

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.