



True Humility: Selfless Respect for Reality, by Costica Bradatan

From the potentialÂ unique location “the site of devastation that we might become” we understand that we are no grander than the rest of the world. Indeed, we are less than most things. The smallest stone we pick up randomly from a riverbed has long preceded us and will outlive us. Humans are barely existing entities: how can we claim privileges? Fundamentally, we are vulnerable, fragile creatures. And if unlike the rest of existence, people are endowed with reason, it is this gift of reason that should lead us to understand how modest our place in the Cosmos actually is.

The experience of failure, then, ought to inculcate humility.Â Rather than a virtue in the narrow sense, humility should be seen, more broadly, as a certain type of insertion into the world, as a way of life. InÂ *The Sovereignty of Good*Â (1970), Iris Murdoch came up with one of the best, most economical definitions of humility, which is simply “selfless respect for reality”TM. She thinks that ordinarily, people suffer from a poor adjustment to reality (“our picture of ourselves has become too grand”TM, we have lost “the vision of a reality separate from ourselves”TM), and it’s one that harmsÂ *us*, above anything else. To reverse the process, to heal, it helps to learn humility, “the most difficult and central of all virtues”TM.

I see three major phases here. In a first movement, humility presupposes an acknowledgment of our cosmic insignificance. This is something as old as philosophizing itself; it is what Yahweh wanted to instill in Job when he asked him: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth?”TM and what the Stoics meant when they recommended “the view from above”TM; what Lady Philosophy sought to teach a terrified-to-death Boethius in his prison cell; or what, more recently, Carl Sagan popularized so well. Embracing our cosmic insignificance is the zero-degree of the human existence “lower than this we cannot go. At this stage, shattered by failure and overwhelmed by the realization of our fundamental precariousness, we rightly feel “crushed”TM, “flattened”TM, “reduced to dust”TM. Humility, thus, places us where we belong; we are brought back to our naked condition. But this is no small feat: for along with the sense of our own self-importance, we also manage to get rid of that mix of self-deceiving habits and self-flattery, which usually keep us hidden from ourselves.

In a second movement, we realize that thanks precisely to our being brought “to earth”TM, we are in fact in a better position because we

are finally on firm ground. We can now stand on our own feet â€“ weâ€™ve undergone a rebirth of sorts. Importantly, we also realize that there is no degradation at this stage because, by embracing our cosmic insignificance, weâ€™ve come to be true to ourselves. We may be poor, but we are frightfully honest â€“ especially with ourselves. And thatâ€™s always the best place to start; wherever we will go from here, it will be progress and a worthwhile journey. Not to say that there is nothing healthier and more refreshing, especially for minds all too frequently pulled up in the air by the force of their own fantasies, than to be drawn back down to earth once in a while. Hardened dreamers undertaking the mud cure are in for a feast.

The third movement is expansive: thanks to having lowered an anchor into the world and regained an existential equilibrium, we can move on to other, bigger things. The dreams now have the necessary ballast to be dreamt properly. At this stage, humility is no longer an impediment, but an enhancement to action; sometimes there is nothing more daring than the act of the humble. In an important sense, then, humility is the opposite of humiliation: there is nothing demeaning or inglorious about it; on the contrary, humility is rejuvenating, enriching, emboldening. If humiliation leaves us paralyzed and powerless, humility empowers us greatly. True humility,Â wroteÂ the rabbi Jonathan Sacks, â€“is one of the most expansive and life-enhancing of all virtuesâ€™. What it presupposes is not â€“undervaluing yourselfâ€™ but an â€“openness to lifeâ€™s grandeurâ€™.

Humility in response to an experience of failure, then, is at its core a form ofÂ _therapy_, the beginning of a healing process. Properly digested, failure can be a medicine against pretentiousness, arrogance, and hubris. It can get us cured, should we care to try it.