

Joy and The Humility Factor

The Dalai Lama, in an interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu facilitated by Douglas Abrams that became [*The Book Of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*](#), noted that “too much self-centered thinking is the source of suffering. A compassionate concern for others’ well-being is the source of happiness” (47). Most people would agree that egocentrism is a source of a lot of pain and a joy thief. And this is not new, either. The Bible is full of stories where a character’s ego caused a lot of problems for a lot of people.

The story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50) is a study on the human experience and therefore includes grand displays of egocentrism. Father Jacob was so self-absorbed that he didn’t realize how his favoritism was destroying his family. The favorite (11th) son, Joseph, was so egotistical that he became insensitive to his brothers, belittling them, sowing seeds that would foster their hatred (he made it easier to hate him). The jilted brothers’ egos were keeping them focused on how they had been wronged, blinding them to and justifying their mistreatment of Joseph, first leaving him for dead but opting to sell him into slavery instead. How kind.

A rejected Egyptian wife had her ego hurt resulting in severe retaliation toward her household slave, Joseph, landing him in prison after her husband (along with his bruised ego), played along with her lie. A released fellow prisoner was so caught up in his own joy that he forgot about the peril of Joseph until much later, resulting in more suffering for the unjustly imprisoned young man from Hebron. Once in power, Joseph’s ego initially fostered revenge toward his brothers – grace came later. *Much* later.

The Dalai Lama shared about his struggle with his ego. “I used to get nervous when speaking in front of crowds. When I was young and had to give some formal teachings, because I was not thinking that we are all same, I would experience anxiety. I would forget that I’m just talking as a human being to fellow humans beings. I would think of myself as something special, and that kind of thinking would make me feel isolated. It is this sense of separateness that isolates us from other people. In fact, this kind of arrogant way of thinking creates a sense of loneliness, and then anxiety” (204-205). His ego caused him pain, and probably others, too.

A healthy ego calls to mind a strong self-esteem built on the idea that we all have intrinsic, inherent value. Theologically, we build this on the premise that we are all made in the image of God – imago Dei – an incredibly progressive idea in its time (and even now). When we think and talk about ego problems in our day, we are referring to unhealthy egos that have no problem touting their own imago Dei yet struggle in word and deed to offer the same to others. C.S. Lewis quipped that “humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less.”

Sometimes, wrapped up in our own egocentrism, we are so frustrated with how “wrong” our plight is that we can never sense peace or joy. Rumi once encouraged his listeners to stop denying the reality of one’s situation based on what should be. Instead, he taught, “Try to learn to let what is simply be.” This is not dismissing the reality of our pain. Nor is it giving up the work toward changing it. It is simply courageously accepting reality, similar to Richard Rohr’s contention in his book, *Everything Belongs*. It’s not that we want every part of our story – we try hard to deny, hide, or dismiss parts of it – but that those parts are there, nonetheless. Might as well admit it – damn our egos – and address them thoughtfully.

The Prophet, Micah, recognized the misguided theology that was leading to his country’s destruction. Many, like today (and very generation before), defined orthodoxy as holding and practicing “right beliefs” – making the correct offerings, believing the right things, saying the right prayers. Yet they were missing the greater, deeper definition of orthodoxy – “believing in the right way.” In his open letter to his fellow Jews, he posed the question, what does the Lord require of you? Sacrificing countless animals? Putting a Christian bumper sticker on your car? Wearing a cross? Simply attending church? No. This is what the Lord requires: Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly. Believing in the right way includes managing our egocentrism.

Toward the end of the story, Joseph reconciled with his brothers, assuring them that he forgave them and would not seek retribution. Rather, he would use his power to ensure their wellbeing. It only took 22 years to get there... Sigh. This is hard work.

How have we struggled with ego? Why? Where do our insecurities come from? How have others contributed to our fragility? How has our own neglect?

We all struggle with egocentrism, and therefore humility. We all want to feel like we matter in life, and we construct our personas according to our gifts, strengths, and personality type. We all carry wounds that have convinced us that we don't measure up, and so we work hard to address that pain with our own, personality-specific means. [The Enneagram Institute](#) suggests that egocentric thoughts and actions correspond to each of the nine types of personalities identified. Do you know your type? Do you know how that impacts how you experience and engage the world?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his recorded dialogue with the Dalai Lama, noted that "when we realize that we are all children of God and of equal and intrinsic value, then we don't have to feel better or worse than others... Sometimes we confuse humility with timidity. This gives little glory to the one who has given us our gifts. Humility is the recognition that your gifts are from God, and this lets you sit relatively loosely to those gifts. Humility allows us to celebrate the gifts of others, but it does not mean you have to deny your own gifts or shrink from using them. God uses each of us in our own way, and even if you are not the best one, you may be the one who is needed or the one who is there" (210-211). How does this speak to your heart and soul?

Think of how the world might be healthier, filled with equanimity, if we were healthier, more grounded, humble. Douglas Abrams pointed out that "the word humility actually comes from the Latin word for earth or soil, humus—which sounds a lot like but should not be confused with the simple but delicious Middle Eastern chickpea dip, hummus. Humility literally brings us back down to earth, sometimes with a thud" (209-210). This jibes with the second, more primitive creation myth found in Genesis chapter two. God forms humanity from clods of dirt. We are dirt clods. Take a moment to look in the mirror and reintroduce yourself. "Hello, my name is Claude."

Jesus' life and teaching remind us of something really beautiful that reminds us that we are more than dirt clods. We are infused with Divine Breath, each and every one of us. Don't be bamboozled by the so-called "Fall" story's misinterpretation in Genesis chapter three, which has convinced many Christians that they are separated from God – as if that's even possible! It is not. Jesus taught that we are fully and completely loved, fully and completely immersed in the Presence of Love. We say that Jesus was incarnate – infused with the Spirit. He would remind us that we are, too. That anointing is what the work Christ refers to – the anointed one or the anointing. Jesus was anointed with the Spirit, thus, Jesus Christ. But you and I are, too. Go back to the mirror and reintroduce yourself. "Hello, my name is Claude Christ." Because you may be a dirt clod, but you are so much more. And so is everyone else.

If you want to experience this truth more fully, grab some crackers and hummus. As you eat this literal communion, playing off the homophones of clod and Claude and humus and hummus, remember that you are both flesh and Divine. Messy, yet wonderfully made in the image of God. May God bless you, Claude Christ. Know that you are forever loved.