

It's easy to mistake humility for humiliation

The saints are so big on humility that sometimes the line seems fuzzy.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [December 19, 2018](#) issue



Juan de la Miseria, *Teresa of Ávila*, 16th century (copy of a 1576 painting, when she was 61).

My best friend and I have a game we play called “humiliation.” It started when we were fresh out of school and beginning our first jobs. We’d call each other up and share stories about how, for example, a man had reached out with a smile after a sermon or a lecture, leaned in, and said, “I felt so sorry for you while you were speaking.” Sharing such stories disarmed them, ordering the confusion we felt in the moment into something more manageable. And laughing together was balm.

We don't humiliate as easily as we used to. But we still have stories to tell. Whenever I open up my email to find a message from my friend with the word *humiliation* in the subject line, I mentally rub my hands together in anticipation and start searching my own recent past for a story to send back. It usually doesn't take very long to find one.

Humiliation isn't really the right word for most of the stories my friend and I have shared over the years. Most are not about being on the receiving end of someone's meanness, but about the kinds of experiences that sting because they contain a bit of truth: survivable discomforts, like reading a negative course evaluation. They are experiences that cultivate humility—the foundation, as Teresa of Ávila teaches, upon which the spiritual life is built. The treasure that Simone Weil says is worth more than any accolade. The vantage point, as Bernard of Clairvaux describes it, from which we might have a chance of glimpsing the truth.

The saints are so big on humility that sometimes the line between humility and humiliation doesn't seem clear. Every year, I see students turn to St. Teresa with excitement, eager to hear a woman's voice speaking about God. And every year, I see them struggle to wade through her many protestations of humility: she's uneducated, merely a woman, the worst of sinners, "a foul and stinking dunghill." But it soon becomes clear that those crescendos of self-deprecation usually culminate in a silence into which Teresa then steps and begins teaching, with authority, about God. Once you've recognized her making that move, you see her doing it again and again.

Teresa's embrace of humility is strategic. But she also means what she says. For Teresa, humility is the first step on the road to self-knowledge, and self-knowledge the first step on the path to God. No matter how far we get along that path, she insists, we can never leave humility behind. It is more than just the first step of the journey. It's the very gravel on the path we're walking, the grit that works its way into our shoes and reminds us that we're no better than anyone we meet along the way, that we all contain hidden places where God is waiting to meet us.

Augustine writes in his *Confessions* of how his lack of humility as a young man made it difficult for him to approach scripture. He remembers wanting to love the Bible, but when he read it, it didn't measure up to Cicero. Inside, the Bible was a vault of mysteries, and Augustine couldn't bend his neck to get through its low and modest door to find them. He would have to learn to see in the humble speech of the Bible a

reflection of Christ's own humble joining of the life of humanity before he could enter.

A few weeks ago, at the weekly Eucharist service at my school, I listened as a student made her way through that low and sometimes unlovely door. The preacher, a queer woman preparing for ministry, drew, through the luck of the lectionary, a passage from the letter to Titus in which women are instructed to be submissive to their husbands. She could easily have chosen another reading, but she stuck with what the lectionary gave her, asking what she was meant to learn from a text that kept her so firmly outside its circle of concern. She concluded that she was being called to notice her own insider language as a student of religion and to ask continually who was being excluded from her discourse. "The letter of Titus may not be speaking to me," she said, "but God is."

Teresa of Ávila could hardly have said it any better. Humility lets us rest for a while in uncertainty. It lets down our guard so we can hear God speaking. It builds up our self-knowledge and makes us capable of change.

Humiliation isolates us in shame, but humility helps us to see our life in relation to other lives and to ask how our choices affect others. This is as true for communities and nations as it is for individuals. Nationalism is nurtured on narratives of humiliation that isolate, that urge us to put our tribe first and to refuse to see how our destiny is bound up with the destinies of other people, other communities, other nations. It casts humility as weakness.

But humility is not weakness. Bernard of Clairvaux taught that it is the vantage point from which we can take in the largest possible view and the path by which we can return to the truth when we are lost. From what Bernard calls humility's "highest peak," we see, even more clearly than our imperfections, the connections that thread through all our lives, binding our futures together.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Humility without humiliation."