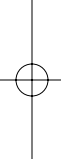




KEY 1

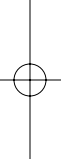
Seeing Yourself As You Really Are



Who's your court jester?

Everyone needs a court jester. And I'm not just talking about someone who can make you laugh. I mean someone who can make you laugh *at yourself*. In medieval monarchies, the court jester was more than a mere buffoon; he was a voice of common sense, insight, and honesty—often brutal honesty, as in “the truth hurts.” He was the only person in the monarch's court who had license to mock the monarch, usually to reveal the folly of his or her majesty's ways. Richard Rohr minces no words when he describes the court jester as the only person who could tell the king that he was full of @#%&, and do so with impunity.

So I ask again, who's your court jester? Who gets to tell you that you're full of @#%&, and can get away with it because you know they love you? Who gets to reveal the folly of your ways and still receive an invitation to dinner? Perhaps



it's a spouse, a sibling, one of your own children, a friend, or coworker. Without a court jester, we run the risk of believing the hype about ourselves. Without a court jester, we run the risk of not being able to attain a true and healthy self-image. And without a healthy self-image, our spiritual wellness is in jeopardy.

Achieving a healthy self-perception can seem as precarious as walking on a tightrope—it is a matter of balance. On the one hand, we are made in the image and likeness of God, and the affirmations we receive in life can help us to recognize our family resemblance to God. On the other hand, we are not God. We simply resemble God. And so our challenge is to find a balance that gives us a healthy self-esteem. Without balance, we run the risk of developing a distorted sense of self that can ultimately skew our perception of reality, including how we perceive others and God. Our quest is to be authentic—to see ourselves as we really are.

Look at me!

Unfortunately, the kind of self-criticism that leads to clear thinking about who we are is not in vogue in contemporary society. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Tootin' your own horn has become the norm in our society. Nowhere is this self-promotion more evident than in professional sports, especially football. Nowadays touchdowns, quarterback sacks, and other big plays are followed by animated displays of strutting, chest-thumping, and jawing. The message is clear: "I am better than you are!"

Politicians, actors, musicians, and celebrities of all kinds use every opportunity to promote themselves. (You may recall actor Charlie Sheen's response to the question of whether he was on drugs: "I'm on a drug. It's called Charlie Sheen.") Popular reality television shows document the mundane comings

and goings of people's everyday lives. It is estimated that over 100 million people (including Yours Truly) have blogs, where they can position themselves as an expert and espouse their opinions on any topic—for once, getting the last word in. Popular Catholic blogger Mark Shea explains, tongue-in-cheek, that the reason for writing his blog, *Catholic and Enjoying It!* is “so that no thought of mine, no matter how stupid, should ever go unpublished again!” Not surprisingly, William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* (a *New York Times* best seller and a popular book among evangelical Christians in the 1990s), fails to include the topic of humility in its discussion of traditional Christian values in Western Civilization. I guess he wouldn't have felt comfortable self-promoting his book if it dealt with humility.

Spiritual wellness and tooting your own horn are incompatible. So, the first key to spiritual wellness is to avoid the temptation to toot our own horns, lest we begin thinking we are more important than we really are. While it's true that we all need a healthy self-esteem, one of the greatest obstacles to spiritual wellness is self-esteem that has been overfed. We have an obesity problem in our society, and it's not limited to physical weight. Our egos are becoming alarmingly obese. So what's the big danger of having a swelled head? Simply put, it distorts our self-image, and the plain truth is that *you simply cannot be happy unless you see yourself as you truly are.*

Being put in your place

Tootin' your own horn used to be frowned upon. In ancient Greece the gods took care of humans who became a bit too arrogant. To the Greeks, good fortune was distributed proportionately to each individual according to what he or she deserved. When this proportion was disturbed, most often by an individual who believed that he or she possessed more

good fortune than others (an attitude known to the Greeks as *hubris*, or in Christian tradition, *pride*), it caused a backlash of resentment among the gods. It was the job of the mythological goddess Nemesis to dole out retribution. She put things back into balance by punishing such individuals, thus putting them in their place.

In many cultures initiation rites are used to socialize the individual to take on a collective identity rather than an individual one. Often, these initiation rites include some form of pain and humiliation (a practice continued today to some degree in fraternity/sorority initiations on college campuses). This ritual strengthens the resolve of the individual and symbolizes the initiate's "death" as an individual and "rebirth" as a member of the collective. In other words, they are being told that their self-esteem comes from their membership in the community, not from individual accomplishments. In his book *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, author Mircea Eliade explains that these initiation rites represent a culture's belief that "a man is made—he does not make himself all by himself." The bottom line is this: no self-promotion is allowed!

Sadly, we don't have many of these safeguards against self-promotion today in our country. One of the last is found in America's pastime, good old-fashioned baseball. In baseball, if a player hits a home run, pauses to admire its flight, and then struts around the bases thumping his chest and jawing at the pitcher, you can be sure that the next time up to bat, the first pitch he'll see will be a 95-mile-an-hour fastball in his ear or right under his chin (referred to as "chin music"). The message? Don't toot your own horn.

"God's doing real good"

Theologian and storyteller Jack Shea shares a good story about being put in your place.

It is known by everyone who cares to know that the Lord Jesus and St. Peter used to repair to the local tavern after a hard day of ministry to break bread and drink wine together.

On a certain rainy night, St. Peter turned to the Lord Jesus and grinned, “We’re doing real good.”

“We?” said the Lord Jesus.

Peter was silent. “All right, you’re doing real good,” he finally said.

“Me?” said the Lord Jesus.

Peter pondered a second time. “All right, God’s doing real good,” he finally admitted.

But the Lord Jesus saw how reluctant St. Peter was to admit the source of all goodness. He laughed and hit the table with glee.

The story continues as Peter complains that he is not getting his due. He tells Jesus he is going to prove how good he is by taking him fishing the next day, to show how the other fishermen respect him as the best in the business. Of course, Peter catches nothing all day. Dejected, he decides to head for shore, and later, Jesus performs the miracle of the “great catch” of fish (Luke 5:1–11). Humbled, Peter says to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” In response to Peter’s humility, Jesus rewards Peter by putting him in charge of a new fishing expedition—fishing for men.

One moral of the story is that a realistic self-image is intimately related to God’s image. The Bible says as much in the first chapter of Genesis, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27).

If we are indeed created in the image and likeness of God, then each of us bears a “family resemblance” to God. Any attempt to develop a healthy self-perception without taking into account our relationship with God will assuredly fall

short. It would be like trying to come to an in-depth understanding of who we are while ignoring our family of origin. Our ultimate “family of origin” is God.

With that in mind, let me repeat what I said above, with an added clarification: You simply cannot be happy unless you see yourself as you truly are, *and you will never see yourself as you truly are unless you see yourself in relationship with God.*

An inflated sense of self-importance

Sadly, this relationship with God was broken by our first parents. The book of Genesis tells the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. The cause of their fall into sin was not simple disobedience but an inflated sense of self-importance. It was caused by their willingness to entertain the notion that they could be equal to God. In fact, the wily serpent tempted them to eat of the forbidden fruit with these enticing words, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

That’s a hard offer to pass up. It’s quite affirming—and seductive—to have someone tell you that greatness is within your grasp. Adam and Eve reached for that which belongs only to God, and they ended up alienating themselves from the very God who created them. They responded by hiding from God and by pointing fingers of blame at one another.

We inherit the effects of this bad decision. Tooting your own horn definitely has an adverse effect on everyday relationships and on our relationship with God. The effects include:

An inability

- to listen to authority

- to take criticism or to admit to being wrong
- to ask for help

An increase

- in anxiety and fear
- in self-pity
- in anger and jealousy
- in insecurity

A tendency

- toward legalism
- to criticize others
- toward defensiveness
- toward self-centeredness

A decrease

- in compassion

It's not about you

So an inflated sense of self-importance is no laughing matter. According to Scripture, pride is guaranteed to bring about our downfall. With this caveat in mind, our Christian tradition makes it very clear that the first key to spiritual wellness is to see yourself as you really are.

This is accomplished by following this mantra: *It's not about you*. Your life is not so much about you as it is about what *God is doing* through, with, and in you. We mistakenly think that we are the stars of a show in which God makes an occasional cameo appearance whenever we invite him in. The truth is that God is the writer, producer, director, and

star of an epic drama that encompasses all of creation, and he invites each of us to discover our very special and integral role within that drama. Theologian Fr. Robert Barron writes, “Either your life is about Jesus and his mission or it is about you. There is no third option.” And it is that first option—a life that is about Jesus and his mission—that is the only sure-fire way to a healthy self-image.

So don't believe the hype

Imagine that someone tells you that you should

- run for office
- write a book
- record a song
- apply for a promotion
- try out for a team
- take a leadership position
- give a speech
- become a fashion model
- audition for a role
- go into business

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these pursuits; in fact, these types of affirmations just may be the encouragement one needs to strive for a worthy goal. It's nice to be told by others that they see potential in you.

Likewise, accomplishments themselves may be very affirming. Imagine if you

- saved your money and finally bought that shiny new car you've had your eye on

- got a promotion and a raise
- had kids who got straight A's on their report cards
- organized and executed a highly successful event
- got a song, article, or book published
- maintained the same physique you had twenty years ago
- moved into a larger home
- were named employee of the month
- received an award

Again, there is nothing wrong with any of the above activities. They are all wonderful accomplishments, and we should indeed take pleasure in our successes. At the same time, temptations come along with these affirmations. An inflated sense of self-importance can take hold of us subtly and gradually. Few people wake up one morning and decide to be arrogant. What happens is that, slowly but surely, we begin to believe the hype about ourselves. We begin to think that we are entitled to the blessings we enjoy. And then, as eventually will happen, someone (or life in general) will treat us in a manner that we feel does not live up to our billing and we feel wronged.

So don't believe the hype. I have no doubt that God must laugh to keep from crying when he observes us patting ourselves on the back for being so amazingly autonomous. Turn a skeptical eye on the inflated sense of self-importance that focuses too much attention on you and not enough attention on other people and God.

Speaking of self-image, it's ironic that so many of us are obsessed with how we appear to the rest of the world, when all we want is to be accepted for who we are. It's no wonder

that so many of us choose to live “on the surface,” avoiding the inner workings of the soul. Superficiality offers a numbness that often seems preferable to facing the complexities of the inner reality we call the soul. Welcome to the wacky world of self-perception.

Humility—a sure cure for hype

In Christian tradition, authenticity is achieved by practicing humility—something that court jesters reminded their majesties of.

Unfortunately, humility is a virtue that too often gets bad press in our contemporary culture, which tends to view it as a belittling of oneself. However, humility is not about beating ourselves up, belittling ourselves, or even exuding a false modesty. Humility is being able to see ourselves as we really are, and as a result, being able to see others and God as they truly are. Humility is not a denial of our self-worth; it is an affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all people and a recognition of our place in that community of people. Humility is the constant recognition of our own worth coupled with the recognition that there is always someone or something greater than ourselves.

Humility creates space for others, whereas a bloated sense of self-importance crowds others—and God—out. When we crowd out others and God from our lives we become accustomed to having control and to following our own will. We lose the ability to listen.

According to Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel, listening plays a central role in our relationship with God. He observes, “In Jewish tradition, the word *listen*, *listen*, *listen* is frequently used. The Bible is full of the word *listen*, listen Israel, listen Moses, listen Abraham, listen. The Jew in me says I must listen to others” (from PBS’s *First Person Singular*).

It is no coincidence, then, that the primary prayer of the Jewish people, the Shema, begins with the command to listen: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Jesus himself remarked, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Mark 4:9). Unfortunately, a swelled head seems to clog the ear canals, preventing us from listening to others and to God. Humility enables us to open our ears, listen to others, and to let go of control.

Humility is not to be confused with timidity, nor is it a lack of self-confidence or meekness. Rather, humility is a bold and confident move away from focusing on the good for oneself and toward seeking the good of the many. An attitude with no pretense improves relationships by decreasing anxiety within those relationships. We get along better with others when we stop comparing ourselves with them. St. Paul said as much in his second letter to the Corinthians: “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense” (2 Corinthians 10:12).

An attitude of gratitude

One of the most effective means of learning to see ourselves as we really are and to cultivate a sense of humility is to develop a profound sense of gratitude. The moment we conclude that we are responsible for who we are, what we have done, and what we possess, then we are in big trouble. When we recognize that God is the source of all the blessings in our lives, we respond with an attitude of gratitude.

A profound sense of gratitude reminds us of the source of all good gifts. It reminds us of the responsibility we have to share those blessings with others. This is why Jesus said, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will

be required” (Luke 12:48). Giving thanks to God is not for God’s benefit, but for our own. God does not need our thanks and praise, but he asks it of us because he knows that when we do so, we will find ourselves in a good place where we can pursue a healthy relationship with him and with one another.

One of the best ways to develop an attitude of gratitude is to practice the Daily Examen, a form of prayer developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola five hundred years ago. The examen is a simple method of reviewing your day in God’s presence. The examen prayer, usually accomplished in fifteen to twenty minutes, involves five simple steps:

1. Ask God for light—in order to see your day with God’s eyes.
2. Give thanks—for the gift of the day you have just lived.
3. Review the day—guided by the Holy Spirit.
4. Face your shortcomings—humbly acknowledging shortcomings.
5. Look toward the day to come—asking God for help in the day to come.

—Adapted from *A Simple, Life-Changing Prayer*

In particular, step 2, giving thanks, is a needed daily reminder that God is the source of all goodness in our lives. Without a regular practice of giving thanks, we can lull ourselves into patting ourselves on the back for who we are, what we have, and what we’ve accomplished. In *A Simple, Life-Changing Prayer*, Jim Manney explains that without gratitude we can slip into a “self-centered do-it-yourself attitude—a kind of Ben Franklin-like self-help mentality.” Manney goes on to say:

This attitude [is] positively toxic when applied to spiritual matters. It turns the spiritual life into a program of self-improvement. One aspect of the examen that is particularly useful in combating the Ben Franklin temptation is the attitude of thanksgiving and gratitude that permeates the whole exercise. By reminding us that we are not God, the examen shatters the illusion that the world revolves around me.

Step 4 of the examen, acknowledging our shortcomings, keeps us humble. In this step, we attempt to fix what's wrong in our lives by asking pardon for our faults. We are not doing this step as though groveling before a hanging judge and pleading for mercy. Rather, we do it in response to God's invitation to see ourselves as we really are and in light of God's abundant mercy. Manney explains, "If the examen prayer is doing its job, it will bring up painful moments and cause you to look at behavior that's embarrassing. Sometimes you squirm praying the examen, but why would you have it otherwise? Real prayer is about change, and change is never easy."

Humbling ourselves is not easy either. However, it leads to a healthy self-perception. When we see ourselves clearly—recognizing the resemblance we bear to God—we will see ourselves and love ourselves as God sees and loves us. And when we love ourselves in this way, we are capable of following what Jesus said are the greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31).

Jesus—humility personified

Jesus is humility personified. Literally. From where did he get his humility? No doubt his earthly parents played a significant

role. Joseph, his foster-father, was so humble that he offered “no comment” about his role in raising the Son of God. Not a single word is recorded in Scripture from the mouth of Joseph. Mary did some talking but it was not about herself. She could have strutted through the streets of Nazareth jawing about her special role as the Mother of God. Instead, she turned the spotlight onto God and said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46–47). In fact, in her entire prayer (called the Magnificat, in Luke 1:46–55), Mary used the words *me/my* only five times, while using the words *he/his* fifteen times. In other words, it’s all about God.

It’s no surprise then, that Jesus epitomizes humility. Unlike Adam and Eve, he did not strive to become like God. Instead, he humbled himself. And, ironically, because of his humility, he is to be praised. Hmm. . . . I think I’ll let St. Paul explain this. I can humbly admit that he does it so much better than I ever could!

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 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. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

—Philippians 2:5–11