

INTRODUCTION

Luke tells us a story about humility
or about arrogance and humility.

I'd like to let the story invite us into the subject -
because humility is a core process in spiritual growth.

It may have a little different meaning than you have come to know.

Humility is a trait woven into an ancient Jewish practice
to which I have given some study.

THE PRACTICE OF MUSSAR¹

There is an old, old tradition
for cultivating personal and spiritual growth in the midst of everyday life.
It's about becoming more whole and more holy - that being our purpose in life.

The practice had its beginnings as early as the exile in Babylonia.
It caught the attention of some of the rabbinic teachers
again in the early 19th century and has been cultivated since then.

The core teaching is
that our deepest essence is inherently pure and holy.
We have a brilliant inner essence or light in our soul.

But – this inner essence is obscured by extremes
of emotion, of desire, of bad habits.

Our life's work is to uncover the light of our soul.

The spiritual teachers suggest that we think of our lives as our curriculum -
the happenings of our lives an array of learning possibilities.

We have a curriculum embedded in our lives.
As we learn from it we free ourselves of
the habits that cause us suffering and sometimes cause others suffering.

They tell us to examine some specific inner traits.

When our traits are not operating in a balanced way
they cast a shadow over the light of our soul.

I suggested some of these human traits a few weeks ago
as traits on a continuum that included things like:

Generosity and stinginess
Gratitude and entitlement
Patience and impatience
Trust and worry
Humility and arrogance
Enthusiasm and procrastination

We have all of them but at different degrees and at different times.

The spiritual issue is not whether you have the traits
but rather their measure on a continuum.
Each has its role.

We are to examine them - looking back and evaluating where we are.
This idea comes from how God looked back on creation
and evaluated it – said it was good.
We want to be able to say that for ourselves.

We could call it an accounting of the soul.

Luke brings it to our attention today -
so let's consider humility as a trait of the inner life – a soul trait.

HUMILITY AS THE FIRST SOUL TRAIT

Here is a story that the teachers give us
to help us understand this soul-trait of humility.

Humility is the first soul-trait to consider
because it is so closely related to the ego - and the relationship of self to soul.

We experience all of life through the lens of the self.

When our sense of self is distorted we have a distorted sense of the world.

This is part of why we enter into a spiritual practice.

STORY OF RABBI ZECHARIAH

The teachers go to the Talmud – and bring us this story.

It takes place during the time that the Temple was still standing in Jerusalem.
It could be during the time of Jesus -
or before or after up until the year 70 of the Common Era.

It starts like this:

"The humility of Rabbi Zechariah (not the Zechariah of the OT)
...caused the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem."

So – how could the humility of Rabbi Zechariah
cause the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem?

There was a man named Bar Kamtza who for whatever reason was angry
with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and sought revenge.
He went to the Romans and claimed that the Jews were rebelling.

To prove his point -
he suggested that the Roman leadership send a sacrifice to the Temple.
Normally such a sacrifice would be received and offered up.
But – Bar Kamtza caused a minor blemish on the animal
that was unnoticeable to the Romans -
but which the rabbis would see and refuse to accept the offering.

The refusal would be an insult to the Romans.
That would be proof that the Jews were in rebellion against Rome.

So when the sacrifice came before the rabbis in the Temple -
they noticed the hidden blemish - and knew what was going on.

One sage – one wise rabbi suggested that they offer the sacrifice anyway.

But – Rabbi Zechariah argued that if they did accept the sacrifice
people would draw the wrong conclusion.
People would think it was alright to offer blemished sacrifices.

The rabbis talked about having Bar Kamtza killed
so that he could not continue using the Romans
in a way that could endanger the Jewish people.

But – Rabbi Zechariah again responded by saying
"If we do that - then people will incorrectly think
that people who inflict blemishes on sacrifices are put to death."
And we don't want them to think that.

As a result of the unwillingness of one of the leaders in Jerusalem -
to accept either course of action - this angry man Bar Kamtza
succeeded in his plan.

The sacrifice was not offered up.
The Romans took this as proof of a Jewish rebellion.
The Romans attacked and ultimately destroyed
Jerusalem and the Temple.



So that is why the Talmud –
that ongoing commentary from the rabbis -
states that "The humility of Rabbi Zechariah
caused the loss of our home - the burning of our sanctuary -
and our exile from the land."

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE TEACHING ON HUMILITY

What can we learn from this story?

Humility is the correct apprehension of one's place in the world
at different times and places.

Rabbi Zechariah showed humility because he did not act with presumption
either by not offering a blemished animal or by condoning murder.

But – he actually manifested too much humility
in shrinking from the task at hand.

He may have offered a legalistic response
but certainly not one that would address the issue and the need.

He held the fate of the Temple and his people in his hands.

Yet – he seems to say,
"Who am I to make such unprecedented decisions
that will potentially mislead the people about the law?"

This was his excessive humility.
His sense of self was flawed because he saw himself as less capable
of solving a real-life dilemma of great consequence.
He backed away – as if to shrink - from a responsibility that was important.

Maimonides (the ancient teacher of ethics) taught that humility
is not the opposite of arrogance.

Self effacement is the opposite of arrogance.

Humility is not at the extreme of the continuum -
but a balanced and moderate and accurate understanding
of where you actually fit in life – and serve -
at different times and places.

So humility and self-esteem go hand in hand.

One way to understand humility is in terms of the space you occupy.

We are all not meant to occupy the same amount of space.
When you are in leadership you need to occupy a lot of space.

Moses occupied a lot of space.

But if a leader occupies more space than is appropriate –
he becomes like the wicked Egyptian Pharaoh.

But as was the case with Rabbi Zechariah -
for a leader to shrink from responsibilities -
or to take up less space than appropriate -
can have disastrous consequences.

Now – there is much more to this kind of study
but I want to get you to thinking
about how it might be alive in your life
and how attention to it
might help you uncover some of the light in your soul.

So humility is about an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses.

You don't want to be so puffed up with arrogance
that you will not see what needs work.

And you don't want to be so deflated and lacking in self-esteem
that you despair of making any changes.

Think about the trait of humility as a measure -
"What is the measure of your humility?"
Does it cast any veil over the light that shines from your soul?

OCCUPYING YOUR SPACE

I close with a few questions for you to take with you:
Think of some everyday scenario that you encounter.
In that scenario are there some
who are more assertive than their position would call for?
And where are you?

Or – is there someone else (perhaps you?)
who has ideas but is reticent to speak up?
You just don't quite see you as deserving of the space.

This may not be something you answer quickly.
But it may be in your curriculum of spiritual learning.

And it might enrich your life.

The scenarios are endless –
but as we think of the genuine situations in our lives we bridge the gap
between something theoretical and something practical.

We might think of a continuum of self-effacement – humility – pride – arrogance.

Not everyone needs to develop humility.
Some people are already too humble –
not bringing themselves forward when they need to.

In order to become more whole – healthy – holy
one may need to cultivate humility and another to enhance pride.

Where are you – in the different places in your life?
Where do you need adjustment
so that your light – the light of your soul is not distorted?

CLOSING

So – here is a little about humility.
These ideas were around when Luke was writing.
They may have been a part of Jesus' learning and even his teaching.
I offer them today for you.

¹ Adapted from *The Mussar Pathway to Everyday Holiness* by Alan Morinis and Shirah Bell.