



Children's Story "Boating" by Natalie Babbit, *The Devil's Storybook*

Reading *Adapted from Lifelines by Forrest Church*

The question we ask is why. Why did children perish in a fire? Was God's hand involved in an earthquake, in the holocaust? A pastor who lost his faith when his wife died in childbirth said to me, "If God exists, then God is a bastard." If God is all-powerful then God knows when we are going to die and how. God has the power to change the course of human destiny.

[But] My heart tells me that there is no God pulling the strings. When anyone tries to explain [a catastrophe as God's will] I say with the preacher in Ecclesiastes, "The fate of men and beasts is the same ... all are from dust, and all turn to dust again."

I cannot believe in the God that many others seem to believe in. This God is too small, unequal to the abundance of creation. I can't believe in a God who keeps records and makes lists. But I also know, as someone who once said of people who don't believe in God, it's not that they therefore believe in nothing. They tend to believe in almost anything. Most of the things they believe in are even smaller than the God I don't believe in. Money. Fame. Success. Knowledge. "All are vanity."

The word vain carries two complementary connotations: puffed up and empty. To elevate ourselves above others is vanity, because from dust we all come and to dust we shall return. We cannot form saving connections when we permit pride to distance us from others.

One of the smallest things we believe in is ourselves. After the last earthquake in Los Angeles, the engineers and architects in Japan proudly proclaimed that a like devastation could never happen there, for they had designed their buildings to endure nature's wrath. They believed in themselves. That is why pride is so great a sin. No other human presumption so perilously exposes us to the whiplash of reality.

I believe in what I cannot know, the God beyond God, not omnipotent and omniscient – these are human constructs – but ineffable and inscrutable – subject neither to human description nor human understanding.

None of this makes sense. I know that. A thing we can neither name or know cannot make sense. We get in trouble when we try to explain what cannot be understood. We get in trouble when we imagine that nothing exists beyond that which we can understand and explain. We get in trouble when we allow what little we know to get in the way of our relationships with our neighbors, given that our knowledge cannot be that much greater than theirs.

If none of this makes sense, it does make something more important than sense. It makes us humble. And it makes us wonder. It helps us empathize with others as mysteriously born and fated to die as we are. It humbles us, and we are changed.

Sermon

As many of you know, I grew up in an immigrant Mennonite community, which means that I grew up in a religious culture that strongly valued the practice of humility. It was one of the primary ways we were supposed to experience ourselves as Mennonite and as Christian and it affected everything, from the smallest social encounter to the most important relationships of our lives.

For example, if you were a successful person, you never boasted of your success, or conspicuously displayed your wealth, or spoke passionately about your ambitions, anything that would draw attention to you or look like you were holding yourself above others. Furthermore, you should attribute your success not to your own actions or as a sign that you were favored by God because that made your success about you. For all our belief in an omnipotent God, we tried not to fall prey to the idea that God pulled strings and pushed buttons and that right faith resulted in the prize of God rewarding you. In this strongly Christian community, you attributed your success to the grace of God, not a reward from God, and expressed gratitude rather than pride for your bounty, because life being what it is, it could be gone tomorrow. To use the words of Ecclesiastes, from dust we come and to dust we will go. Anything that we have here is temporary and will come to an end so we are to hold onto those things that are eternal, not be bound to this frail and transitory world.



Let me give you another example. If you wanted something, say a position in the church, you should never explicitly promote yourself for that position. That would be competing, which means striving to put yourself before others. Rather than highlight your skills, you would quietly offer your service. And if you were given what you hoped for, you accepted it not as a personal achievement, but as a deep honor and responsibility.

And then there was how you accepted praise. If people complimented you, you accepted the compliment in a way that drew attention away from yourself so that you would not be putting yourself above others. So you might look gently away and quietly thank them, and often you would credit your accomplishment to someone else, or to God because there is the strong value that we accomplish nothing alone. Any achievement is an achievement of many, not of a single individual alone.

All of this was about living in a state of humility, about being extremely conscious about your neighbour. You might equate it to our first and seventh principles, to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the interdependent web of all existence. It was about living the priesthood of all believers, which states that we are all equal before God, a theology that Unitarian Universalism practices as well, although in a more theological plural way.

Very little of this was taught directly. It was mostly by example, or by inference. And if you crossed a line, rarely was your crossing addressed directly. Even the way boundaries were enforced, was understated, because the one correcting you could so easily become vain in how they did it, so you even had to reprimand in a way that was humble. Just one word, or one glance, was sufficient. And if you'd been the one to cross the boundary, the ethical response was not to beg for forgiveness because drama is self-inflating. You should quietly change your ways and not expect undo praise for it, because really, it isn't human praise that you should be after.

So if you're wondering what it's like for me to stand at the back of the church after the service and receive praise for a sermon well done, now you know. It's always a struggle because my first response is to make sure it doesn't go to my head, that it doesn't make me proud, even as, truly, I am honored by the words of appreciation. And I do believe that anything I or anyone accomplishes is not ours alone. We draw our strength and our passions from deep within, and from communities of family and friends and the divine as it lives in and through us.

So this is a glimpse of the culture that I grew up in, and my experience of humility. And I would remiss if I failed to mention that this whole system was and is under pressure, because we live in modern society. We live in a culture with a strong valuing of individualism. It is a powerful and compelling and liberating ideology even as it becomes so clear that in many ways the way we do individualism now is out of control, leading not to strong individuals, but self-absorbed individuals.

As I grew up, the practice of humbleness was often ridiculed, seen as old fashioned, old world and self-demeaning and many in our community consciously and unconsciously broke it down as they assimilated into North American society. And to be honest, there were some things that needed to be broken. As in all cultural systems, there was the potential for abuse. The way you were expected to be humble was influenced by social factors, like your class, or your family line. The kind of humbleness expected of women often meant not questioning, not expecting anything for yourself, being invisible, and far too often, putting up with abusive behavior. Sometimes the expectation of humbleness became a deadening pressure to submit to the status quo. Sometimes, humbleness became a tool for gaining power. Because humbleness was so valued, you could raise your status by doing it better than anyone else, and then you'd use your status to manipulate others into getting what you want.

You know what I think? I bet that this doesn't just happen in the Mennonite community. I think many of us grew up in cultures that turned the spiritual practice of humility into the abusive practice of humiliation, that have taken this powerful practice of radical decentering and turned it into an instrument of control and abuse. So, we are humble not because we yearn to be in a state of reverence, but because we are depraved, sinful, untrustworthy, unworthy. Even if you did not grow up in a church, or grew up in a more progressive religion, you would have been influenced by it. We live in a culture that has taken this skewed understanding of humility as humiliation, and it has penetrated our legal systems, our educational systems, and political systems, the way we understand love and parenting and marriage and responsibility.

Even if you didn't grow up in the west, even if you didn't grow up Christian, it has likely influenced you. Buddhism, for example, has a powerful practice of humility. The whole discipline is focused on letting go of the self so as to join that great oneness which dissolves all sense of self. But even that has been abused by repressive political forces for the purpose of subjugating dissent and enforcing compliance.



How many of us learned that humility means accepting without question what a minister or a teacher or a leader or a parent told us? How often has the practice of humility been used to strip us of the right to examine our own conscience, and to express our own thoughts and hopes and desires?

We have all seen humiliation masked as humility. So, rather than humility being a positive experience where we connect with the immensity of the universe and enter into a state of reverence for life and all its mysteries, we've been shamed, and pressured into self-effacing, self-demeaning ways of being. In fact it is that pressure that pushed many of you out of your churches and towards a religion like Unitarian Universalism. Not that we're perfect. But we consciously resist this understanding of humility, and name it for what it is, spiritually violent.

Several years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association published a study by the Commission on Appraisal about our theological diversity and what we hold in common. One thing they held up is that many Unitarian Universalists stand intentionally between two extremes. On the one hand, we stand apart from belief systems that are rigid, where the individual is expected to break themselves to be faithful. On the other hand, we are also uncomfortable with a society that seems shallow and meaningless, where we have made idols not of gods but of ourselves. Just walk through a mall, glance at a magazine, turn on the TV, and you will see how self-absorbed we taught to become. Our practice of individualism has become corrupted. Many of us don't want the restrictions of more traditional religion, but we're tired of the meaninglessness and selfishness in larger society. We want a more respectful way of living, for ourselves and for our children.

To paraphrase Forrest Church, we hunger for an alternative to the worship of small gods. One destroys the self by demeaning it. The other destroys the self by worshipping it. The result is actually the same. In both extremes we become spiritually bankrupt, anchored to nothing.

We need to recover a true sense of humbleness, one that expands who we are at the same time as we will ourselves to become smaller, to melt into a great oneness that is more than we can ever imagine, more than we can ever define. I think we hunger to be restored to a place of humbleness that allows us to resist the soul numbing shallowness of an individualism that is swallowing us whole. We yearn to be restored to a place of humbleness that allows us to hold onto our sense of self so that our willingness to sacrifice ourselves for another is never abused again but instead held up as a manifestation of the divine.

Sometimes I'll be asked, “Does Unitarian Universalism save you from anything?” And I say, you bet. We are saved from meaningless lives and mind-numbing obedience. We stand in humbleness before the awesome mysteries of life knowing we will never understand it all. We are simply grateful for life itself, and for the abundance of grace within it.

This faith would not exist without humbleness. How else could we live with the theological diversity in our churches? Each of us has the responsibility to embody the truth that there is more than we can ever know about the universe, the sacred and the human spirit. Embodying that truth means that we have to be exceedingly humble with each other. One believes that there is no god, there is nothing beyond physical life. Another believes that a personal god watches over them, suffering when they suffer, rejoicing when they rejoice. One feels that God has abandoned him; he's in that “God is a bastard” place. Another believes that a plethora of gods and goddesses stand ready to join her on the thin line between this world and the next, another that the sacred is able to be touched with the slightest moment of intention. Yet another wonders what the big deal is and waits for a spiritual experience that has not yet come to be. Another prays their deepest intentions to a god they wished existed but deep down believes probably doesn't. With all this diversity, we are always in the presence of truth and mystery, and for that we are indeed blessed.

When I go home now, I look at the ways my people still practice humility. Like most us, sometimes they get it, sometimes they don't. I look at the ways they struggle as we struggle to find paths of integrity, justice, respect, and hope that help them to live their ordinary lives with purpose and meaning. May the mysteries and the truths of this amazing world hold us in a place of reverence, gratitude, and unrelenting love. Amen and blessed be.