

It's Not the Heat; It's the Humility
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Readings

[On a Tree Fallen Across the Road](#)

(To Hear Us Talk)

By Robert Frost

[Song of the Builders](#)

By Mary Oliver

Sermon

I grew up with the understanding that *humility* is a good thing to have; *humble* is a good thing to be. This was taught most clearly in church in terms of my relationship to God.

There is the story of the woman who wants a divorce from her husband. Explaining the grounds for her request, she says that it boils down to irreconcilable religious differences. “Religious differences?” asks the counselor. “You have different beliefs?” “Yes,” the woman replies, “My husband believes that he’s God, and I don’t.”

This illustrates what I was taught in my Lutheran upbringing: that belief in God (a God that isn’t myself) is a healthy antidote to the natural tendency of humans toward inflated self-importance. *We* are not the final judge of what is right or good or beautiful; *we* are not the measure of all things. Rather, we find our proper place in relationship to the Almighty. This recognition and acceptance of a power infinitely greater than ourselves lends us the appropriate humility.

This was coupled with recognition that we are all sinners. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” There is nothing that we can possibly *do* to change this fact; only to accept, through the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus, forgiveness of our sins and salvation.

As I grew older and my theology went through changes, I wondered about the place of humility in my new understanding of the world. Humanism, for example, is considered by many Christians to be the blasphemous worship of humans in place of God...but is that how I understand humanism now?

Let me begin by saying that our tradition—the Unitarian stream of our twin tradition in particular—has had a hard time grappling with humility. I have quoted before Thomas Starr King, a minister who served both Universalist *and* Unitarian congregations well before the merger, [describing the difference between Universalists and Unitarians](#): “Universalists believe that God is too good to damn people, and the Unitarians believe that people are too good to be damned by God.”

It *is* certainly true that Unitarians, in response to the extremely harsh view of human nature put forth by Calvinism, placed much more faith in human will and reason. We can understand what God wants of us by a reasoned study of Scripture and serious reflection on our own experience. We can choose to do the good through our own free will. We are not helpless pawns in a Divine plan, but active participants in our own lives and salvation. As Unitarianism expanded to include theologies outside of Christianity, as

well as the moral and ethical teachings grounded in agnostic and atheistic worldviews, this faith in human nature rarely faltered. Increasingly, the classic Christian teaching about humility was seen as less a virtue than, at best, an unnecessary hindrance to spiritual and ethical growth and, at worst, a manipulative tool employed by the church to keep people in line. Of what use is humility?

On the face of it, then, it would appear that conservative religion has held onto humility, whereas liberal religion has let go of it. But things are not always as they first appear, of course. As I began to think about this further, it struck me that our resistance to proclaim a “capital-T Truth” is a healthy form of humility. The fact that we can bring many names for that which captivates our beings; that we gather, theists and atheists, mystics and humanists, seekers and arrivers, that we gather in acceptance, encouragement, and respectful communication. We do not presume that we can hold the Ultimate Answers within our community; only that we can walk beside one another with compassion and understanding as we each search them out. We do our best to guard against the arrogance of utter certainty so that we can keep our ears open to new truths and unfamiliar understandings. That is a form of humility.

Further, the Christian theology that I grew up with, for all of its humility, put humans squarely in the center of the Divine Plan, the pinnacle of God’s creation. Humans are meant to be humble before God, but they are humble before a God whose primary focus is humanity. Depending on how you read the two creation stories in Genesis, humans were either created last, in the very image of God, as the crowning achievement of God’s six-day labor...or man was created first, and became something of a co-creator with God by helping to name all of the other animals as God paraded them before him. (God then finally creates woman in this story from the rib of a man, but that is a whole other sermon, believe me!).

The point is that the apparent humility that comes with acknowledging the creator God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is subtly undercut by the arrogance of believing that we are the proverbial apple of God’s eye. This leads to an interesting debate when it comes to issues like the teaching of evolution. It has been pointed out that evolution’s real threat to conservative Christianity is not so much about the place of God in the story as the place of humans. If we have evolved from other forms of life, how do we justify our special standing before God? If we were not a separate and unique creation, how do we revise our understanding of our place in the world? Though Creationists and Intelligent Design folks will talk about the arrogance of evolutionary scientists, this may stem from their own fear of the *humbling* implications of facing up to our utter interdependence with the natural world. Humans are a small piece of the whole.

The reason I began today with the Book of Job is that it offers a wider view of creation than the Genesis stories. Job, you may remember, is a righteous man who suffers greatly, intensely, more than any of us will ever have to do, I sincerely hope. Job spends most of the book arguing with his friends about why he is suffering—Job proclaims his innocence in the face of their accusations that “he *must* have done something” that God was punishing—and he continually cries out to God to answer his pleas for justice. When God finally replies in the later chapters, he doesn’t answer Job’s pleas directly, if at all. Rather, he says that it’s his turn to question Job.

Where were you, He begins, when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.

Who determined its measurements? You?!? I don’t think so. (Job 38:4-5)
(My paraphrase, but faithful to the text, I swear...)

Have *you* commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?
(38:12)

Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain and a way for the thunderbolt to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to make the ground put forth grass? (25-27)

After describing what happens in the desert where humans do not live, He goes on to describe the creatures that are well beyond the reach, beyond the control of humans.

Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high? (39:26-27)

It goes on like this for four chapters, in a rather irritable, challenging tone. Is this just a Divine rant? What are we supposed to get out of this?

I think it is meant to inspire humility. Not self-abasement; not guilt; not *humiliation*; in fact, Job has a change of heart in the middle of this tirade and “repents his dust and ashes.” He gives up his position of anger and despair and moves on as best he can with his life. I think what God said is: “Hey, Job, it’s not all about *you*.” And while that seems like a callous response from the deity who presumably allowed all this suffering to come to Job (I don’t claim that I can untie all of the theological knots here), it is also something of a relief for Job to realize that *there may not be a reason for his pain*, that he is simply part of a wild and mysterious creation that he cannot fully comprehend, but that within that context, he can act compassionately and responsibly. He has spent the whole book crying out to God for justice, a request which God basically ignores, but in an interesting note at the end of the book it mentions that Job included his daughter in his inheritance. This was not a common custom for the time, and what an interesting detail to add to the end of this story. It is as if Job took the responsibility to *create* the justice that he sought. And he was able to do that once he understood his place in the world, which was not at the center, but as *a part of*.

One of the roots of the word *humble* is the Latin *humus* which means *ground*. One could say that humility *grounds us* in reality, giving us a true understanding of our place in the scheme of things.

Whereas some would find this depressing, thinking of how small our lives are from this perspective, others, like Mary Oliver in *Song of the Builders*, discover a real dignity:

Near me, I saw
a single cricket; *she writes*
it was moving the grains of the hillside

this way and that way.
How great was its energy,
how humble its effort.
Let us hope

it will always be like this...

But this is all rather lofty talk, still, isn't it? Humility may have its place as we contemplate the cosmos, but how about in everyday life? How about in politics? In our jobs? In our relationships? Is it necessary? Practical? How do we know if we're humble? What makes us think that we *should* be?

Culturally, we are rather conflicted about *humility*. We grudgingly agree that it may be part of a virtuous character, but we are not sure how to attain it. Media mogul [Ted Turner expressed this](#) when he said, "If I only had a little humility, I'd be perfect,". And while we have a penchant for celebrating the humble beginnings of the famous and powerful, it should be noted that we only celebrate those humble beginnings if they don't end that way. [Humility was even touted by President Bush](#) in 2001 as being a hallmark of his foreign policy:

"If we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us," Bush said of the international community. "If we're a humble nation but strong, they'll welcome us. We've got to be humble and yet project strength in a way that promotes freedom."

Needless to say, this plan never quite reached the implementation stage...and as far as I can tell from Internet searches, *humility* has never again figured as prominently in any of President Bush's speeches.

But President Bush highlights one of our cultural problems with humility. He says we must be humble *but* strong, as if humility implies weakness. The cultural trend is in agreement; there is an utter lack of humility by religious leaders and politicians and activists and pundits and movie stars and journalists and talk show hosts and world leaders...so many are screaming at one another, fighting one another, being as arrogant and unthinking and stubborn and in-your-face as possible, as if any hint of humility would weaken their stance, their argument, would weaken *themselves*.

And I wonder; is humility weakness? Or is it the strong assurance of someone who is not threatened by another's viewpoint? Of someone who is not afraid of failure? Of someone who is *grounded* in their own understanding of their place in the world, cognizant of what they can effect, and ever-aware of how little control they actually have?

Humility may simply be the honest questioning of our own supreme importance. A man named [Andrew J. Holmes has a wonderful quote which says](#), "It is well to remember that the entire population of the universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others." Think how often you are thinking of that one trifling exception in proportion to how often you think of the rest. Humility, I've been told, is not thinking badly of oneself. It is not thinking of oneself at all.

I believe that this only happens in moments. I think we achieve humility in those moments when we can stop, or are stopped by outside forces, like the fallen tree in Robert Frost's poem, and are asked just who we think we are, insisting always on our own way so. We have time to stop and catch a glimpse of a new perspective. Sometimes we are stopped by a person; we are drawn into their lives and realize, for a moment or two, *really realize* at the core of our beings that the entire population of the universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others. And we realize, too, that we will not keep this awareness forever, that we will continue on our journey and return to our lives that center on ourselves, as will the other person...but for that moment, we are humbled. And though we cannot carry the actual awareness with us forever, we can carry the fruits of that humbling experience. Humility allows us that perspective so that we can be open to another's understanding and experience; so that we can be open to the possibility of new truth; so that we can share a laugh at our comical obsession with ourselves amidst the zillions of life forms in the universe.

And though the deflation of our self-importance may be painful at first, it is also a great relief knowing that we do not bear the crushing weight of the responsibility that would inevitably come with being the center of the universe...no, we are joined with others in an interdependent web of life, bringing our great energy to bear on humble tasks. For the majesty and magnitude of the macro vision of the universe includes within it the miracle of the micro view. Our smallest compassionate actions, while seemingly insignificant in the widest view, are intensely meaningful from one person to another. They matter. We may even find ourselves hoping that

it will always be like this,
each of us going on
in our inexplicable ways
building the universe.