

Humility

Benjamin Franklin, from *The Autobiography*

While I was intent on improving my language, I met with an English grammar (I think it was Greenwood's), at the end of which there were two little sketches of the arts of rhetoric and logic, the latter finishing with a specimen of a dispute in the Socratic method; and soon after I procur'd Xenophon's Memorable Things of Socrates, wherein there are many instances of the same method. I was charm'd with it, adopted it, dropt my abrupt contradiction and positive argumentation, and put on the humble inquirer and doubter. And being then, from reading Shaftesbury and Collins, become a real doubter in many points of our religious doctrine, I found this method safest for myself and very embarrassing to those against whom I used it; therefore I took a delight in it, practis'd it continually, and grew very artful and expert in drawing people, even of superior knowledge, into concessions, the consequences of which they did not foresee, entangling them in difficulties out of which they could not extricate themselves, and so obtaining victories that neither myself nor my cause always deserved. I continu'd this method some few years, but gradually left it, retaining only the habit of expressing myself in terms of modest diffidence; never using, when I advanced any thing that may possibly be disputed, the words certainly, undoubtedly, or any others that give the air of positiveness to an opinion; but rather say, I conceive or apprehend a thing to be so and so; it appears to me, or I should think it so

or so, for such and such reasons; or I imagine it to be so; or it is so, if I am not mistaken. This habit, I believe, has been of great advantage to me when I have had occasion to inculcate my opinions, and persuade men into measures that I have been from time to time engag'd in promoting; and, as the chief ends of conversation are to inform or to be informed, to please or to persuade, I wish well-meaning, sensible men would not lessen their power of doing good by a positive, assuming manner, that seldom fails to disgust, tends to create opposition, and to defeat every one of those purposes for which speech was given to us, to wit, giving or receiving information or pleasure. For, if you would inform, a positive and dogmatical manner in advancing your sentiments may provoke contradiction and prevent a candid attention. If you wish information and improvement from the knowledge of others, and yet at the same time express yourself as firmly fix'd in your present opinions, modest, sensible men, who do not love disputation, will probably leave you undisturbed in the possession of your error. And by such a manner, you can seldom hope to recommend yourself in pleasing your hearers, or to persuade those whose concurrence you desire.

Pope says, judiciously:

“Men should be taught as if you
taught them not, And things un-
known propos’d as things forgot;”

farther recommending to us

“To speak, tho’ sure, with seeming
diffidence.”

And he might have coupled with this line that
which he has coupled with another, I think,
less properly,

“For want of modesty is want of
sense.”

If you ask, Why less properly? I must repeat
the lines,

“Immodest words admit of no de-
fense, For want of modesty is want
of sense.”

Now, is not want of sense (where a man is so
unfortunate as to want it) some apology for
his want of modesty? and would not the lines
stand more justly thus?

“Immodest words admit but this de-
fense, That want of modesty is want
of sense.”

This, however, I should submit to better
judgments

My list of virtues contain’d at first but twelve;
but a Quaker friend having kindly informed
me that I was generally thought proud; that
my pride show’d itself frequently in conver-
sation; that I was not content with being in
the right when discussing any point, but was
overbearing, and rather insolent, of which
he convinc’d me by mentioning several in-
stances; I determin’d endeavouring to cure
myself, if I could, of this vice or folly among
the rest, and I added Humility to my list giv-
ing an extensive meaning to the word.

I cannot boast of much success in acquiring
the reality of this virtue, but I had a good
deal with regard to the appearance of it. I
made it a rule to forbear all direct contra-
diction to the sentiments of others, and all
positive assertion of my own. I even for-
bid myself, agreeably to the old laws of our
Junto, the use of every word or expression
in the language that import’d a fix’d opin-
ion, such as certainly, undoubtedly, etc., and
I adopted, instead of them, I conceive, I ap-
prehend, or I imagine a thing to be so or so;
or it so appears to me at present. When an-
other asserted something that I thought an
error, I deny’d myself the pleasure of contra-
dicting him abruptly, and of showing immedi-
ately some absurdity in his proposition; and
in answering I began by observing that in cer-
tain cases or circumstances his opinion would
be right, but in the present case there ap-
pear’d or seem’d to me some difference, etc.
I soon found the advantage of this change in
my manner; the conversations I engag’d in
went on more pleasantly. The modest way in
which I propos’d my opinions procur’d them
a readier reception and less contradiction; I
had less mortification when I was found to be
in the wrong, and I more easily prevail’d with
others to give up their mistakes and join with
me when I happened to be in the right.

And this mode, which I at first put on with

some violence to natural inclination, became at length so easy, and so habitual to me, that perhaps for these fifty years past no one has ever heard a dogmatical expression escape me. And to this habit (after my character of integrity) I think it principally owing that I had early so much weight with my fellow-citizens when I proposed new institutions, or alterations in the old, and so much influence in public councils when I became a member; for I was but a bad speaker, never eloquent, subject to much hesitation in my choice of words, hardly correct in language, and yet I generally carried my points.

In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself; you will see it, perhaps, often in this history; for, even if I could conceive that I had compleatly overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.