Is Modesty the Forgotten Virtue?

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Ambrose Bierce's Devil's Dictionary defines the word "selfish" as "devoid of consideration for the selfishness of others." This fractured definition provides a good starting point for a discussion of modesty, for it reminds us that no one is free from ego. Each of us starts from ourselves; ourselves are the people we know best, and with whom we are naturally most concerned.

The op-ed piece by David Brooks that I read a moment ago suggests that there has been a cultural shift in the Twentieth Century, so that the generation that fought World war II was habitually modest and humble and the generations after discarded that modesty in favor of a self-seeking and self absorptive culture.

When I read this, I thought it might be useful to preach about it; we have in this congregation many members of the so-called Greatest Generation, which fought and won the war making us safe from Hitler, and we have many boomers, my generation. Most of the WWII generation won't be comfortable with that phrase I just used, the Greatest Generation, both because they still remember the generation which went before, and because the phrase offends that basic modesty that we are talking about today.

To David Brooks' indictment, I want to offer here a plea of guilty with extenuating circumstances, and offer my own version of cultural history that might help us understand one another better across the generations.

Modesty, as I want to use it here, is a quality of what we do and say, how we act. It is social and external – a public virtue. I contrast it with humility, which is an internal and spiritual state. The two are related – often a person who is truly humble will act and speak with modesty – but we can also think of people in whom they are opposed – I think of a lawyer colleague I knew in South Carlina whose pose of modesty seemed false to his friends because we all knew he was brilliant and felt that he did as well. In our living room there used to hang a poster advertising Ken Burns' film about one of the colossal egos of the Twentieth Century, Frank Lloyd Wright. The poster features a picture of Wright with his hands folded, looking out at the camera with a very self-satisfied expression, and below the picture is this quote from him: "At an early age, I had to choose between an honest arrogance and a hypocritical humility. I chose honest arrogance."

Modesty as we use the word has two main aspects: how much of you is revealed to

others, and your opinion of your worth as expressed in speech and actions. The first aspect, how much is revealed, itself breaks down into three branches: first, modesty in dress, or how much of your body is revealed in the clothing you wear; second, modesty in the displays of affection and intimacy in public, and third, modesty in other ways 0f seeking attention, such as whether you post your every thought on a social networking site or whether you have vanity plates on your car, whether you stage a hoax that your boy is trapped inside a balloon for six hours. The other main branch, modesty as expressed worth, concerns the extent to which you claim credit for your accomplishments or a high place in a status hierarchy. This sense is captured in a phrase my late stepfather used to say, "if I could buy him for what I think he's worth and sell him for what I think he's worth, I'd have make a lot of money."

In my title here, I call modesty a virtue. As I've said before, there is a school of philosophy called virtue ethics. The basic idea is that we shouldn't try to make people do good by giving them lots of rules, but by teaching them to be virtuous. This is a very ancient idea. The Greek, Roman and Chinese civilizations all tried to inculcate virtues in children as they grew up. Virtues like honor, integrity, honesty, generosity, wisdom, reverence – and modesty. Confucius said "The firm, the enduring, the simple, and the modest are near to virtue."

David Brooks' indictment is that we have forgotten the formerly American public virtue of modesty. I offer a plea of guilty to David's Brooks' accusation: I think my generation and the generations after mine, X and Y and the Slackers and whatever else, lost the American culture's custom of modesty in all these senses. There are exceptions to this gross generalization, but in the main, we dress in a more daring way, we engage in more public displays of affection, we put more of our personal information out there on display, many of us try to call attention to ourselves, and we express a higher opinion of ourselves than have previous generations in American culture.

American immodesty contrasts sharply with the ethos of the Muslim world, particularly as regards dress and public displays of affection. The radical Islamist movement which launched the Muslim Brotherhood and contributed to al-Qaeda was started by the Egyptian Qu'ran scholar Sayyid Qutb, who was radicalized during his stay in Colorado in 1948 by going to a dance and watching the way American men and women dance in public. Radical Islam continues to draw recruits in its jihad against the West by Islamic cultural reaction against what they perceive as American lack of modesty. How did we get this way? We were not always thus. To give you just one bit of data from the realm of public display: the waltz was considered scandalous when it was introduced at the turn of the Nineteenth Century because it required the men to embrace the woman's torso while whirling around, with the possibility that the woman could faint into his arms because of the dizziness and the tight corsets. In our early history, we were a modest people.

Where does our cult of modesty come from? I'm going to go out on a limb and say its roots are in our passion for equality. Alexis de Tocqueville, observing American Democracy in 1831, noted that Americans had a formal freedom to express themselves, but that their passion for equality severely restricted in practice the expression of opinion.

> "There is indeed a manly and legitimate passion for equality which rouses in all men a desire to be strong and respected. This passion tends to elevate the little man to the rank of the great. But the human heart also nourishes a debased taste for equality, which leads the weak to want to drag the strong down to their level, and which induces men to prefer equality in servitude to inequality in freedom.[1]"

In Europe the throne or government power might be a check on individual expression, but in America, the weight of public opinion was a much more absolute check:

> "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America. .... In America the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them.[2]"

This is the shadow side of American cult of modesty – it arises because we suppress alternative forms of expression. The cost of the public virtue is a stifling of public discourse. American democracy since the time of de Tocqueville has always tended to suppress dissent, to encourage conformity of opinion and manner. I sensed this growing up in the Eisenhower years. In public, one did not want to be too big for his britches. You didn't want to stand out. You didn't want to put on airs, to be affected. The culture rewarded modesty, in all senses of the word. Norman Rockwell's paintings and Carl Sandberg's poetry, Jimmy Stewart's movies celebrated something they called the Common Man, and Americans in general bought it, and believed it.

The Common Man (I am deliberately using the gendered term here because it is historically consonant, since the idea was current before we degendered our language) did not want a statue erected after he was gone; he didn't want his name etched on a brick or engraved in stone above the lintel of a multimillion dollar building. The Common Man is a man among men. Marge Piercy beautifully describes the figure in the poem we read earlier:

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[1] Democracy in America I, 1, 3.

[2] Ibid, Ch. 15.

> I want to be with people who submerge in the task, Who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along, Who stand in the line and haul in their places, Who are not parlor generals and field deserters but move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

But here's a little secret: the Common Man is a ghost. It is a cultural ideal. It existed in the hearts and minds of the nation, yea even in Western Culture generally, but there never really was a common man – or woman. It was an ideal against which we measured ourselves.

Like race, the Common Man is a social construct; and like race, there is still power in the concept. There is safety. Giving lip service to the ideal of the Common Man insulated one from criticism, we thought. It meant we belonged. It gave meaning to our lives.

Politically, Andrew Jackson discovered the Common Man, and rode the ghost to the White House. The legendary Davy Crockett was the Common Man's hero of his day, and the Jacksonians courted his vote when he was in Congress. The whole strain of populism in American politics, from Jackson through William Jennings Bryant to Joe the Plumber exploits the ideal of the Common Man.

But always alongside the Common Man in our culture was a cult of the individual. Emerson extolled the individual in his essay Self-Reliance. "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist." To get in touch with a transcendent realm, you must put aside the common opinion of humankind. Emerson extolled those who broke from the mold. In the next generation, Whitman's "Song of Myself" celebrated his uniqueness, not his commonality.

There has always been a current in American popular culture which celebrates the outlaw and the rebel – Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde, Captain Ahab.

So there were conflicting currents in the culture long before the Sixties, but they seem to have come to a head in that tumultuous decade in which I came into adulthood. The Sixties gave us drugs, of course, and rock music with its rock stars, and the celebration of the outlaw, the loner, the rebel. I named my first child Luke under the influence of Paul Newman's unforgettable rebel in Cool Hand Luke.

The worst thing you could be in the Sixties was a conformist. The battle cry of my rebellious generation was "don't trust anyone over thirty." We read Marcuse and McLuhan and Fanon and Malcolm X, and vowed not to work with the system. We envisioned getting rid of the corporate culture that seemed to have a stranglehold on our souls, and the military-industrial complex that seemed to run our politics. We sought an alternative society. Many of us still do.

I came to grips with these larger cultural issues in a course my third year in college taught by Charles Reich, a law professor at Yale who would go on to write a book called *the Greening of America*, a sort of manifesto for the various liberation movements then afoot.

Much of what I have said up to this point today is found in that book, for the course had a profound effect on me.

The Sixties started the crack in the culture of modesty. Then after the sixties came the "me" decade of the Seventies. Black liberation begat women's liberation begat gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender liberation, a struggle by those marginalized by society to claim their place at the table. But as we tried to liberate ourselves from societal oppressions, some of us looked inside and realized that a lot of the alienation we felt came as much from within as from without: we were really not in touch with what went on in our own psyches. How many of you know the term EST? That stood for Ehrhardt Sensitivity Training, one facet of what has been called the Human Potential movement designed to clear out some of the debris in our own souls which prevents us from being our fullest selves. There is much good in this movement, but many of us who were raised in the culture of modesty shied away from it. For years, I pooh-poohed my friends who were all excited about EST and similar movements. I used the derogatory term "touchie-feelie." But when I started thinking about going into ministry, I realized that I was pretty alienated from many parts of myself, and I plunged right in to a program of self-exploration.

Much good has come out of the Human Potential Movement. Self-awareness, mindfulness, is a good thing. It is the goal of many meditation techniques in yoga and Buddhism, and it is a way of life which I try to cultivate. It is not just an Eastern concept; inscribed above the oracle's temple at Delphi in ancient Greece was the phrase gnothi seauton, know thyself.

But when does self-awareness slide over into self-absorption? When does the gaze at one's own navel occlude the look into other people's faces? We are social beings by design. Evolution has given us the ability to recognize others, to read other's faces and body language, to respond to the emotional states of others. If you think this is easy, try building a computer to do these social things that most human children learn to do naturally.

Mary Oliver writes, "tell me despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." She might have been describing small group ministry. Small group ministry, at its best, works by a deep sharing of our hopes and dreams and despairs, and our stories which embody these feelings.

When we hear a story of someone's divorce, or someone struggling with the death of a parent or difficulties with a child, it fits right into a template in our own stories, and what often happens is that we stop listening to the other and go off on our own jag. In a small group, this may result in a an individual catharsis, a letting go of burdens, but at the expense of the group processes.

We are called by our religious principles to respect the inherent worth and dignity of other people, and to honor the interconnected web of all being. We are not called to be egoless,

pure altruists or completely other-directed. A heqlthy mindset will balance the internal with the external, the concern for the self with a concern for others.

Yes Mr. Brooks, my generation is less modest than the ones which preceded me, and so are the generations which follow. But we have not lost the sense that we are a person among other persons. In our social discourse, we emphasize our unique stories, our unique tastes and proclivities, rather than pretending that we are all alike. We cherish our diversities. We are letting it hang out more, not only by how we dress in public, but by what we put on our websites and what we twitter and what we post on social networks.

Modesty is a good virtue, but there are other competing ones which need to be balanced against it. We are better off for the cultural revolution of the Sixties, and some of the better goals of that movement still point the way to a better future.

Narcisissm and self-absorption by the Boomers and succeeding generations is a problem but not a crisis. In many ways, it is self-correcting. We have had colossal egos in every generation; those who grandstand too much in the public spotlight get criticized, and at a certain point, we get bored and quit listening. If these parents in Colorado staged the balloon hoax, they will get the public scorn they deserve.

To the extent we all become self-absorbed, as each of us does from time to time, I have a modest proposal" When it gets too hot, too fetid, too boring inside your own skull, get out of yourself. Go find someone else and listen to what they have to say, really listen. Practice the art of deep listening. Engage with others unlike yourself.

Modesty is a public virtue, but public mores change, and there's nothing we can do to keep them from changing. Humility, now, that's another thing altogether. To be truly humble is to recognize the vastness of all that is, and the smallness of our own lives and selves by contrast. Humility is a reality check. It is an essential component of happiness.

Jesus enjoins humility on us, but does not preach modesty. To the contrary, he says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 14-16),

> 14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

We will not be modest about witnessing for our values in the world. We will not take down our rainbow flag because some of our neighbors might disagree. The robust expression of today is better than the stifling conformity of the Eisenhower years. Modesty isn't everything.

And finally, always remember, you're unique, just like everyone else.

Amen.

Reading September 15, 2009t
High-Five Nation
By DAVID BROOKS

On Sunday evenings, my local NPR station airs old radio programs. A few weeks ago it broadcast the episode of the show “Command Performance” that aired the day World War II ended. “Command Performance” was a variety show that went out to the troops around the world.

On V-J Day, Frank Sinatra appeared, along with Marlene Dietrich, Jimmy Durante, Dinah Shore, Bette Davis, Lionel Barrymore, Cary Grant and many others. But the most striking feature of the show was its tone of self-effacement and humility. The allies had, on that very day, completed one of the noblest military victories in the history of humanity. And yet there was no chest-beating. Nobody was erecting triumphal arches.

“All anybody can do is thank God it’s over,” Bing Crosby, the show’s host, said. “Today our deep down feeling is one of humility,” he added.

[Burgess Meredith came out to read a passage from Ernie Pyle, the famous war correspondent. Pyle had been killed just a few months before, but he had written an article anticipating what a victory would mean:

“We won this war because our men are brave and because of many things — because of Russia, England and China and the passage of time and the gift of nature’s material. We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other peoples. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than we are proud.”

This subdued sentiment seems to have been widespread during that season of triumph. On the day the Nazi regime fell, Hal Boyle of The Associated Press reported from the front lines, “The victory over Germany finds the average American soldier curiously unexcited. There is little exuberance, little enthusiasm and almost none of the whoop-it-up spirit with which hundreds of thousands of men looked forward to this event a year ago.”

The Dallas Morning News editorialized, “President Truman calls upon us to treat the event as a solemn occasion. Its momentousness and its gravity are past human comprehension.”]

When you glimpse back on those days you see a people — even the rich and famous celebrities — who were overawed by the scope of the events around them. The war produced such monumental effects, and such rivers of blood, that the individual ego seemed petty in comparison. The problems of one or two little people, as the movie line had it, didn't amount to a hill of beans.

You also hear a cultural reaction. As The Times of London pointed out on the day of victory, fascism had stood for grandiosity, pomposity, boasting and zeal. The allied propaganda mills had also produced their fair share of polemical excess. By 1945, everybody was sick of that. There was a mass hunger for a public style that was understated, self-abnegating, modest and spare. Bing Crosby expressed it perfectly on "Command Performance," as Gregory Peck, Dwight Eisenhower and George Marshall would come to express it in public life.

And there was something else. When you look from today back to 1945, you are looking into a different cultural epoch, across a sort of narcissism line. Humility, the sense that nobody is that different from anybody else, was a large part of the culture then.

But that humility came under attack in the ensuing decades. Self-effacement became identified with conformity and self-repression. A different ethos came to the fore, which the sociologists call "expressive individualism." Instead of being humble before God and history, moral salvation could be found through intimate contact with oneself and by exposing the beauty, the power and the divinity within.

Everything that starts out as a cultural revolution ends up as capitalist routine. Before long, self-exposure and self-love became ways to win shares in the competition for attention. Muhammad Ali would tell all cameras that he was the greatest of all time. Norman Mailer wrote a book called "Advertisements for Myself."

Today, immodesty is as ubiquitous as advertising, and for the same reasons. To scoop up just a few examples of self-indulgent expression from the past few days, there is Joe Wilson using the House floor as his own private "Crossfire"; there is Kanye West grabbing the microphone from Taylor Swift at the MTV Video Music Awards to give us his opinion that the wrong person won; there is Michael Jordan's egomaniacal and self-indulgent Hall of Fame speech. Baseball and football games are now so routinely interrupted by self-celebration, you don't even notice it anymore.

This isn’t the death of civilization. It’s just the culture in which we live. And from this vantage point, a display of mass modesty, like the kind represented on the V-J Day “Command Performance,” comes as something of a refreshing shock, a glimpse into another world. It’s funny how the nation’s mood was at its most humble when its actual achievements were at their most extraordinary.