 self-ish-ness and self-less-ness.

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## Lord, It’s Hard to Be Humble

Reverend Linda Lawrence

We were splurging for a special “date night” with dinner out and tickets to see *Rent* at the Phoenix Theater – front row! I was excited! It was going to be a fine evening.

Gary and I made our way to our seats and began reading the playbill. We were joined in short order by a young man and his date. While his lady friend went in search of refreshments, the fellow began a friendly banter about baseball. After a few minutes of being stuck between two baseball enthusiasts, I jokingly suggested that we change seats so they wouldn’t have to talk baseball over me. That shut them up, though it wasn’t really my intent!

The young man kept checking the Red Sox scores on his iPhone but couldn’t seem to contain his enthusiasm for conversation. I half-listened and

half-ignored him – after all, I was trying to read the playbill. However, he somehow got onto a different topic altogether, and I became aware that he was making comments about immigration. Not the type of comments I like to hear either.

I could feel my whole body tense. As he continued to make derogatory remarks about various groups of people, I met his verbal assertions with a clenched jaw and cold stare. Finally I said, “I really don’t think you can make generalizations about all members of any group based on limited experiences with just a few members of that group.” And then, in a more cajoling, tongue-in-cheek way, I added, “Surely, there are at least one or two trustworthy, hardworking people in each of the groups you just named.”

Well, maybe I didn’t cajole. I might have sneered just a little. I hate to admit this, but

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## Accepting Others' Gifts

Linda Bellantoni

President, Board of Trustees

Okay, I'll admit it: sometime it's hard to be humble. Humility, as a virtue, seems counter to much of our cultural conditioning; we are, after all, rooted and indoctrinated in "American exceptionalism." We have a healthy sense of self-esteem and self-worth. We are special. We take pride in ourselves and our accomplishments and strive for ever more. We have an almost pathological need to win, and at all costs. We are the "best." How can we be humble when we're so great?

Humility has been espoused as a key human virtue for millennia, heralded in virtually every philosophical, ethical and religious tradition as a central or foundational aspect of goodness – a quality to be developed. While traditionally associated with the concepts of submission, temperance, or pridelessness, there are dimensions of humility that can resonate with us in our modern day-to-day lives and help us to grow personally and spiritually: perspective, awareness, equanimity, self-effacement, modesty, empathy, doubt.

Doubt? That's a tough one, isn't it? Doubt: an absence of certainty. That's not something we are traditionally comfortable with – we like our certainty. Perhaps the greatest impediment to cultivating humility for many of us is an *overabundance* of certainty. Doubt compels us to concede that we may not know everything, that our perspective may be biased or colored by our experiences and assumptions, that we must be open to learning something from another, or, that we may just be wrong. I'll admit that this is an area in which I can always do better. And I don't think I'm alone in

that. It's not that we are intentionally or willfully un-humble, but our certainty can cause us to make assumptions about others, convince us that we are *right* about . . . something, or, perhaps more concerning, cause us to not always be open to accepting others' knowledge, wisdom, or truth.

As has been noted recently by many commentators, our society has become more highly polarized than in any time in our history. It certainly feels that way. It seems that it's not sufficient to merely disagree; we disparage those with different views and, even worse, ascribe to them nefarious motives. Or we tell ourselves that they can only think 'that way' because they are uninformed, uneducated, or just don't understand; after all, if they knew everything we knew, or would just *listen* to us, they would agree with us, right? We have succumbed to an *us vs. them* mentality, a dismissiveness and divisiveness that separates us from our fellow humans and results in our talking past each other, rather than talking to each other. And at the core is an unwavering certainty in the way we see things, a want of humility.

Winston Churchill once famously said that "The greatest lesson in life is to know that even fools are right sometimes." Humility compels us to be receptive even to those we consider 'fools'; it necessitates an openness to and acceptance of people and their gifts. Being willing and able to change one's mind, and one's heart, enables us to learn and grow and thrive. Every person we encounter has a gift to give us, a lesson to teach us, if we are humble enough to accept it. □

I believe that the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I don't mean by humility, doubt of his power. But really great men have a curious feeling that the greatness is not of them, but through them. And they see something divine in every other man and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful.

— John Ruskin



## Striving for a New Understanding of Humility

Anne Byrne

Director, Children's Ministries

Just when I think I have processed and released all the baggage of my religious upbringing, I am hit with yet another spiritual crisis that forces me to revisit my past and try to create a new interpretation of concepts I hold in disdain. These spiritual crises have been coming fairly regularly and are otherwise known as the deadline for my monthly Horizons article.

In the past, I have been able to side-step the crisis a bit by choosing my own topic, but now we have adopted monthly themes. This month's theme is a kicker – Humility. Who picked these topics, anyway?

I started out optimistically enough. I sat at my computer and told myself I was just going to crank it out and actually get it done by the deadline, which is a pretty rare occurrence. I wrote a little, surfed the internet for inspiration, tried to write a bit more, surfed some more, got up and walked around. At one point I got up and walked down to Office 2 and announced to Heidi that I had nothing to say about humility. With a wicked grin, she allowed as how she couldn't be much help, since humility is not one of her strong suits.

The more I surfed the internet, the more bogged down I became. Most references to humility were religious in nature and many talked about submitting to God's will or submissiveness to another. I remembered a conversation I overheard many years ago while waiting for a table in a restaurant. Two men were talking to one another, or more accurately, one was talking and the other listening. The man was describing the glory of submission to God's kingdom and how he, as a human being, was as inconsequential as a grain of sand. The first man encouraged the second man to submit to this kingdom so he too could feel the wonder and beauty of insignificance, otherwise known as humility.

Yikes. No wonder I am having trouble coming up with an inspirational message about humility. On an intellectual level, I understand that humility means a lot more than submission and personal insignificance, but my gut is reacting and remember-

ing this narrow definition.

The day continued on into evening, and my article was still not done. My mom weighed in on the subject, proclaiming that Charlie Brown was a model of humility, but Snoopy was not. Then, this morning she announced that humility was something expected more of the women of the world than men, and did I know that the reason Catholic women were supposed to wear hats in church was to demonstrate their submissiveness to their husbands?

Now, at least, it is clear where I come by my aversion to submissiveness. It is also clear that I have more work to do to release the baggage of humility as the embodiment of submissiveness and insignificance.

In my internet searching, I did seek Unitarian Universalist interpretations of humility. One of the sources that popped up was a sermon by our own Rev. Susan from 2010. I am pretty sure I was in the service on this Sunday because I remember the sermon. Unfortunately, I am still working on integrating the message she delivered. Here is part of what she said:

*Humility is about being mindful of the ways that we are not isolated beings, but deeply connected and dependent on one another, on those who came before us and on this life-giving, life-sustaining planet. This definition does not mean we are called to act as less than another person, but to open our eyes to see the way that our lives are not solely our own – to see the ways we are connected to others. This mindfulness reminds us of the ways our choices affect others, for better or worse. It calls on us to think of our own responsibilities in light of the ways we are bound to others. It reminds us that we do not sit at the pinnacle of creation, but are one strand in it.*

Now, this is an interpretation I can accept. So, I will humbly continue to try to understand and integrate a different interpretation of humility than the one I learned in my religious upbringing. I invite you to do the same. Fortunately, we have a terrific guide in tackling the subject in Rev. Susan. And yes, she is the one who picked this challenging topic! □



## Teaching Humility to the English Language

Benjie Messer

Music Director

Our choir director, Connie Jahrmarkt, often asks the choir to sing in multiple languages, and it's a meaningful thing to ask. As choir members work on their pronunciation, and as we hear them sing at Sunday services, all of the native English speakers get the chance to notice what non-native English speakers among them notice every day – what it's like to hear a language that is not our first. We get to notice what it feels like, what it sounds like, whether we feel excluded or invited, if we're pulled to learn it, if we're afraid or disappointed about what we don't know.

I think it really makes a difference how comfortable all of us are with hearing, learning and speaking multiple languages. Certainly, the way that racism and segregation play out in Arizona is very tied up in issues of language. As we contemplate the value of humility this month, maybe those of us who are native English speakers can try to see our own language with humility, as only one of the rich family of human languages, not better or worse than any other.

Many of us feel that the state of Arizona doesn't treat our Mexican and Mexican-American neighbors with enough love and respect – certainly not with humility! But few of us who are native English speakers have close, loving relationships in

Spanish. How can we expect the state to do something we can't do ourselves? Let's lead the way by learning another language! I am not fluent in Spanish, but I am studying, so please talk with me – *quiero practicar!* (I want to practice.) And Connie and I will continue presenting music in multiple languages at UUCP. I hope it reminds you of humility, and perhaps even inspires you to study a language, in order to reach over the language barrier to the people on the other side. □

*To be humble, [my father] told me, was to remain teachable. Whenever we think we know it all, real humility reminds us to stay open and willing to learn.*

*– Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove*

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## Memorial Garden



Evemarie Holl Mosher  
Walter Blake Williamson, Jr.  
William Frank Hall

Homer M. Sarasohn  
Roger Davy  
Rodney Earl Engelen

*friends whose ashes were interred in the Memorial Garden this month in past years are still remembered*

## Unicare News

### In remembrance:

- Jack Ripple, Aug 11
- Memorial service for Dr. Eugene Grigsby will be held Saturday, Oct 19, 11:00 AM, UUCP sanctuary

### Serious illness/hospitalization:

- Jesse Hise had quadruple bypass surgery at John C. Lincoln Hospital Sept 5
- Margy Angle was hospitalized at Scottsdale Healthcare due to a fall and broken hip Sept 6

### Births:

- Hudson Archer Wilson , born August 22 to Nancy and Carlos Wilson

### Other news:

- Toni Collette and Greg Holmberg moved to Bend, OR
- Dr. Jagdev Sharma was inducted into the Hall of Honor of World Poultry Veterinarians. The ceremony was conducted in Nantes, France on August 22 and attended by his family.

For more information on significant events in the life of UUCP members / friends, sign up to be on our Unicare email list at [unicare@phoenixuu.org](mailto:unicare@phoenixuu.org).



Ceyshe' Napa, Unicare Coordinator

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It is a virtue that helps us 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. In this way, it supports both a healthy sense of self and a respect and care for others that helps us develop stronger and more positive relationships.

Another reason 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 those associated with individualism, individual success and virtues that are most related to economic output. Brooks names some that have significantly increased in use, 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 we encourage self-indulgence – the practice of quickly satisfying every want we or our children have. I find myself struggling against these tendencies in my own life and family. I have to resist tendencies to want my child to be the best in school or in athletics. Sometimes I have to stop

myself and remember that virtue, including humility, wisdom and character are all a part of my child's development. But 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 relation to others. Humility, meanwhile, encourages a healthy appreciation for one's self and a desire to understand and be in good relationship with others. However, this does not mean we can not be professionally or academically successful and humble – we just have to be intentional about balancing our ego, our confidence, with our hopes, respect and care for others and their success.

As Unitarian Universalist Minister Forrest Church points out, the word humility shares the same root as that for human, humane, humanity and even humus (as in 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 re-discovering humility, understanding it better and working to nurture it in our lives and community. □

## October Worship Theme: **Rediscovering Humility**

### **October 6: Wrestling with Humility**

Service Leader: Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

The Hebrew prophet Micah said that what is required of us is to "do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God." Justice and kindness are cornerstones of our commitments as UUs, but where does humility fit among our values and virtues? Is humility as essential as justice and kindness? Is humility something we should try to nurture in our lives?

### **October 13: Behind the Kitchen Door**

Service Leader: Rev. Linda Lawrence

Meeting friends for lunch, dining out to celebrate a special occasion – these are commonplace occurrences for many of us, but the people who prepare and serve our restaurant meals often cannot afford to feed their own families. How do we respond to this dilemma in light of Unitarian Universalist values? Join Rev. Linda in reading and reflecting upon this year's UUA common read: *Behind the Kitchen Door* by Saru Jayaraman.

### **October 20: Tomorrow's Joy**

Service Leader: David Weaver

The way of spiritual exploration is not for the faint of heart. When all our yesterdays are remembered with a generous spirit of humility, we make it possible for tomorrow's joy to fully blossom.

### **October 27: Multigenerational Dia de Los Muertos Service**

Service Leader: Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

Dia de los Muertos, a Mexican celebration of life and death, reminds us of the importance of living, singing, celebrating as we remember our loved ones who have died. Everyone is invited to bring a memento of a loved one to help create our altar of remembrance.



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whatever I did or said really shut him up, though that wasn't really my intent. Or was it? We sat there in stony silence and didn't speak to one another for the remainder of the evening.

I've had a difficult time putting this incident out of my mind. I am embarrassed by the way I behaved and chagrined that my "buttons" got pushed so quickly. How judgmental and self-righteous I was! I did not use our conversation as an opportunity to engage, connect, or learn more about this young man's convictions and fears. Instead I shut him down, shut him out, and eliminated any chance we might have had to learn something from each other.

Marilyn Sewell, Minister Emerita of First Unitarian Church of Portland, has often spoken about the "Seven Deadly Sins" of UUs. Pride is at the top of our list. We are a prideful bunch. Even as we say that there is more than one way to capital-T "Truth," even as we tout tolerance, we often cling tenaciously to our own ideas and opinions. We frequently think that we just don't have anything else to learn.

In a summer sermon here at UUCP, David Weaver said that we UUs seem to be addicted to being right. Being right about what? Well, just about

*everything!* As Mac Davis sang, "Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble!" And it really is. It's one thing – and an important thing – to take a stand for what we feel is right and just, but it's another thing altogether to close ourselves off, to refuse to believe that we can learn something useful by engaging in conversation with those who may think, feel, or believe differently than we do.

I may not be able to easily change someone else's mind when it comes to "hot topics," but I'll *never* change anyone else's mind (including my own) if I cannot enter into a conversation with humility, with the intention of learning and understanding why someone thinks the way he does, what experiences shaped him, where we might find common ground. To be immediately defensive and adversarial (as I was) pretty much leads nowhere. To view every person as a teacher and every encounter as a teaching moment – that's humility.

If I ever meet that young man again, I'd like to buy him a cup of coffee, sit and listen, get to know him a bit, and see if he has something to teach me. I'd try, really try, if I had another chance. While I may never see him again, I know that life will give me plenty of other opportunities to practice humility. I'll keep trying. Lord, it is hard to be humble. □

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

If anyone tells you that a certain person speaks ill of you, do not make excuses about what is said of you but answer, "He was ignorant of my other faults, else he would not have mentioned these alone."

— Epictetus



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