

Humility

THE TALE OF A VIRTUE



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A new chief executive faces the debris of mismanagement and cronyism. Poor financials. Poor operations. Poor quality. Poor safety. Dispirited people. Lacklustre executive team. Many will have to work harder before they work smarter, or go. She feels she could do their work better in half the time. A little arrogance to shake the place up? A little humility to soften the cynicism? She can't afford this introspection. There are changes to be made. Why does she struggle? The experts say there is no tension between people and performance. But there *is* a tension and it has a long history. She faces a tangle of ideas and ideals around virtue and leadership that has persisted throughout the history of western ideas and society. Humility is part of that tangle. We need to appreciate this history.

ON VIRTUE AND LEADERSHIP

There is a long tradition of defining leadership by virtues. It was the standard approach of philosophers and orators, widely attested in literature, inscriptions and personal correspondence from classical times through the Roman Empire and Middle Ages down to the present. Benefactors and heroes are praised for their virtues on monuments and plaques in our own cities. But the ancients would not approve our list of virtues. They would think us queer, confused; liable to undermine the good order of society. They would never call humility a virtue for leaders.

In the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome, leadership meant rank. Position, not role. Leadership was a right and responsibility attached to a man (overwhelmingly a man) by birth, marriage, or adoption. Leadership did not depend on competence, gift, intellect, or experience. Its purpose was to maintain the order of a highly stratified society. Good order depended on people staying in the places allotted to them by birth, by Fate, by the gods, or by personal accomplishment.

It might seem that leadership positions were filled as a matter of course by some benign social process. Not at all. We need to appreciate the difference between rank and status. One's rank was largely fixed by birth with some chance at change through marriage or adoption. (We read of great men with sons many years their senior.) Status was another matter. Its marks are familiar to us: education, wealth, fame, achievements, friendships, personal appearance, memberships, lifestyle. A man might live many steps above or below his rank according to how well he fared in business and in securing the right friends.

Imagine a social network akin to a modern pyramid scheme. This was how the classical world worked. A vast web of patron-client relationships carrying formal obligations and conventions. One worked to create obligations to oneself, and called upon the conventions of enmity when slighted. This is the social reality behind the sermonising on friendship by the likes of Plato or Seneca. Most layers in the pyramid never worked a day in their lives. Work with one's hands was unseemly, including what we

would call administration or management. Those above took a share of what was achieved below.

Strange as it may seem to us, money flowed *down* as well as up the pyramid. So what did patrons stand to gain? Support. Prestige. Influence. The harmony and well-being of the *polis* (the city or state) depended on public works, the dole in times of famine, religious observances, festivals, and games. Relatively few of these were financed by public monies. The money came from benefactors, the men at the top and those keen to impress. Friendship meant reciprocity. There were no free lunches in Athens or Rome. Layer upon layer of free born men, and not a few entrepreneurial freedmen, spent the bulk of their days in lobbying and intrigue, subterfuge and toadying. Litigation was rampant.

This is our context for understanding virtue. Virtue was tied to ambition, both of the individual and of the *polis*. Indeed, the love of ambition was itself considered a virtue. Men and women competed to be known as virtuous. Virtue was a point of comparison, a competitive advantage. The social conventions of leadership were to maintain rank and to allow the trading of status. With this social context in mind, we can better consider the individual virtues as the marks of noble leaders.

Four virtues were supreme in philosophical and popular thought: courage (manliness), justice, self-control (temperance), and wisdom. This book includes only two: courage and wisdom. The ancients would *never* have included the rest of our topics: compassion, humility, humour, passion, or integrity. Compassion was a weakness. Humility, at best, was a virtue for a woman, not a man. Love of ambition was a virtue. Humour was unseemly (notwithstanding the many great one-liners and gags of the satirists). Passion disturbed the fine balance of the noble man. Integrity too was tied to social convention. One was expected to act not in accordance with one's private values (a concept foreign to Greeks and Romans alike), but in keeping with what was expected of one's social standing. Wisdom was the mark of the man who read the political moods and timed well his move up the ladder.

Like leadership, indeed *because* of leadership, virtue was tied to rank. Only the elite were capable of virtue. Only the elite knew best. If a noble man judged that lying to the masses was in the best interests of the *polis*, then to lie *was* virtuous. Even the two virtues we share — courage and wisdom — were thoroughly cast

in service of rank and power. Courage was manliness — hence the censure on gentleness or compassion.

We still quote the Delphic maxim, “know yourself.” We might better translate it, “know your *place*.” Of the more than 250 such moral maxims in wide circulation over almost a millennium, the fab four were these: “know yourself”; “nothing to excess”; “a price for commitments”; “pick your time.” We can hear the tones of rank and status. Compassion and humility hinder ambition. Keep compassion to those who deserve it. Don't exceed what is socially expected. Or there'll be a price to pay. So stay in your place while you wait your chance.

Mercy, love, or grace never figured as virtues. Nor humility. They were blemishes, excesses, liabilities. The gods agreed. Humility was no more a “heavenly” virtue than an earthly one. The affairs of men mirrored the soap-operas of the gods. There was nothing divine about humility. Not, at least, in the Greek and Roman traditions.

The classical virtues — courage, justice, self-control, and wisdom — were structured and controlled by rank and status.¹ The good order of society required balance, order, the middle path between extremes: “Virtue...observes the mean relative to us...We call it a mean condition as lying between two forms of badness, one being excess and the other deficiency.”² Good order required benefactors. Given the dependence of individuals and the *polis* alike on benefactions, it was in everyone's interests to support the big man. Thus the inscriptions. They were propaganda. They told the sons of the big man and his peers what they must live up to. They told lesser mortals that they were inferior, and rightly so. The virtuous leader was an ideal and a social necessity. For Seneca, the Roman senator and

¹ There are similar lists in Oriental traditions. Confucius is credited with saying, “Wisdom, benevolence and courage, these three are virtues universally acknowledged in the Empire” (*Chung yung, Li chi chu shu* 52.19a). Benevolence is the mark of the gentleman. The idea and social context are coloured by the demands of rank and status not unlike the world of the Greeks and Romans: “If the gentleman forsakes benevolence, in what way can he make a name for himself?” (*Analects* 4.5).

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6. Confucius makes a similar point: “Supreme indeed is the Mean as a moral virtue. It has been rare among the common people for quite a long time” (*Analects* 6.29).

philosopher, the virtuous leader aimed at self-protection. There was little place for humility:

Know, therefore, Serenus, that this perfect man, full of virtues human and divine, can lose nothing... The walls which guard the wise man are safe both from flame and assault, they provide no means of entrance — are lofty, impregnable, godlike.³

Our outlooks on life, virtue, and leadership might be much closer to those of the ancient Greeks and Romans had it not been for the incursion of another tradition. A scandalous worldview of a breakaway sect of an irascible people in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. Two figures stand at the head of this social and intellectual incursion: Jesus of Nazareth, and Paul of Tarsus.

Martin Luther King Jr, like Gandhi before him, built his platform of non-violent leadership and transformation on the words of Jesus to an audience open to armed revolution: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."⁴ The note of social reversal pervades the teachings of Jesus: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."⁵ At the heart of the Christian explanation of the story of Jesus is the theme of self-sacrifice and humility. As Paul of Tarsus explained the story, Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to death"⁶ for the benefit of those unable to reciprocate: "though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich."⁷ It is a vision that has fired the imagination of artists, writers, and leaders over many centuries. Yet it derives from a land, a life, and an event deemed ignoble and scandalous by Greeks and Romans.

Paul of Tarsus was a Jewish lawyer and leader, most likely trained both in Jewish and Graeco-Roman law, a fierce opponent of the earliest Christians, and a supporter of terrorism against the occupying Romans. Yet he was soon to become the most articulate advocate of the Christian "good news," a term laden

with political connotations.⁸ Paul became the architect of what is arguably the most radical reshaping of human relations in western, if not human, history.

Given what we have seen of the social conventions of his day, consider his innovations and departures from tradition. Palestine had been deeply Hellenised (influenced by Greek culture) for over a century and Jews lived throughout the Roman Empire, many holding positions of high rank. Paul himself was a Roman citizen, an honour passed from forebears who had merited high standing. Paul could play both worlds: zealous Jewish agitator, and urbane, Hellenised professional. So what would an audience make of his pronouncement that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"?⁹ Or when he advised others to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves"?¹⁰ Or to "not think of yourself more highly than you ought," but to "associate with people of low position"?¹¹ Today we prize adaptability. In Paul's world it was unseemly. Grace, he said, drove him to adapt to those he sought to serve: "I have become all things to all men."¹² To most he was unstable and inconstant.

Humility was not an idea to Paul. He would not call it a virtue. It was a commitment, a way of life thrust upon him by his identification with Jesus of Nazareth which he felt compelled to model and to justify. It fed upon his understanding of grace as the new shape of divine and human relations. He took the paramount political metaphor, the body, commonly used to prove the superiority of the head, and used it to teach the equality of all parts and the value of the lowliest. He coined the idea of gifts: that every member was divinely endowed with gifts for service not personal status. He wrote directly to women, slaves and children, an unparalleled break with convention. He refused to work the crowd with oratory. He declined patronage. He worked with his hands.

³ *On the Firmness of the Wise Man* 6.3-8.

⁴ *Matthew* 5:5.

⁵ *Matthew* 23:12.

⁶ *Philippians* 2:7-8.

⁷ *2 Corinthians* 8:9.

⁸ *Euangelion*, "good news," was used in announcing the birth of the emperor's son and military victories. Likewise the slogan "Jesus is Lord" was an affront to "Caesar is Lord."

⁹ *Galatians* 3:28.

¹⁰ *Philippians* 2:3.

¹¹ *Romans* 12:3, 16

¹² *1 Corinthians* 9:19, 22.

If Paul broke with the classical spirit on the virtues, he was no less radical on leadership. He left no room for personal power or office. In a world where leadership was rank, Paul was anti-leadership. This is difficult for us to grasp. He exerted profound influence. He founded communities. He taught and modelled a reordering of social relations that would eventually reshape the social order. We are accustomed to calling all of this leadership. Yet he rejected the term. He described himself with simple, demeaning metaphors like slave, servant, or gardener. He reframed friendship away from personal gain. In time, the new language (servant) came to delineate rank (minister). But not for Paul.¹³

The intellectual and cultural richness of western society derives from the tensions, the contradictions, the antagonism and plagiarism between its two great traditions – the classical worlds of the Greeks and Romans, and the Christian worldviews which grew from Jewish soil. A rich synthesis, made richer by tension and contradiction, was hammered out over four centuries. This conflation has shaped our expectations of leadership. We seek a man or woman of strong intellect and vision to build the *polis*. We want leaders made worthy by grace and humility, not rank. We desire leadership that upholds the ideals of democracy. But democracy does not mean to us what it meant to the ancient Greeks. We desire virtues of compassion and humility in our leaders. But the clearest sources are New Testament letters hostile to leadership.

Westerners live in multicultural societies that bear witness to two traditions above all others. We may not have read Aristotle, nor hold Christian convictions, but we inherited their richly contradictory notions and practices of virtue, leadership, and humility. In this creative tension we seek an understanding and practice of humility for our own times.

ON HUMILITY

Humility is “the quality of being humble; (a) modest sense of one’s own significance.”¹⁴ It is akin to modesty, that disposition of “a moderate or humble estimate of one’s merits, importance,

etc; free from vanity, egotism, boastfulness, or great pretensions...free from ostentation or showy extravagance.”¹⁵

In colloquial speech, Australians talk about “eating humble pie,” “eating crow,” “not getting above oneself,” “not being up yourself,” being “happy to take a back seat,” and “not putting yourself forward.” We refer affectionately or sympathetically to unpretentious (and usually struggling or unsuccessful) people as “battlers” or “underdogs.” A man, sometimes a woman, may refer to his or her spouse as “the better half.” Our distaste for arrogance and unreasonable pride is captured in sayings like “she doesn’t suffer fools,” “he’s up himself,” she’s “got a healthy ego,” he’s “got tickets on himself,” and “she thinks she’s the ants pants.” We don’t like those who “big note” themselves. Somehow we have maintained this preference for humility and distaste for arrogance in the face of the rampant self-promotion of marketing and media spin-doctors.

“Humility,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks maintains, “is the orphaned virtue of our age”:

Its demise came with the threatening anonymity of mass culture alongside the loss of neighborhoods and congregations. Today’s creed is, “If you’ve got it, flaunt it.” Humility, being humble, didn’t stand a chance. What a shame...True virtue never needs to advertise itself. That is why I find the aggressive packaging of personality so sad. It speaks of loneliness, the profound, endemic loneliness of a world without relationships of fidelity and trust.¹⁶

Is humility weakness? Executives have said to me, “If I practice humility it will be interpreted as weakness. Surely it *is* a weakness if I miss out on some reward or recognition by putting others forward.” We need to be clear about what we’re saying here.

Humility *was* weakness in ancient Greece and Rome, and it *will be* weakness in any social system that values status over substance, personality over character, performance over depth. The path of humility *is* social weakness. It is to refuse the games and cop the possible flack. So is humility just for “mugs,” for those who aren’t smart enough to play the game? I think it largely depends on how big is one’s view of life.

¹³ For a full discussion, see my *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace and Community*, Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

¹⁴ *Concise Macquarie Dictionary*.

¹⁵ *Concise Macquarie Dictionary*.

¹⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Humility: An Endangered Virtue,” <<http://www.jewish-holiday.com/humvirtue.html>>.

I have to confess I'm no fan of management books. But recently I read one that had me cheering. Jim Collins' *Good to Great* is the sequel to the well-known *Built to Last* which he co-authored with Jerry Porras. In *Built to Last*, Collins and Porras wanted to know which corporations had truly lasted. They made a study of corporations which passed a battery of intimidating tests of reputation, product quality, market share, and financial performance, and had done so for over 50 years. In *Good to Great* Jim Collins and his team pursued a different question: "Can a good company become a great company, and if so, how?"¹⁷ The team began with 1,435 companies gradually developing robust and exacting criteria and narrowing the list to 11 companies they believe are truly great and 11 direct comparison companies who had achieved success but never greatness.

Well into the research, the team began to report that leaders of the 11 great companies showed different traits to their counterparts. What is crucial here is that Collins did *not* set out to create a new theory of leadership. He explicitly warned the team against this:

I gave the research team explicit instructions to *downplay* the role of top executives so that we would avoid the simplistic "credit the teacher" or "blame the leader" thinking...I kept insisting "Ignore the executives." But the research team kept pushing back, "No! There is something consistently unusual about them. We can't ignore them"...Finally,...the data won.¹⁸

The data showed an uncanny inverse image between the leaders of the great companies and their direct comparisons. The "comparison leaders" were mostly outside appointments; the "great leaders" were almost all long term employees. The "comparison leaders" had attained high public profile and the turnaround of the company was widely featured in the media; the "great leaders" were largely unknown and their turnaround stories achieved comparatively modest publicity. The "comparison leaders" explained success by looking in the mirror; the "great leaders" explained success by looking out the window. The "comparison leaders" explained failure and setbacks by

looking out the window; the "great leaders" explained failure and setbacks by looking in the mirror. The "comparison leaders" were gung-ho enthusiasts; the "great leaders" were often shy, modest and averse to attention. The "comparison leaders" channelled their ambitions into their own careers; the "great leaders" were ambitious too, but they channelled those ambitions into what they were building.

Two words summed up what Collins and his team believed they had seen in these leaders of truly great companies: humility + will.

The argument for humility will mean little to those whose focus is on the short term and their own advancement. If the daily movement of the share price is our guide to significance, then we shouldn't bother with humility. Arrogance, bravado and a certain callousness in the use of people will get the results – for as long as they last. Building what lasts requires faith, persistence, resolve, grace. Humility opens us to a world big enough to warrant perseverance; big enough to learn from. Humility is only for those who wish to build something great, something that lasts, something noble. Think of the recent corporate collapses both in Australia and the USA. Think of the leaders. Humility?

Is humility just for "mugs"? Do the big names need humility or will it just get in the road? It comes down to the breadth and depth of our view of life. What seems great may in truth be small; what seems small may be great. To quote the good Rabbi once more, "Humility opens us to the world:"

What a glorious revelation humility is of the human spirit...True humility is one of the most life-enhancing of all virtues. It does not mean undervaluing or underestimating yourself. It means valuing other people. It signals an openness to life's grandeur and the willingness to be surprised, uplifted, by goodness wherever one finds it...False humility is the pretence that one is small. True humility is the consciousness of standing in the presence of greatness.¹⁹

Cynicism has no comeback to humility. It will mock but it has no answer. Cynicism is a sickly, small view of the world. A world where people do not change. Where nothing noble can be done. Where no one can act for the good of others. Where there is no

¹⁷ Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, New York: Harper Business, 2001, page 5. See also Jim Collins, "Level 5 Leaders: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve," *Harvard Business Review*, (January 2001).

¹⁸ Collins, *Good to Great*, page 21.

¹⁹ Sacks, "Humility: An Endangered Virtue."

joy in learning and making. Sacks is right: "Humility opens us to the world."

Humility is the heart of an inquiring mind. The world is big. I am big. No point denying it. No bigger than others, and no smaller. Just big, and different. Life holds infinite mysteries and joys. I can learn them if only I don't think I already know. If only I don't think *you* can't teach me.

Humility is a door to wisdom — to reading oneself, others and the world around us with insight. The wise leader prizes the gaining of wisdom above all else. In the words of an ancient chief executive, "Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding."²⁰ Those who would learn to lead wisely must receive and give instruction humbly:

Yu, shall I tell you what it is to know? To say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not, that is knowledge.²¹

The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice...A mocker resents correction; he will not consult the wise...He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise.²²

There is paradox in what we are saying about humility.

To be humble is to recognise that we are both small and big. Small in the face of a big world offering a large life. Big in the face of the petty fears and self-doubt that may rob us of the joy of life. Small as those who have much to learn. Big as those who can learn far more than we can imagine. Small as a child helpless in his mother's arms. Big as a child who brings a father to his knees. If we are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made, then humility is our amen.

In *Dead Poets' Society*, Robin Williams character, the English teacher John Keating, takes his new charges into the school foyer for their first class. He has them read a poem which begins, "Gather ye rose buds while ye may, while time is still a-flying." "The Latin term for this sentiment," he explains, "is *carpe diem*...seize the day!" Drawing them close to photos of long dead graduates, he breathes the paradox: "They are food for worms lads...Make your lives extraordinary." You will die; so live.

This is no simple "make the most of what you have" speech. Later he has them rip out the introduction in their textbooks not just because it gives the wrong idea of poetry, but because it offers a false orientation to life, of which poetry is a door, a key, a window.

Keating seizes on the extraordinary power of death to orient the heart and mind. It is a truth found in many traditions: "One who is a Samurai must before all things keep constantly before him, by day and by night, the fact that he must die."²³ Drawing on the work of the German philosopher Heidegger, William Barrett wrote:

Men die. This happens every day in the world. Death is a public event in the world, of which we take notice in obituaries... But so long as death remains a fact outside ourselves, we have not yet passed from the proposition "Men die" to the proposition "I am to die."²³ The authentic meaning of death — "I am to die" — is not an external and public fact within the world, but an internal possibility of my own Being... Only by taking my death into myself, according to Heidegger, does an authentic existence become possible for me... Though terrifying, the taking of death into ourselves is also liberating: It frees us from servitude to the petty cares that threaten to engulf our daily life and thereby opens us to the essential *projects* by which we can make our lives personally and significantly our own.²⁴

Humility is a commitment to life when the certainty of our own death loses its fear. We *will* die. So what lasts? What is it to live meaningfully? What gives meaning to our lives? Memories. Relationships. The joy of intimacy and the meeting of minds. Making. The bringing to existence of what would not have been except for us. The memories of what we have created with and on behalf of others.

It is crucial that we not see humility as synonymous with being shy, withdrawn, quiet, self-effacing, or self-critical. There is nothing wrong with any of these behaviours. But they must not define humility. Humility is as much at home among the gregarious, ambitious, and confident. Humility is not being negative about oneself. Negativity poisons humility with self-pity

²⁰ *Proverbs* 4:7.

²¹ Confucius, *Analects* 2.17.

²² *Proverbs* 12:15, 15:12, 31.

²³ Yūzan Daidōji, *The Code of the Samurai*, late 17th to early 18th century.

²⁴ William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, London: Mercury, pages 201-202.

and self-centredness. In my experience many people struggle with this very point. Can I value myself and my abilities without becoming arrogant?

A couple of years ago I was leading a small design team for a client organisation and had taken them away to workshop the skills of strategic conversation and design. As part of the workshop I had the team complete an exercise individually and then meet up with a partner to talk through the insights they gained. The exercise works from a simple analogy. In many ball sports we speak of sweet spots – that place on the club, bat, or racquet from which the ball flies strong and true. By extension we speak of those moments when everything comes together beautifully. We all experience sweet spots and not just in sports. I asked the team to find a quiet place and map the sweet spots in their lives. The moments when they knew they were doing what they loved, what they were good at, and what was of value to others. Some moments contain only one of these; some contain all.

Several team members were rising stars and obvious choices. One was not. Her supervisors had been taken back when I had said I wanted to invite her onto the team. She had limited education, no professional qualifications, and was in a low paid position. But I had witnessed her insight, integrity, and earthy manner of getting to the heart of things. Unknown to the rest of us, she found the exercise paralysing. “I have never stopped to think positively about myself,” she told us later. “I couldn’t think of anything.” Her partner for the exercise was a gentle man of great depth. When he found her she was feeling blank and stupid. An hour later she had told him story after story of remarkable personal growth through difficulties, employment initiatives, small business ventures, and community involvements. We were stunned by the tapestry he had mapped of her stories and the emerging portrait of her character and competence. Late that night we spoke at length. She was startled by glimpses of unforeseen meaning and possibility.

A few months later she participated with senior leaders from many organisations in a development workshop run by a colleague of mine. I dropped by on the last day, quietly taking my place at the rear of the room. With great skill she was leading a group of senior executives to new clarity about a pressing problem. The original workshop was a watershed for her. She now saw herself as competent and successful with skills far beyond her position. Did this confidence kill humility? On the

contrary. What she displayed before was more negativity than humility. Her sense of unworthiness capped her capacity to learn and to draw out the insights of others. Her joy now is to use her gifts to help others find uncommon clarity. *That* is humility.

So can humility be taught? By a program, no. By life, yes. How?

- By focusing on character more than personality. “Character,” it has been said, “is what you are in the dark.”
- By watching and emulating those whose characters impress us as much or more than their achievements. “There is no point in seeking the views of a Gentleman who, though he sets his heart on the Way, is ashamed of poor food and poor clothes.”²⁵
- By finding people who will tell us the truth. Mentors who will challenge us to live humbly and nobly. “Hui is no help to me at all. He is pleased with everything I say.”²⁶
- By facing our mistakes. By keeping short accounts in relationships. “Go and humble yourself; press your plea with your neighbour.”²⁷
- By refusing to lay guilt trips on people. Think of what we do with plans and performance reviews. Are they just wish lists and guilt sheets?
- By lifting up others. By extending kindness and dignity to others without thought to their merit or status or to our own.
- By taking time to enjoy life and other people deeply without the trimmings.
- By mentoring generously. Mentor the rising stars. Mentor also those deemed less likely.
- By speaking with intent: “The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.”²⁸
- By nurturing moral imagination to sense the consequences of our decisions and actions.
- By frequenting three little words: “On behalf of” whom or what will this make a difference?

²⁵ Confucius, *Analects* 4.9.

²⁶ Confucius, *Analects* 11.4.

²⁷ *Proverbs* 6:3.

²⁸ *Proverbs* 15:4.

- By not creating false dilemmas. We can be humble *and* confident. Modest *and* sure of our gifts and talents. Humility is ultimately not shaped by how we regard ourselves, but by how we regard others.
- By not allowing ourselves to be paralysed by motives. Life and leadership is not as neat as our 7 virtues. Humility comes wrapped in stories, self-perceptions, and expectations. There are no pure motives. The test is openness to genuine conversation.
- By facing anxiety. Leadership involves tough choices. We cannot know how our choices will turn out until we choose. This creates anxiety. Anxiety puts us on a knife-edge: to face it and grow, or run away and regress.
- By refusing to protect ourselves by petty behaviour. No gossip. No put downs in front of colleagues. No thinly disguised references to others.
- By refusing to insist upon our own rights. Imagine a seeming dead-lock between our group and another. We can insist that the other group provide the service they have promised. Or we can acknowledge that they need our input. We can lift the monkey off their backs — and our own.
- By giving up on myths of control. By giving up on formulas for leading people.
- By not fishing for compliments. “It is not the failure of others to appreciate your abilities that should trouble you, but rather your failure to appreciate theirs.”²⁹
- By letting go of ideals and stereotypes about leadership. There is no one pattern to greatness. “Humility comes before honour.”³⁰

I learned three wonderful little aphorisms from my father that have come back to me time and again. I do not know their original sources. Most likely you have heard them before:

Take care in little things.

Faithful in little things, faithful in big things.

Leave things/people better than you found them.

He was trying to inculcate in me a sense of the beauty in humility and love. No task or person is insignificant. The measure of

character is what we do when no one is watching; when the task is too small for others to notice. If we want to be given large responsibilities and opportunities, then we must earn the privilege through discharging smaller responsibilities well. The test comes when we are accustomed to bigger things. What happens when we are asked to do something small? Many of us were taught to leave things better than we found them, like filling up with petrol before we return our friend's car. My dad tried to teach me that this was as true of people as cars. There's a knife edge there. To think of “leaving people better than we found them” can smack of patronising and claiming to know better. That wasn't his intent. It was simply the thoughtfulness to speak a word that might encourage, a word that might open the door to a bigger world for others.

Humility needs to be seen in relationship to our other virtues and qualities. It is inward looking in a way most other virtues are not. Humility is a stance I take towards myself arising from a stance I take toward others. With the possible exception of integrity, the other virtues are mostly a stance we take towards others and the wider challenges of life. I'm not saying that humility is most important. The virtues need to be seen as interdependent. Each needs to be seen in the light of the others. Humility without compassion, courage or integrity is hollow. Without humility the other virtues may become parodies:

Compassion without humility is likely to be patronising.

Courage without humility is likely to be foolhardy.

Humour without humility is likely to be cruel.

Integrity without humility is likely to be self-righteous.

Passion without humility is likely to be overbearing.

Wisdom without humility is likely to be pompous.

In *On Equilibrium*,³¹ John Ralston Saul makes a case for the combined use of six universal qualities as our primary means of ensuring the good of the *polis*, what Aristotle called the “partnership in living well.”³² We might argue over his distinctions between virtues, values, qualities and characteristics. We may argue over his final choice of the six qualities. What he offers is a rich view of what are common to us all, but not always as

²⁹ Confucius, *Analects* 1.16.

³⁰ *Proverbs* 15:33.

³¹ John Ralston Saul, *On Equilibrium*, London: Penguin, 2001.

³² *Politics*, Bk 3, chapter 9.

common in use or as valued as they should be. Each quality is made richer and surer by humility:

Humility exalts common sense — it challenges the tyranny of experts.

Humility brings a human face to ethics — it brings abstraction back to earth.

Humility fires imagination — it silences cynicism and takes vision beyond us.

Humility enlightens intuition — it deepens discernment.

Humility is the straight edge of memory — it checks the distortions of self-interest.

Humility makes reason reasonable — it teaches us to value clear thinking as nothing more or less than that.

ON HUMILITY WITH NOBILITY

Clearly humility does not exist in isolation from the other virtues, qualities, and arts of leadership. When it comes to leadership there is perhaps one characteristic manner of being that stands out as the natural twin of humility. Humility and *nobility*. Humility *with* nobility:

Honor is not the same as public acclaim. Virtue is not determined in moments of public attention to our behavior. Courage, devotion, compassion, humility — all the noble human qualities — are not practiced in pursuit of public approval. They are means to much nobler ends. And they are ends in themselves.³³

To be noble is to be “admirable in dignity of conception, or in manner of expression, execution, or composition; imposing in appearance; stately; magnificent; of an admirably high quality.”³⁴ We are not talking about nobility in the sense of ranks made elite by birth or decree, but of nobility of *purpose*, and of a personal bearing that befits that purpose.

Humility with nobility is easier to see than to define. There is a scene in the telemovie *Gettysburg* that offers a portrait of the beauty of humility with nobility. The film recounts the devastating

battle in 1863 between North and South in the American Civil War near the little Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. The film is based on the well-researched Pulitzer Prize winning historical novel, *Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara.³⁵ From other sources we know that the particular scene sticks close to the actual words and actions of the leading figure. The film tells the battle through the lives of a handful of senior officers on both sides. On the northern side, Colonel Joshua “Lawrence” Chamberlain has recently taken command of the 20th Maine regiment, a once proud outfit of 1000 men now reduced to less than 300. The scene opens as Chamberlain’s crusty old Irish aid comes to tell the ailing colonel some unusual news.

A detail of 120 men of the now disbanded 2nd Maine are arriving under guard. They have refused to fight. Most soldiers enlisted for 2 years. These men signed for 3 years but thought they signed to fight with the 2nd Maine only. When the regiment disbanded, they believed they were free to go home even though they had served only 2 years. They mutinied. Now they’d been assigned to the only other Maine regiment in the 5th Corps. Chamberlain’s orders state that he is “authorised to shoot any man who will not do his duty.” The men arrive under guard of a spiteful young captain who has marched them at bayonet point and without food in order to “break them.” As one says later, “We ain’t broke yet.” When dismissed, the captain makes a pointed little speech ostensibly to Chamberlain but in truth to humiliate and threaten the men.

Chamberlain’s first act is to dismiss the guards with the words “we won’t be needing any guards.” He then provides for food and shelter. In a brief exchange, Private Joseph Buckland identifies himself as the elected spokesman for the mutineers. Chamberlain invites him to his shelter where he listens to Buckland recount the men’s grievances. A courier announces that the 20th Maine has been instructed to move immediately to the forward position. Buckland leaves, and after a delay, Chamberlain joins him and gathers the men to address them.

He begins awkwardly explaining that Buckland has outlined their grievances but that his new orders give them little time to talk. He comes clean with them: “They tell me I can shoot you. Well, we both know I won’t do that. Maybe someone else will, but I won’t.” He believes he can’t ask them to join and fight without a reason. His passion grows as he speaks. They enlisted to fight

³³ Senator John McCain, Occasional Address at Valley Forge Military Academy and College Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 30, 1999, <<http://mccain.senate.gov/vfmaspch.htm>>.

³⁴ *Concise Macquarie Dictionary*.

³⁵ Michael Shaara, *Killer Angels*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1974.

for many reasons but most because they thought it was “the right thing to do.” He sees a noble purpose: “We are an army out to set other men free.” He is heavy with the burden of war: “We have all seen men die.” Reaching the crescendo of his impromptu speech, the former professor of rhetoric is suddenly self-conscious and awkward: “Sorry, I didn’t mean to preach.” He offers to give back muskets to any man who will fight and gives his word that “nothing more will be said by anyone anywhere.” For those who refuse to fight he promises to see that they get a fair trial. Turning to walk away, he pauses: “Gentlemen, I think if we lose this fight, we lose the war. So if you choose to join us, I’ll be personally very grateful.”

Chamberlain’s humility and nobility continues to impress and inspire. He will not tolerate the surly captain’s disrespect, neither of himself nor of the dispirited, cynical, starved mutineers. His very first words in their hearing are to dismiss the guards. He looks to their well-being, offering food and shelter. Buckland is taken back, first by Chamberlain’s invitation to hear him out, then by his offer of his hand, a coffee, and a seat. Chamberlain sits quietly through Buckland’s outburst. Buckland volunteers that he has been in 11 different battles and asks how many Chamberlain has seen. He has seen only 1 or 2 and will not lie but knows he cannot afford to lose Buckland, so he answers, “Not that many.” He does not react when Buckland denounces “these officers, these gentlemen...these lame-brained bastards from West Point that ain’t fit to lead a Johnny detail.” Our own soldiers suffering under the incompetence of English officers at Gallipoli in WW1 would have understood. Chamberlain had not been to West Point. He was a professor and one of the few officers with no formal military training who proved capable. He does not take exception but quietly reads the courage and passion in the awkward private.

Walking to address the men he is still unsure of what to do. He will not be drawn into banter that might otherwise have amused. He stands below them and makes no attempt to call them to formal lines or stand. He acknowledges Buckland. He believes he owes the men a reason. He feels strongly about the war, notwithstanding the uncertainty and confusion that will grow within him in the coming battles. He sums up where they find themselves in story. It is truthful and unpromising. He paints a picture of what they are fighting for, once again in story. He is clear about their choices. He cannot make them fight. He won’t shoot them. They will be coming. He will get them a fair trial. He neither deceives nor withholds knowledge that is truthfully theirs.

He believes what he says and his rhetoric rises till he self-consciously catches himself and apologises for “preaching.” He calls them “gentlemen.”

Humility and nobility. One man among others. Aware of his relative inexperience. Courteous and dignifying. Cutting vitriol short. Putting the captain in his place, not because he is better but because the captain is a fool who feeds their contempt. Holding his position with honour. Not drawn into banter at such a time. Willing to listen and learn. Giving the man a chance to prove what he is made of. Looking beyond the outburst. No self-justification. No wounded pride. He does not defend his peers. Yet neither does he speak his own misgivings about them. He respects the men’s need of a reason. No deceit. He speaks without affectation. With courtesy. He respects their experience, anger, and grief. He offers only what he can. He attempts to lift their hearts and minds to what he believes is a noble purpose.

So what happened? We know that the Civil War was not as simple as slave state versus free. Chamberlain, like many peers on both sides, increasingly wondered at the reason for it all. Of the 120 mutineers, 114 men chose that day to fight. Days later, in the lull between terrible onslaughts, he appealed again to the final six, three of whom took up their muskets. One may have saved Chamberlain’s life. The three remaining mutineers received a fair trial. Nothing more was said to those of the 117 who survived. His actions at Gettysburg turned the battle. He was gravely wounded several times in later battles, given up for dead, and promoted to Major General. Chosen by General Grant to receive the Southern surrender at Appomattox, he stunned both sides by calling his troops to attention to salute the defeated Southerners. He was elected Governor of Maine, returned to office 3 times, and finally succumbed to his war wounds in 1914. His men held him in awe and devotion to the end.³⁶

Closer to home I think of Captain Edward “Weary” Dunlop and his indefatigable labours as the senior medical officer and sometimes commanding officer among Australian prisoners of war in Burma during the Second World War.³⁷ Weary is remembered for many things. His brilliant surgical innovations

³⁶ See John Pullen, *Joshua Chamberlain: A Hero’s Life and Legacy* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 1999).

³⁷ See Sue Ebury, *Weary: The Life of Sir Edward Dunlop*, Melbourne: Penguin, 1995.

first performed with bamboo and other improvised instruments and aids. His fearless confrontation and gentle wooing of the Japanese guards and officers to win relief and supplies for his men wherever possible. His distaste at the vengeful treatment of many former guards after the Japanese surrender. And his tireless work for all returned POW and their families until he died. Upon resuming his surgical career in Australia, some peers were jealous of the goodwill shown to him. They sought to taint his efforts on behalf of others with the smear of mixed motives. His biographer recounts Weary's own explanation:

Hintok 1943 is the key, when he read the Sermon on the Mount in the midst of "all the misery, the squalor, the grey rain and slush and sick and dying people". He had never felt more useful. It was then that he was possessed by a "marvellous, almost religious experience...a sort of happiness. I understood what it would mean to love your neighbour more than yourself."³⁸

Evelyn Crawford lived a truly "remarkable life."³⁹ She didn't know it at the time but a noble dream began to form in the heart and mind of this young Aboriginal girl from her earliest days growing up in far north western New South Wales and south eastern Queensland in the 1930s. A vision of life made better by wisdom and education wherever it could be found. Her grandparents bequeathed to her a deep appreciation for the wisdom and vast knowledge of those who live close to the land. She learned to see beyond. She learned to master complex languages and custom. From her first school teacher she learned that education was a door to a different life. At the white man's rubbish dump outside of town she found labels and discarded papers holding precious words to learn to read and write. At the mission school she encountered for the first time the prejudice and ignorance that only deepened her resolve to bring the kinds of learning that would reconcile people. Her dream took forty years to begin to realise:

We had no idea what our little group, three Aboriginal women and one white man, would become in later years. We were just thinking – at least I was – from one week to another. It wasn't anything pre-planned. We never said, "if we get this

done, we can surely get that done." We just went ahead very, very slowly...We knew that if we wanted to be in the education system, and get other people to come forward and do the same thing after us, we'd have to work bloody hard to git in, and to be accepted, because we started from scratch. The challenge was there for me, an old woman almost fifty, and I never, ever walked away from a challenge in my life.⁴⁰

Neither did she walk away. With several friends and colleagues, Evelyn Crawford was at the forefront of establishing a place for Aboriginal teachers' aids in public schools, technical college classes for Aboriginals, an Aboriginal liaison department in the NSW public education system and, finally, full teacher training and benefits for Aboriginal teachers. Through it all she tended to play down her own capabilities and ignored her own rights while working tirelessly to applaud the talents and protect the rights of others. She summed up herself well: "Yes, we were the gate openers, and I'm proud of the ones that come through that gate."⁴¹ Nobility with humility.

ON LETTING TALL POPPIES GROW

One hundred remarkable young adults had gathered in the town of Launceston to "pass through a gate" at the Future Leaders Forum sponsored by the Foundation for Young Australians. One hundred chosen from hundreds of nominations from around Australia. For six days they listened to politicians, chief executives, economists, environmentalists, activists, academics, and social researchers addressing the question, "What will you face as a leader in this country in the next 10 or 20 years?" Between sessions they worked in small groups framing their own pictures of the society they hoped to leave to their children. On the last day I met with them to address the question, "What will it take for you to make a difference?"

This was an impressive group. The most diverse I have ever seen in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, religion, education, work, socio-economic background, interests and achievements. Many already had significant public profile. I began my session with two questions.

"After six heady days," I asked, "how many of you are awed at your new colleagues and think to yourself, 'What am I doing

³⁸ Ebury, *Weary* page 547.

³⁹ Evelyn Crawford, *Over My Tracks: A Remarkable Life*, Melbourne: Penguin, 1993.

⁴⁰ Crawford, *Tracks* pages 269-270.

⁴¹ Crawford, *Tracks* page 314.

here’?” Almost every hand went up. “And how many of you,” I continued, “have parents, siblings, friends, and colleagues who can’t quite fathom why you would spend a week in a conference like this, and you struggle to know how to tell them because you feel somewhat awkward even embarrassed to talk about it?” Once again, almost every hand went up.

Most of one hundred highly talented, motivated, articulate, high achieving, highly regarded young Australian adults indicated that they felt anxious and awkward about saying they wanted to make a difference. They didn’t lack drive, passion, or vision. There were some very healthy egos. What they felt was anticipation. They anticipated a disposition among Australians that stands ready to cut down those who stand tall.

Hugh Mackay comments on the so-called tall poppy syndrome:

It’s not the tall poppies we slash: it’s the one’s that *act* tall. So, to the list of other desirable attributes in a leader – strength, integrity, passion – we must add the important modifier: humility. With humility, strength can be expressed with dignity and grace; integrity can be assumed, without anyone’s attention being drawn to it; passion can be focused on the task at hand, without spilling over into lust for power. (Some older Australians recall Curtin and Chifley – as some older Americans recall Truman – as leaders who displayed true humility.)⁴²

Australians do hate arrogance. But passion is not arrogance. Nobility is not elitism. Humility is not self-deprecation. Perhaps we have little deep understanding of humility or nobility. We seem embarrassed by passion; awkward about a truly noble cause. Thus we cut down those who have a dream and dare to realise it. We do need to check arrogance. But we also need to encourage the strength of character, the robustness, to care deeply and to commit to making a difference. Humility does not negate passion, commitment or confidence; it makes them credible.

A few months after my Tasmanian experience, the Foundation for Young Australians invited me to speak with 100 teenagers chosen from public and private schools across Australia. 2001 was the Centenary of Federation for Australia. The young people were our Federation Envoys telling the story of Federation in their schools and communities. They had gathered at Parliament

House, Canberra, for a final debrief. Deciding against a formal speech, we found a large corridor where the young people sat on the ground leaving a path for me to wander as I spoke with them. Like their older counterparts, I began by asking them questions.

“When you applied a year ago to become a Federation Envoy,” I asked, “did you think then that you were able to make a difference in any of the serious issues that face your communities?” Almost all were negative. “What about now?” I inquired. “Do you think you can make a difference now?” Almost all were positive. “So what has happened for you in this past year?”, I added. They began to tell stories. Initiatives they had taken. Conversations that had changed them and changed others. A growing confidence. Some demurred. The exchange was fascinating.

I passed around copies of Marianne Williamson’s poem quoted by Nelson Mandela in his 1994 speech on being inaugurated as President of South Africa:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking, so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us, it’s in everyone and, as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people the permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.⁴³

It is not humility that makes us shrink back. It is not arrogant to commit to being as brilliant, as big, as glorious, as unafraid as possible. With Williamson’s poem, and his own life, Mandela moved South Africa and us all to grasp humility with nobility. Whatever the man’s flaws, he modelled it for us. The young people grasped this. They spoke of the fear that holds them back. They spoke of peers who tried to hold them back. They voiced the desire to hang on to desire – the desire to make a difference.

⁴² Hugh Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future*, Sydney: Macmillan, 1999, page 142.

⁴³ Marianne Williamson, “Our Deepest Fear,” in *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*, New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

Leading is like bricklaying. We have a picture of the *polis* in our minds. What emerges is close but never exact. We learn to set a string line and work the level. But it's the eye that grows to know what's plumb and true. The arts of leadership. Then there's the mortar, the "mud". The qualities. The virtues. Humility. Nobility. Courage. Compassion. Integrity. All of them. Bricklayers don't skimp on mud. They don't measure it out. They throw it on. Extravagantly. And so it is with leaders who build what is great.

Everyone has dignity. We call some kids gifted and talented. But they're *all* gifted and talented. Everyone. Each person at each desk, building site, office, machine, headset and driver's wheel is gifted and talented. Some see it. Some don't. What could we create if we made the space for people to bring the very best of what they have to all that they do? Arrogance, rudeness and indifference make the world smaller.

Humility with nobility opens up a bigger life. Ambition directed into what we build. A willingness to learn from all. An idea that inspires and is open to question. A willingness to do little things well. Bringing dignity to a role without superiority. Graciousness when shown we are wrong. Making sure praise goes to those who deserve it. Humility is mud with which we build partnerships in living well. Be extravagant with it.

I have three precious things which I hold fast and prize. The first is gentleness; the second frugality; the third is humility, which keeps me from putting myself before others. Be gentle and you can be bold; be frugal and you can be liberal; avoid putting yourself before others and you can become a leader among men.⁴⁴

SEVEN GREAT WORDS ON HUMILITY WITH NOBILITY

1. "When a man intermingles praise of himself with censure of another, and causes another's disgrace to secure glory for himself, he is altogether odious and vulgar, as one who would win applause from the humiliation of another." Plutarch
2. "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Jesus
3. "Therefore, desiring to rule over the people, one must in one's words humble oneself before them; and, desiring to

lead the people, one must, in one's person, follow behind them." Lao Tse

4. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgement." Paul
5. "(The sage) does not show himself, and so is conspicuous; he does not consider himself right, and so is illustrious; he does not brag, and so has merit; he does not boast, and so endures." Lao Tse
6. "Great joys come from contemplating noble works." Democritus
7. "Humility is the orphaned virtue of our age." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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⁴⁴ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* 2.164.