

Humbled: Escaping the universe of pride

by [Paul J. Wadell](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue



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When I was on the cusp of adolescence, my mother gave me a card on which were emblazoned these plaintive words of Thomas Merton: “Deliver me from pride, which is the heaviest of burdens.” Of course, I had no idea why my mother would think Merton’s prayer was one I should make my own, so I stashed the card away, certain that pride might be somebody else’s problem but would never be mine.

That deception did me in. Pride is a subtle, sneaky vice, and it lured me into its world even though I had no idea that that was where I was living. But pride went to work on me, and because I did little to hinder it, pride did its work exceedingly well. Beguiled by its logic, I began to invest far too much of my identity in having to be better than everybody at something, never realizing that always having to be above and ahead of others is a very lonely place to be. I worried more about grades than real learning, cared too much about others’ opinions and was pretty sure a good life was one in which everything worked to my own best advantage. I took myself way too seriously while not taking others seriously enough.

I was keenly aware of my gifts—and always gratified when they were acknowledged—but would feel the pinch of envy whenever the successes of others were celebrated. And because I thought all was well with me, I was dangerously blind to my capacity to hurt and oblivious of how thinking so highly of myself often left me judging others harshly. Nestled in the universe of pride, I could not see that until I crossed the threshold and entered the world of humility I wouldn’t really live, because I would never escape a world that was no bigger than myself.

Yet there I stayed for years, never once thinking that something was amiss. This is not surprising—vices diminish us not only because in cultivating them we fail to nurture some essential dimension of goodness, but also because we so rarely are aware that we have them. That is why the damage done by pride was something I could see in retrospect, but not when pride quietly infested my life.

So I continued along pride's way unaware of how in the dark I really was. I could not see how sterile and suffocating the world of pride is. I could never admit that our greatest human need is not for admiration and praise, but to be known and loved and accepted by others, because that could never happen while I stayed safely turned in on myself. Contrary to what I thought, instead of building me up pride was killing me because it cut me off from the love and goodness and mercy that bring us to life. Indeed, the greatest irony was that I thought I was prospering, but I was shut tight in a tomb, gladly refusing to be resurrected.

The first sign that something was wrong came on a weekend retreat. The retreat did not begin well for me. I was walking around the grounds of the retreat center on a gloomy November afternoon and wanted to bolt. None of the preaching was reaching me, and my prayers sounded phony even to myself. I felt so out of step with everything that I decided to leave the retreat the next morning. What was the point of staying?

But then something surprising happened. Later that day I was resting in my room and looked up to see a small crucifix on the wall. Obviously it had been there all along, but I hadn't noticed it. As I gazed at the crucifix, I had the dizzying sense of having fallen away from something good, of having lost something precious and of having distanced myself not only from God and from others but from my own true self. Instead of elevating me, pride had grossly misdirected me, so much so that I wondered if I could find my way back. Looking at the wounded Christ, I knew that pride had wounded me because in the space where God ought to be, I had enthroned myself.

Instead of fleeing the retreat, I absorbed it as a man who was famished. That night the talk was on the passion of Christ. Looking back, what the priest said that evening helped me take my first steps away from the universe of pride into the world of humility. When he spoke of the vulnerability of the crucified Christ he helped me realize that often God enters our lives not through our strengths and successes but through our weaknesses, struggles and fears. If we try to pretend all is well with

us—that we have no flaws, no needs and no shortcomings—then nothing can reach us, nothing can touch us. But when we do not hide our helplessness, the very things about us that we most resist claiming are the openings that God needs in order to heal us. The retreat talk stayed with me because it taught me that I would leave the universe of pride only when I acknowledged how dependent on and indebted to God and others I really was.

It is always helpful to have a trustworthy guide in a foreign land, and I knew I needed someone to help me make my way in the strange new world of humility. I found my guide in Fr. Hubert, an elderly priest in a religious order of preachers, for whom the greatest burden was preaching. Fr. Hubert never knew I had chosen him to mentor me, but I learned the power of humility by observing him.

A saintly man plagued by nervousness and persistent doubts about his worthiness, Fr. Hubert was convinced that his own inability made him a poor proclaimer of God's word. But no one's sermons spoke to me more than his, not only because I knew he was a man of prayer who had meditated long over the scripture readings for the day, but also because the depth of his humility allowed God to speak through him. God spoke through Fr. Hubert not only in his sermons but also in his unfailing kindness, in his beautiful goodness, in the great delight he found in the simplest things and in the infectious joy he took in the successes of others.

Every virtue brings its own special excellence. Fr. Hubert taught me that humility is indispensable in the Christian life because it blesses us with a clarity of vision about ourselves, others and our place in the world—a clarity of vision that frees us to respond to all situations with justice, compassion, mercy and love. Graced with humility, we act differently because we see differently. Unlike the self-aggrandizing distortions of pride that prevent us from seeing others as well as ourselves truthfully, humility enables an honest appreciation of ourselves that allows us to honestly appreciate, esteem and genuinely love our neighbors. Pride skews our vision—it bends the world to ourselves—because pride trains us to view everything and everyone in terms of our own needs and enhancement. But the special power of humility is that it continually opens up our world because it teaches us to see others neither as our servants nor our rivals but as gifts brought into our lives by God.

The Christian life sets us on a trajectory away from pride and into the world of humility because, as the Gospels attest, we find life and freedom and joy not by collapsing in on ourselves but by transcending ourselves in love, service, generosity

and devotion to others. I opened the door to humility because I grew tired of pretending I was somebody I was not, tired of feigning and posturing. I opened that door because I didn't like the person I was becoming in the universe of pride; there was no joy in dissembling, and there were moral dangers aplenty in always having to excel. I haven't always stayed in the world of humility, but I believe that when Jesus praised not the self-righteous Pharisee who thanked God that he was "not like other people" but the contrite tax collector who prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:9-14), he did not mean to make things harder for us but to show us the path to life.

I used to picture humility as a door I did not want to open because I feared what was on the other side. I never thought of humility as an itinerary to holiness. It is easy to play it safe in the universe of pride because nothing is asked of us there. We construct a world to our liking and settle into it as life passes us by. What I learned from Fr. Hubert is that humility, far from holding us back, is the openness by which we engage life, the openness that allows us to receive in order to give, to be blessed in order to bless. Or, as Thomas Merton wrote, "In humility is perfect freedom." Maybe this is what Paul had in mind when he told the fledgling Christians at Philippi: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4).

Such advice sounds quaint and even foolish in a world that encourages self-assertion, applauds self-importance and often sees self-esteem as the most valuable character trait. Humility is a dangerous virtue to nurture if we believe that the only sure route to self-respect is by feeling superior to somebody else or that if we grow in humility, we'll never get ahead but only fall further behind. I know now that it is only when we cross the threshold and enter the world of humility that we truly begin to live.