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An Ethic of Modesty in the Support of Others

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It is an inherent longing in all people that their lives be rich and full. The potential of any human being is ultimately unknowable and we would be very remiss to simply see people as they may appear to us today. Life has many elements that are necessarily hidden from our view and we are all, in our often solitary way, searchers for what is right and true for our lives.

A great mercy in all this is often the many good and kind people who assist us along the way to find the things in life that bring us contentment and hope. Equally, but in unexpected ways, even those who might harm and frustrate us often can serve as catalysts for our advancement.

It is a natural desire when we recognize the potential in the lives of others to want to see that unfold in beneficial ways. From this is born the desire to serve others in their life journeys. Nevertheless, "being there" for others is not some automatic inevitability that emerges just because it is sought, needed, and idealized.

It may well be that what is good for people remains elusive to both themselves and those who care most for them. For this reason, our desire to serve must be coupled with an acceptance of the existential uncertainties that may lie at the core of what it means to be a person. If not, then we risk the delusion of thinking we sufficiently understand the person. We must see that service involves an unceasing search, with few guideposts for what is right and good.

The harm comes in relating to our version of the person in preference to being guided by the emerging person who always is beyond what we have neatly classified. We are inevitably creatures of habit and, even in the service of others, we return again and again to our own convenience. Our needs and values are no less important than those of others, so the harm comes not in having these. Rather, we must be alert to whether the hungers of our own "personhood" somehow distort or diminish the identity of others. At some point, there needs to be adequate recognition of the limits we all face in regard to our ethical scrupulousness. The extent to which we can respect an other person is in itself a search, rather than an answer. If we were to exclude ourselves from commitments of service because we had not sufficiently understood and respected the people we seek to assist, there soon would be no one available for the task.

Thus while it is crucial that there be an ideal that draws us to a deeper truth of people, this must be taken up with an unromantic acceptance of the inescapable imperfection that haunts this undertaking. It is a paradox that we need to "be there" for others but we cannot do so except to a degree.

This challenge can be greatly helped by our willingness to see our efforts at helping as being, at times, vital and life-giving, while still being able to see when they are not. If we were to be too easily discouraged by the persistent nature of this condition, we could not bring to bear the necessary creativity needed to advance the circumstances of people's lives.

There are many assets and virtues that can be drawn upon to help enrich acts and lives of service. Certainly one of the more durable of these is the ethic of modesty. Where modesty is present, there is typically no claim to excellence, distinction, and unbridled success. There is more likely to be words such as struggle, difficulty, and gratitude. There will be a sense that the work is never finished because people's lives have so much more ahead of them. There will be a curiosity about what is happening or not with people, and a willingness to better learn what this means.

It takes modesty to continually come back to people's lives with an open mind and a humble heart. Yet this is what likely will make the greatest difference for people when those around them keep a fresh and searching spirit. Each day presents yet another challenge and opportunity and we do well when we see this.

Fixing our service to others into frozen models only conceals from us the dynamism that is natural to people and their lives. To serve well is to stay with people and go where they need to go. We must regularly be willing to amend and abandon our work if their lives dictate the need to do so.

Yet this is not going to happen if we are too taken with ourselves. Modesty, properly cultivated and balanced with other virtues, is the antidote to this. It frees us to not only continually reconsider the lives of others but also to look at what we are doing with our own. This ethic is not a call to an impossibly remote selflessness, but rather an attitude that favors our ability to be more "with others" while being ourselves.

The story of every person is necessarily a work in progress. Yet it is also true that there will be no "progress" if the final chapters are already written well before the lives of people have ended. We must choose, then, whether we will be a part of letting a story unfold in ways that might undo today's patterns, or whether we will insist on our favorite chapters being repeated. If we are modest we will remain open to an authorship that is only partially our own.