

Humility

AN INDISPENSABLE VIRTUE TO LEARN FOR PRACTICING WITH EXCELLENCE

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It is impossible for doctors, nurses, medical technicians, chaplains, social workers and administrators — or anyone else in health care — to achieve excellence without cultivating the virtue of humility.

Maybe it is hard to see how humility could make us better at something, particularly the practice of medicine. If people in the medical profession were to rank attitudes, dispositions and qualities of character that enable them to do well what they are called to do, surely integrity, honesty and compassion would be just some of the attributes that would come before humility. But humility is essential for the moral formation of health care professionals. Without it, one may be a competent doctor, nurse, technician; chaplain, social worker or administrator — but not a truly excellent one.

Humility is important not only when one begins working in health care, but also when one is being educated and trained to enter the profession. If humility is lacking in someone before taking up work as a doctor, nurse, physician's assistant, or technician, he or she won't suddenly become a shining exemplar of humility the first day on the job. That's because humility is a virtue — a characteristic way of being and acting — and virtues are only slowly acquired.

Virtues are habits for excellence, habits that enable us to embody the attitudes, dispositions and behavior necessary to succeed in the different roles of our lives, including our professions. But we truly possess a virtue — such as humility — when it characterizes not only our behavior, but also ourselves. Virtues transform us because they gradually rid us of ways of being and acting

that keep us from doing anything well and replace those habits with the qualities of character that enable us to excel.

This is why health care training must include education about, and formation in, humility, as well as all the other virtues patients have a right to expect in those who care for them. Knowledge and technical expertise are absolutely essential, but they are not enough. Any medical education program that extends no further is woefully incomplete.

In short, if doctors (as well as others in the field of medicine) are not typically known for being humble, it may be because their training and education never considered it important. That's ironic because humility enables the openness, curiosity, and critical spirit necessary for learning anything well.

DISTINGUISHING TRUE FROM FALSE HUMILITY

Perhaps humility is little appreciated because it is so easily misunderstood. Genuine humility always brings us more fully to life, while false humility always diminishes us. People sometimes fear humility and even find it repugnant, because

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they confuse virtuous humility with its counterfeit versions.

It is not uncommon to associate humility with persons who exhibit a chronic lack of self-regard. They show an unhealthy submission to others, especially persons in authority, and an irritating inability to recognize, claim and use their gifts. But persons who have little regard for themselves, who continually see themselves as inferior to others and who don't speak up when they are mistreated, are not humble. They are failing to genuinely love and care for themselves.

Humility is not humiliation, and it is not cowardly timidity. Similarly, humility never requires that we deny the gifts that have been entrusted to us, for that would make us both useless and irresponsible to others. Genuine humility enables us to know our gifts, be grateful for them and use them generously on behalf of others, which obviously is essential for excellence in health care.

The word "humility" is derived from *humus*, a Latin word that means "ground," "soil" or "of the earth." Humble persons are well grounded or rooted, inasmuch as their lives are centered in a healthy and liberating understanding of who they are. Humility frees people from having to pretend that they are more than, or other than, who they truly are. This suggests humility and genuine self-confidence are intimately connected. Such persons realistically assess not only their gifts and talents, but also their limits and shortcomings, enabling them to appreciate and depend on the talents and accomplishments of others rather than deny or envy them.

Thus, humility might best be described as clarity of vision about ourselves, our place in the world and about how we stand in relation to others. It is a clarity of vision that enables the ongoing cooperation without which good health care is seriously impaired.

We can appreciate the special importance of humility if we reflect on what it is like to live or work with someone dominated by pride, the vice that most directly opposes humility. Pride keeps us from acknowledging who we really are: gifted but also limited, blessed but also incomplete, capable but also dependent. Pride destroys

the thoughtfulness, kindness and graciousness of spirit that enable us to flourish and do good in our professions. Persons marked by the vice of pride are habitually unable to appreciate anything other than themselves, much less perspectives and viewpoints other than their own. Their

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appraisal of themselves, as well as others, is distorted because they attribute gifts and qualities to themselves that they really don't have, while not recognizing or acknowledging gifts and qualities that others do have. Such a characteristic is guaranteed to sabotage the collegiality that is indispensable for excellent health care.

As the theologian Daniel Schwartz observes, with pride, "I 'overstep what I am': I produce a public image of myself that does not fit reality."¹ But if I continually "overstep what I am," I cannot possibly work well with others, because I will be unwilling to acknowledge my dependence on them. And I particularly will be unable to admit that I might be wrong, that there are things I don't know and need to learn. Therefore, I must listen carefully to those who can teach me, whether they are other colleagues, the patients entrusted to my care or their families and friends. Pride, rather than elevating and protecting us, is ultimately self-defeating because it estranges us from the very persons whose expertise, counsel and support we need in order to do our jobs well.

REMEMBERING THAT PATIENTS ARE PERSONS

How, then, does humility contribute to excellence in health care? Humility makes for better health care professionals in many ways, but three seem most important: First, without humility, doctors and nurses — along with administrators, technicians, aides, social workers and pastoral care ministers — will not be sufficiently attuned to what always must be health care's central focus and

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abiding concern: the patient who is sick, frightened, vulnerable or confused. Humility helps everyone who attends to patients see them not as biological puzzles needing to be solved, but as unique persons in need of healing, care, understanding and compassion. Humane health care — and certainly a Catholic understanding of health care — requires humility because without it, the human side of medicine is lost.

Here is an example: Several years ago, I attended a medical ethics conference at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. One of the doctors shared with us how she approaches her patients. Her reflection eloquently describes the difference humility can make in the practice of medicine, particularly in how one beholds patients:

“I expect extraordinary things to happen every day. I really believe God brings me the patients I am meant to see. I believe I am supposed to love my patients, to give generously, exuberantly and without reserve of my time and attention and to bring everything that I am and have when I encounter a patient. I believe that I need to listen to what love requires of me as I listen to patients and their stories and to be with them in their suffering. I believe in the practice of medicine as a sacrament. I try to think intentionally about hospitality and the exchange that happens between host and guest, the gifts we give to each other. I believe that my patients minister to me and love me, and I am learning to let them, and it helps, it really does.”²

Humility is clarity of vision, and the doctor’s humility enables her to see each of her patients

magnanimously. She approaches them not as interruptions or nuisances, but as persons who have been brought to her by God, persons who, in whatever time she has with them, depend on her wholehearted attention and care. Humility is important in health care because it alerts us to what really matters, namely, human beings in need. With humility, we become more fully conscious of all that stands before us in our everyday lives. With humility, we learn to pay attention in the measure that acting responsibly requires.

Later in her reflections, the doctor wrote: “It’s 8:30, time to start seeing patients.” And she really does see them. She sees the fear and panic in the mother whose child has been sick for a year. She sees the woman who is crying, “tears streaming down her cheeks,” and knows that there is more going on than just her illness. Humility transforms the way we see; it enables us to see other persons more reverently and compassionately, and with an empathetic imagination.

With an empathetic imagination, as this doctor’s story illustrates, we are able to transcend our own limited horizon and experience in order to identify with the thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences of others. We can do so because humility cultivates a more morally attuned way of seeing. In short, because we see differently, we act differently. The doctor who sees her patients not as cases, but as guests, demonstrates that the more benevolent and compassionate our vision

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becomes, the more truly healing and life-giving our behavior will be, even for those patients who cannot be cured.

HUMILITY AND THE ART OF LOVING WELL

A second reason humility fosters excellence in health care is that humility enables us to love well. It might seem strange to speak of love in the context of health care, because we ordinarily associate love with the more personal and private rela-



tionships of our lives. But if Jesus commands us to love every neighbor who comes our way, then in health care it means loving the neighbor who happens to be a patient. Like any neighbor, patients come in all shapes and sizes, with different temperaments, personalities and dispositions. And, like any neighbor, they are not always easy to love. But still, we are called to love them.

What would this mean? At the very least, to love means to recognize, respect and respond to patients as singular human beings. To love is to genuinely care for patients, to be committed to

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their well-being and to do whatever we can to help them in their suffering. Much of the work of love comes down to being present, available and attentive to those who are entrusted to us, something that is not easily achieved when we are distracted, stressed or exhausted.

Real love, whether in our personal or professional lives, is hard work because it is the promise to expend ourselves on behalf of others. Humility fosters this love because humility forms us into persons who are able to live for something other than themselves, persons who, every day, respond to the call to transcend themselves for the sake of another's good. In this respect, humility empowers a love that is altruistic and caring.

One of the potential hindrances to excellence in health care is to gradually lose sight of patients as unique human beings with distinctive needs, fears and concerns. The more bureaucratized and depersonalized medicine becomes — and perhaps the more technical — the more likely it is that the personal dimension of medicine will be lost. A love informed by humility resists this depersonalization by reminding us that the relationship between health care providers and their patients is, from first to last, a human encounter in which a person in need comes for help. That

very encounter constitutes a moral call to affirm the dignity of the persons in need by acknowledging their presence and doing what one can to help them.

Here's an example: My sister has been a nurse for more than 40 years. She told me about a surgeon with whom she works, someone she greatly respects, and this is why, she says:

"He is not hurriedly running in to mark the surgical site and then trying to run out of the room, avoiding the patient and their family. He calmly walks into the pre-op room, sits down and engages in conversation with them, entertaining any questions that they may have. He never acts as if his time is too valuable to be bothered. He will sit and answer any questions or just engage in some random conversation to put everyone at ease before surgery. The value of this can't be measured."³

That's a perfect expression of what it means to love a neighbor who happens to be a patient about to have surgery. Like the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke, this doctor doesn't hurriedly pass the patient by, not wanting to be bothered or inconvenienced, but stops to offer whatever reassurance he can. He is utterly present to his patients, because he listens to them, comforts them and shows compassion by letting them know that he understands them and wants to do whatever he can to help them. Without exhibiting a love informed by humility, the surgeon might be highly capable, but something would be missing in his practice of medicine.

My sister also noted that in her long career as a nurse, she has cared for all kinds of patients. Many inspired her, but some (and their families, as well) could be painfully unreasonable, endlessly demanding and exquisitely difficult, no matter what she did to help them.

One was particularly unforgettable:

"I remember a man who was very difficult to like; in fact, he was downright unlikable. He was very demanding, ungrateful and rude. He talked to me in ways I have never been talked to before, always belittling me and constantly changing his demands as I tried to meet his needs. I began to get frustrated and really struggled to hold my tongue.

"The longer I cared for him, the more I thought about why someone would behave that way

toward the very people who were caring for him. I realized that he was sick in his soul. He had no spiritual life at all. I watched his interactions with his family and realized that everything revolved around him. No wonder he was so unhappy and mean. I felt a great compassion for someone who had gone through so much of life empty. I felt renewed in my care of him and even though his behavior didn't change, mine did."

In light of such experiences, my sister noted that an especially tempting vocational hazard for her was to become jaded, insensitive, judgmental and even cynical. But she knew that if she succumbed to those attitudes, she could not care for her patients as she ought. Humility helped her remember what drew her to nursing in the first place, and it helped sustain her commitment to show care and compassion to all of her patients, including the ones who were notoriously difficult to love.

HUMILITY AND COLLEGIALITY

Finally, humility contributes to excellence in health care because it nurtures deep collegiality among all who are involved in caring for and ministering to patients. A humble person recognizes that none of us, no matter how highly educated, trained and skilled, either knows or can do everything. Because our knowledge and expertise is limited, we have to listen to and learn from others. We have to be open to their suggestions, willing to consult them, and ready to admit that their ideas may be better than our own.

Without humility, we can be overly confident in our abilities and in our assessment of particular cases, barging ahead without taking time to discern with others what needs to be done. Humility reminds medical professionals that excellent health care requires an institutional culture of collegiality characterized by charity, mutual respect, communication and ongoing collaboration.

When writing about the virtue of humility, the medieval theologian St. Thomas Aquinas said that humility "curbs pushiness."⁴ Aquinas recognized how easy it is for any of us to be pushy, especially when we think we, alone, know what needs to be done, that we are always right and that we can succeed in our professions all by ourselves. When this occurs, the collegiality necessary to achieve the fundamental goal of health care begins to frazzle.

Humility assuages pushiness because it teaches us how much we need others. The contemporary theologian Timothy Radcliffe, OP, relates a story that captures this truth. In a vision, "God says to St. Catherine of Siena, 'I could well have made human beings in such a way that they each had everything, but I preferred to give different gifts to different people, so that they would all need each other.'"⁵

That's the wisdom of humility, an unacclaimed and often neglected virtue, but one that needs to be honored, embraced and nurtured if all who are involved in health care are to achieve excellence and flourish together in their vocation of providing compassionate care to patients.

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NOTES

1. Daniel Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 76.
2. The reflections are taken from a case study, "Wrestling with the Angels," that the doctor wrote and shared with the conference participants. Used with permission.
3. Used with permission.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), II-II, 161.2.3.
5. Timothy Radcliffe, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* (New York: Burns & Oates, 2005), 141.

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