

Only we can humble ourselves

Humility is always a personal act of inner volition.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [April 21, 2019](#) issue



Getty Images

He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

—Philippians 2:8

There is no shortage of people getting humbled these days. From celebrities in the limelight to everyday volunteers receiving awards, people seem eager to vocalize their humility with each honor bestowed, success achieved, or record set.

Vice President Mike Pence spoke last summer of being “honored and humbled” when receiving the remains of U.S. soldiers who died in the Korean War. Hillary Clinton declared that voting for herself in 2016 was a “humbling experience.” Academy Award-winning actor and filmmaker Bradley Cooper noted at the recent Oscars how “very humbling” it was to have so many colleagues pulling for him.

To speak of being humbled in this fashion is a nice way to feel immense pride while trying to avoid being seen as prideful. It's a clever method for announcing personal triumph, goodness, or happiness by using modest-sounding language, intended to mitigate critique. Look at me! Who, me? Please notice my lack of arrogance. If any of us are humbled by an exhilarating experience that delivers a high, we're probably using the word humble to mean its opposite. Like our use of the word interesting to signal our lack of interest in paying further attention to someone, feeling humbled rarely has anything to do with humility.

In sports, being humbled regularly gets confused with losing. When the New York Mets suffered their worst defeat in franchise history last summer in a 25-4 loss to the Washington Nationals, Mets players spoke of being "humbled." But they weren't humbled at all; they were humiliated. Crushed. Shut down. No one can humble another team much less another person. I am the only one who can humble me. You are the only person who can humble you. Not even God can humble us. Each of us holds the key for unlocking that otherwise invulnerable vault better known as our ego.

Plenty of detractors humiliated Jesus. Some stripped and beat him. But he humbled himself, as the apostle Paul reminds us. It was a do-it-yourself project that surely included prayer. As the scriptures suggest elsewhere, humility is always a personal act of inner volition. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and [God] will exalt you," various writers declare. Those who gain humility are those who learn to grow in lowliness, submitting themselves to others. According to J. I. Packer, humility is "[giving] up our dreams of being greatly admired for doing wonderfully well." In other words, true humility is not the same as being unctuously humble.

Esther de Waal connects her quest for humility with humus, or earth, from which the word itself derives: "I allow myself to be earthed in the truth that lets God be God, and myself [God's] creature. If I hold on to this it helps prevent me from putting myself at the center." That's how she unlocks her vault of personal ego.

Public declarations of humility rightfully sound suspicious because of one truth: real humility involves interior work. As the hymn "Come Down, O Love Divine" so beautifully expresses, humility is what we wear on the inside, not the outside.

Let holy charity mine outward vesture be,
and lowliness become mine inner clothing;

true lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part,
and o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Being humbled?"