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identity of this author, all efforts have failed. I rather imagine this is just the way our anonymous author wanted it.

I have no answer to our contemporary dilemma. But I am refreshed by the author's complete freedom from human praise. Perhaps his/her personal obscurity is an important teaching in itself . . . teaching us that Christ should be the focus of attention and his followers become more unassuming, more kind, more humble. How would this teaching play in our narcissistic culture?

Second, I am struck by how dynamic and contemporary the message of *The Cloud* feels. The one specific detail we do know about this book is that our anonymous author is writing to a twenty-four-year-old who is also anonymous to us. Talk about speaking to the heart needs of Millennials! Here is a resource par excellence for the twenty-something person who wants to move beyond the superficialities of modern culture.

Third, I am struck by the gentle wisdom found in *The Cloud*. This is true for the entire volume, and never more so than when the author touches on the topic of humility. I wonder, *What is the connection between wisdom and humility?* I don't know, I just wonder. I'd like to tease this out in the days ahead.

(((((THIRD WEEK)))))

THE AWFUL RUST OF SIN

The Cloud's guidance on humility is imminently practical and filled with pastoral care. It begins with the simple yet profound definition: "humility is seeing yourself as you really are. It's that simple." And I concur, "Yes, it is that simple."

The word *humility* comes from the Latin *humilitas*, meaning "grounded" or "from the earth." Think of our word *humus* (earth,

soil). Hence, with humility we are brought back to earth. We don't think of ourselves higher than we should. Nor do we think of ourselves lower than we should. No pride or haughtiness. No self-deprecation or feelings of unworthiness. Just an accurate assessment of who we actually are. Our strengths and competencies. And, yes, our weaknesses and shortcomings.

And this is exactly where *The Cloud* turns our attention. We have no idea if our anonymous author had read Aristotle, but he (could our author be she?) clearly understands the value of self-knowledge. "Self-knowledge is the only way to get and keep the virtue of humility." *The Cloud* adds, "Don't flinch in the face of the tremendous work involved. Get to know yourself. Yes, it is backbreaking labor. Embrace it. Through it, you'll experience God as he is. I don't mean you'll know God completely. . . . But when you get to know yourself better as the mortal human you are, your soul grows in humility, and you'll know God as fully as possible on earth."

So, how do we experience this self-knowledge? *The Cloud* teaches that "self-reflection" is the best way for us to know ourselves as we truly are. In a posture of deep humility in itself our anonymous author states, "I will admit that those who sin on a regular basis (and I have and do) need this sort of self-reflection. We must be humbled by the memory of our sinfulness and past mistakes, until the awful rust of sin is scrubbed away."

Right alongside *The Cloud's* stress on the importance of self-knowledge is the qualification that self-knowledge is "an imperfect humility." The author's point being that a focus on knowing the self as fully as possible still leaves us with a focus on the self.

The move from an "imperfect humility" to "perfect humility" comes as we are enabled by divine grace to turn from ourselves to God alone. The author writes, "The best way to grow in humility is not through reflecting on our weaknesses but by remembering

God's goodness and love. . . . 'Perfect' humility comes when you experience God's goodness and superabundant love."

Our anonymous author does add a sobering note. In this life "perfect humility" is a temporary, almost fleeting experience. It comes "when, by grace, you allow the hidden love of your pure heart to press against the dark cloud of unknowing between you and God." Even though our experience is "fleeting" our counselor/author speaks a word of encouragement: "I . . . want you to be able to recognize perfect humility so you can set it up in your heart as a sign of love. It becomes something to aim for. . . . I believe that the mere awareness of perfect humility will help you be more humble."

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Somewhere in his *Journal* I remember Søren Kierkegaard writing, "Now, with God's help, I shall become myself." I rather think this fits quite nicely with the teaching of *The Cloud* on humility.

A SIMPLE PRAYER

A simple prayer has been drifting in and out of my consciousness in recent days. I haven't gotten the wording quite right and so decided that writing it out might help me articulate the inner yearnings.

Loving Lord Jesus, I humbly ask that you would . . .

Purify my heart,

Renew my mind,

Sanctify my imagination, and

Enlarge my soul.

Amen.

I think it would be good to stay with this prayer for a while.

THE HUMAN SIDE AND THE DIVINE SIDE

Took a hike today with my little prayer as my companion and sensed that there are two sides to its answer: the human side and the divine side.

On the human side

- With regard to *heart purity*, I am *to consider* tenderly the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am *to see* his heart as an open wound of love toward all humanity. And I am *to feel* the divine love pouring out of his wounded heart for me.
- With regard to a *renewed mind*, I am *to think* on whatever is true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable (Phil 4:8). Not all the time, but whenever I am able.
- With regard to a *sanctified imagination*, I am *to picture* the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem, the river of the water of life bright as crystal, and the tree of life on either side of the river whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev 21–22). Imagine that! Picture this, not constantly, only as I can.
- With regard to an *enlarged soul*, I am *to find* people I can serve. In small ways, and even large ways. Whenever possible.

On the divine side

- With regard to *heart purity*, God alone purifies the heart. God alone will straighten out the twistedness of all desires. God alone will radiate light into every dark corner.
- With regard to a *renewed mind*, God alone will train the mind into deep habit patterns of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).
- With regard to a *sanctified imagination*, God alone slowly, slowly, slowly channels all the imaginings into that pure stream which is comprised of the good and the true and the beautiful.

- With regard to an *enlarged soul*, God alone will place deep within the subterranean chambers of the heart and the mind and the imagination an understanding of the overwhelming preciousness of every single person.

Then came this authoritative word: remember that God is . . .

- quick to forgive
- eager to heal
- glad to restore

(((((FOURTH WEEK)))))

MY SEARCH FOR ELENA FERRANTE

Right now I am reading an essay Lar gave me from *The Atlantic*: “My Search for Elena Ferrante.” It is about an Italian pseudonymous author who goes to great lengths to hide her identity, maintaining only that her identity lies in her writing. Hmm. Does anonymity reflect an underlying humility?

CAPTIVATED MY MIND

At the church service this morning I was immediately struck by the last stanza in the processional hymn, “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” The words captivated my mind and I heard little else. I decided that this stanza was what I needed to focus on at this time. It is a stanza that is omitted in the hymnbooks I have at home.

Time like an ever-rolling stream,
 bears all our years away;
 they fly forgotten, as a dream
 dies at the op’ning day.

And what does this have to do with humility? Well, it most certainly puts all our “magnificent accomplishments” in their place! . . . “They fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op’ning day.”

THE LAKOTA VIRTUES

Since I am using the Lakota calendar to frame these journal entries, I thought it might be useful to consider Lakota cultural ideals as I go along. The twelve Lakota virtues create a nice frame for a year of reflection, one for each of the next twelve months.

They are

- Humility
- Perseverance
- Respect
- Honor
- Love
- Sacrifice
- Truth
- Compassion
- Bravery
- Fortitude
- Generosity
- Wisdom

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