

Response to “The Humble Heart” by Cynthia Reville Peabody

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You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore, be at peace with God, whatever you conceive God to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful. Strive to be happy.
—Max Ehrmann, *Desiderata*

In my introductory astronomy course for non-science majors, I always have students who take the course because it's the least abhorrent science class they can find. These students have been convinced by their previous education that they “can't do” science and math. Though they are bright, articulate and accomplished and have earned their place in a selective liberal arts college, they're convinced that they lack some special neural connections or chemical transmitters to understand information and arguments that happen to fall under the broad umbrella of science. My course is designed for these students and all but a very few succeed. On the last day, after we have spent the semester working through calculations of the luminosities, temperatures and sizes of stars and the distances to galaxies, I give them *Desiderata*.¹ I focus on the fact that they are children of the universe and they belong here. Humans are not something artificial plunked down on Earth. We are part of it. We are Earth's mind and voice. I review how they have come to exist, from the earliest moments of the Big Bang creating the protons and neutrons in every atom in their bodies, through a couple generations of stars fusing primordial hydrogen and helium into the carbon, calcium, nitrogen and oxygen in their skin, bones and breath; the explosive deaths of giant stars creating the iron carrying oxygen to their brains, the iodine regulating their metabolisms and the gold and silver shining in their jewelry; half a billion years of biological evolution giving them arms, legs and brains and ten thousand years of cultural evolution giving them a university. I reveal that as one who has studied the universe for decades, the most wondrous things I have found are them, the students in my classroom. They are the wonders of the universe for me because, not only do they express the story of the universe in their being, they amplify the wonder by looking at the sky

1 Max Ehrmann wrote this in 1927 and widely circulated it in the 1960's under the false information that it had been found in St. Paul's Church, Baltimore dated 1692. The date was actually the date of the founding of the church.

with minds capable of embracing it and transforming it into poetry, symphonies and the equations of theoretical physics.

I go on to tell them how much I admire their intelligence and how much we need them. As a species and a planet we have many problems to solve and they, members of the privileged one percent of people with college degrees have much to offer. I tell them they need to appreciate themselves as the wonders of the universe, take care of themselves, take care of each other, and take care of Earth so that this one place we are certain minds delight in the universe will continue to nurture its creatures.

The students are quite taken aback to hear this from a professor. Most of them have not heard such positive things about themselves or about their species and are uncertain how to respond. It's my last chance to "rock their world" and I delight in giving them this one last gift.

And the gift I give is actually a dose of the very humility that Cynthia Peabody has described so clearly in her essay.

Then it was if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.

Thomas Merton²

The humility defined by St. Bernard de Clairvaux as Peabody describes is what most of us learned as children. It is more a lack of self-esteem or a self-loathing than the humility she ultimately defines, stating, "Humility born of radical amazement is not self-abnegation or self-loathing; nor is it the opposite of arrogance. It is, as Thomas Berry says, discovering our 'true place in the vast world of time and space.'"³ For my students and for any of us to take our places in the world requires a realistic sense of what we have to contribute. It also requires confidence and courage. Any false discounting of our abilities decreases the possibility that we can make a contribution. St. Paul tells us that "to each individual the manifestation of the spirit is given for some benefit."⁴ That is, we all have gifts that are to benefit the community. I see those who, sometimes in the name of humility, do not identify and develop their gifts as the third servant in Jesus' parable of the talents.⁵ This is the one who buries the one talent with which his master has entrusted him instead of even depositing it in a bank to earn interest. When I heard this as a child, I actually thought that Jesus was speaking of talents as in artistic or athletic abilities. Though I later learned that a talent was a specific weight

2 Thomas Merton, *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 156-157.

3 Cynthia Reville Peabody, "The Humble Heart", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* vol. 63: 1&2 pp. 187-197.

4 I Corinthians 12:7, New American Bible available at The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website, www.usccb.org/nab/bible/index.shtml.

5 Matthew 25:14 - 30.

of precious metal, I have never stopped hearing Jesus' admonition to contribute the gifts we've been given to the community.

But many people learn to discount their talents and ability. They seem to walk around feeling crummy about themselves and about the world. Our educational system leaves us feeling inadequate, our churches leave us feeling vaguely guilty, our economy has us feeling uneasy, our political system has us wondering if the nation can survive and every day brings more worrisome news about melting glaciers, floods, fires, storms and animals on the verge of extinction. At a time when we need the insights and efforts of everyone to solve the social, economic and environmental problems we face, many passively shrug asking "what can I do?" in a misguided expression of humility. Currently, if one believes the polls, it seems that only anger has the power to overcome this passivity.

Cynthia Peabody, however, gives us another path. Those of us who have the opportunities to speak to groups in churches, classrooms, or lecture halls must take up her definition of humility and seek to convince our audiences that they are the wonders of the universe.

We need to give people the ability to recognize that being an ordinary person is quite an extraordinary thing in this universe where, at this point, we know of no other species capable of the creativity and action of our own. When I give retreats where I teach about the history of the universe in the context of theology, I move participants toward this by them perform the Ash Wednesday ritual of marking with ashes. It is generally seen as a ritual to remind us how lowly we are. But I change it to remind us that we are amazing creatures produced by an incredible universe. Each of us marks another person with ashes we have blessed as a group and says "remember that you are made from the stars and to the stars you will return."

Later, after teaching about the history of Earth and life, I give each participant a small stick ... a twig, actually. I point out that if one plants an acorn and goes away for fifty years, a huge oak will have grown in that spot. I ask where the tons of wood, the large volume of material that requires a truck to haul away, came from. People offer that it came from the ground. "So shouldn't there be a hole in the ground?" I ask. In time, with some hints about the fact that the wood is primarily cellulose, $C_6H_{10}O_5$, someone realizes that the substance of the tree has been made from the carbon dioxide it has absorbed using sunlight, water, and nutrients. The realization that the trees are making wood out of air allows them see the twig in their hand and everything on Earth differently. If trees are that amazing, how amazing are the scampering, climbing, flying and burrowing creatures that live off the bark, berries, and leaves?

When people are able to see these realities, it re-enchants the world for them. And that re-enchantment is what we desperately need right now. In spite of Thomas Merton's statement that "there is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun,"⁶ we must persevere in telling them over and over again until they are jolted with awe at their own existence. When they

6 J. Robert Oppenheimer, "Physics in the Contemporary World," Arthur D. Little Memorial Lecture at M.I.T. (25 November 1947).

are, the awe can expand to include other people, animals, and even the plants and rocks of this world in radical amazement.

Despite the vision and farseeing wisdom of our wartime heads of state, the physicists have felt the peculiarly intimate responsibility for suggesting, for supporting, and in the end, in large measure, for achieving the realization of atomic weapons. Nor can we forget that these weapons as they were in fact used dramatized so mercilessly the inhumanity and evil of modern war. In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.

J. Robert Oppenheimer⁷

For radical amazement to lead to the humility Peabody describes, the expansion of awe must lead to a sense of responsibility for the consequences of our actions for others, including the natural world, as well as ourselves. Awe without such responsibility can lead to terrible consequences as J. Robert Oppenheimer recognized when he recalled the words of the Bhagavad Gita at the detonation of the test atomic bomb at Trinity Site, New Mexico, “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”⁸

But those who worked on the Manhattan Project were acutely aware of their responsibility to develop the atomic bomb ahead of the Nazis. As my graduate school professor, Ross Lomanitz, who had been Oppenheimer’s student put it, they were terrified of “jackboots run amuck.”⁹ Only if every physicist at the time had chosen to not pursue the application of their knowledge of physics could the atomic bombs have been avoided. And it would take all physicists of all time making that choice to avoid nuclear weapons all together. That great a humility and restraint among so many people is likely impossible, but it may be what humanity must achieve in order to survive into the next millennium, particularly as biologists delve into the deepest workings of life. In the face of one of their creations, perhaps they will echo’s Oppenheimer’s conclusion that by developing nuclear weapons, “the physicists have known sin.”¹⁰

Unlike the physicists who faced the immediate danger of the Nazis, we are faced with choosing what we do, develop and use for the effects it will have on the climate and environment of our great grandchildren and the people who share the world with them. Very few of us in the developed world will feel the effects of climate change until well past mid-century. And it is not until then, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),¹¹ that the consequences of our having reigned in our carbon dioxide emissions will diverge from those of

7 Thomas Merton, *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 156-157.

8 David Cassidy, *J. Robert Oppenheimer and the American Century*, p. 210.

9 Personal communication, July 1985.

10 David Cassidy, *J. Robert Oppenheimer and the American Century*, p. 255.

11 IPCC Assessment Report Four, Working Group I Figure 10.4 available at www.ipcc.ch.

having done nothing. After that, the consequences will become moderate or dire depending on our actions in the next decades.

Yet many in the United States, in spite of voluminous data and the strong consensus of the scientific community, deny that our actions have effect on the climate. To a great extent, this is a result of concerted efforts of the fossil fuel industry akin to the tobacco companies' denial of the health effects of smoking. But it is also a failure of humility. It is a refusal to acknowledge our responsibility for restraint in the face of uncertainty. Instead of refusing to alter our lifestyle until evidence of its contribution to climate change is as obvious as a storm surge flooding lower Manhattan, humility demands that that we change unless we are certain our lifestyle will not have such consequences. This is particularly true since those of us living now in the developed world who have caused the most harm will suffer the least consequences of climate change. Our responsibility for reducing our greenhouse gas emissions is most starkly illustrated by the maps presented by Jonathan Patz and his colleagues in *Climate Change and Global Health: Quantifying a Growing Ethical Crisis*¹² shown in Figure 1. In the top map, distorted to show the cumulative carbon dioxide emissions from 1950 to 2000, the US and western Europe dominate and China, South Korea and Japan are also apparent. Mexico and South America are tiny appendages of the north in this map and Africa nearly disappears. The second map is distorted to show the health effects of malaria, malnutrition, diarrhea, and floods. In this one, the US, Europe and most of Asia disappear except for the arctic regions, while Africa and south west Asia grow huge. The authors cite the World Health Organization Comparative Risk Assessment showing "that 99% of the disease consequences of climate change have been occurring in developing countries and 88% of that in children under age 5."¹³

Since that small group of physicists in New Mexico watched the first mushroom cloud form over New Mexico in 1945, there has not been a clearer call to acknowledgement of responsibility, restraint and humility in the face of our creations and actions than global climate change.

AN URGENT CALL TO HUMILITY

Cynthia Peabody's timely and insightful essay on humility is not just a theological reflection, it is a call to action. The consequences of climate change are made more dire by each day we delay acting on the knowledge we already have. In order to mobilize people to make the changes necessary for our civilization, our sisters and brothers across the world, and the entire biosphere to continue to thrive we must nurture in each person the humility she defines. All of us who speak to classes and congregations must develop our own sense of wonder at our own existence and that of all our fellow humans and of nature. We must then, at every opportunity, draw all we can into the circle of radical amazement where they can recognize and confidently share the gifts they were given for the greater good of the world. Thus strengthened by the recognition of our own good, we can face our

12 Patz et al, *Climate Change and Global Health: Quantifying a Growing Ethical Crisis*, Eco-Health 4, (Springer-Verlag: New York), pp. 397-405, 2007.

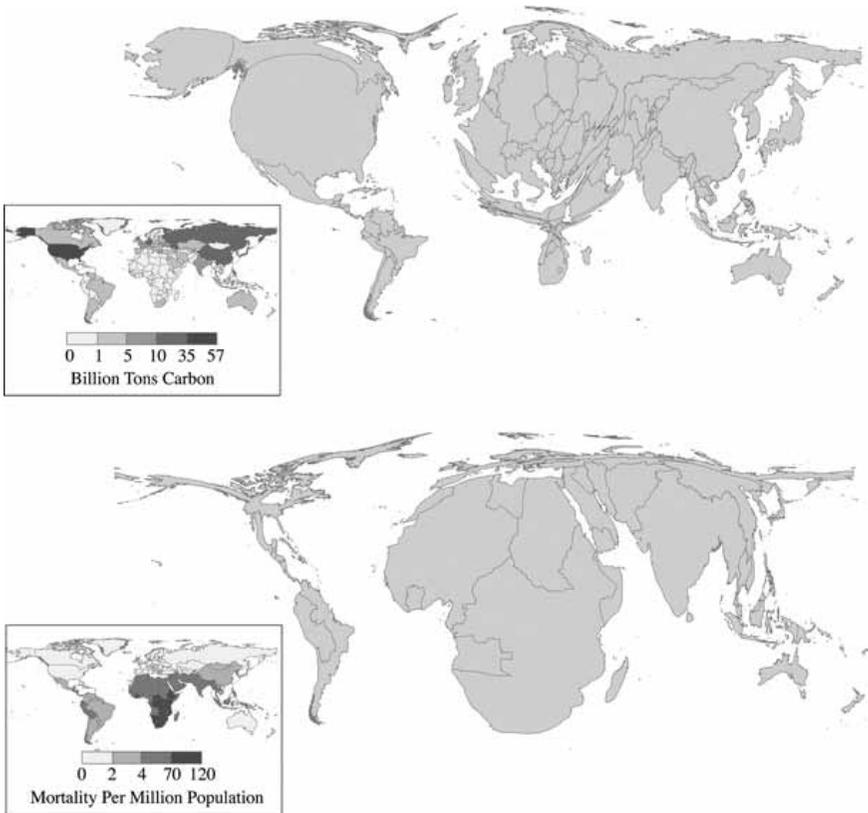
13 Patz et al, *ibid*, p. 399.

responsibility for climate change and confront the challenge of creating a sustainable world. The powerless humans, animals, and plants of the world need people with the confidence and courage of true humility to stand up to the misinformation and inertia of the developed world if they are to survive.

There are a few hundred billion galaxies in the universe, each having, on average, a few hundred billion stars. If each star has at least one planet, that's upwards of 10^{22} planets ... ten billion trillion. So far, this is the only one of those planets we have found on which creatures dwell that sing, dance, write poetry, study the origin of the cosmos from which they emerged, laugh and cry. Humanity and our fellow citizens of Earth are extraordinarily rare and precious in this vast universe. The Earth has been through much greater changes in climate than we are currently facing. It's not the Earth we must save, but ourselves and the creatures around us. To do that will take confidence and courage; true humility. Then the gifts each was given for the good of us all will emerge so that all of humanity can "live in a way that compliments the history of the cosmos while, at the same time, respecting the rights of future beings."¹⁴

FIGURE 1

Maps from Patz et al, "Climate Change and Global Health: Quantifying a Growing Ethical Crisis" *EcoHealth* 4, (Springer-Verlag: New York), p. 400, 2007. The top map is distorted to show the cumulative carbon dioxide emissions from 1950 to 2000. The second is distorted to show the health effects of malaria, malnutrition, diarrhea, and inland flood-related fatalities.



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