On Humility: Maybe Micah Had It Right

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

My 50th college reunion, while mostly a testament to faded memories and physical decline, still produced some inspiring moments. The most compelling came during a panel discussion of classmates who had done remarkably well for themselves. You'd recognize some by name and others by reputation.

The moderator began with the obvious question: *How do you account for your success?*
One participant's immediate response:

"I was ridiculously lucky," he said. "Lucky to be born into a family that could send me to a good school. Lucky to get into this college, where a professor noticed I was floundering and helped me find direction. Lucky to meet a businessman who just happened to need help on a project that gave me the experience I needed to start my own business. Sure, I worked hard and guessed right upon occasion—but mostly, I was in the right place at the right time.

Every panelist had his own version of that story, but the theme was consistent: their achievements owed as much to chance as to talent or grit. Fate, it seemed, had shown its light upon them time and again.

What struck me was how central that sense of humility must have been to their success. Humility keeps you from assuming you're the smartest person in the room or immune to error. It protects you from risks fueled by ego—like believing you can time markets, outguess the future, or shield yourself from bad luck and accountability. It clears space for better judgment, empathy, respect for others, and basic decency.

Humility also opens doors. It makes it easier to ask for advice, listen to opposing views, and collaborate rather than control. It lets you show appreciation and gratitude without feeling diminished by it. It reminds you that good leadership has more to do with managing than manipulating.

When Micah wrote, *"Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God,"* he wasn't issuing a pious command so much as offering a practical guide to living. If he were a life coach today, he might put it more bluntly: *"Dude, just don't be an a-hole."* Different era, same message.

Humility brings other advantages, too. You can stop worrying about being perfect or at least better than everyone around you. Fallibility becomes something to learn from and accept, not conceal. You can make mistakes without turning them into indictments of your worth. Humility grants you permission to be human.

At the reunion, we were given a book of short autobiographies many in our class had written. It made for compelling reading. Here's part of what I contributed:

"I marvel at how lucky I've been at every turn. Yes, my family has had its share of hardship, and some burdens still linger. But I have a habit of ending up in the right place at the right time, more by luck than talent. And I stayed healthy, maybe because I photographed sports instead of playing them. I've been a fortunate fellow, and I know it."

Trust me, arriving at that conclusion wasn't an exercise in false modesty or personal branding. After thinking about my life for the essay, it was simply the only reasonable one I could draw. I was born at the right moment, into a decent family with some means, and endured physically. I'll take a credit for a degree of perseverance and resourcefulness, but those traits only mattered because the cookie usually crumbled in my favor.

Back home, I read the rest of the essays. Nearly every one of them expressed the same sentiment. These were people who had done well, or well enough, and recognized that good fortune had walked closely beside them.

Maybe that's the quiet truth of it: humility doesn't limit us; it steadies us. And sometimes, being comfortable with imperfection is the key to becoming the happiest person in the room.