

Spiritual Mobility

2 Corinthians 3:1-6)



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I remember looking bewilderedly at my husband as we sat in the Admissions Office of the pre-school of our dreams, talking to the Admissions officer about the prospect of our then 3 year-old daughter being admitted the following year. The Admissions officer had just explained quite sympathetically how few openings they had each year and how difficult admittance was. Wanting to put our best foot forward and yet knowing that it would not be appropriate to boast about our child, I asked if there were anything that we could do to strengthen our daughter's chances of gaining admission into the nursery school, and the response surprised us. We were told that letters of recommendation might be of help.

The practice of presenting letters of recommendation has been around for a long time. It was practiced in the ancient Greek world and, as we can see from the letters Paul wrote, in Paul's day as well. In the ancient world, as people traveled, they often took with them letters written by friends, commending them to friends of their friends. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul wrote, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church . . . so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well." He proceeded to recommend two others, "Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus and who risked their necks for my life. . ." (16:1-4). As Paul knew well, letters of recommendation enabled one to put one's best foot forward without resorting to the tricky business of boasting about oneself.

If only Paul could have relied on such letters for himself. Unlike those whom he commended, Paul had no one who could write on his behalf. Unlike the eleven who were well-known as Jesus' disciples, and unlike those who were included among their circles, Paul had to start from scratch. Furthermore, since Paul was the first to evangelize in cities where the gospel of Christ had not yet been preached, there was no one who had gone ahead of him to pave his way, to give him a leg up, or to make any introductions. With no social connections to open doors for him, he had to travel from city to city and try his best to gain a hearing, a reception, and moreover the trust necessary to win people over to Christ.

To make matters worse, after Paul had worked so hard to blaze a new path, other apostles more easily made their way to the churches that Paul had established, and they came with letters in hand to recommend them. With their higher social connections, these so-called "super-apostles" began to call into question Paul's credibility and integrity. So challenging was this situation that in almost all of Paul's correspondences we can see his struggles and attempts to authenticate his authority and to defend his apostleship, all the while trying his best not to boast.

It is not the case that, in the eyes of the world, Paul lacked accomplishments about which he could boast. If a résumé had been required, his could have been quite extensive. After all, he was fluent in both Hebrew and Greek; as a former leader among Pharisees, he knew Jewish law inside and out, and yet having lived in the urban centers of the Hellenistic world, he was also intimately familiar with Greek culture and Greek peoples. Being as cosmopolitan as he was, Paul could and at times did make the case that he was well suited to bring the gospel to a diverse Hellenistic context.

But we can almost feel Paul's revulsion at having to say these things, because he really doesn't want to boast. Only a fool, he says, would boast of things according to human standards. Giving the Corinthians what they seem to want - his résumé, he turns it on its head: what begins as a boast of strengths soon becomes a boast of weaknesses. Listen to what he writes to them:

But whatever anyone dares to boast of - I am speaking as a fool - I also dare to boast of that.
Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham?

So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman - I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. . . . Who is weak, and I am not weak? . . . If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness (2 Corinthians 11).

In his book *The Road to Character*, New York Times columnist David Brooks writes about his own struggle with boasting. Speaking frankly, he admits that he wrote this book to save his own soul (xiii). “I was born,” he writes, “with a natural disposition toward shallowness. I now work as a pundit and columnist. I’m paid to be a narcissistic blowhard, to volley my opinions, to appear more confident about them than I really am, to appear smarter than I really am, to appear better and more authoritative than I really am” (xiv). At some point during his illustrious career, what David Brooks realized was that while he had a long list of “résumé virtues,” he hadn’t yet cultivated a long list of “eulogy virtues,” “the virtues that get talked about at your funeral” (xi). Furthermore, he recognized what we all likely recognize: that though eulogy virtues matter more, most of us will have spent more time and effort thinking about, planning for, and investing in résumé virtues.

It would not be surprising if the personal struggle about which David Brooks writes were to resonate with many of us. After all, we live in a highly competitive society that pulses with the drive for upward mobility. The institutions that make up the air we breathe set standards and measurements that contribute to this drive. They teach us to push and promote ourselves and to hone the skills required for success.

And the thing is: this drive toward success and upward mobility shapes even our most sacred relationships, including the relationships that parents have to their children. Parents who have the resources spend so much time, effort, and money investing in their children’s skills that the love they intend to be unconditional can be felt as directional: in the direction of upward mobility. Although thoughtful parents try to raise their children to know they are loved unconditionally, from their earliest moments, children nevertheless pick up on spoken and unspoken expectations that are in their environment.

Let me give you an illustration. When my daughter was four years old, my husband planned to take her out to a park so that I could have a few quiet hours at home. As he was leaving the apartment with my daughter in tow, he said, “Someone has to work on a dissertation today,” which began a process of deductive reasoning in my daughter’s mind. I heard her say, “Daddy has finished his dissertation. I haven’t started my dissertation. You must be talking about mama.”

Deep down we know there is much more to the story of life and love than success and merit. To some extent, practice may make perfect. What you get out of something may depend on what you put into it. Effort may lead to reward. Investment may lead to profit. But deep down we also sense the truth that you have to give in order to receive; that you have to forget yourself in order to fulfill yourself (Brooks, xii); that, as Jesus said, “whoever would save his life shall lose it and whoever shall lose his life for my sake shall save it” (Luke 9:24).

Out of the need to save his soul, David Brooks sought to know what the road to character looks like. So he turned to some of the world’s greatest leaders throughout history to see how they became people of strong character. Although these historical exemplars led very different lives, he found one pattern in common among them. He writes: “They had to go down to go up. They had to descend into the valley of humility to climb to the heights of character. . . They had to humble themselves in self-awareness if they had any hope of rising up transformed” (13). Only by confronting and getting in touch with their own weakness were they able to become men and women of strong character.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest well-known for his spiritual writings, wrote a small book in which he talks about “downward mobility and the spiritual life.” As a professor at an Ivy League school and as a renowned writer, he too wrestled against his need “to be seen, praised, and admired” (10). Like David Brooks, Nouwen confessed that he had always been susceptible to the enjoyment of human applause. It wasn’t until in 1986 Nouwen was called to serve as a pastor to a community of adults with intellectual disabilities, the L’Arche community in Toronto, that he was able to shake himself loose from the lifelong lure of being admired and applauded. Living ten years among adults who knew nothing of his famous books or reputation as a speaker, he experienced for the first time true downward mobility, and it changed him. He came out of the valley of humility less competitive, less comparative, free of the need to be the center of attention.

It did more, however, than change *him*. Humility created new space from where he could pay attention to *others*. No longer preoccupied with his ambition to raise *himself* up, he was free instead to lift *others* up. No longer living under the illusion that competency could solve every problem, he saw more clearly the need to rely on others and became appreciative of their diverse gifts. And isn’t this what matters? Isn’t this the point? Humbling oneself is not just what we need to become people of good character; it is, more importantly, what the world needs.

Former Federal Reserve chair Ben Bernanke made the observation, “A bedrock American principle is the idea that all individuals should have the opportunity to succeed on the basis of their own effort, skill, and ingenuity” (*Our Kids*, Putnam, 32). Historically, Americans have not begrudged people for their success or cared to put limits on how high the socioeconomic ladder can be climbed, as long as everyone has equal opportunity to climb it, given equal merit and effort. What has always been of concern, however, is that there be equality of opportunity and mobility. Because of a number of forces and factors, such as systemic racism, globalization, inadequate training in novel technical fields, the bedrock American principle that all individuals should have equal opportunity has been eroding.

Studying this complex phenomenon, sociologist Robert Putnam focuses on one contributing factor that, though challenging, seems to be a factor that each of us can do something to reverse. Putnam points out that today, in contrast to even just 40 to 50 years ago, fewer and fewer people are exposed in their daily lives to people outside their own socioeconomic class. Our neighborhoods, our schools, and even our marriages are increasingly becoming more socioeconomically homogeneous. While these social arenas are becoming incrementally more diverse with regard to race and religion, they are becoming less diverse with regard to class. The picture of America that Putnam sees is one of growing class segregation in which “rich Americans and poor Americans are living, learning, and raising children in increasingly separate and unequal worlds, removing the stepping stones to upward mobility for poor Americans” (41).

Given the growing gap between their worlds, poorer kids are growing up with fewer informal ties to people who have connections to wider and more diverse networks. They have fewer relationships with neighbors, acquaintances, and family friends who have any social capital. Social scientists know, as I think we know, that the reach and diversity of our social ties are especially important for social and economic mobility. Can you think of the individuals who went out of their way to help you along in life - who made an introduction, wrote a letter of recommendation, mentored you, or simply told you about an opportunity that would be right up your alley? For me, it was my father’s colleague who met me when I was four, who became an invaluable friend to our family, and who wrote letters of recommendation for all my college applications. I can also think of a church member who sang in the church choir with my mom and who, when I became a Senior in high school, nominated me for a college scholarship at her beloved alma mater of which I had never before heard. Who comes to your mind? And would you come to someone else’s mind? Would someone name you as that person who had helped him?

I love remembering each of the people who, out of the kindness of their hearts, gave me more than a passing thought and made a good difference in my life. When I think about where it was that these social ties were made, I think about the different social spheres that overlapped in my life: school, the university where my dad was a professor, the church in which I grew up. You see, as one of the few minority and immigrant families in town, we did not arrive with any social capital to spend. My parents were not “joiners.” They did not join the country club or belong to any civic groups. Out of their religious commitments, however, they did

become members of the First Presbyterian Church, and that made all the difference to our sense of belonging in the community. It was at church that we, like so many other people, formed the social relationships that have come to mean so much to us over the years.

According to Robert Putnam, church is one of those social institutions that generates social capital and provides a network for social mobility. That is why he thinks it is so important for the church to resist becoming an institution that, like so many others, is socioeconomically homogenous. Only by engaging people of all classes can the church be a significant resource for social mobility.

Talking about the church and social mobility, we need to be careful. If we are not, we might easily make the same mistake the Corinthians made, relating to one another in terms of merit, accomplishments, and social connections. To correct the Corinthians' thinking, Paul preached the way of Jesus Christ to be one of downward mobility, of one "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8).

With this gospel of Christ at stake, Paul knew that his authority as an apostle could not rest merely upon human achievement or human commendation, either his own or that of others. It had to rest ultimately in God. Any letter of recommendation that would truly count as authentic would have to be authored by God, written not by ink, but by the Holy Spirit, and written not on stone tablets, but on human hearts. No matter how wary we are of social networking, the truth is, I think, that the Spirit works in our relationships with people; the Spirit moves from heart to heart. Unlike the single-minded motivation to benefit ourselves, however, the Spirit motivates us to do what we can to benefit others. And unlike social mobility that has an upward drive, the Spirit moves us in every which way, including downward. Sometimes we have to go down in order to be raised up and in order to raise others up. Perhaps when the Spirit is fully at work in our lives, we will find ourselves able to move with ease back and forth and across different social classes, no longer aware of whether we are moving up or down.