HUMILITY
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

In her essay titled “Becoming Bread”, writer Grunilla Norris writes a poem called Earth.
Your wheat grew in the ground as did mine.
We have no experience without soil.
Background-our parents and their parents.
Home-ground-our feet on this earth.
Made from ground, sustained by ground,
We are soil. This is the first humility.
If we forget this, we forget that we are human.
We are of the land. We are humus.

We live our lives between the cosmos and the earth. Poised between earth and sky…roots hold me close, wings set me free…we want both loam and lunar light….we are of earth and stardust.

We seek to belong, to be of worth. Some of us begin from a lowly place, having been spoon-fed a sense of our own unworthiness. Some of us begin from higher ground, having been told again and again, we are the best of the lot, the pick of the litter, the brightest, the prettiest, the winner.

Both are true you know…we are, each of us, of earth and sky…both lowly and exhausted. We spend our lives seeking the fulcrum, the balance, the appropriate weight to give our worthiness, the appropriate play to give our awesomeness.

The word humility comes from the Latin…humilitas…meaning lowliness, meekness…close to the word for soil…humus.

Humility is a spiritual virtue, within reason, that is. Authentic religious and spiritual leaders lead from a place of humility rather than pride.
Moses is described by the Bible “as very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth”. And the Buddha sought wisdom while sitting on the ground under the Bodhi tree. And Gandhi lived simply, weaving his own clothes, and Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke eloquently, even from a prison cell, and Mother Teresa lived in poverty among the sick and diseased, and Nelson Mandela, carried humbleness like an inner light.
Don’t misunderstand, I am not suggesting that we ordinary seekers should live the extreme humility of saints. And yet, there is a place in our lives for true humility. In a culture that encourages everyone to appear on television, everyone to claim their 15 minutes of fame, everyone to go to the top college, to buy more than we need, to run for president, we need to do some serious thinking about humility.

This past week, our church staff went on retreat to the National Cathedral. We talked some about humility as we stood in the shadow of the great cathedral. Even as we acknowledged the artistic and architectural achievement of the temple…we felt more connection to beauty, truth and meaning while standing in the bishops garden…a small and delicately drawn, spirit-filled place of contemplation.

The cathedral reaches for the sky, while the garden is of the earth.

Perhaps Unitarian Universalism is more humble a faith than it sometimes seems to be, because it too is more earthbound than heaven directed.

I had an experience of the humble quality of our faith, about a week ago, when a dozen or so of us gathered in Founders Hall for the second session of a class on the NPR series, “This I Believe”. After introduction, instruction and reading aloud from the book in our first session together-participants were sent home with instructions on how to write their own “This I Believe” statement.

The time arrived and we sat in a close circle of chairs around our chalice candle, and took turns reading our essays. After each reading, we shared a moment of silence before responding with a simple question or a statement of appreciation. It was the most moving experience I’ve ever had in a UU congregation. The statements of belief were beautifully wrought and offered as gifts to the listening group.

“I believe in the transforming power of love”. “I believe that perfectionism is highly over-rated.” “I believe in the power of encouragement.” “I believe that everyone needs to love and be loved.” “I believe that one should pursue your fear.” “I believe in kindness.”
Because our liberal religion honors the experiences and gifts of all equally. Because we believe in the priesthood and prophethood of all believers…because all beliefs are honored and all expression valued- I, as minister, could receive the gifts being offered that evening.

And as I listened, I felt humbled to minister to people so wise, so talented, so trusting.

Humility does not mean undervaluing yourself. It means valuing other people. Jewish writer, Jonathan Sacks, writes that humility signals an openness to life’s grandeur and the willingness to be surprised, uplifted, by goodness wherever one finds it.

Humility is the willingness to be open to and admire something greater than oneself.

Humility does not mean undervaluing yourself. It means valuing other people. There is a story from the Hassidic masters. A visitor from Hungary asked a stranger for directions.

“Can you please direct me to the home of the great Rabbi Elimelech?”

The stranger raised his eyes in astonishment; “you mean to tell me you journeyed all this way to this Rabbe!? Have the exaggerations and embellishments about this man traveled that far already? I know this Rabbi Elimelech personally, and the man is an absolute zero, I’m afraid that you’ve wasted your time and money on these silly rumors.”

The visitor was outraged. “You lowly, despicable man!” he thundered. “What do you know. You obviously have no understanding of anything holy and spiritual” Still fuming, the visitor stormed off.

Later that day, when the traveler entered Rabbi Elimelech’s study for his appointed audience, he nearly fainted in shame and remorse. The man he had derided earlier on the street was none other than Rabbi Elimelech himself! With tears in his eyes, he begged the Rebbe’s forgiveness.

“Why are you so upset?” Asked the Rabbi. “There’s no need to apologize. I told you the simple truth, and everything you said was also true…”
Both were true…the Rabbi was both lowly and exhausted. To acknowledge that each one of us, everyone we know and love, everyone we know and don’t love…every single human being…is both of the earth and of the sky…that would be an amazing truth to live by.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, he was letting people know that he was not only exalted…but that he was also human and therefore of the earth…of humus…just like all of humankind.

Humility does not mean undervaluing yourself. And within community, humility comes from the most human of moments…not when we are approaching perfection in a task, but when we see wholeness shining through the broken places.

Annie Dillard…in “Teaching a Stone to Talk” writes of a small church community. In her words;

“Recently, I returned to the small congregational church for an ecumenical service. A Catholic priest and the minister served grape juice communion. Both the priest and the minister were professionals, were old hands. They bungled with dignity and aplomb.

Both were at ease and awed; both were half confident and controlled and half bewildered and whispering. I could hear them: “Where is it?” “Haven’t you got it?” “I thought you had it!”

The priest, new to me, was in his sixties. He was tall; he wore his weariness loosely, standing upright and controlling his breath. When he knelt at the altar, and when he rose from kneeling, his knees cracked. It was a fine church music, this sound of his cracking knees.”

Humility means valuing others. Is there someone in your life, that exemplifies humility…that lives in a way that values others above all else? Is there a person who uplifts by their very goodness?

In light of recent headlines and the continuing heat of a political season, it might be a good time to begin a conversation on humility.
I have a friend. His name is Oliver, he is a doctor. Some doctors think of themselves as Gods, some doctors are the epitome of self-importance. I would admire Oli for his humility, if he were a plumber, an auto-mechanic, or a concert pianist. Because I’m sure that his character, his selflessness, his compassion, his habit and intention to put others’ needs ahead of his own, would be there, no matter what work he did. He chose medicine because he felt it was the path in which he could do the most good.

After a lifetime of working in family medicine, of organizing medical collectives, of working for universal health care, of caring for elderly patients, of teaching international students, of working and speaking on behalf of the poor. Oli is nearing retirement, he is reluctant, but he says one reason to retire is to be more available to his circle of friends and family- to have more time to consult with them on their health issues.

And when we visit Oli and his family in Brooklyn, he is always up early on Saturday morning, in order to run out and get the best bagels for the rest of us. I am always uplifted by his goodness.

As you can see, humility is very close to love. To value other people, and act out of that high value for others, is, perhaps the purest form of love. Humility does not mean undervaluing yourself.

For those of us who have been hurt by other religious traditions—traditions that may have taught humility as a lowering of self and a shattering of self-esteem, reframing/rethinking humility can be a difficult step. It may be one reason why prayer is difficult for many Unitarian Universalists, or why the word worship doesn’t sit well.

For those of us who have been hurt by people in positions of power or authority over us, we may confuse something that has been done to us…to make us feel small, with true humility, which in fact makes one feel exhausted and full of the beauty and preciousness of what it means to be human.
Climbing a mountain, watching a flock of birds overhead, spotting a hawk sitting atop the National Cathedral, serving food at a homeless shelter, singing in a large chorus, holding a newborn baby, or holding the hand of a dying parent...getting down on our knees in the garden, sitting in a circle of trusting friends in Founders Hall...all these things can evoke a sense of humility. An appreciation of our place within the grand scheme of life.

One purpose of religious community just might be to create moments in which we can experience humility...a valuing of others. Religious community ought be that place where we are uplifted by simple goodness.

There was a philosopher named Pascal...the story has been told that upon his death, there were two notes found sewn into the pockets of his old coat. In one pocket was a note that said, “We are made of dust and ashes” and in the other pocket a note saying; “we are made of the stuff of stars.”

Earth and sky. Exhausted and human. Roots and wings. We are made of dust and ashes, we are made of the stuff of stars.

We are humus. We are bread. We are love. We are of shining worth.

Blessed Be/Amen