

Leitmotifs in Life
By
Daniel E. White January 27, 2025

Leitmotif: short, recurring musical phrases. Are there leitmotifs in our lives?

I have written notes to myself from time to time. I used to call them letters to myself at age 64 but I am a bit past that signpost of life. I haven't set a new age target yet. Looking back at what I have written, I can spot short, recurring themes—leitmotifs—that might qualify. Wondering about humility is one.

Growing up, I heard Dad tell me that bragging just wasn't done if one wanted to be respected. He called it "tooting your own horn." He didn't use the word "humble." But he might have done.

When I graduated from SDHS, Girls Vice Principal Miss Delight Smith gave me two lines on a card that I still carry in my wallet: "Knowledge is proud that he knows so much. Wisdom is humble that he knows so little." Though the girls' vice principal, she noted something about this boy and offered me advice.

After successfully defending my dissertation in Spring 1974, my committee chair gave me a ride home. As we left the campus, he said, "you might have noticed, Dan, that the faculty here refer to each other as Mr., Mrs, Miss or professor, never Dr." I tried to grasp that I had just finished working for a title that I might now not use much, but a colleague offered "well, at least you can get better reserved tables at restaurants." I never tested that premise.

Experience intervened over time. As I held more jobs with greater responsibility, I had some successes that I knew were not mine alone. That knowledge prompted a teaching point for me in the classes I taught for budding school heads. "If things are going well at your school, there will be little need for you to tell everyone about your success. Folks will figure out who the head is."

Then the opportunity to start a school came to Judy and me. To us fell the responsibility to establish the values, find our colleagues, create policy, recruit students and their families, even choose the school motto, I Mua Me Ka Ha'aeo; go forward with confidence. We liked the strength, the self-assuredness the words conveyed, whether in Hawaiian or English.

Sometime later, a friend pointed out that "ha'aeo" doesn't just mean confidence. It also translates to "humble pride." What you have done, you have done. But you have not done it alone. You are the sum of many factors that came together. Embrace that.

CS Lewis put it succinctly: Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less."

A year after agreeing to chair the Board of Directors of the Friends of Madera Canyon and likely in an attempt to begin to establish some heretofore undiscovered credibility in the

study of nature, I read *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, by Lyanda Lynn Haupt, detailing the life of Charles Darwin as he moved from his voyage on the H.M.S. Beagle to writing *The Origin of the Species*.

In reflecting on Darwin's thinking, she wrote: "It's an intricate word, humility, rooted in the Latin word 'humus,' meaning 'soil,' 'land,' 'the earth itself.'" "In learning and re-learning humility, we are reminded of our creativeness, our astonishing and sometimes mysterious nature as humans who live in a culture but remain rooted in the soil, indigenous, at home with the lively wilderness of biological life. In humility, we remember this condition, the earthly dimensions of our peace, our truth, and grace."

In a review of Margaret Renkl's *Every Living Thing is Pursuing its Own Vital Interest* in the Christian Science Monitor, (12/11/23) Danny Heltman wrote "...crows and other entities aren't living their lives for our approval..." This abiding reality is a liberation (to Renkl). She had written "the natural world's perfect indifference...has always been my best cure for my own anxieties...The earthworms beneath the soil haven't the least idea of the frets that pluck at my heart. In their rest, I find rest."

In a later part of her book, Haupt wrote: "Darwin was humble in the presence of mystery, yes, but he was more than humble. He was uncommonly comfortable."

These days, I know where I can go to understand how **insignificant** a part of the universe I am: to the Wrightson Parking Lot at the top of the Madera Canyon Recreation Area in the early morning where I am encompassed in the arms of tall mountains and remarkable quiet or into my yard on a clear night in this Dark Sky Community, looking up. Both are comfortable places to be.

In 1969, Morris Udall wrote: "Man is so much more than the other animals. His brain is so much larger; he has a soul and a conscience. But man, like other animals, is a product of the Earth, subject to her laws, and he must have a continuing relationship with the outdoors, with nature, or he loses sight of his place on Earth."

As Hawaiian wisdom puts it, "The land is a chief; man is its servant."

Miss Smith, maybe I am beginning to understand more completely the words you gave to me those many years ago.

Now, to live up to them.

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