

## MICHAEL MILBURN: "On Humility"

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My dictionary defines "humble" as "having a modest sense of one's own rank" (Def. 1), a quality that I occasionally (and not so humbly) recognize in myself. The accompanying synonyms—"low," "meek," and "submissive"—rob the word of some nobility, but apply no less accurately to me. Acquaintances would agree that I am "not arrogant" (Definition 2), but those who know me best might describe me as also having "feelings of insignificance, inferiority, subservience" (Def. 3). How could a word so apt for the self-effacing guy I try to be also fit the shrinking, sniveling side of myself that I deplore? By what calculation do "courteously respectful" (Def. 4), which I am to a fault, and "abased" (Def. 5), which I too often feel after encounters with people, especially assertive ones, add up to "humble," to me?

The dictionary adds that "to humble" means "to make meek—e.g. to humble one's heart." Maybe some people can feel good about doing this, but not me; no matter how graciously I acquiesce, the overcharging plumber departs looking triumphant. In humbling myself, I inspire him to humble me right back. Without apparent effort, he manages to "destroy the will" (Def. 6) of me to protest his exorbitant fee. Once one of my college students handed in every assignment late and missed a third of my classes. As I walked to the registrar's office to turn in his failing grade, he sprinted up from behind. Guessing my mission, he pleaded his case. He had no legitimate excuse, but spoke so feelingly of computer and alarm clock setbacks that I switched his grade to a D. He made me meek. A veteran colleague laughed when he heard the story. "They look so unassuming (Def. 7)," he said, "but will use any angle to improve their grade." I must have looked pretty unassuming myself, never suspecting a scam.

To be humbled, however, is not always to be shamed. James Baldwin's talent humbles me every time I read his essays. No loss of dignity in being shown up by one's betters. Only when the humbler has not earned deference, like the plumber or my student, do we glimpse the word in its most toxic form: humiliation. (Yet even humiliation benefits us if it strips us of arrogance. It's no coincidence that humiliators are most in need of the treatment themselves). Some days, when my writing flows and I start picturing my words in *The New Yorker's* font, it does my ballooning ego good to re-read a few paragraphs of Baldwin or George Orwell. On other days, when a rejection slip is thanking me for submitting my essay and wishing me good luck placing it elsewhere, I'm feeling abased enough without a nudge from those models. Donald Trump, on the other hand, would probably need an extended dose of humiliation to qualify as "not arrogant."

Who qualifies as a perfectly humble person—anyone who is "low in rank, importance, position" (Def. 8)? I think of figures in a Brueghel or Norman Rockwell painting or a Chekhov tale—simple types who do not aspire beyond simplicity except in simple ways, as toward a bountiful harvest, family, etc. Surely Lou Gehrig's "luckiest man alive" retirement speech turned him into an icon of humility, but I hesitate to praise this quality in successful people—it's easier for them to be modest. Even famously humble figures such as Jesus, Gandhi, Mother Theresa, and Nelson Mandela, while self-effacing and altruistic, had lofty aspirations, and their importance exceeded that of presidents. Despite their symbolic humility, these activists and civil disobeyers were, in the best way, positively arrogant.

In his article "Meta-Humbled," the journalist Christopher Caldwell remarked on the irony of public figures expressing their humility in the face of extravagant accomplishment, as when "Tim Robbins described himself as 'humbled and moved' by his Oscar for Best Supporting Actor." Caldwell suggests that "Humbled is one of those words ... that is now regularly used to mean its opposite."

Glowing with victory the afternoon after Election Day, President Bush appeared before the Washington press corps and declared, "America has spoken, and I'm humbled by the trust and the confidence of my fellow citizens." Humbled? What could the word "humbled" possibly mean to a man who had just received more votes for president than anyone in American history? Yet no one chalked the remark up to a lack of sleep or added it to any list of "Bushisms." Indeed, when the president chose Condoleezza Rice two weeks later to replace Colin Powell as secretary of state—and thus to direct a globe-girdling diplomatic operation that touches the life of every person on the planet -- she described the moment as "humbling."

Some of the most convincingly humble people I have encountered were recovering alcoholics testifying at the open AA meetings I used to attend in the company of a friend. As they described their transgressions and single-minded resolve to stay sober and make amends, I respected these people more than others born into humble lives. The route one takes to humility—up from disgrace, down from arrogance—that's virtue. But what if a panhandler approaches me in downtown New Haven—unassuming, lowly, aspiring only to survival? Say that no staggering economy has eliminated his job or caused him to be discharged from a mental institution; he's just not making it, as a result of his behavior, disease (alcoholism), or plain bad luck. Do I consider him humble or low, modest or meek?

My point is that these words can't seem to decide whether they're noble or contemptible. I wonder the same thing about myself. "To a modest man," reads the affectionate yearbook inscription my high school students presented to me. "You're so goddamned modest it could be years before anyone knew you'd published a book," a friend said when he spotted my new collection of essays on my kitchen counter. "You have to blow your own horn," my mother used to advise me, "modesty won't get you anywhere." Such comments rarely give me pleasure, even when they're intended as compliments. I often admire

modesty in others, but hardly ever in myself, where I am certain that it masks feelings of insignificance or arrogance.

My father used to remind me that as the youngest of six children I could never do or say anything original in his eyes; my experiences were chapters in a book he had read too many times. His quickness to scorn drove me to extreme quietness; the word "humiliation" comes from the Latin *humilis*, defined as a small, flattened cloud, and it was this appearance that I assumed while growing up. I still dread attacking others with my father's tongue. The airline clerk who bungles my reservation, the waitress who sloshes soup in my lap—I rush to reassure them, as if flinching from my own expectation of reproach. Yet my father's example has made me a better teacher and parent: when my student makes an embarrassing remark I quickly find something to praise; when my son shivers through his soccer game on the bench, victim of a coach's favoritism, I congratulate him for enduring the man's pettiness without complaint. My father would have seized upon these chances to exploit a child's vulnerability.

The mercurial moods brought on by my father's drinking also made me excessively polite. In our house the rarest prize was harmony, stretches of time where my father did not lose his temper or withdraw into a sulk. Even ten years after his death I continue to appease and accommodate liberally in company, desperate to keep the peace. But I have always yearned to speak my mind without regard for consequences. This may explain my attraction to blunt people, from my extroverted ex-wives to two of my literary idols—the critic Randall Jarrell and the playwright and AIDS activist Larry Kramer. Jarrell in his scathing poetry reviews for *The Nation* and Kramer in his polemics deploring the media's early AIDS coverage hurled their opinions without concern for repercussions or their targets' feelings.

I struggle equally hard to suppress my father's legacy of arrogance. Within our family he cultivated a myth of invulnerability, never admitting to mistakes or mentioning situations in which he was at a loss. In reality he was an effective lawyer who struggled futilely with his weight and drinking, and had a terrible relationship with his wife and children.

His arrogance, so clearly a mask for insecurity, still infects me. Sometimes I bury it under layers of humility and sometimes I will it away. In the company of my son, driving or watching TV, I am forever resisting the impulse to mock peoples' looks, speech, behavior, intelligence—an overweight woman laboring across the street, an inarticulate bystander interviewed on the TV news. The conspiratorial laugh that such comments elicit from my son delights me the way mine must have delighted my father, but I know that a youth who has heard enough such comments directed toward others will eventually begin to direct them toward himself.

Modesty helps me to disguise my arrogance, but also feeds it. I'm only humble when I can afford to be, when a show of humility contrasts with my accomplishment in a way that reflects well on me. Caldwell aptly calls this "self-interested self-effacement ... the kind of meekness that La Rochefoucauld described as 'only an artifice of pride.'" My siblings and I still routinely disparage our triumphs, aware that nothing could equal the

myth of superiority that our parents instilled. As a result, I have come to respect people more for acknowledging and even celebrating their glories than for diminishing them. True modesty lies not in understating one's success, but in measuring it accurately.

Sometimes egotistical behavior masks genuine humility. Robert Frost was well-known for his arrogance and competitiveness in person, once setting a handful of papers on fire to distract the audience from a poetry reading by his rival Archibald MacLeish. Lawrence Thompson, author of a multi-volume biography of Frost, started out revering the poet, but came to dislike him as he uncovered information about his life. Yet to my mind Frost's poems are steeped in humility; I doubt that anyone could write a poem such as "Acquainted With the Night" without a deep understanding of this quality:

I have been one acquainted with the night.

I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.

I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.

I have passed by the watchman on his beat

And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet

When far away an interrupted cry

Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;

And further still an unearthly height

One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.

I have been one acquainted with the night.

My own arrogance, which I usually succeed in concealing beneath my humble demeanor, emerges more often in my writing than in my behavior. Writing originally appealed to me because it let me express judgments in print that I would never have dared make in person. Twenty years ago I worked in a small library that hosted poetry readings. My job entailed extensive contact with visiting poets who I felt obligated to treat with deference even when I disliked their work. In my free time I wrote book reviews for a journal with a tiny local circulation. Assuming that hardly anyone would read my reviews, I dispensed with diplomacy when commenting on poetry in print, unleashing my opinions without fear of consequences. In one review I included an offhand put-down of a well-known poet's previous book. The poet read the review and wrote me a letter—not an angry retort that might have caused me to stand by my criticism, but an amused letter sympathizing with the distress his poems had caused me.

I quickly wrote back apologizing for the comment, confessing that I was trying to be witty and in the future would find better things to do than deliver cheap shots in poetry reviews. Ever gracious, the victim responded by urging me not to dilute my criticism. He assured me that he could handle a harsh remark if it meant that there was a poetry reviewer out there who said what he thought. I felt cowardly, knowing that I would never have dared offer the opinion to his face. The fact that my arrogance roared forth from the apparent safety of my obscure journal made me all the more disgusted with the humble facade I projected in person.

I have come closest to understanding the true nature of humility in my current profession—teaching in a middle school. The job's paltry pay and prestige tend to deter arrogant people, particularly men, who need some outward trappings of success in order to justify their sense of superiority. Children demand deference out of need rather than ego, and good teachers learn to defer in ways that preserve authority and dignity—both their own and their students'. Schoolteaching has taught me that genuine humility begins with self-respect; people who possess this quality need not rely on false modesty, arrogance, or humiliation to inflate themselves or diminish others.

Thinking about humility in this way helps me to reconcile the dictionary's contradictory definitions of the word. My father taught me early on to equate meekness, subservience, and lowliness with humiliation. He not only helped to obliterate my self-respect, but also deprived me of a model for how to humble myself in a noble rather than a selfish or belittling way. Perhaps that explains the comfort I felt among the alcoholics, many of whom had sunk so low that they had no vantage from which to condemn others. In the context of their recovery, the simplest actions—attending the meeting, not taking a drink that day—were praiseworthy. Starting from scratch, they accumulated enough self-respect to sustain a definition of humility that dignified rather than demeaned them.

