

The Narcissism Epidemic

I will never forget my first trip on a jet airplane. I was filled with anticipation as I flew out of Bismarck, North Dakota to Washington, DC to visit a seminary I was considering attending. As the plane increased speed to take flight, I sat in my seat thinking, "We must be going about 50 mph, now 60, 80, 100; holy cow, we must be going 150 mph!" And the nose of the plane lifted up and off we went! I could see numerous fields that looked like a checker table. Then I heard on the intercom they would be serving refreshments. "Wow, what a way to travel!" I thought. I wondered how long it would take to drive from Bismarck to Washington, DC and guessed around 20 or 25 hours. Flying is much better!

I overheard a couple of guys talking behind me. They appeared to be business men who flew often. They were complaining about how bad the airline service had gotten. "They don't even serve lunch anymore," one man said. "All we get are these nuts and pretzels." I began thinking about how our ancestors traveled and how long it would have taken them to go from North Dakota to Washington, DC in a horse drawn wagon. My great-uncle Frank told stories about traveling from his farm to town for supplies with his horse and buggy. "When I tried to cross the Little Missouri River", he said, "the water was so high that the horses dropped out of sight! I didn't think we would make it, but we did." My thoughts were interrupted again by the guys behind me. By now they had each had a couple of drinks and were getting a little obnoxious. The stewardess was delayed in bringing them another scotch and water and they were again complaining about the bad service. As I gazed out the window, I could see the Red River Valley in the distance.

I felt privileged to be able to fly in an airplane and couldn't understand why anyone would complain about anything. The fact that the plane remained safely in the air was reason enough to be grateful. It wasn't long and we were landing in Minneapolis where I needed to change planes for the flight to Washington, DC. I couldn't believe how large the airport was. Bismarck's had two gates and Minneapolis had over a hundred! My gate was a fair distance away and I welcomed the exercise. As I hurried down the walkway, I noticed powered walkways moving people quickly along as they stood gazing out the windows. If I walked quickly, I could keep up with the folks on the walkway. Along the way I saw McDonalds, Burger King and many other places to eat, all within the huge airport. Uncle Frank would be shocked!

I arrived at the gate with time to spare and waited for the plane that would whisk me from Minneapolis to Washington, DC in only three hours. I couldn't help but see the contrast between my experience and uncle Frank's. I read stories about families traveling from the east coast of the United States to homestead out west and having to bury loved ones who died somewhere along the way. I doubt they could afford scotch to drink much less a stewardess to serve it in an air-conditioned tube moving at 200 mph 30,000 feet above the ground.

Our lives today are much different than those of uncle Frank's generation. We have many more technological advancements that have made life easier and more comfortable. But it has come with a price tag—a narcissistic society.

Nar-cis-sism: excessive preoccupation with oneself; obsessive self-love; vanity.

When our hearts are full of gratitude rather than ourselves, it's hard to complain. Narcissism replaces gratitude with a sense of entitlement. Its main concern is to bring gratification to self, which can become a bottomless pit.

Today, along with a lifestyle that has become more comfortable, impatience and a low tolerance for hardship have increased. I doubt uncle Frank experienced much road rage in his horse and buggy. Narcissism forgets where we have come from.

Narcissism has even spawned its own religion, which is seen in the "Left Behind" series of books and movies. This, along with the gospel of prosperity (God will make you wealthy) and decision theology (Your decision will bring you salvation) are the pillars upon which many mega-churches are built and helps to explain their popularity. But you can see the narcissism and the minimizing of God's omnipotence. Luther faced a similar situation during his lifetime when the church attribute God's activity to itself. His great epiphany was the realization that God alone and not the church or any individual is sovereign. He saw this most clearly in infant baptism where the baby does nothing to merit God's grace. The beauty of Lutheran theology is that it keeps the egoic self in check.

Narcissism produces hopelessness and anger. The self, no matter how you dress it up, is still only human and cannot deliver what it promises. Much of the hostility within religion and politics today is coming from individuals and groups who have equated their agenda with God's. Narcissism believes itself to be infallible.

None of us is exempt from the narcissistic epidemic sweeping our society. There is no inoculation other than vigilance. Examine your life and honestly ask yourself who is at the center. Is it the self masquerading as God? Can you separate your faith from God or are they fused? Do you always have to be right? Does your faith bring comfort but few demands? When has your faith taken you where you would rather not go? Are you involved in any mission outside yourself? What percentage of your income is given away to help others?

Overcoming this epidemic is not only a spiritual issue. Curbing narcissism will also be necessary in order to bring solutions to the many social and economic problems facing our country.

One of the largest living organisms in the world is a grove of aspen trees. Each tree springs from a common root system. Humans are like aspen groves, but narcissism fails to see this. Our roots are deeply woven together and to find ourselves, we must not only look inward, but must also reach outward to love and give ourselves away.

Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches." Unless we see ourselves joined to God and others on the vine and think and act accordingly, we will continue to be caught up in the spiritual void of narcissism.

~ PB