

## The Radical Power of Humility by Nipun Mehta

[Below is transcript of a talk, delivered to four thousand people gathered at the National Jain Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. Prior to Nipun's talk, civil rights legends John Lewis and Andrew Young shared insights from their journey with Martin Luther King, Jr.]

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to all of you. What an honor to be here with all you today, and a special honor to get to follow John Lewis and Andrew Young.

Today I'd like to surface an unpopular virtue. One that's fallen out of favor in a time of selfies and relentless status updates. The virtue of humility. We live in an era that believes it can no longer afford to be humble.

Years ago, I sat down for lunch, next to a young villager in India. As usual, I closed my eyes for a moment of gratitude before eating. As I opened them, I saw the most unusual thing -- this boy was preparing a bite from my plate. My plate! Seeing my confusion, he kindly explained, "I wanted a piece of your prayer, and so I figured the best thing was to be of service to it right now." Saying this, he offered me that bite. Imagine hearing these words, and receiving that gesture from someone you've only just met. I was touched.

Curious to know more about him, I asked him about his work. He smiled and said, "Well, it's hard to describe. It's a bit like the sparrow in that fable. As the story goes, the sky is falling down and all the creatures are fleeing. The sparrow thinks to itself, 'I want to help. But what can I do? I'm just a sparrow.' Then, the sparrow has a flash of brilliance -- it lies on its back and points its two feet towards the sky. 'What are you doing, Little Sparrow?' others ask. 'Well, I've heard the sky is falling, and so I'm doing my little bit to hold it up.' After a pause, my new friend adds, "That's what I try to do too."

Small, subtle, silent. And humble.

The world we live in is almost the polar opposite -- grandiose, mundane, loud.

A few years ago, Google released a searchable database of 5.2 million books published since 1500. Researchers soon discovered that, between 1960 and 2008, individualistic words increasingly overshadowed communal ones. The usage of "kindness" and "helpfulness" dropped by 56%, even as "modesty" and "humbleness" dropped by 52%. Our language reflects our lives. Phrases like "community" and "common good" lost in popularity to "I can do it myself" and "I come first." We moved from We to Me.

The archetype of today's hero is a go-getter, with a nice-guys-finish-last mindset. Our systems are designed to privilege power, where respect is calibrated by our titles and bank balances. As business cards lead our handshakes and hugs, our daily lives have

morphed into a relay of commercial intentions. In a rat-race to pad our resumes, we've condensed our nuanced experiences into elevator pitches. We're primed to "speak up", and to favor ambition over surrender.

The question is no longer if we can afford our humility, but rather can we really afford our own arrogance?

Without humility, our overblown sense of entitlement disconnects us. It increases narcissism and reduces empathy. That may be good for the economy but certainly not for societal well-being. A couple of months ago I was in Bhutan with the folks who implemented Gross National Happiness, and from them I learned about some remarkable research at the University of Michigan. It turns out that ever since 1980, our empathy levels have been gradually dropping, but in 2000, they suddenly plummeted 40 percent. Forty! Not surprisingly, a Gallup report just released last week reported that the US has dropped from 12th position to number 23 on the global well-being index. It's a strange paradox, we are at the same time, more self-centered than ever, and less happy and healthy for it.

With humility, though, we can give birth to a whole new story.

In the late 70s, two Buddhist monks -- Rev. Heng Sure and Heng Chau -- began a mind-blowing bowing pilgrimage along the California coastline. For 900 miles, they would walk three steps and take one full bow to the ground. Their practice was to meet everything as a reflection of their mind and rebound it with a heart of love. One day, crossing through a rough neighborhood in LA, they found themselves surrounded by a bunch of gang members. One of them threw down a trash can, removed the rod connecting the can with its lid, threateningly started screeching that rod around the side of the trash can. Sluzzzz, slussssh, as if sharpening his blade and signaling the impending fate of the monk's head. Other friends egged him on with a menacing chant. As Rev. Heng Sure would later write in his journals, "All the hair of my body stood up in fear." Yet his commitment was to unconditional compassion: no matter what you bring to this moment, I bow to the goodness in you. May you be blessed. And so he humbly went for that final bow at the teenager's feet. His would-be attacker's fist was raised in the air poised to strike, but he froze. Completely froze. Others around him fell silent. Imagine if you're about to pummel someone and he bows to you with great compassion. The monks continued bowing right past the dumbstruck gang.

Humility is seen as a sign of weakness, in today's culture, when, in reality, it is the gateway for an unparalleled and profound strength.

We see examples of this across all wisdom traditions. In Sikhism, Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth of their ten gurus, offered this credo to all the warriors: "Humility is my mace; becoming the dust of everybody's feet is my sword. No evil can withstand that." Jesus Christ washed the feet of his disciples, the 12 apostles, and then adds, "Know ye what I have? I have given you an example." At another point, he explicitly states, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." In Jainism, as you all know, there is the powerful practice of Micchami Dukkadam on the last day of the holy Paryushan period, where Jains actively seek and offer forgiveness: "If I have caused you offense in any way, knowingly or unknowingly, in thought, word or deed, then I seek your forgiveness." Every year, on this day, I receive many such emails from Jain friends. Simply being on the receiving end is such a humbling feeling, that I can only imagine what it means to be on the other end.

□  
□□  
□□□ We have so many contemporary examples as well. Mother Teresa called humility the "mother of all virtues" and reminded us, "We can do no great things. Only small things with great love." And, of course, we have Gandhi. When he died, with less than 9 possessions to his name, journalist Edwin Murrow read this across the radio waves: "Man without wealth, without property, without official title or office. Mahatma Gandhi was not a commander of great armies nor ruler of vast lands. He could boast no scientific achievements or artistic gift. Yet men, governments and dignitaries from all over the world have joined hands today to pay homage to this little brown man in the loincloth who led his country to freedom."

□□□  
□□□  
□□  
□

Today, then, I want to share three progressive doorways of power that humility opens up.

The first doorway is the power of many.

In the absence of humility, we forget the shoulders that we stand on, and foolishly begin to take singular credit for what we're doing. I remember my mom telling me a parable from the Mahabharata. A dog is traveling on Krishna's chariot, and lo and behold, when the dog wagged its tail to the right, the chariot turned to the right. And when he wagged it left, the chariot turned to the left. It was an example of correlation, not causation, and it would have been nothing short of ludicrous for the dog to actually believe it was controlling the chariot with its tail. Yet, that is precisely how our arrogance deceives us. We forget that behind each one of us lies an invisible stream of conditions that supports our every move.

Growing up, I had certainly forgotten that wisdom. I started out doing all the "right things": did well in high school, got into UC Berkeley, landed a prestigious job in Silicon Valley. Then, in my early twenties I left the corporate world, and started ServiceSpace. My television debut was a half an hour interview on CNN. People celebrated my accomplishments, and initially I believed I deserved the credit. But over time, I realized that I was just a dog on the chariot. The ego is ever-ready to build a story around our exclusive special-ness. Whether it's about worldly achievement or even service, pride comes in one flavor. And our world, unfortunately, encourages this. Slowly, though, I started seeing the long series of cascading conditions that had to conspire even just for me to stand here today. How could I possibly think that this is all my doing?

New science is now pointing to the power of many. We have a greater impact on each other than we think. Studies have shown that the strongest influence on someone's behavior is -- their friend's behavior. According to groundbreaking research by Harvard's Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, happiness loves company -- it spreads virally, in a network. So does obesity, cancer, and even divorce. If you have a divorced friend, you are 147% more likely to divorce yourself. So if you want to stay married, we have to work on strengthening your friend's marriages. I try to tell my wife that if she wants me to get into shape, she needs to get my brother and mother on the treadmill. :) And it works the same way for philanthropy, kindness, and good news too. Everything we do ripples out and affects each strand in the web of our connections.

With this understanding, a significant insight emerges: everyone matters, and everyone has something to give. And if we organize around leveraging people's gifts we begin to create breakthrough possibilities.

I recently met a guy named V. R. Feroze. He had turned around a Fortune 500 company's R&D department, and by age 36, had 5000 employees working for him. He married his college sweetheart, became a father and one devastating day, he and his wife learned that their son, Vivaan was on the autism spectrum. They were shattered by the news, but in the crucible of their despair, Feroze and his wife forged their lifes' calling. As Feroze succinctly put it, "I want to change the world for Vivaan, and my wife wants to change Vivaan for the world."

Soon after, they launched many successful projects. Feroze looked deeply into the unique gifts of the autistic population. Well, if you're autistic, you are never bored, and you never lie. Feroze looked at those traits, and then took a revolutionary leap -- he hired 5 autistic staff at his Fortune 500 Company, and then matched them with roles that allowed their gifts to shine. It was a huge success. The new staffers excelled at their jobs. News of their contributions reached the CEO of the company and he was so moved that he announced that, by 2020, 1% of their 65 thousand world-wide staff would be people on the autism spectrum. "That day a friend came into my office and said, Vivaan has just created 650 jobs. I had tears in my eyes," Feroze remembers. Now, the UN is exploring a mandate to inspire other Fortune 500 countries to do the same.

All this transpired because Feroze understood that the best way to support his special child, was to help create a world that supports the specialness of others, and to build a community that thrives on the belief that everybody is good at something.

Tapping into people's gifts can't be done by brute force or authority. It takes a heart of humility. It takes deeply trusting the synergy of our inter-connections, and understanding the power of many.

The second doorway that humility opens is the power of one.

Last year, I had the pleasure of spending some time with Francois Pienaar, a rugby legend who was very close to Nelson Mandela -- and famously played by Matt Damon in the movie *Invictus*. As he shared many personal encounters with Mandela, the thing that struck me was how practically every story spoke to Mandela's humility.

One of the most pivotal moments in Francois's life came when he visited Mandela's jail cell on Robben Island. Holding his arms out, he said, "This is what how much space he lived in, for 27 straight years. I grew up thinking he was a terrorist. All Afrikaners did. And yet he come out of jail with an open heart that can hold everyone." Indeed, Mandela's first words, after being released from jail: "I stand here before you not as a prophet, but a humble servant." Humble. Servant.

A telling example of Mandela's servant leadership came in 1995. Amidst rampant civil tensions that were taking hundreds of lives, he had come to power as the first democratically elected President of South Africa. That also happened to be the year that the country's rugby team was winning a lot. With millions cheering on, many South Africans saw this as a symbolic opportunity to signal the end of Apartheid; they were eager to change the team name, colors and jersey in a sport that was widely considered a "white man's game". Mandela, on the other hand, saw a different opportunity. An

opportunity for forgiveness. He went from sport clubs to town halls to rally his countrymen to take the higher road: "We have to surprise them with compassion, with restraint and generosity; I know, all of the things they denied us, but this is no time to celebrate petty revenge."

That was the thing about Mandela. He had the audacity to believe in each person's capacity to transform their suffering into love. He had done it himself. Where the power of many teaches us that everyone is good at something, the power of one points to our unbounded capacity for inner transformation. Everyone can find greatness in love.

□

□□

□□□ They kept the same name, same jersey, same colors. Springboks in green. That year South Africa makes it to the finals, where they faced New Zealand. At the end of regulation, it's tied 12-12. Overtime. An epic game. And South Africa wins the World Cup, for the first time in the country's history! Mandela humbly comes out onto the field, not in a Presidential suit, but wearing a green Springboks jersey -- what many considered the "uniform of the enemy." The 65 thousand person crowd spontaneously erupts into a chant: Nelson, Nelson, Nelson! It was electric. "Never seen so many grown men cry," players later said. The crowd later goes on to sing "Shoooo--shaaaa-llooooo--aaaaa" -- a Zulu song that Mandela had often sung to himself while in jail. In that moment, an entire nation stood united under Mandela's leadership -- and his love.

□□□

□□□

□□

□

In the concluding trophy presentation, as Mandela handed the trophy to Francois, he whispered to him: "Thank you for what you have done for the country." Francois paused, deeply moved. And then spontaneously came his response, to the man he had once thought of as a terrorist, "Thank you, Madiba, for what you have done for the world."

Mandela shook the world, not through the might of his ego, or his considerable skills, but through his breathtaking capacity for inner transformation and humility. He believed in the power of one, he embodied that power of one, and showed us how it is a force beyond measure.

The third, and subtlest, doorway of humility is the power of zero.

I recently met a 96 year old Sufi saint named Dada Vaswani. He has a great many followers around the world, is highly respected by monks and nuns from various traditions, and radiates a profound sense of peace. I was deeply grateful to meet him. But his first words to me were, "I'm so grateful to have met you." It wasn't just a pleasantry, he really meant it. And it wasn't because he thought I was special -- he just knew that everyone is special. Because everyone is connected to everything, and the whole show is sacred.

Everything about him, and around him, was humble. When we met, in his private study room, we sat on simple, white plastic chairs. Another plastic table stood flimsily between us. You could tell these surface trappings didn't matter to him. The way he carried himself, the words he shared, the kindness he emanated, it empowered me and everyone

around him -- empowered us, not to be bigger, grander, somebodies... but rather to be small, simple, nobodies.

Dada shared that his own teacher was once asked who he was. "Are you a poet? Are you an educationist? Author? Saint?" He responded with, 'I am a zero.' Then he paused for a while and added, 'I'm not the English zero -- the English zero occupies space. I am the Sindhi 'Nukta'. In Sindhi, zero is written like a dot. So that was the ideal placed before me," Dada shared.

When we succeed in radically downsizing the 'I', we find true expansion. It is when we shrink our preoccupation with self, that far greater energies course through us. We no longer attempt to drive change in the world, but rather to "be" that change we wish to see. St Francis's prayer was not, "Make me CEO of your peace". It was make me a channel of your peace. And to be a channel, is to understand the true power of being zero.

At one point in our conversation, I asked Dada about his plans for the future. He's 96 and the spiritual leader of millions, so the succession plan is a natural concern for many. Yet, his response was unequivocal: "Oh, that's not my concern. I'm not the one making this happen now, and it won't be me in the future. I just try to be zero." He had given a lifetime to this work, and yet was not trying to control its future. He knew his job was to simply - be an instrument.

To probe into this idea of being an instrument, of being zero, I asked him about Bodhisattvas. Similar to Jinas in Jainism, Buddhists define Bodhisattvas as beings who forsake their own liberation for the sake of others. He paused for moment, locked eyes with mine and recited a poem by Shantideva. One deliberate word after another.

May I be a guard for those who need protection,  
A guide for those on the path,  
A boat, a raft, a bridge for those who wish to cross the flood.  
May I be a lamp in the darkness,  
A resting place for the weary,  
A healing medicine for all who are sick,  
A vase of plenty, a tree of miracles;  
And for the boundless multitudes of living beings,  
May I bring sustenance and awakening,  
Enduring like the earth and sky  
Until all beings are freed from sorrow,  
And all are awakened.

His voice died into silence, and no words could describe the electric feeling in the room. My heart was overflowing with gratitude. With whatever limited humility I was capable of, I asked, "Dada, how may I be of service to you?" Then, he did something that blew me away. He cupped his two hands in front of me, as if holding out a begging bowl, and gently said, "I request your tears of compassion."

Long pause. This time, on my account. No questions were arising, no answers were arising. We just gazed into each other's eyes. Finally I managed to get a few words out, "I'll do my best, Dada," I said.

When Dada asked for my tears of compassion, what he was pointing to is the power of zero - that capacity to be an empty vessel, so that compassion's flood can effortlessly surge through you. And it all begins with the wisdom of humility.

In conclusion, I want to end with a story of a friend and a wonderful person, Shakkuben.

Shakkuben spent most of her life working as a school janitor in India. One day, however, she had this beautiful wish arise in her heart: I want to serve. Immediately after, she had another thought: what can I possibly give? A friend told her a story of how Gandhi had once lost a very small pencil, and he was looking everywhere for it. When someone told him, "Bapu, you're the father of the nation; you don't have time to look for a small pencil, here's a dozen more," Gandhi simply replied, "But a child had given me that pencil with a lot of love," and carried on the search for the pencil. For Gandhi, size of love mattered a lot more than the size of the pencil. And Shakkuben took this to heart, and started her own experiment in service. Everyday, she would sift through the trash at her school, look for those small pencils that others had thrown away, and give them to people who couldn't even afford that much. And for her, it wasn't about the pencils but the love that they'd be wrapped in.

One day, after breakfast at home, Shakkuben offers me a parting gift. A slightly-ripped pink plastic bag, I still vividly remember it. Her first collection of those small pencils. I was so touched, I couldn't even open it in front of her. I had another event that morning, and I couldn't resist sharing her story there. As a show-and-tell, I opened that pink bag, put my hand in, and held out a fist full of small pencils, broken erasers, blunt sharpeners. Oh, man. It wasn't just the pencils ... it was what they were wrapped in. The love of this humble janitor. I couldn't hold back my tears.

When our gifts to the world are draped in such humility and reverence, an unspeakable thunder roars behind those rain drops. And this is precisely what Jainism invites us to do. Bow to all life, Ahimsa; bow to others points of view, Anekantvad; bow to our inter-connection, Aparigraha.

When we bow to all that is, we reframe our understanding of success and accomplishment. We discover that everyone is good at something. That anyone can find greatness in giving, and that each is connected to all. We know then that our job is simply to be like the sparrow, and do our little bit to hold up the sky. Like my young friend who broke a piece of bread and offered up that bite, may we always strive to serve one another in small ways. And to hold a piece of each others' prayers.