

Humility

by Bill Herbst

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All the human beings I know and have ever known — including me — have a hard time entertaining the disturbing possibility that everything we know (or, more accurately, think and believe that we know) may be wrong. That idea is disconcerting and difficult to accept, even though it's demonstrated time and again.

I won't suggest that it's "routinely" demonstrated, because that would imply that having the rug pulled out from under us happens every single day. It doesn't. Most days we can go our merry way believing that what we know or think we know is accurate and dependable. But every so often, some new information, perception, or realization comes down the pike that throws into a cocked hat every assumption we've made over our entire lives. And that "every so often" occurrence is repeated, again and again.

The revelations may be vast and impersonal, as in the recent mapping of dark matter in the universe that might invalidate our understanding of the cosmos, or it may be small and very personal, as in the realization that most of the food I've eaten over my lifetime is probably poison. That's an ongoing "Ah-Ha" that I've been assaulted by over and over for many decades now. Soy is good, then soy is bad. Fat is bad, then fat is good. Oats are good, then oats are bad. Butter is bad, then butter is good. Especially here in America, food is an endless Tower of Babel that knocks us up the sides of our heads. Just when we think we know what's healthy, new information comes along to derail our confidence.

When anything we believe and accept as true is questioned, our first tendency, almost a knee-jerk reaction, is to reject the unsettling information and double down on our existing belief. *"Oh no,"* we say, *"what I believe and have always believed is valid and reliable, and this new evidence that perhaps reality is very different from what I've presumed is just fucking bogus."* And sometimes, if we wait around for a bit, that rejection is confirmed. The new, challenging, and disturbing perspective may be revealed to have its own feet of clay. That can be both confirming and comforting. *"See, we were right all along, and this bullshit challenge just proves it!"*

But other times, after doubling down defensively, or even after more time passes, the disturbing challenge to our existing beliefs doesn't go away. It refuses to dissolve into the mist. Instead, it solidifies and hardens, becoming a

burr under our saddle, a rock in our shoe, poking and prodding us to reconsider what we've assumed to be sacred, and thus true.

The first condition, where we reject out of hand any possibility that we might have been wrong, is called *arrogance*. Another word for the same thing is *hubris*. The second possibility, where we actually consider our own potential fallibility, is called *humility*.

Unconscious human nature seems to be constructed around the arrogance of certainty. That's the basis for almost all claimed authority. In essence, authority says, "*This is the way things are, no other possibility exists, and I have both the power and permission to enforce that view.*" So, when you're driving your car and get pulled over by a cop who informs you that you were speeding or ran a red light or have a taillight that's out, any denial you might make is likely to be rejected. The cop invokes his socially-sanctioned authority and gives you a ticket. You can, of course, go to court later and plead your case — "*No, your Honor, I wasn't speeding, or I didn't run that stop light*" — but most of us don't do that, in part because it's usually just our word against the cop's, but also because going to court is a big hassle involving time and effort that we're likely to lose anyway. We just pay the fine and bitch about it forever after.

I'm big on humility as a direction I want to move in my life. That's different from claiming that I'm a humble person. I'm not. My tendency is more often to be an arrogant son of a bitch, a dogmatic authoritarian. In short, I'm an asshole. In fairness, I wouldn't have made a living, however modest, as an astrologer for the past 50 years without a substantial measure of those intensely domineering qualities. In part, clients in sessions give credence to what I say because of my vibe of authority and certainty. That's not the only reason people work with me, of course. I am, in fact, quite brilliant at interpreting charts in ways that really do illuminate people's lives and accurately reflect their awareness of themselves. But my amassed experience and expertise have always been bolstered by my arrogance. So no, I can't claim to be humble. Far from it. But I try my very best to work in that direction by always remembering my fallibility and how full of crap I can be.

Arrogance is powerful, but humility is our saving grace. Humility makes us human and keeps us honest. In very real ways, humility is the only perspective that saves us from the seductive nature of our own worst impulses, most of which fall under the heading of egoistic narcissism.

Achieving humility doesn't mean having an "aw shucks, I'm not special" attitude. That's false humility. That's just the ego covering its ass and trying to look good. True humility acknowledges both what we're good at and what we're not, and does so in an even-handed way, without melodrama, succumbing to neither praise nor blame. And boy, is that hard work or what? We get it wrong a lot. In my view, though, no matter how many times and the myriad of ways we may get it wrong, humility is still worth striving toward.

I don't need to regard the discipline of humility as noble or heroic (both of which are categories I regard as little more than further expressions of ego-based arrogance), but working over time in the general direction of simple, true humility seems to me an honorable endeavor.

The authoritarian impulse is very attractive to a large percentage of human beings. Either they embody it within themselves and strive to express their superiority, or they feel insecure about their own power and wish for another person from outside themselves to provide that strength of certainty. This is the Big Daddy or Pied Piper Syndrome.

Among the reasons I hate authoritarianism so much is that I see it so plainly in myself. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin — all of those archetypes reside in my psyche. I suppose we could add Jesus Christ to that group, although I don't seem to have much of that one. The whole Son of God thing, whether invoked as the Divine Right of Kings or as the great spiritual Avatar and Savior, is just plain reprehensible to me. I identify that impulse as the most profound arrogance imaginable. I don't trust it as far as I can throw it in myself or in anyone else. Divinity is poetic in human beings, not literal.

And yet, millions of fundamentalist Christians breathlessly await the Second Coming. They believe in The Rapture without a shred of doubt and are totally convinced that the Bible is the actual word of God, handed down from On High, rather than merely a book of fables written by fallible human beings. And, of course, followers of other religions have their own versions of hard-and-fast absolutism. If honchos like Jesus, Mohammed, and Buddha could return, I wonder how they'd react to seeing what's been made of their teachings.

Where exactly is the line past which our human need for certainty (whether possible or not) and belonging head down the slippery slope into absolute dogma and the willingness to stone to death anyone who doesn't agree with us? I don't know where that line is, but it seems evident that we crossed it collectively a long, long time ago. Civilization itself seems to run on dogma and domination.

Hell, this goes way beyond just individuals who are immature or damaged. All the systems we've created in modern society to manage our affairs — systems that have grown huge, complex, and immensely powerful — build into their structure and operation the idea that domination is perfectly fine. Unlike individuals, where at least the possibility of conscience exists, systems have no conscience at all and never will. If we build our systems for domination (as we have), then that's what they'll do.

All I know to fall back on (like retreating to the monastery) is the continued work of humility. We have never been in charge, and we're sure as hell not in control. I'm not optimistic that anything will save us from our own worst impulses, but acknowledging our arrogance might be a step in the right direction.