

Rev. Cathy Rion Starr, Unitarian Society of Hartford

10/15/17 Habits of Humility

Carey Nieuwhof writes that pride and humility are not attitudes, but rather habits that we build through practice. Let us explore the practice of humility and the courage it requires. How might focusing on a culture of humility strengthen collaboration here at USH?

Sermon:

A couple years ago, I attended a General Assembly workshop a couple years ago by same name as this sermon (Habits of Humility):ⁱ

Pacific Power & Light, the electric company in the Pacific Northwest, has lines going through the Cascade Mountains. Now, these aren't "mountains" like Avon "mountain," but rather Mount Ranier and other real mountains – think snow-all-year-round mountains. So when winter came, ice would build up on the power lines in the middle of the forest on the mountains, and these ice storms made for terribly unsafe jobs for the linemen. If the ice wasn't removed, the lines would break; but removing the ice entailed getting to the lines in the middle of the forest in the middle of a storm, climbing up the poles and then taking a long pole with a hook on the end to rattle lines until the ice broke.

Understandably, the linemen didn't like this dangerous job in the woods. So the company convened experts to find a different solution – they brought together engineers, foresters, electricians, and the linemen to brainstorm. They brainstormed all day.....and never got anywhere.

So next, they hired a consultant! The consultant said "I want to get everyone in a room together, from all departments: secretaries, accountants, mailroom staff, kitchen staff, together with the engineers, supervisors, linemen, and management.

Once everyone was in the room, the consultant led – wait for it --- another brainstorm. For hours the brainstormed, and, as is often the case in group dynamics, some people talked a lot, others were quiet, and some just watched.....and after several hours, they still didn't have a solution.

So the consultant broke everyone into small diverse groups and said: "Don't come back until you have an answer."

Well, the first group complained about the consultant: Why isn't she more prepared? We hired her! We're wasting time! Doesn't she understand how serious this problem is?

In the second group, a kitchen staff person and an HR exec commiserated: "I have work do to, this isn't my problem. I don't know anything about ice on the line! I want to get back to my job."

And in a third group, people started throwing out outrageous ideas. Here's how their conversation unfolded:

One lineman said, "we have to figure out a way to skin this cat, I hate this job. Last week, I came down and say eye-to-eye with a black bear! It chased me for a mile!"

Someone else sarcastically added: "let's just train the bears to climb the poles – they're heavy enough they'd probably knock it down." Others in the group laughed.

"But we can't train the bears."

"Maybe we could entice bears to go up – what if we put honey at the top?"

More laughter and lots of reasons why that wouldn't work.

And, still sarcastically, "How do we get the bears to climb during icy weather? And how would we fill the honey pots?"

"How about those helicopters the fat cats use – they could fly pole to pole with honey pots when icy weather coming."

Well, that got everyone laughing – what a ridiculous image!

And then a secretary who'd been quiet all day said: "hey, I was a nurse's aid in Vietnam. Many soldiers arrived by helicopter. The downwash was intense – blinding even. I wonder if we flew the helicopter over the lines, would the downwash knock the ice off?"

This time, there was no laughter. (Pause)

Ever since then, Pacific Power and Light has used helicopters and their downwash to remove ice from their mountainous lines.

A Culture of humility is one where no one is expert – we ALL bring something to the table.

Some – like the engineers in our story – had been taught that they knew all the answers – they brought a confidence from years of being able to solve problems – a lifetime of being told they were smart and capable. That's valuable knowledge, but it wasn't enough to solve the ice-on-the-line problem; they didn't know it all.

Some – like the secretary in our story – had been taught to do what she was told, stay quiet, and that she didn't know enough to solve this problem. And yet it was her piece of experience from years and years ago that ended up leading to the solution.

In the end, it took everyone to get to the creative solution to the ice-on-the-line problem.

We are stronger when we collaborate with humility. When we have the courage to say “I don’t know” or “what do you think?” or “I know a lot about this problem, but I’m too distracted by grief or stress or pain to focus on it”

When we lead with humility, we are open to the knowledge and wisdom – even the questions – of others who may bring a different vantage point.

When we lead with humility, we honor our own ignorance and see that there is wisdom even in our “stupid” questions.

When we lead with humility, we risk sharing our hearts, our vulnerabilities, our egos. It’s a big risk. And it can lead us to stronger community – and stronger decisions.

Here’s the thing: humility is not something that our dominant culture teaches us to value. So how might we create a culture of humility here at USH?

In 2005, Screenwriter and movie producer Josh Friedman ate “a bad farmers’ market burrito and ended up learning that I had kidney cancer.”ⁱⁱ He writes of “crying, pulling myself together, rocking my son to sleep, crying more and then taking Ativan so my wife could rock me to sleep.”

Here is a man who writes screenplays full of daring, fighting, and courage (Terminator, War of the Worlds), and Friedman says: “you don’t battle cancer. You don’t fight it. If cancer wants you, it walks into your room at night and just takes you.”

Too many of you here know this – you have gotten the call from a son or mother or dear friend or your own doctor about the “c” word. You have watched radiation and chemotherapy ravage your own or a loved one’s body. You have done the best you could to live with cancer, and, sometimes, to live with the grief of a life it has taken too early.

Cancer sucks.

I so appreciate Friedman’s honest take on cancer – this man who writes tough-guy narratives for the big screen says tough-guy narratives about cancer are seductive in a largely harmful way: This language about “fighting” cancer and standing “strong” that we so often use to describe dealing with cancer “suggests that we have control over our fate, that we can *will* cancer away....but courageousness is a standard that no sick person should have to meet.”

“I’m a coward,” he writes.

There is such humble strength in Friedman's declaration "I'm a coward." This movie producer who writes bravery and violence says no, I'm not brave. I am human; when I had cancer I was a grown man crying in my bed – and that is okay.

Bless him for modeling humble honesty. This honesty that unveils the vulnerability we all share. When we hold up walls of "I'm ok, everything is under control," (even when it's not), we negate some of our humanity and close off doors to connection and support.

It's scary to let down those walls and show our rough edges or admit that we are suffering – whether emotionally or physically.

Friedman writes: "Our culture likes its heroes undaunted, especially in the stories we tell. When we glorify strength without showing empathy for weakness, we end up with a toxic version of heroism, one that links bravery to goodness and cowardice to getting what you deserve.

You are good if you are brave. If you are a coward, you get what you deserve. It's your fault if you can't heal from cancer, or if you can't make ends meet this month.

This way of valuing bravery closes off doors to our humanity.

"And when we do that, [Friedman says] we can no longer tell stories of grace, or forgiveness, or connectedness. We can no longer tell stories about real people – the ones who fail, the ones who are afraid and the ones who let themselves and others down. These are the stories we need more than ever, especially those of us walking on life's edge."

Isn't this what we're trying to do here? To be fully human? I've often described church as a place where we practice being human – mistakes, warts, gifts and all.

We need stories of real people – who are afraid and fail and let each other down.

And to do that, we need the courage to be vulnerable.

These two stories – of Friedman's "cowardly" life with cancer and the creative solution to the ice-on-the-line problem both offer lessons in humility.

I invite you to think for a moment of a time recently when you had the courage to be vulnerable.

And a time when you acted from pride or had your walls up.

We all do both of these. Some of us lean more towards pride and keeping our walls up – because of the way we were raised and socialized in a particular culture (and often those with more education, money, or socialized as men or white are often taught to be “brave” and never let your walls down to show your vulnerability or humility)

Some of us lean more towards humility or insecurity – again because of the way we were raised and socialized in a particular culture. For example, often women are socialized to make space for others or are ignored when we do speak up, and many women, working class folks, visibly disabled people and people of color are socialized that our opinions or feelings aren’t as valid as other people’s more “Expert” opinions.

Creating a culture of humility has something to offer all of us. Creating a culture of humility means making space for those who never let down their walls to have the courage to be vulnerable. Creating a culture of humility means honoring –and actively making space for-- the questions and insecurities of those who feel less empowered but have much to offer.

We do this so well in our Small Group Ministry here – creating sacred space for courageous vulnerability.

How might we support one another in cultivating habits of humility that ripple out through everything we do here? How might we inspire and support one another to have the strength to be humble in all of our lives?

One way we’ve done this here at USH in the last few years is that we’ve worked on breaking down silos and a sense of “turf” that often develops in congregations. That’s partly why Collaboration is one of our themes this year. It’s an invitation to remember that you are not alone. That we are all interconnected. That people outside of your subcouncil or project have knowledge, wisdom, and creativity that can strengthen our collective ministry.

This year, we’ve been asking you to consider the question: who are all the stakeholders in this piece of ministry? Who could we work with that we haven’t before? Who might bring another perspective to the table? Who don’t we know who we’d like to get to know better?

A culture of humility is acknowledging that none of us has all the answers – but together, we weave stronger and stronger fabric of community.

For example, we’ve had a couple meetings in the last weeks to stabilize our sound system (we’re trying to fix the challenges you’ve heard here the last couple weeks). We convened a wider group of users/stakeholders than usual: As Rayla put it (I wasn’t at the meeting): Stu Spence (from B&G) spoke to the difference in volume from the two

ministers and what that means for sound. He also has the institutional knowledge. Sam, who brings an ear for music], really understood the dynamics of what's being going on lately and understands our system. Rayla was able to bring up the needs of our rentals and how it differs from how we use the system for congregational needs (tho doesn't know the technicalities). Peter Delloro is a sound engineer who doesn't even come to church, but volunteered to help out when his wife Caron talked about some of the problems we were having.

Everyone brings their different questions, knowledge, and lack of knowledge, and needs – and came together to solve it. (Don't worry, the solution doesn't involve us purchasing helicopters!)

Here's a thing about collaboration: it can be a pain in the toosh. It involves more people and often more time. Those secretaries and kitchen staff and CEO who spent a day working on this ice-on-the-line problem? Well, I'm sure they had "better" things to do with their time. But it was the breadth of people in the room that ultimately solved the problem.

And here's a thing about collaboration: it can be energizing, fun, joyful, and, perhaps most importantly in our covenantal faith: collaboration deepens relationships. When Rev Heather set out to preach on Hartford Stage play "The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey," she had no idea that we'd end up with the playwright and actor James Lecesne right here on our steps telling our Time For All Ages that day. Starting down the road of collaboration with Hartford Stage began with a brief conversation with our own member Antay Bilgatuy and has led to an ongoing relationship with Hartford Stage that is joyful, inspiring, and rich (stay tuned for more about this year's collaboration in January!)

We are an interdependent web of existence – what touches one affects us all.

Thankfully, we're not dealing with bears or helicopters or screenplays. But we are dealing with tender hearts in what feels like apocalyptic times. What we do here matters. How we do it matters.

Let us keep daring to open our hearts to one another, to let down the walls and ask for support when we need it – or even simply an honest ear.

Let us cultivate a culture of courageous humility that can unlock so much beauty, creativity, power, and strength.

Let us set down our egos and our insecurities, and bring curiosity as we engage with differences.

Let us admit to one another that we are all both brave and cowardly, and cultivate a willingness to be vulnerable.

Let us create a covenant to hold that tender space that vulnerability asks of us. Let us trust our leaders. Let us trust our own resilience.

Let us keep opening ourselves to the unseen and the unknown with as much humility and grace as we can cultivate together.

So may it be.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ You can see the story at about 6 minutes into the Habits of Humility workshop at General Assembly 2015 (or watch the whole workshop!).

<https://www.uua.org/leadership/skills/development/ga/habits-humility>

ⁱⁱ "It's O.K. to be a coward about cancer," Josh Friedman, Time Magazine 8/7/2017, p.21-22

ⁱⁱⁱ This section draws from the slide "Spiritual Strength in Congregations" in the Habits of Humility workshop: Willingness to be vulnerable and a covenant to hold that tender space. Trust in leaders. Curiosity. Openness to what is unseen and not known. Engagement with difference. Resilience.