

The lowly virtue: Humility is a gift

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

The other day my class was discussing George Herbert's *Humilitie*, a poetic dream-vision in which the virtues, personified as court officials, accept "tokens of submission" from beasts and fowls who allegorically represent the vices. Spoiled by the tribute, the virtues fall to squabbling:

. . . as they beheld the grace
Of that brave gift, each one began to fume,
And challenge it, as proper to his place,
Till they fell out: which when the beasts espied,
They leapt upon the throne . . .

Anarchy ensues until Humilitie, stationed beneath the azure throne of the virtues, intervenes to restore order. Why, my students wondered, is humility set apart from the other virtues? Why does humility persevere when the other virtues fail? Come to think of it, why does the well-known list of cardinal and theological virtues (prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude; faith, hope and love) omit humility, vanquisher of the chief deadly sin of pride?

Perhaps it's because humility has no use for tokens of submission. Humility's job is not to crown the virtues but to serve them and infuse them with the spirit of the beatitudes ("Blessed are the meek"). Always taking the lower place, humility is unskilled in public relations. Hence the rumor persists of a disreputable liaison between humility and obsequiousness. Strange rumor indeed, since genuine humility is difficult to fake. One quickly sees through the mock-humility of Shakespeare's Gloucester or Dickens's Uriah Heep. Nor is the self-abnegation that turns wounded girls into cutters and anorexics a friend of true humility. Humiliation is an affliction; humility is a gift. Genuine humility orders the soul, bestowing clarity, calmness and competence. "He is humble," writes Walter Hilton, "that truly knows himself as he is."

The best advertisement for humility, the best way to set the record straight, is to meet a saint or a saint-in-progress; and the best way to find one—at the grocery store, in the pew, in the monastic cloister or in line at the post office—is to smell out humility.

We all know that smell. We may even take it for granted when it graces our friends and neighbors. Occasionally, though, it takes a startling form, as my husband and I discovered many years ago. We had just begun a nine-month sojourn in a studio apartment in Paris, where I was working on my dissertation. Early one morning my husband answered a knock at the door, thinking it might be the plumber our landlady had promised to send to fix the heating system. As I emerged from the bathroom I saw something that stopped me in my tracks: Dom Jean Leclercq, the famous Benedictine medievalist, was crouching alongside my husband, peering at the pipes and trying to be helpful. He had received a letter of inquiry from me and decided to answer it in person. Here was a world-class scholar, a legend in his own lifetime, the most famous living monk next to Thomas Merton—and my husband took him for a plumber! The embarrassment faded, however, as soon as it became clear that Jean Leclercq was perfectly comfortable being taken for a plumber, perfectly willing to fix our pipes if he could, perfectly willing to sit in our homely surroundings, share a baguette and discuss 12th-century thought. This is not the way distinguished medievalists, generally speaking, comport themselves with their inferiors. But it is the most characteristic of monastic traits.

In my decidedly unmonastic town there are lots of cars with bumper stickers of the “I am woman, hear me roar” variety. An especially popular one is “Well-behaved women rarely make history.” The source for this slogan, improbably enough, is a remark made by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, a historian of colonial American life who has devoted her scholarly career to studying the lives of ordinary unheralded women—midwives, weavers, healers, housewives—by means of their diaries and household artifacts. Ulrich’s books (*A Midwife’s Tale*, *The Age of Homespun*, *Good Wives*) reveal the complexity, depth and essential goodness of countless women who rarely made history because they rarely made scenes, instead turning their attention, like Jean Leclercq, to the task at hand.

Humility may not be the most prestigious of the virtues; it lacks the supremacy of the theological virtues and the “manliness” of the classical virtues. It lays a foundation in the soil (*humus*, whence *humilitas*) for the edifice of the virtues. It makes a ladder, according to St. Benedict and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, with the

strange property that whoever descends its steps will rise. Well-behaved women who rarely make history know this ladder, and so do medievalist monks who try to fix the pipes. Our friends who are using all the money they earn from their housecleaning business to start a school in a nomadic region of eastern Tibet know this ladder; so does our mail carrier, who has been sidelined by an injured Achilles tendon; so does the shopkeeper downtown who is showing signs of Parkinson's disease; so does the librarian who is legally blind but devoted to tracking down (with the aid of a massive magnifying glass) any minute reference that might be helpful to a young scholar; so does a beloved teacher of mine, now struggling to recover from a stroke.

The plumbers union in heaven, to which Jean Leclercq ascended 13 years ago, must be crowded with people who never attracted renown for their heroic virtues or achievements but who in attentive, loving obedience to their given tasks plumbed the depths of humility while on earth.