CLOSE-READING THOMAS JEFFERSON

This sculpture of Thomas Jefferson, by Rudolph Evans, stands in the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. Look closely at the key elements of the statue to answer the questions below and on the following page.

1. Describe Jefferson’s posture.

2. Look at his hands and feet. Describe the gestures indicated by the hands.

3. What does the placement of his feet indicate about him?

4. Describe his facial expression. Where is his gaze directed in relation to the statue itself?

   Note: in its placement on the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., the statue is facing in the direction of the White House.
What might the sculptor have been indicating about Jefferson in sculpting his face in this way?

5. How is he dressed? Compare this to the clothing typically seen on portraits and statues of U.S. Founders. What does this communicate about Jefferson's personality, temperament, and what he valued?

6. Taken as a whole, what might the sculptor (Rudolph Evans) be conveying to the viewer about Jefferson's character?

7. How do these elements of the sculpture, taken as a whole, illustrate Jefferson's humility?

8. How can humility relate to the glory often given to leaders like Thomas Jefferson?

9. How might humility have been an essential part of Jefferson's leadership style?
A traveler, after stopping for the night at a Virginia inn, struck up a conversation with “a plainly-dressed and unassuming” stranger. The stranger “introduced one subject after another into the conversation” and demonstrated himself to be “perfectly acquainted with each.” When the topic was the law, the traveler assumed he was speaking with a lawyer. But when the discussion moved to medicine, the traveler surmised that the stranger must be a physician. When their talk turned to theology, the traveler determined that the man must be a clergyman. “Filled with wonder” that one person could be so well informed about so many things, after the conclusion of the conversation the traveler sought out the proprietor of the establishment. “Oh,” said the innkeeper, “I thought you knew the Squire.” What the innkeeper said next “astonished” the traveler. The stranger, “whom he had found so affable and simple in his manners,” was the third president of the United States.

Shy by nature, Thomas Jefferson rarely bragged or called attention to himself. His rambling, stammering, tongue-tied expression of affection for a young woman who caught his eye during his student days at the College of William and Mary failed to capture her interest—and soon she married someone else. Even as a revolutionary, Jefferson stood out as a result of his reticence. As John Adams remembered, “during the whole time I sat with him” in the Continental Congress, “I never heard him utter three sentences together.” Even when delivering his First Inaugural Address, Jefferson’s voice was so soft that few could actually hear it.

But Jefferson’s natural reserve often seemed to work to his advantage. Then, as now, shyness rarely characterized public officeholders. Yet then, in the eyes of many, an inclination toward humility could actually merit a good deal of trust. The generation that came of age during the American Revolution felt weary of government and its monopoly on the lawful use of force. From Caesar to Cromwell, leaders throughout history had abused their power—even when claiming to act in behalf of the people. Many accepted that the more power the government possessed, the less power people possessed, as individuals, to govern themselves. What could be more admirable than a government official who appeared to possess neither an inflated view of himself nor much inclination to exercise power or enjoy its trappings?

While people criticized his predecessors for embracing ceremonies and symbols characteristic of European monarchy, Jefferson rejected what he called “the rags of royalty” and instead served as a role model for more humble, less grandiose gestures reflecting “republican simplicity.” While Washington and Adams rode to their inaugurations in liveried coaches, Jefferson walked. Instead of elaborate state
dinner featuring seating arrangements reflecting guests’ supposed importance, Jefferson favored smaller dinners and allowed visitors to select their own seats at round tables. People calling on President Jefferson expressed surprise when the man who opened the executive mansion’s front door was not a servant but instead the president himself. Anthony Merry, the British ambassador, even felt insulted when Jefferson greeted him while wearing slippers on his feet.

Jefferson’s modest attire and simple manners drew praise as well as criticism, however, reinforcing his image as the “Friend of the People.” They also help to make sense of the many stories in which people interact with him fully unaware of his identity. When, early on summer mornings, Jefferson walked to the Washington Navy Yard and struck up conversations with dockworkers and shipwrights, many had no idea that before them stood the President. A similar thing happened when President Jefferson, out riding on horseback with a small group of gentlemen, encountered a man on foot who needed help crossing a stream. Jefferson reached down, pulled the man up to share his saddle, and rode with him to the other side. Afterwards, as Jefferson continued on, a member of his party asked the man why, of all those on horseback, he had not requested assistance from one of the others.

“From their looks, I did not like to ask them,” he replied. “The old gentleman looked as if he would do it, and I asked him.” The man, of course, was surprised to then learn that “the old gentleman” was Thomas Jefferson.

It may well be true that Jefferson had little to gain from bragging or putting on airs. In this era before photography and television, his face was not famous, but nearly all knew his name and acknowledged his many accomplishments. His shyness, humility, and habitual self-effacement served mainly to add luster to his character—a fact he could not have failed to recognize. Consider the epitaph that he asked be inscribed on his tombstone: “Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.” Who could have missed the fact that Jefferson chose not to mention his service as legislator, governor, secretary of state, vice president, and president? Who cannot admire that Jefferson most wished to be remembered not for the instances in which people gave power to him, but instead for the acts by which he gave power to the people?

–Robert M. S. McDonald
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Defining Civic Virtues: Humility
Remembering that one’s ignorance is far greater than one’s knowledge.
Readily giving praise to those who earn it.
Discussion Guide

Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. What are some ways Thomas Jefferson exhibited the virtue of humility?

2. Based on what you already know about Thomas Jefferson (and, if you analyzed the Jefferson Memorial sculpture, what you observed in the sculptor's depiction), how would you describe Jefferson? Does your description include the words “bold” or “humble”? Or both? Why or why not?

3. Historian Robert M. S. McDonald notes that Jefferson wished to be remembered “not for the instances in which people gave power to him, but instead for the acts by which he gave power to the people.” Do you agree with this analysis? How does it help you to understand the virtue of humility? What does this reveal about Jefferson’s belief about virtue among citizens as compared to virtue among political leaders?

4. Does the fact that Jefferson might have been helped politically by appearing to be humble make his humility any less admirable? Why or why not?

5. Jefferson’s fellow Founding Father Benjamin Franklin wrote about humility in his Autobiography. Franklin wrote, “I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue [humility], but I had a good deal with regard to the appearance of it.” Did Franklin see a difference between being humble and appearing humble? Do you see one?

6. Ben Franklin described his actions to appear humble: “I made it a rule to forbear all direct contradiction to the sentiments of others, and all positive assertion of my own. I even forbid myself … the use of every word or expression in the language that imported a fix’d opinion, such as certainly, undoubtedly, etc., and I adopted, instead of them, I conceive, I apprehend, or I imagine a thing to be so or so; or it so appears to me at present. When another asserted something that I thought an error, I deny’d myself the pleasure of contradicting him abruptly … and in answering I began by observing that in certain cases or circumstances his opinion would be right, but in the present case there appeared or seem’d to me some difference, etc. I soon found the advantage of this change in my manner; the conversations I engage’d in went on more pleasantly. The modest way in which I propos’d my opinions procure’d them a readier reception and less contradiction; I had less mortification when I was found to be in the wrong, and I more easily prevail’d with others to give up their mistakes and join with me when I happened to be in the right.”

- What benefits did Franklin see in appearing humble?
- Are these benefits worth seeking?
- Do you think Jefferson had similar beliefs?
- How can you do these things each day? What else can you do to be humble? Explain.
Virtue In Action

At school and in other areas of your daily life, remember that your ignorance is far greater than your knowledge. For the next month, resolve to be humble in your interactions with others.

- Be willing to ask questions in class, even if you’re worried about revealing that you don’t know something.
- Support others when they ask for assistance; don’t laugh at classmates who ask what might appear to you to be silly questions out of an earnest desire to learn.
- In class discussion, try using the type of phrasing Franklin suggested in his journal. Note if your contributions help the group advance their knowledge, and, if so, resolve to continue.
- When working on group projects, listen to the expertise of others and ensure that your contribution meets their expectations.
- If someone else receives credit for something you did, refrain from pointing it out. Be happy that good was done, and don’t draw attention to the fact that you were slighted.
- Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve.” Ask your parents, siblings, teachers, coaches, friends, and others in your community for their feedback on ways you can serve them.

Sources & Further Reading


Humility

Humility can be a struggle to make into a habit. As Franklin wrote in his Autobiography, it is often tempting to tell others they are wrong, or to share your ideas as though they are facts. It is difficult not to object publicly if someone else gets credit for something you did. This is because humility requires caring more about what is right than about who is right.

Directions  Identify a person (someone you know personally) who reflects humility. How does this influence the people around him or her?

What, for you, is most challenging about living humbly? How might you overcome those challenges?

“A great man is always willing to be little.”
–RALPH WALDO EMERSON