

On Humility

BY MARGARET ALLEN, MINISTER, THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP AT STONY BROOK, NEW YORK



From Hasidic tradition we have a little story about Rabbi Simcha Bunim Bonhart, who lived in the Polish village of Peshischa at the turn of the 19th century. They say that he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one he wrote: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*—“For my sake the world was created.” On the other he wrote: *V’anokhi afar v’efer*—“I am but dust and ashes.” He would take out each slip of paper as necessary, as a reminder to himself. In one pocket “For my sake the world was created.” In the other pocket “I am but dust and ashes.” Such is the paradoxical nature of the practice of humility.

To be humble is to understand that you are part of a magnificent story in which you play a critical part. You must know that you have gifts, that your body is a miracle, that through this body you express a unique genius, and that you have an awesome capacity to create new things and to solve vexing problems. When you look up into the summer sky and see the Milky Way spilled across the blackness of space you must think to yourself that you are part of a complex, indescribably beautiful cosmos; that you are made of stardust; that you too are the creator of universes. Through your own eyes you see your place in the world as an actor, an agent, a consumer, a creator, a recipient of and embodiment of magnificence. “For my sake the world was created.” In one pocket you have this truth.

To be humble is also to understand that everything you are right now will fall apart, will cycle back into formlessness, and all you have been and done will be subsumed into the ongoing evolution of a life so vast and so complex that your existence has a negligible effect. You will die with questions unanswered, with your most durable foibles and weaknesses still making a mess of things. You will die leaving behind beings you have hurt and dreams that came to nothing. Nothing you are or do matters and nothing that does matter was revealed or understood or accomplished by you alone. You were always part of something much larger than yourself. In the other pocket you have this truth. “I am but dust and ashes.”

Both slips of paper are true, and true at the same time. To be humble is to live in the balance of those truths.

When I got out of my car in the parking garage of Stony Brook University Medical Center, a man in his forties or so stopped me to ask if I knew where the nearest access to the hospital was from there. We chatted as I led him to the right corner of the garage and we went together down the stairs to the hospital doors. As we walked, he told me he was going to visit his first grandchild—a boy, born that night. I told him that I was a minister and I was going to be with a family that was taking someone they love off life support, and that the man was likely to die within a few hours. I said I was glad to know that at the same time another family would be welcoming a new life. And we both said together: “the cycle of life.” And I said “Enjoy the new light in your life.”

The Milky Way. A wonder of nature or of art. The birth of a child. The dying process. The compost pile. This body. What can this body do, between the gates of life and death, to honor and protect the world it is born into? This is the question one might ask of the balancing point between the wisdom of the right pocket and the wisdom of the left pocket.

The words humble, humility, humus and human all have linguistic origins in the root word for earth. And the name of the first human being created, as described in the Hebrew scriptures, is Adam, which is closely related to the word for the earth

Quest

Vol. LXXIII, No 11

December 2018

Humility
is to make
a right estimate
of oneself.

—Charles H.
Spurgeon

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT HUMILITY

- ON HUMILITY
Margaret Allen
- YOU MIGHT BE WRONG
Nancy McDonald Ladd
- HUMILITY AND HUBRIS
Ron
- FROM YOUR MINISTER
Meg Riley
- RESOURCES FOR LIVING
Lynn Ungar
- CHRISTMAS
Lynn Ungar

from which he was formed: *adamah*. To be humble is to be grounded. To be humble is to be grounded in who you are, in who you are shaping yourself to become, and in the work that you are made to do most joyously in the world. To be so grounded is to be secure in the wisdom of the slips of paper in both pockets. And to be so grounded is to understand that nothing, absolutely nothing you do, was accomplished by you alone. You are in perpetual debt to seen and unseen helpers, people who have been dead for days or centuries, people who made the lamp, wrote the book, sewed the shirt, built the road, sang the song, eased your shoulders out of the birth canal, and will hold your hand as you take your last breath. To be grounded in humility is to know that the whole picture is bigger than you can see, but that your piece of the puzzle fits in its one right place.

We are interdependent. No one accomplishes anything on their own. We tend to think our “success” in life depends on our own intellect, our own drive, our resilience, our creativity. Yes, you have your gifts and skills, but the environment in which you learn what it means to be human has more influence than we commonly acknowledge. The field of striving towards your own “right place” isn’t level or fair. Your capacities and options are shaped by the circumstances of your birth and growth: how large the spectrum of possibility that you see for your life; the power of your network of mentors, advisors, sponsors to boost you towards a vocation that calls you; how much others are able to empower you to defy community norms that limit your imagination; how much wealth is at your disposal; how adults around you responded to frustration, setbacks, betrayal, and mistakes when you were growing up; how they modeled critical thinking, creative problem-solving and attentive observation of the world around them; the quality of education you received and the quality of your internalization and organi-

zation of that education. Some people get more help, a clearer view, more time, a cleaner path as they make their way to their right place. More basically, some people get clean water, clean air, enough to eat, a safe place to live—and some do not.

To be humble is to keep the balance faithfully together.

A grounded life is all about finding that right place for your piece of the puzzle, yet understanding that our contribution to the picture means nothing outside of the context of all the other pieces. As we are reminded in the Shaker song “’Tis a Gift to Be Simple,” “’Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be, and when we find ourselves in the place just right, ’twill be in the valley of love and delight.” To be humble is to know you are in the right place, without claiming that you made the place or the right-ness of it. Humility is one of those paradoxical virtues. If you claim to be humble, you are not. Humbleness is something others notice about you because you are grounded “in the place just right.” They notice it about you because you give them the space, time and attention they need to find their own space. You welcome your partners in building a common life at the balance point.

My colleague Josh Pawelek, minister at the Unitarian Universalist Society: East in Manchester, Connecticut, talks about humility as “a character trait, a demeanor, a manner, a personality type, a way of holding or conducting oneself that creates space for others, that allows others to breathe; it’s a way of moving lightly through the world, walking softly upon the earth; it’s an open, inviting, welcoming, hospitable way of engaging others. It’s a way of service. It’s a virtue.” This sounds to me like what my teachers in seminary called “servant leadership.” The

opposite of humility, many have noted, is not pride, but arrogance. We all have our place, our genius, our work, but no one person’s place or work or genius is more important than any other.

If the picture we make is awesome, its awesomeness has little to do with me and everything to do with us. Grounded together, each with our own portion, the picture becomes clearer and clearer, makes more and more sense. No winners, no losers. No smart, no dumb. No easy, no hard. No top, no bottom. No right or wrong. No blame or acclaim. Just beauty. Just gratitude. Just wonder. Just love. Just together. That is the story of a world of meaning and intention and direction, a place and a people “just right,” built on humility.

Wonder and humility have a reciprocal relationship. What is beyond us in wonderfulness engenders humility: the night sky, a newborn’s face, a piece of art that transforms our understanding. What is simple and accessible and real and down-to-earth and everyday engenders wonder. The man crossing the threshold into the breathless Mystery, the compost pile steaming in the cool morning air, the peach, the bath, the sad eyes of a friend, the leaves turning red, the bulbs storing themselves for spring.



To be humble is to keep the balance faithfully together. In one pocket a slip of paper that says: “For my sake the world was created.” In the other pocket a slip of paper that says: “I am but dust and ashes.” To be humble is to keep these messages handy, one in each pocket, and to take out one or the other to read as necessary, as a reminder to yourself. ■

You Might Be Wrong

BY NANCY
MCDONALD LADD,
SENIOR MINISTER, RIVER
ROAD UU CONGREGATION,
BETHESDA, MARYLAND



I grew up Catholic, even pondered becoming a nun, and studied theology with awesomely radical social justice Jesuits before following the theological thread of my life right into Unitarian Universalist seminary. I started seminary when I was barely old enough to drink.

But the wide-open theological embrace of Unitarian Universalism was and is the home for my spirit. It was where I belonged. It still is. I knew when I found this faith that there was room in it—both theologically and personally—for change and growth. I felt assured that if I followed my path to a different belief structure than the one I carried with me through these doors, there would still be room for me in our tradition. I wouldn't be shut out. And I wouldn't have to shut anybody else out for the precise structure of their belief system either.

I have always been at home among this tradition that we share—all except for one thing... one little sneaky issue that I noticed from the earliest days of seminary... one thing that has itched and ached for me all along in my identity as a Unitarian Universalist, and that I still have not adequately resolved within myself.

What has always bothered me about us righteous do-gooders with open minds and warm hearts and helping hands is this: *we can be so utterly and damnably sure of ourselves.*

As I walked the halls of my Unitarian Universalist seminary I kept encountering people who were just so certain that they were right about stuff. Lots of stuff. About theology, sure. The existence or non-existence of God was a favorite topic of highly-assured debate. But it wasn't just that.

People also seemed curiously certain about a whole lot of other stuff too, like geopolitics and wine and meditation and how nobody should ever, ever eat at McDonald's. Sometimes I felt that my fellow Unitarian Universalists moved in the world as if everyone else was just about to break through and come around to their perspective on all of these important things—especially that bit about McDonald's.

Given time, the good liberal church people seemed to think, everybody else would get on board and we'd all get busy together bringing down those waters of justice and making sure peace rained down on the whole dang world like an ever-flowing stream. Perhaps we would start this endless process through a grand gesture of solidarity with all peoples—like planting a Peace Pole. Surely that would bring on the kingdom of righteousness sooner rather than later, don't you think?

By the way, we have a Peace Pole here at River Road. I quite like it. It's right outside of my office and it says the word *peace* in many different languages. It is perfectly lovely—and has not, as of yet, succeeded in bringing about the much-anticipated advent of world peace.

And that's the real kicker of it. You see, most of the time—then and now—I didn't really disagree with many of the perspectives of my self-assured fellow progressives. Much of what my colleagues and co-religionists asserted about the social, political and theological world around us seemed true enough to my limited understanding, and I have never been one for lukewarm opinions myself.

After all, as inveterate Texan Jim Hightower likes to put it, "there's nothing in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos." I do believe we need to stake our claims to truth somewhere, and I don't begrudge us that.

What was challenging to me among my liberal religious compatriots was not

the analysis of any given situation. Rather, it was the utter certitude with which everyone seemed to hold those ideas. We had found our places on one side or the other of every single idea, and we not only avoided the middle of the road, but we also failed to see that there were drivers headed somewhere worthwhile on that other side to begin with.

What bothered me back then, and what bothers me still—even about myself—is how very little room I sometimes perceive in the liberal church for acknowledgement of either one's own limitations or the tragic dimensions of our days that confound even the very best laid plans of mice and men and ministers.

We live in these tragic dimensions: the edges of our own capacity and the frayed borders of what we know and what we can control. We meet one another in those places every day. Mutually, we arrive through honest conversation at the place in which there are no clear answers. And then we get up from our tear-filled reveries and walk around in the world as if we know what we're doing, as if we are all OK, even though we know full well that we are merely, and blessedly, stumbling through it all together.

Though I could not have stated it then, I knew that this confident projection of bright ideals imposed on the actual, sometimes deeply uncertain, experience of our lives was something I would eventually have to come to terms with in liberal religion.

To that end, for the last decade or so, I have written every single one of my sermons underneath a Peanuts cartoon that I have pasted on my office wall. Here it is—the tonic for our surety:

Charlie Brown approaches Snoopy, who is perched atop his doghouse clacking away at his latest composition.

"I hear you're writing a book about theology." Charlie Brown says,

“I hope you have a good title.” “I have a perfect title,” comments Snoopy in his perennial thought bubble: “Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?”

And that—that simple statement, “Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?” might just be the most powerful thing we Unitarian Universalists have going for us. Even though we are self-assured and sometimes a little bit puffed up. Even though the idealism and sense of confident assurance present in so many liberal religious settings has something to do with privilege and with class and with education and, yes, even with whiteness—even so, underneath it all there is a fundamental humility in our theology that we can return to.

“I don’t know is a phrase that becomes us.”

Our tradition teaches that there is deep and abiding truth in many paths—and that it is possible not only that we may individually be wrong on a number of issues great and small, but also that our way is not the right way or the only way for any number of partners and companions we will meet along the journey. We actually believe in diversity of perspectives. We actually believe in theological difference. At our best, we don’t profess lukewarm “toleration” while secretly believing everybody ought to be just like us.

And I’m not saying we shouldn’t be proud of who we are and invite people to join us. We absolutely should—we’ve got a good thing going here.

What I’m saying is that, uniquely among faith traditions, we don’t have to operate under the illusion that we’ve got a corner on the market of truth. In fact, *it is in the center of that humility* where all of our deepest work and most profound growth is possible. That’s what our covenant calls us to. The way we choose to be together invites us

first of all to listen to understand rather than to judge or prove a point, to assume good intentions, to meet each other with the respect of taking one another seriously.

The great philosopher Rousseau once said that “*I don’t know* is a phrase that becomes us.” It is a starting point for ongoing growth. It is an acknowledgment that wherever it is we are going, we have not arrived there yet. There will always be spaces in between our blessed assurances.

This space, which starts with *I don’t know* and leads to continued conversation, is the whole basis of congregational life. The open space that is left by all we do not know is the origin point of the next step on the journey, and it is an essential component of even the most rational of questions.

Without leaving some open space for all you do not know, the whole world could change around you and you would remain fundamentally unmoved.

Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?

It is the question that makes community possible.

It is the question that makes spiritual and personal growth possible.

It is the question that makes science possible.

This is a question that haunted the civic life of empires before us, and it is the same question that currently haunts our civic life for those of us in the United States of America, where the performance of blustered self-assurance is placed before us every day as if it is a normative form of discourse.

The stakes could not be higher. We are forgetting how to speak to each other, how to deliberate, how to remember that we might be wrong.

As Leah Hager Cohen writes:

Our civic life is heavily marked—indeed, pocked—by debates in which each side is so certain of its position

that any movement is effectively impossible. For that matter, debate—in its original sense of “to consider something, to deliberate”—is impossible. We wind up with so much sound and fury and nothing gained.

We spin and we spin and we exhaust ourselves in our continual drawing of lines in the sand, and we are so busy being reactive that we can’t remember how to empathize across the categories we have placed each other in.



We are each more fragile than all of the certainties we might perform for one another. None of us is in possession of all the wisdom we will need to survive. We are, all of us, so desperately in need of each other’s empathy and compassion that the absence of it could be our undoing.

And the gift of not being so sure—of coming home to a theology of humility which says you do not have to have it all figured out, and which invites you to lean over the edge of all you do not know—is right here, every day.

Sure, I know we good liberal religious people have every reason to project confidence in ourselves and in the human capacity to overcome great obstacles. Our fundamental optimism is one of our gifts to the world. We can build a world where we bind up what is broken. We can plant poles that at least point the way toward distant peace. But we can only do it together with others who fill in the gaps of all we do not know. We can only succeed with a kindness that is deeper than our need to be right, and with an empathy that turns all of our bluster, our certitude, and our self-assurance into a starting-point for all that yet will be. ■

Adapted After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism, from Skinner House Books, available in January.

Humility and Hubris

BY RON, CLF MEMBER
INCARCERATED IN TEXAS

My first impulse in trying to describe the essence and practice of humility was simply to say: *Look at the current U.S. president and then think about his opposite in personality and behavior—that will pretty well define humility.* My second impulse was to know that that wasn't it, after all. Instead, my own first impulse shows how easy it is to step off the path of humility. For however true my first impulse might be, the very fact that I didn't automatically consider my own considerable hubris as the opposite of humility, didn't deal with the plank in my own eye before the mote in another's eye (no matter how celebrated and big a mote that might be), reveals the challenge it is to receive the promise of humility.

I could have immediately thought of the examples I know of a few physicians who, once they leave the clinic and enter into community life with volunteer work and church membership, are insistent on not being known or called by the title of their profession. They make this choice not only because they don't want anything to possibly detract from their mission, but also, and primarily, because this is how they see their core identity as one among many.

My instinct is too often to default to the other way, to indulge in the strong desire to elevate my false and immature sense of myself that is defined by status, achievement, the "likes" of people on social media and the desire to be in charge of my own legacy. I can readily be like the self-deluded man in the Bible story who prides himself on not being proud and showy like that other person. How deep can the roots of self-centeredness go? How mired do we become in that limited sense of self, focused on and forged in fear and scarcity, so fed these days by culture?

The evidence is there in the fact that I can be in prison, and still be writing on attachment and longing for reputation.

Shedding hubris and becoming more clothed in humility, getting over ourselves for a better self, begins, ironically, with the stance that we take toward ourselves. To move beyond, we move into. If we rarely or ever truly question our life's actions and inactions, isolating our inner selves from the influences and sight of others, then we have already given our selves over to hubris. Whatever we attain as a result will have diseased roots and will be short-lived.

However, a life with roots in humility, one that depends on the intimacy of relationships and is open to the guidance of others, is a life that opens doorways to cross into ways of being that are sustaining. It is as true now as it was in previous millennia that humility shows the way to disrupt the default of the dominant culture and its flawed definition of a good life.

It is important, though, to note how a false sense of humility can lead to disempowerment instead of strength and solidarity. It is hubris that elevates the isolated self, while humility elevates the communal. Once we adopt this covenantal reality that at our best we are each one among many, then we can see how humility may prompt some to step back, stay quiet, commit to serve as followers, while others step up and speak out and commit to serve as leaders. To know when it is best to do one or the other is a result of living a life that puts itself within the circle of a Greater Life. Which is another way of describing humility.

Prison is full of daily opportunities to lean into either hubris or humility. Becoming a number among so many other numbers can prompt reactions that lead us away from others, to elevate and think of ourselves as better than those around us even here. It can lead to patterns of fear, even fearing feelings themselves, which create an

overblown sense of the self, since so much of institutional life denies it. But, especially for one with privileges of ethnicity and education and gender and sexual orientation, prison's limits and leveling—even its unjust segregations and stresses and fears—can create opportunities to practice humility in life.

No matter where we
find ourselves in life
physically and spiritually...
life's gift can be
more than enough.

As those in recovery know, and as great spiritual traditions teach, humility is self-care. The unbalanced, driven self—both in being too exalting of self and in being too starving and depleted of self—is what the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of AA describe as “constant in its unreasonable demands upon ourselves, upon others.” Humility grounds us. It is no surprise that the word's etymology takes it back to the earth, our communal home, our one-and-the-same soulfulness with the land. No matter where we find ourselves in life physically and spiritually, in whatever status, life's gift can be more than enough. As author and teacher Jill Filopovich wrote recently in a *Time* magazine column about those celebrities in many fields who have been exposed in the #MeToo movement, and who have lost positions, work and possibly more as a result of their actions, their futures may still teach them that “a quiet, kind life can be a good life.” That is humility's promise in return for the hard work—for some of us especially—that it requires. ■





From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Perhaps you watched the comedy special on Netflix by Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby, entitled “Nanette.” If you didn’t, perhaps you’ve seen some of the media coverage about it, using words like “game-changing” and “comedic revolution.” Gadsby delivers a show which is part comedy and part deconstruction of comedy, particularly related to gender and sexuality. (She is a lesbian who identifies as female but is often mistaken as male.)

One of the most quoted lines of Gadsby’s show is: “I have built a career out of self-deprecating humor and I don’t want to do that anymore. Because do you understand what self-deprecation means from somebody who already exists in the margins? It’s not humility. It’s humiliation.”

As we explore the theme of humility this month, Gadsby’s words keep coming back to me. When does what appears to be humility become participation in your own humiliation, and when does it not? If a famous, rich man acts normal and kind, we notice with something like amazement, and marvel to one another about how much humility he has. If a poor, unknown woman acts normal and kind, we might think she should be grateful if we notice her at all. So, what does it really mean to be humble?

The old joke has a rabbi going into the synagogue and crying out to God, “I’m nobody! I’m nobody!” Then the cantor comes in and cries, “I’m nobody! I’m nobody!” Then the janitor comes in and cries, “I’m nobody! I’m nobody!” The cantor nudges the rabbi and says, “Look who thinks he’s nobody!”

“It’s not my place to be angry on a comedy stage,” Gadsby says. “People

feel safer when men do the angry comedy; they’re the kings of the genre. When I do it, I’m just a miserable lesbian ruining all the fun and the banter. When men do it, ‘heroes of free speech!’”

Humility and humiliation come from the same root word, related to *humus*, earth. And yet our experience of the words is vastly different. Humility radiates from our own center; humiliation is done to us. Humility means we are grounded, of the earth; humiliation is being ground into the dirt. The opposite of humility is arrogance. The opposite of humiliation is respect or honor.

Both humility and humiliation are team sports.

Though we tend to think of *humble* as our own orientation toward ourselves, when I reflect on it, the people I know who are genuinely humble stand out not because they think little of themselves, but rather because they think with genuine regard of other people. And the people who humiliate other people often seem to do so because they actually have low regard for themselves and want to feel better by putting others down—they don’t think they can afford to lift up others without looking worse themselves. Both humility and humiliation are team sports.

Gadsby is right that self-deprecation might be humility, or it might be humiliation. What can’t be so twisted is sincere and abiding respect for others—not seeing ourselves as either superior or inferior, but rather as simply one among many whose needs and gifts are also important.

When I reflect on it, the most gifted, intelligent, respected, people I know are also humble. This doesn’t mean that most of them don’t have pretty healthy egos. It does mean, however, that they also know and value other

people in the worlds they inhabit, for whom they also exhibit great respect. My favorite singer ever, Ferron, sings in her song “Proud Crowd/ Pride Cried”:

*A friend tried to find me and saw
through to my wheel
She said you're now on the bottom,
it's either that or
the top
You can keep yourself tiny and
bang on the big door
Or take the space saved for the
queen of the hop...*

I’ve always envisioned that wheel she describes, the interplay of “I’m the greatest/ I’m the worst,” as a Ferris wheel, and whether someone is riding high on the top at the moment or down at the very bottom, they’re still on that wheel. We’re all kind of stuck on it, we who wrestle with our egos, and ever shall it be. But perhaps in some ideal world we’d just announce we were dizzy and climb out of the little car.

We’d climb out of the car where our feet had been dangling and we’d sit on the bank next to all kinds of other people, knowing we were one among many, knowing that each of us had gifts and each had liabilities, each held an important piece of the puzzle but not the whole thing, each needed the others to be whole and human. On that bank, I think we’d know real humility.

The CLF is deeply committed to serving those who are making positive change in the world. When you support the CLF you support ministers; lay leaders in congregations, jails and prisons; activists who rarely leave their homes and many more folk with community and spiritual resources. Please give generously through sending a check in the enclosed envelope or by going to clfu.org/give to be an active part of this movement for change. ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

What is your favorite Christmas carol? Mine is the English carol “The Friendly Beasts,” which begins:

*Jesus our brother, kind and good
Was humbly born in a stable rude,
And the friendly beasts
around Him stood.*

Jesus our brother, kind and good.

The rest of the verses are from the point of view of the animals in the stable, which is always a win in my book. You can never have too many friendly beasts, I say! But there’s something else I love about this carol. It really emphasizes the humble nature of Jesus. Not only is he humbly born in a plain, rustic stable (which is what the word *rude* meant at the time—it wasn’t a stable with bad manners), but he is also described as our “brother, kind and good.”

In most stories when God or gods become incarnate they are powerful, imposing. They are born to royalty or to other gods. They are pillars of fire or capable of throwing thunderbolts. They don’t get described the way you would a favorite babysitter, as a particularly gentle and caring sibling.

The Christmas story makes kind of an extraordinary statement about humility. God is born as a baby. Not a baby with magic powers or extraordinary gifts, just a baby. With ordinary parents—a young woman and her older husband who have no important social connections and no particular gifts beyond an ordinary job as a carpenter. They are not even the long-suffering, put-upon heroes of fairy tales who we know will rise to the top through a combination of wit, courage and goodness. They’re just...folks. With a baby.



And who gets first word of this miracle that God has appeared on Earth in human form? To whom do the angels

choose to announce this wonder of the word become flesh? Just some guys. Shepherds out tending their sheep. Just doing the everyday kind of things that shepherds do. The story never claims that they were particularly virtuous or wise or holy to deserve this honor of angels bringing them tidings of great joy. They were just...there.

Of course, literature and music is full of descriptions of Christ as Lord and King and Conqueror. But that all came later. We have a hard time with the whole humility thing. We want to worship power, might, success. We want to be on the winning team, to know that our God could take your God in a fight. But that’s not the Christmas story.

In fact, after an angel visits Mary and tells her that she will bear the child of God, Mary goes to her cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant. They share their joy, and Mary sings this song:

*My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty....

God, Mary exclaims, has been “mindful of the humble state” of God’s servant. Mary was chosen for this honor not in spite of, but rather because of her humble state. And why would God do this? Well, the song goes on to talk about God toppling the proud and lifting up the humble, filling the hungry and sending the rich



away. Much later, some Christians would come to look upon wealth as a sign of God’s favor, but that’s not what’s in the story. What’s in the story is the radical claim that God is on the side of the humble, the poor, the ordinary. The Kingdom of Heaven is not the kind of kingdom that comes with a crown.

After he grows up, Jesus spends a good deal of time trying to explain what the Kingdom of Heaven is, without much success in terms of getting people to understand him. The Kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field. It is like yeast that gets in with flour. It is like a mustard seed. It is like seeds that grow in the ground. Whatever the Kingdom of God is, it’s a small thing that has a big effect. It belongs to the humble, to those without power. But yeast is a humble thing that utterly transforms flour. A mustard seed is a tiny thing that grows into a bush large enough for the birds to roost in it.

There is a power in humility, declares the Christmas story. It isn’t the same

kind of power that you are used to, the power of wealth and royalty. It is

the power of transformation that lies inside the tiniest seed, inside a defenseless baby, inside you and inside me. ■





Church of the Larger Fellowship
Unitarian Universalist
24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BOSTON, MA
PERMIT NO. 55362

You can listen to audio recordings of *Quest Monthly*, read back issues or get electronic versions of the text to share with friends (and much more) at questformeaning.org

Quest Monthly Editorial Team: Stefan Jonassen, Janet Lane, Kat Liu, Beth Murray, Meg Riley, Jaco ten Hove, Arliss Ungar, Lynn Ungar, editor

Copyright 2018 Church of the Larger Fellowship. Generally, permission to reproduce items from *Quest Monthly* is granted, provided credit is given to the author and the CLF. **ISSN 1070-244X**

CLF Staff: Meg Riley, senior minister; Jody Malloy, executive director; Lynn Ungar, minister for lifespan learning and *Quest Monthly* editor; Mandy Goheen, director of prison ministries; Lori Stone Sirtosky, director of technology; Beth Murray, program administrator; Judy DiCristofaro, fiscal administrator; Hannah Eller-Isaacs, social media coordinator and administrative assistant; Andrea Fiore, webmaster.

Learning Fellows: Margalie Belizaire, Rodney Lemery and Jessica Star Rockers

Web Site www.clfuu.org — **Email** clf@clfu.org — **Toll-Free Line** 800-231-3027 or 617-948-6150

CLF Jewelry at *inSpirit*, The UU Book and Gift Shop 800-215-9076

CLF Unitarian Universalist, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston MA 02210-1409 USA



Christmas

BY LYNN UNGAR,
MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING,
CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

It was all so complicated:
The questionable parentage,
the awkward journey,
the not knowing where you will sleep,
or when the baby will come,
or what his life will look like—
even what the world will be like
when he is grown.
Life is usually that complicated.

It was all so simple:
Keep walking. Stop when you can.
Breathe. Through the pain, breathe.
Hold him. Feed him. Keep him warm.
Cradle his head in the palm of your hand.
These are things we all know.

It was, it is, so complicated
and so simple:
Love what does not belong to you.
Love what will be broken.
Love what mystifies you.
Love what scares you.
Love the aching flesh
no more and no less than
the brilliant star.
Love what will die
and what will be born again
and die again
and be born again
in love.

