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Two Pocket Theology

I can remember exactly where we were when she said it, but I have no memory of what prompted my childhood friend, Ginny Wilbur, to turn to me in the spring of our senior year in high school and say, “Whether someone tells you you’re great, or someone tells you you’re not so great, both are true, and you can’t let either one get to you.” I’m not sure we knew it, but Ginny was talking about the spiritual practice of humility, which has something to do with cultivating our capacity to know ourselves – great and not-so-great – and to throw our weight, humbly, to the side of great.

What other people think of us is none of our business. Still, it can get to us. Actually, what we *think* other people think of us seems to be as bad, or worse, than really knowing. But *finding out* what they think should not be on our to-do list. What *we* think of us – what you think of yourself, what I think of myself; the truth of our lives – is enough grist for the spiritual mill.

I’ve told you before that a group of therapists I know were in an audience with the Dalai Lama, and shared with him that one of their biggest challenges in working with western clients was the low self-esteem that is pervasive in our society. His Holiness was stopped in his tracks; his English is good, but he had no idea what they were talking about. “What,” he asked his translator, “is low self-esteem?” After much back and forth, he shook his head sadly. There is no comparable term in Tibetan. There is no such thing in Tibetan culture.

On the other hand, there’s the over-inflated sense of self. I almost always think egotism a flimsy cover for low self-esteem; whatever its source, it’s another doozy of a character defect. And it didn’t used to be so pervasive. When Germany surrendered at the close of World War II, Bing Crosby said, “All anybody can do is thank G*d it’s over. Today, our deep down feeling is one of humility.” War correspondent Ernie Pyle had been killed a few months earlier, but, anticipating the victory, he had written, “We did not

win [this war] because destiny created us better than all other peoples. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than we are proud.”

In 2009, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote a piece called “High Five Nation,” in which he writes, “When you look ... 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.... It’s funny how the nation’s mood was at its most humble when its actual achievements were at their most extraordinary.” David Brooks concludes, “... Today, immodesty is ... ubiquitous....”¹

I want to share with you one of my favorite Hassidic Jewish teachings, which I call Two Pocket Theology. Rabbi Simcha Bunim Bonhart, born in Poland in 1765, said, “Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that [they] can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling high and mighty, one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words, ‘I am but dust and ashes.’ But when feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there find the words, ‘For my sake was the world created.’”²

I did a graveside service last Saturday morning, during which we placed ashes into a deep, narrow hole in the ground. You’ll remember it was a beautiful day, clear after the spring rain, with the fragrance of late crabapple blossoms and new lilacs hanging in the air. The earth, too, smelled wonderful, and it was lovely, our simple ritual. I thought, This is an image to cherish for any time, but especially, perhaps, for Rabbi Simcha Bunim’s high and mighty left pocket times: “I am but dust and ashes.”

Reading his work led me to another rabbinical saying, this one unattributed, which I love. It says, “In front of every human being, ten thousand invisible angels go, crying out, ‘Make way for the image of G*d! Make way for the image of G*d!’”³ How wonderful! This is also an image to cherish for any time, but especially, perhaps, for Rabbi Simcha Bunim’s disconsolate right pocket times: “For my sake, the world was created.”

¹ *The New York Times*, 9/15/09, p. A33 (New York edition). Please see nytimes.com/2009/09/15/opinion/15brooks.html?_r=0

² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simcha_Bunim_of_Peshischa

³ Thanks to Rev. Jack Zamboni, *A Sermon for Ash Wednesday*, St. Francis’ Episcopal Church, Dunellen, NJ, 2/17/10. Please see stfrancisdunelleln.org/sermon20100217.htm

Humility leads to equanimity ... peace. It requires commitment to a spiritual path that includes unflinching engagement with truth, devotion to profound self-knowledge, and a willingness to correct any unbalance in our lives. As yet another rabbi states it, this practice will yield our hidden treasure.

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I want to thank Arlington Street's David Schumann for turning me on to *The Moth*, and for this story.

In 1989, Doctor George Lombardi, 32 years old, is at home alone unpacking boxes when he receives a mysterious phone call. A woman's voice begins to interrogate him, "Are you an infectious disease specialist? Did you live and work and do research in East Africa? Are you an expert in tropical infections?"

He's new in town, and he's been hoping for business, but he figures out pretty quickly this is not just any new patient. "Who are you?" he asks. She introduces herself as the representative of a world figure and Nobel Laureate who is suspected of having a viral hemorrhagic fever. She had gotten his name from a colleague of his who had told her, Call Dr. Lombardi. "He knows about a lot about very weird things." She wants him, she says, to consult on the case.

He finds this highly improbable. Nonetheless, he agrees to try to help. Within ten minutes, he is patched through to a hospital in Calcutta, and it is then that he learns that the patient is Mother Teresa. On the line are her two main Indian doctors. They are deeply worried about their patient. Dr. Lombardi speaks to them for about an hour. Then he hangs up, and goes back to unpacking his boxes.

The woman calls again an hour later. "They were very impressed by what you had to say. They want you to come to Calcutta. I'm making the arrangements. I can get you out tomorrow afternoon on the Concorde."

Dr. Lombardi notes that that would be impossible, as he has just unpacked his passport and discovered that it had expired three months before. She says, "That's a minor detail." She would pick him up at 7:00 the next morning, a Sunday, and take him to the consulate to renew his passport and obtain a Visa.

Sure enough, right on time, a wood-paneled station wagon with bad shock absorbers comes careening down the block. The woman takes him to the passport office at Rockefeller Center, where a State Department official issues him a brand new passport ... within fifteen minutes.

Next stop: The Indian consulate. A Sunday morning, and the entire staff greets him in full dress uniform. The counsel general, himself, affixes the visa to the passport. And just as it is beginning to dawn on Dr. Lombardi just how deep a dive he is taking, the counsel general says, “We bestow our blessings on you,” and adds, “The eyes of the world are upon you.”

On the way to JFK, five Sisters of Charity are picked up and wedge themselves into the back seat of the station wagon. Dr. Lombardi asks, *sotto voce*, “Why are the nuns here?” “Well,” says the woman, “you’re flying standby. The sisters will go up and down the line of ticketed passengers and beg, until someone gives up their seat” on the Concorde.

No problem.

After twenty-four hours in flight, Dr. Lombardi arrives in Calcutta – one hundred degrees, one hundred percent humidity. He’s whisked to the hospital by a private security detail of nuns. And it’s then that he meets his patient for the first time. Mother Teresa’s condition is deteriorating. She beckons him to her. “Thank you for coming,” she says. “I will never leave Calcutta. Do not ever disagree with my Indian doctors; I need them. They run my hospitals and clinics, and I will not have them embarrassed.”

He runs tests, then leaves her to rest. He slips out a side door of the hospital; in the front, five thousand pilgrims are keeping vigil. Back at the hotel, he turns on the TV to relax. The news is nothing but an endless loop of footage of Dr. Lombardi entering and leaving the hospital. That night and for every night to come, it is the lead story: “Dr. Lombardi attends to Mother Teresa as she inches closer toward death.”

She’s deteriorating.

On the third day, bacteria shows up on one of the cultures – the most beautiful sight Dr. Lombardi has ever seen. He believes that a pacemaker

put in some months before could be the source of a treatable infection. The Pope's cardiologist is flown in from Rome, and appears at the hospital, right out of central casting: Brioni suit, Gucci loafers, Hermés tie. Dr. Lombardi is carrying a vinyl backpack and wearing sandals with socks. When he presents his findings to him, and suggests that the pacemaker is infected, the Pope's cardiologist erupts Vesuviusly. "Out of the question!" he bellows.

Mother Teresa worsens.

At the end of the day, Dr. Lombardi leaves the hospital through the front door, wading through the press of pilgrims. He feels uplifted and upheld by their love, their prayers, their faith.

At the end of the fifth day, Mother Teresa is in septic shock. Dr. Lombardi makes an impassioned plea to remove her pacemaker, enraging the Pope's cardiologist. The Indian doctors are forced to choose between them. They choose Dr. Lombardi. The Pope's cardiologist announces that he is washing his hands of the case, leaves the hospital, goes directly to the airport, and exits the country.

Dr. Lombardi, an infectious disease doctor, is left to perform the surgery. He has never performed this surgery before. The pacemaker box comes out right away, but the wire leading into the right ventricle is stuck. If he slips, he will kill Mother Teresa.

In the most surreal moment of the entire saga, Dr. Lombardi says a prayer *to* Mother Teresa *for* Mother Teresa.

The pacemaker wire slips out.

Almost immediately, Mother Teresa begins to improve. Two days later, she is sitting up, and, indeed, goes on to live another eight years.

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Dr. Lombardi has an ongoing relationship with the nuns, and he cares for them. One day, the mother superior and two young novitiates come to his office; the new Sisters of Mercy want to see the photos from India on Dr. Lombardi's office wall. The nuns thank him for saving Mother Teresa's life.

And then one says, “Dr. Lombardi, in the convent, we think of you as a rock star.”⁴

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Beloved spiritual companions, humility requires of us a deep engagement with truth, and a commensurate willingness to open our minds and hearts to that truth. “Whether someone tells you you’re great, or someone tells you you’re not so great, both are true, and you can’t let either one get to you.”

We are called to live between
 “I am but dust and ashes”
 and
 “For my sake was the world created.”

One moment, you’re new in town,
 you’re hoping for the phone to ring,
 your passport is expired.
 The next, you’re on the Concorde,
 you’re in the presence of a saint,
 you’re saving a life.

Humility is the fast-track to peace.

May we be humble, and peaceful;
 may we be nobody, and a rock star.

⁴ This story, “Mission to India,” is told movingly and hysterically by Dr. George Lombardi on *The Moth*. I adapted it a little to shorten it (the facts are untouched). Please visit themoth.org