



*Consider This.  
Thoughts on Living Well.*



*Submitted by Dr. Brian Sayers  
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## **Turning into the Storm: Humility**

In an address to a group of medical students in 1906, William Osler made this plea: “In these days of aggressive self-assertion, when the stress of competition is so keen and the desire to make the most of oneself so universal, it may seem a little old-fashioned to preach the necessity of humility, but I insist . . . that humility should take the place of honor on your list [of virtues].”

What is humility? Some define it as the opposite of a sense of self-importance or infallibility. Humility is about understanding, admitting, and responding to the limits of our knowledge, understanding, and abilities. As one author described, “Humility is an attitude of spiritual modesty that comes from understanding our place in the larger order of things. It entails not taking our desires, successes, or failings too seriously.” Most of all, humility is about recognizing the inherent dignity, equality, and shared humanity with those around us as we all go through life on a common journey. We are no better and no worse than any of our colleagues or patients. Humility is not a sad legacy of failure. It is not surrender. It is a source of strength.

In the context of medical practice, why is humility so valuable?

- Humility helps us admit our limitations so that we can ask for help when we need it.
- Humility allows us to admit the limits of our knowledge, makes us more curious, more eager to learn.
- As one author notes, “Genuine empathy requires humility.”
- Humility helps us to recognize the limits of technology and science and allows for the potential to fill those gaps with humanity and compassion in the care of patients.
- Humility helps us see that—along with successes—failure, mistakes, and other storms are inevitable. This acceptance keeps us prepared and ready to deal with setbacks and the unexpected. They become an expected visitor and we are prepared for their occasional, often painful visits. We recognize that these visits are part of life for everyone.
- Perhaps most important of all, humility connects us more fully, more intimately, with those around us. While patients have high expectations from their doctors, there is research that shows patient satisfaction and outcomes are better when they perceive physician humility. The sweet spot might be something referred to as “confident humility.” Likewise, one of the most important domains of physicians’ professional satisfaction is the quality of their relationships—at home, with friends and colleagues, and with their patients. Humility is conducive to more enjoyable, meaningful, and fulfilling relationships. When you think about the relationships you value the most, you are probably thinking of people in whom you easily can recognize humility.

Where does humility come from? There is a push in medical education to try and teach it, to instill humility in physicians-in-training. I hope they are successful. Some people just seem to be born with it. It’s an integral teaching of religions and spiritual disciplines. But perhaps its real lessons are forced upon us more often than not, inside and outside of our medical practices, learned the hard way, often with a short half-life, soon overwhelmed by pride or shame. Regardless of the source, sometimes humility sticks and is a seed that can grow, open our eyes, even be passed along and I have seen and considered it in people I have greatly admired. Some of them are even doctors.

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## **Poet's Corner**

It hardly mattered what time of year  
We passed their farmhouse,  
They never waved,  
This old farm couple  
Usually bent over in the vegetable garden  
Or walking by the muddy dooryard  
Between house and red-weathered barn.  
They would look up, see who was passing,  
Then look back down, ignorant to the event.  
We would always wave nonetheless,  
Before you dropped me off at work  
Further up on the hill,  
Toolbox rattling in the backseat,  
And then again on the way home  
Later in the day, the pale sunlight  
High up in their pasture,  
Our arms out the window,  
Cooling ourselves.  
And it was that one midsummer evening  
We drove past and caught them sitting  
together on the front porch  
At ease, chores done,  
The tangle of cats and kittens  
Cleaning themselves of fresh spilled milk  
On the barn door ramp;  
We drove by and they looked up—  
The first time I've ever seen their  
Hands free of any work,  
No tool or rope or pail—  
And they waved.

"No Tool or Rope or Pail," from *Where Rivers Meet*.  
About the poet [Bob Arnold and his work](#)

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