

Pastoral Reflection 8-28-22, 22nd Sunday, Ordinary Time

I had many a lesson in humility when I was in graduate school and beginning my psychotherapy training in earnest. Humility, after all, shares its root with humiliation—from the Latin “humus,” meaning of the earth or ground. Humility keeps us grounded, but its lessons can often involve humiliation. Very few things are as humbling or, at times, as humiliating as being a twenty-something clinical trainee sitting across from a survivor of war crimes who is twice your age, listening to their stories, and hoping against hope that you’re at least not making things *worse*. During my training, I had many opportunities to ask myself questions that still sometimes plague me: who am I to be in the therapist’s seat? What am I *actually* doing to serve this person? Who let me do this, anyway? (The answer to the latter question is, apparently, the state of Missouri.)

In my work today, a few years on, I still recall the advice my supervisor gave me one day during those early days of my training: our two greatest tools are curiosity and stupidity. This line, delivered matter-of-factly—and, well, *humbly*—took me aback and rightfully knocked me down a few pegs. I wasn’t going to help anybody if my goal was dazzling them with my brilliant interpretations of their unconscious conflicts—but I might have a shot if I listened deeply to them and remembered that I *didn’t* have it all figured out. It’s in being open to what we *don’t* know that we can truly be open to the unknown within another person, which is where real intimacy starts, and thus real opportunity to be of service.

On the other hand, it’s easy to fall into false humility. Humility is not refusing to acknowledge our gifts. Humility is not self-flagellating. Humility isn’t insecurity or low self-esteem.

In fact, security in our own gifts is an important step towards achieving an honest humility, as it frees us from the need to be constantly affirming ourselves—often by putting others down, or by elevating ourselves above others. Feeling confident that we are enough *as we are now* provides a security of self that enables us to truly meet another person in open-hearted encounter, without needing to guard against fear of being rejected or overwhelmed by them.

After all, as a beginning therapist, it wasn’t because I was certain of my brilliant clinical skills that I would often pressure myself to know exactly how to help the person in front of me—it was because I was new and insecure in my work. When I was reminded that my curiosity and even my stupidity were *enough*, I was freed up within myself to listen to my patients and learn from *them* what they needed.

Like Jesus reminds us in today’s Gospel, “when you are invited, go and take the lowest place so that when the host comes to you he may say, ‘My friend, move up to a higher position.’” May we remember that it is enough to be invited to the table at all, and in keeping this in mind, maybe we will have the pleasant and unbidden surprise of being celebrated not for who we *think* we need to be, but for who we *really* are—stupidity and all.

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