

# The Humble Heart

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Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Matthew 11:28-29

When I was a child, I said the same bedtime prayer every night: “Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto thine.” I don’t recall ever thinking about the words of the prayer, or understanding exactly why I would want a “humble heart.” It is only now, decades later, that I have given considerable thought to what a “humble heart” might be. My interest in the oft misunderstood virtue of humility was sparked by the work I do at the Center for the Study of Science and Religion (CSSR) at the Earth Institute of Columbia University. My colleagues at the CSSR who are microbiologists, ecologists, cosmologists, and primatologists have clearly shown me that the natural sciences have much to teach theologians about humility.

First, I’d like to propose that humility is not shyness, or a lack of self-esteem, or Uriah Heap unctuousness, or a willingness to “eat humble pie.” One hopes we have come a long way from St. Bernard de Clairvaux’s *The Steps of Humility* in which he instructs:

Humility may be defined thus: Humility is that thorough self-examination which makes a man contemptible in his own sight. It is acquired by those who set up a ladder in their hearts whereby to ascend from virtue to virtue, that is, from step to step, until they attain the summit of humility, from where, as from the Zion of speculation, they can see the truth.<sup>1</sup>

Bernard de Clairvaux’s teachings on humility are based on what Thomas Berry refers to as the “old story” of creation whereby humility means accepting that one is born a “child of perdition” in want of salvation from the moment of birth. Berry writes that according to this old cosmology, “the original harmony of the universe was broken by a primordial human fault, and that necessitated formation of a believing redemptive community that would take shape through the course of time.”<sup>2</sup> Berry points out, “Presently this excessive redemptive emphasis is played out. It cannot effectively dynamize activity in time because it is an inadequate story of time. The redemption story has grown apart not only from the his-

1 Bernard de Clairvaux, *The Steps of Humility*, translated with introductions and notes by George Bosworth Burch (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963). p. 125.

2 Thomas Berry, “The New Story” in *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: a Global Anthology*, edited by Richard C. Foltz (Belmont, CA : Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003), 525.

torical story, but also from the earth story.”<sup>3</sup> Arguably, Clairvaux’s epistemology of humility fits within this old cosmology, so that the virtuous, humble soul attains enlightenment through deepened awareness of his or her own mortal sinfulness. Humility is thus a sort of paradoxical personal identity struggle in which higher spiritual enlightenment corresponds to self-deprecation. The problem with this humility is that it is so centered on personal salvation that it alienates the seeker from the rest of Creation. Here, humility is stifled by a lack of appreciation for the timeless interconnectedness of all things. The humility I’ve come to appreciate is quite different than Clairvaux’s. It is grounded in the “new story,” also known as the “universe story.”

#### ALL THINGS ARE BEAUTIFUL BY THIS BEAUTY

Throughout the ages poets, philosophers, mystics, and songwriters have held forth on our place in the mysterious and marvelous universe. Their works are as likely to be filled with angst as they are with awe. The biologist Ursula Goodenough remarked, “Mystery generates wonder and wonder generates awe. The gasp can terrify or the gasp can emancipate.”<sup>4</sup> After all, each of us is a living, breathing, complicated, and vital individual. Yet, as the most recent photos from the Hubble telescope once again prove, each one of us is also an infinitesimally minute speck in a vast, intricate, and largely unexplored cosmos. The universe story helps us to understand that we do not exist at either extreme; we are neither all-important nor insignificant. Rather we are one of many essential participants in an ever-evolving Creation. The new story is a story of an unfolding universe that over the course of many millions of years gives expression to the mystery and beauty of unending transformation. Every being in the cosmos is involved in that mystery and beauty. Thomas Berry maintains that human beings enter the story just as the universe becomes conscious of itself. “We bear the universe in our beings as the universe bears us in its being. The two have total presence to each other and to that deeper mystery out of which both the universe and ourselves have emerged.”<sup>5</sup>

For many people this reality evokes a sense of awe and gratitude – they are thrilled to be included in this “glorious accident” that started with a Big Bang. The Psalmist exclaims: “I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well” (Psalm 139:14). Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said it this way: “Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy.” Unlike Clairvaux’s humility that is rooted in accepting personal sinfulness, the humility of the new story grows out of being grateful for being a part of the grandeur of Creation. Furthermore, humility in the light of the mystery and wonder of the universe includes recognition that all beings are fearfully and wonderfully made, all of Creation is marvelous. There is no room in the universe story for anthropomorphic arrogance. The humble heart exists in community with

3 Ibid., 528.

4 Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

5 Berry, “New Story,” 529.

the rest of Creation, gratefully acknowledging its rightful place in the natural order of things.

Bill Bryson's scientific account of the birth of our universe gives further testimony to the elegance of our beginnings:

And so, from nothing, our universe begins.

In a single blinding pulse, a moment of glory much too swift and expansive for any form of words, the singularity assumes heavenly dimensions, space beyond conception. In the first lively second (a second that many cosmologists will devote careers to shaving into ever-finer wafers) is produced gravity and the other forces that govern physics. In less than a minute the universe is a million billion miles across and growing fast. There is a lot of heat now, ten billion degrees of it, enough to begin the nuclear reactions that create the lighter elements—principally hydrogen and helium, with a dash (about one atom in a hundred million) of lithium. In three minutes, 98 percent of all the matter there is or will ever be has been produced. We have a universe. It is a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful, too. And it was all done in about the time it takes to make a sandwich.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas many scientists maintain that modern astrophysics makes all belief in a Creator God obsolete, modern people of faith find that the universe story only strengthens their attraction to a transcendent, loving, and mysterious Being. Rabbi Heschel called this “Radical Amazement”: “Our radical amazement responds to the mystery, but does not produce it. You and I have not invented the grandeur of the sky nor endowed man with the mystery of birth and death. We do not create the ineffable, we encounter it.”<sup>7</sup> Heschel further explained:

The force [radical amazement] that inspires readiness for self-sacrifice, the thoughts that breed humility within and behind the mind, are not identical with the logician's craftsmanship. The purity of which we never cease to dream, the untold things we insatiably love, the vision of the good for which we either die or perish alive – no reason can bind.<sup>8</sup>

To meet as equals before the mystery is to acknowledge the worth of all beings in Creation and to let go of any notions of personal superiority, or, for that

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6 Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003) p.10.

7 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1951), 20.

8 *Ibid.*, 9.

matter, inferiority. The universe story is a powerful equalizer and unifier. The great theologian Howard Thurman observed,

The awareness that the universe is dynamic gives to the individual the quiet assurance that wherever he may be located he is in immediate candidacy for the strength that comes from a boundless vitality. This fact makes for a universal kinship among all living things.<sup>9</sup>

The humble person gratefully accepts that every part of Creation has equal value, even those who are unjustly despised and ostracized on earth. The Creator's unifying love made apparent in the universe story gives strength and solace to "the least of these." Reflecting on his rough childhood Howard Thurman writes,

[Religion] gave me a sense of worth, an intrinsic sense of being creditable to myself - a sense that God, who created the ocean, which I loved, and the eclipses, and all the other things in nature, also created me. So that I felt, in all the external world around me, that there was a kind of kinship that was not pantheistic but grounded in a fundamental experience of meaning which was all mine by virtue of the fact that I was created...there was a contagion that came to me as a little child in knowing that the Creator of Existence also created me. Therefore, with that sort of backing, I could absorb all the violence of life.<sup>10</sup>

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." Humility is an appreciation of, and gratitude for, the gift of being in an ever expanding and intricate universe. From that true place the humble person takes seriously "the beloved's clear instruction: "Turn me into song: sing me awake."<sup>11</sup>

Do not let me hear  
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,  
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,  
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.  
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.  
T.S. Eliot, *East Coker, Part II*

Just as there is much to learn about humility from grand-scaled cosmology, so too studies of the natural world on a smaller scale teach us about humility. Today, scientists are expanding our understanding of cooperative ecologies,

9 Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), 101.

10 Roger Eyre, "A Conversation with Howard Thurman and Roger Eyre," *Theology Today*, 38:2, July 1981, 211-213.

11 Gregory Orr, "Untitled (This is what was bequeathed us)" in *How Beautiful the Beloved* (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2009), 88.

interspecies dependency, and mutualism. Natural ecosystems are elegant examples of the interrelatedness of all Creation. To truly realize our place in these systems we must put aside traditional nature-dominating theologies. Humility demands that we move beyond the Augustinian belief that because plants and animals do not reason they are ours to use and abuse as we see fit. Rather science moves us to a different understanding of our importance to the natural world. We know now that bees, bats, bugs, and bacteria are essential to our healthy living. The biologist E. O. Wilson famously noted, “If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos.” Like all species, human beings are dependent on other beings.

A panel of eleven scientists hired by the Ecological Society of America to study ecosystem services concluded:

What has been less appreciated until recently is that natural ecosystems also perform fundamental life-support services without which human civilizations would cease to thrive. These include the purification of air and water, detoxification and decomposition of wastes, regulation of climate, regeneration of soil fertility, and production and maintenance of biodiversity, from which key ingredients of our agricultural, pharmaceutical, and industrial enterprises are derived. This array of services is generated by a complex interplay of natural cycles powered by solar energy and operating across a wide range of space and time scales.<sup>12</sup>

Basically, we can now scientifically affirm John Donne’s “Meditation XVII” of 1624:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man  
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;  
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe  
is the less, as well as if a promontory were,  
as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine  
own were; any man’s death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind.

While Donne was concerned with human beings and ecologists are concerned with all species, the insight is the same. No one species can exist in and of itself – all living things are reliant on each other for their existence. This notion flies in the face of America’s love affair with the lone cowboy – the good man (in this case non-inclusive language is intentional) who comes into town to save the day, but by day’s end ambles back into the sunset alone, “strong and free.” Americans often like to believe that we are “beholden to no one,” admiring those who

12 Gretchen C. Daly, Susan Alexander, et al. “Ecosystem Services: Benefits Supplied to Human Societies by Natural Ecosystems” *Issues in Ecology*, no 2, Spring, 1997, 2.

can “go it alone.” And yet, the natural sciences dispel the myth of noble independence and offer in its place the facts of earth’s interdependent biodiversity.

T.S. Eliot’s poem (cited above) recognizes that our fear of belonging, “to another, to others, or to a God,” bars the way to wisdom. Humility locates the human identity within dynamic systems. Thus, the enlightenment of humility emerges not through self-denial, but through confronting fears of our dynamic interdependence-- our reliance on others as well as the responsibility that comes with having other beings dependent on us. As Eliot notes, there is wisdom in this humility. When we realize that each being is equal and necessary in God’s Creation we are freed to listen and learn from one and all. Humility allows us to grow cooperatively. Again, Howard Thurman speaks to just this point:

The humble spirit. I learn the meaning of the humble spirit from the earth. The earth takes into itself the rain, the heat of the sun, and it works with these gifts of life to bring magic out of itself to be used for growth and sustenance of all living things. The earth is good because it takes what life gives, and within itself it uses its gifts to make life abound. It waits for fruition and gathers its fruit unto itself for more life and growing. I shall learn of the earth the meaning of the humble spirit.<sup>13</sup>

#### NATURE DOESN’T CARE

The fact is species are dependent on each other; it is also a fact that, for many species, their dependence is biological and not emotional or moral. In her book *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* Lisa H. Sideris takes issue with some eco-theologian’s tendency to romanticize natural ecosystems while, at the same time, completely ignoring the darker side of evolutionary science. A misplaced effort to identify communal altruism, peace and harmony in nature leads some theologians to homogenize the needs and actions of all beings. “Yet an environmental ethic that seeks harmonious and peaceful relations among all beings surely cannot take seriously the particular needs, the specific ways of life, of animals – take for example the needs of predators, whose means of survival will apparently be revoked when the original goodness of creation is restored.”<sup>14</sup> Scientists have clearly demonstrated that parasitism, predation, herbivory, and competitions for the same resources exist within ecosystems.<sup>15</sup> These behaviors cannot be judged as good, bad, uncooperative, or disturbing of the peace. They are amoral yet wholly natural. The peaceable kingdom on earth is a religious ideal, not a reality.

When we teach a course entitled “DNA, Evolution, and the Soul,” CSSR Director Bob Pollack and I always upset a certain number of students by insist-

13 Thurman, *Meditations*, 183.

14 Lisa H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 88.

15 Eliza Woo, “How Are We Connected to the Earth?” a lecture delivered at Union Theological Seminary, July 7, 2010.

ing that “Nature Doesn’t Care.” That nature is amoral is a hard concept to grasp. There is no right or wrong in nature. Random mutations (the driving forces behind evolution) are simply random. Similarly, every living thing will die, not as a reward or a punishment but because bodily death is in the natural order of all living things. What a scary thought – planets orbit, lightning strikes, genes mutate... all without value judgment. And yet, this statement does not render human life meaningless or free us from faithfully exercising our free will. It is only recognition that the laws of nature are not based on a moral code. Ironically, knowing that nature doesn’t care can be quite liberating. I offer a few stories to illustrate my point.

Two years ago a student approached me and asked if she could talk about something personal. She was a woman in her forties who had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. After telling me about her diagnosis, she paused and then very quietly said, “You know I’m not a believer, but I can’t help thinking that...well...I wasn’t a very good daughter when my parents were alive...” I understood immediately that she felt that her cancer was divine retribution for her troubled relationship with her parents. We discussed what a cancer cell looked like, what it was made up of, how it proliferated, and that it could not reason, it had no free will, and that it was therefore amoral. Cancer is not a judgment call: remember, nature doesn’t care. For her, this was helpful.

In the same vein, one of my lectures mentions that Jerry Falwell was way off the mark when he said HIV/AIDS was God’s damnation of homosexuals and drug addicts. A virus is a virus; it doesn’t care whose body it lives in. It will spread from homosexual men to Hispanic women, to white suburban IV drug users, to whole African nations without so much as a by-your-leave. On two separate occasions students who happened to be HIV positive came up after class to comment that learning that “nature doesn’t care” freed them from the oppressive notion that they were literally damned by a virus.

In an odd way these students were humbled by nature’s amorality. As far as science is concerned they weren’t particularly unique, they weren’t singled out to suffer, their joys and concerns were of no consequence, nor were they hopelessly doomed. Cancers and viruses are opportunistic on a biological level, they don’t care at all in whom they grow.

Howard Thurman recalls breaking his arm in the summer of his eleventh year. He was miserable because he couldn’t play in the woods or swim in the river.

I spent much time trying to decide what I had done that was worthy of such drastic punishment. I remember talking about this with my grandmother. Her simple comment was, ‘You broke your arm because you fell on it.’ ...There is no more critical issue here than the individual’s encounter with the world of either of nature or society...<sup>16</sup>

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16 Howard Thurman, “What Can We Believe In?” *Journal of Religion and Health*, 12:2, April 1973, 115.

Nature doesn't judge. This is not to say that our lives have no meaning, or that our actions carry no consequences; it only to point out that nature cannot, and does not, care how we as individuals conduct ourselves.

Finally, earth sciences can explain the physical conditions that brought Hurricane Katrina to New Orleans and a massive earthquake to Haiti. Earth Sciences can also serve to disarm those people who insist that the people of Louisiana and Haiti brought the natural catastrophes upon themselves by their sinfulness. Such scientifically unsound accusations are both cruel and destructive. Those who suffer natural disasters deserve to be relieved (and humbled) by the fact that nature doesn't care. Their being in the world neither occasions natural disasters nor prevents them. I am only speaking about natural disasters here. Floods, famines, and disease caused by climate change and environmental degradation can be explained by human agency; we create the optimum conditions for natural disaster. But again, in these cases nature is only responding to physical and/or biological principles, not judging our callous misuse of our planet. Rabbi Heschel noted, "Nature shows little regard for spiritual norms and is often callous, if not hostile to our moral endeavors."<sup>17</sup>

#### A NEW HUMILITY

Up until now I have been writing about humility on a personal level. What might it look like on a global level? As the world gets smaller and more crowded it cries out for cooperation, collaboration, respect for others, and a dedication to the future. Here, humble gratitude for our place in the universe story is expressed by exercising responsibility. Now, more than ever, we must acknowledge the fact that all beings are interdependent and we are responsible to one and all. Therefore, the human gift of heightened reason is not for us to hoard, it is to be used conscientiously for the well being of all Creation. The philosopher Hans Jonas made this brilliant observation:

If the new nature of our acting then calls for a new ethics of long-range responsibility, coextensive with the range of our power, it calls in that name of that very responsibility also for a new kind of humility – a humility owed, not like former humility to the smallness of our power, but to the excessive magnitude of it, which is the excess of our power to act over our power to foresee and our power to evaluate and judge. In the face of the quasi-eschatological potentials of our technological processes, ignorance of the ultimate implications becomes itself reason for responsible restraint – as the second best to wisdom itself.<sup>18</sup>

A humility in the face of our technological powers would never have occasioned a company to drill an oil well miles below the ocean floor without first developing the technology to remedy any well malfunctions that might occur.

<sup>17</sup> Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 106.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethic for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 22.

Were TransOcean and BP so arrogantly sure of their technology that they didn't think to have repair methods at the ready? Did they never consider their responsibility to the many ecosystems that they are obliterating right now?

Charley Lineweaver, an astrobiologist once wrote "Five continents and millions of species evolving over tens or hundreds of millions of years are yelling at us upwind against our vanity."

Jonas' notion of a new humility that hinges on responsible restraint is similar to the lines Rick Warren included in his inaugural prayer for Barak Obama:

When we presume that our greatness and our prosperity is ours alone, forgive us. When we fail to treat our fellow human beings and all the earth with the respect they deserve, forgive us. And as we face these difficult days ahead, may we have a new birth of clarity in our aims, responsibility in our actions, humility in our approaches, and civility in our attitudes – even when we differ.

Warren's prayer joins a renewed and urgent cry for a global ethic that would respect the rights of all of Creation. It would require nations to trade their chest thumping, muscle flexing industrialism for cooperative, just, and sustainable policies. The universe story includes all beings in a history billions of years old, but we are at a point in that history when unchecked arrogance can irresponsibly upend the natural order of all things. To quote Hans Jonas one more time:

It was once religion which told us that we are all sinners, because of original sin. It is now the ecology of our planet which pronounces us all to be sinners because of the excessive exploits of human inventiveness. It was once religion which threatened us with a last judgment at the end of days. It is now our tortured planet which predicts the arrival of such a day without any heavenly intervention. The latest revelation-from no Mount Sinai, from no Mount of the Sermon, from no Bo (tree of Buddha)-is the outcry of mute things themselves that we must heed by curbing our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland of what was creation.<sup>19</sup>

If we are to survive as a planet we will have to heed the prophet Micah by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our Creator.

#### A HUMBLE HEART

The natural sciences have given new meaning and significance to my childhood prayer; I now understand a humble heart to be a heart that is radically amazed by the universe story. The story is billions of years long and each being in the story was and is important to its unfolding. With amazement comes gratitude for the blessing of being included in this elegant universe. A humble heart express-

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<sup>19</sup> Hans Jonas, "The Outcry of Mute Things," in *Mortality and Morality: a Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, edited and with an introduction by Lawrence Vogel., 202-3.

es gratitude by accepting the interconnectedness of all living things in Creation and choosing to live cooperatively and collaboratively for the good of all – or, as Gregory Orr would say, “to keep the sweet machine of it going.” The humble heart strives to live in a way that complements the history of the cosmos while, at the same time, respecting the rights of future beings. Gratitude and awe compel the human heart to accept the responsibility that comes with our unique ability to reason and exercise free will – that is, the responsibility to care. Humility in the face of our elegant universe and heartfelt concern for the future of all beings compel me to pray anew, “Jesus meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto thine.”

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