

August 28, 2016

## **Sunday Sermon: “Chutzpah, Hubris and Humility”**

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Before I get going on this sermon I have to define terms.

Humility is the act of being humble. This is not much help. How about having respect for one’s place in context or the act of lowering oneself in relationship to others. Humility is usually seen as a virtue as contrasting narcissism, hubris and other forms of pride. How about, not uppity? I’ll give you an example. There was once a young man was invited to dinner by the South African statesman Cecil Rhodes. He arrived by train and was driven directly to the Rhodes house in his travel stained clothes. When he arrived everyone was dressed as if they were on Downton Abbey, in black or white tie. Soon Rhodes appeared wearing an old suit. Having heard of the young man’s problems he decided to spare him the embarrassment. This is humility.

There was a story about Booker T. Washington, the renowned black educator, who exemplifies humility. Shortly after he took over the presidency of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, President Washington was walking in an exclusive white section of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. In the 1880s when he took over the presidency this wealthy woman did not know Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her. Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. A young girl in the area recognized him and later told the woman. The next day the embarrassed socialite went to the campus and apologized to President Washington. He said, “it’s perfectly all right, Madam, occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it’s always a delight to do something for a friend.” She became a financial supporter of the Tuskegee Institute and urged many of her friends to support the Institute. This is humility.

My eldest daughter as many of you know is a special ed teacher, although most of her time now was spent teaching teachers. Since she uses me as an example of Dyslexia. I use her in my sermons. When she was actively teaching she had one game that she calls the balloon stomp. In the game a balloon is tied to

every child's leg. The object of the game is to pop everybody else's balloon while protecting your own; the last balloon intact being the winner.

When she taught this to group of fourth-graders only a few of them protected their balloons on the outside of the circle. Most of them got right into the fray and tried to devour all the balloons they could in order to complete their mission. They became, pushy, rude and offensive. This, you might say, is our American way of being. On another occasion, Kirsten as a special education teacher, taught it in a class where children were all differently able. She gave the same explanation to the class as she did the fourth-graders, but they just didn't get. After the balloons were attached and the signal was given to start popping the balloons, the game proceeded differently. Rather than playing against the other members of the class, the class played against the balloons. The object was for the class to pop all the balloons. They helped each other, one student would hold the balloon, and another would pop until all the balloons were popped. When all the balloons popped, the class cheered. This is humility.

Now Chutzpah is a word everyone seems to understand, but with different meanings. In fact it is so confusing dictionaries don't know if it starts with a C or an H. It is Yiddish word from a Hebrew root meaning insolence, cheek or audacity. Courage bordering on arrogance is a striking definition I came across. Chutzpah is boldness and audacity and courage and nerve. In the Hebrew bible, David is said to show Chutzpah.

Let me tell a story that may illustrate hutzpah. An old Jewish grandmother had a bagel stand right after you get off the Staten Island ferry on the south side of Manhattan. I am familiar with this section of Manhattan because when I came back to the states from overseas, on my first trip into the city, I came from Staten Island and landed on the south side. I know how cold the wind blows off the bay. The woman had to stand there for many years. When the people would disembark the ferry, many of them to walk up to Wall Street, she would sell him them warm morning bagels. One young stockbroker didn't particularly like bagels but in the winter and throughout the year he would see this old grandmother trying to sell her bagels for one dollar. She had a large sign hand printed that said "Bagels one dollar." She did pretty good, but it does get cold and sitting there all day made her stiff, so this kindly young stockbroker, passing on the way to his office every day, would drop a dollar into her change jar, but he didn't take a bagel.

Now this had gone on for a couple of years. Every day the broker would drop a dollar in her till. Then as the price of bagels went up, one day the grandmother raised her price and the sign was changed to read “Bagels, \$1.25.”

The young man still came by every day and dropped his dollar in her till until, finally one day she says to the young man, “Read the sign. The price went up.” Now that’s chutzpah.

Another example of chutzpah gone to extremes is the young man who kills his mother and father, then throws himself at the mercy of the court because he’s an orphan. That’s real chutzpah.

The third definition I have to consider today is hubris. Hubris is from ancient Greek. It means extreme pride or self-confidence. In Greek plays it is extreme pride and arrogance shown by a character that ultimately brings about his downfall. When it offends the gods of ancient Greece, it is usually punished. It is usually when humans attempt to act as God’s that the gods are offended. Greek mythology depicts it as a great crime and demands a severe punishment.

Generally, the Greek idea of Hubris is that a character in an authoritative position becomes so proud of his exceptional qualities that he forms a delusion that he is equal to gods. Eventually he tries to defy the gods and his fate. Hubris is a personality flaw in a character who is in a powerful position; as a result, he or she overestimates their capabilities to such an extent that they lose contact with reality. Think of the news about professional or college athletes that put themselves above the law or society’s expectations, the Olympic Swimmers in Rio or an orange hair topped politician. This is hubris.

There’s a lot of literary reference to Hubris. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Victor displays hubris in his attempt to become a great scientist by creating life through technological means, but eventually regrets this previous desire. Once again Man’s delving into the realm of God. The classic story about Faust can fall into the category of hubris. Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* displays an act of arrogance and pride in his scholarship. In his irresistible desire to be superior to everyone, he bets his soul to Lucifer, signing a contract with his blood in order to learn magic that defies Christianity. He pays for his arrogance and pride. The devil takes his soul to Hell.

Modern day acts of hubris even have a worldwide award. It's called the Darwin award and is presented annually to an individual whose self-serving act of hubris helps purify the human genome.

In March 2014, two British soccer fans dared each other to test their courage against an intercity train at a Rotterdam train station on a Sunday evening, after soccer match in Holland.

The two men stepped off the platform and strode forth onto the tracks. One lay down between the tracks, intending to prove that the entire train would pass over him. His friend was less confident and he merely knelt down next to the track and kept his head as close as possible to where he thought the train's profile would be. The 130 km/h train that came down the track some seconds later was both lower and wider than they estimated thus clearing the gene pool of any of their genes.

Another example occurred on Florida when the Darwin winner fell down an elevator shaft at Tampa International Airport in 2013.

The winner forced open the elevator doors, jumping toward the cables, and wrapping his arms and legs around them to slow his descent. The man lost his grip and fell headfirst down the shaft from the seventh floor, resulting in a quick and painless death. Not to be undone, his estate filed a lawsuit against the Air Port, claiming the elevator manufacturer should have prevented it.

The court found that it is reasonable that elevator doors should be opened in emergencies and that the Darwinian winner had enough illegal substances in his body to impair his judgment. The court found for the manufacturer. In Jungian Psychology we believe that the psyche is self-correcting, and the Darwin award winners are a result.

Everyone needs a healthy amount of narcissism in order to function in the world. Chutzpah, hubris and humility are part of character. You can't just put on a coat of humility if it is not part of who you are. For people who are heavy with hubris or chutzpah, their character is flawed. They exist in worlds that center around themselves. But the people who have humility at the center of their character have a worldview that looks beyond themselves.

Sometimes a story can have dual meanings about humility, and may appear to display hubris or chutzpah. The story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey colt is one. This is consistent with the prophecy from Isaiah, which speaks of a meek and humble king. The symbolism is found in Zachariah which talks about the coming of Zion's king saying "see your king comes righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of the donkey."

This symbolism of the donkey refers to an Eastern tradition in which it is seen as an animal of peace versus the horse which is seen as an animal of war. A king riding on a horse would be seen as a warrior king. The writer wished to portray Jesus as a prince of peace and not as a war-waging king. Likewise in the near East culture, it is customary to cover the way or path of someone thought to be worthy of the highest honor. This is the equivalent of what today would be a red carpet.

Well, this act may be seen differently, as an act of humility, chutzpah, or hubris. Like all questions of this nature, it depends. Modernity would view Jesus riding a donkey as an act of humility. But the events didn't occur in modernity. In the first century for a relatively unknown itinerant preacher to be fulfilling a prophecy of the King of Israel, and to be led into the capital city while throngs of the population rolled out the red carpet could be seen at least as chutzpah but probably hubris. The writer of Matthew indicates that presenting Jesus as the King of Israel, is an act of chutzpah. Since Matthew wrote this story more than two generations after the event. It was probably contrived by Matthew. And in contriving it, the gospel writer was attempting to elevate the real life of Jesus to the status of a God. Thus the act can be seen as hubris. But I personally see riding a donkey over red carpet as just chutzpah.

From the book of Sirach 13:20:

Humility is an abomination to the proud; likewise the poor are an abomination to the rich.

May we be recognized by our humility, and see our own hubris and our chutzpah.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world.