

Self Love – It Is Not All About You

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The Golden Rule and the second great commandment tell us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. This wisdom is included in most of the world's religions. Confucius called it the Reciprocity Principle and said it was the most important guide in life. Self-love is a necessary and good thing. It gives confidence and strong self-image that are essential for healthy achievement in life's challenges. But it has to be balanced by love of others. The balance is often not easily achieved.

Self-love can become narcissism, the overwhelming fascination with oneself that is named after the Greek mythical figure, Narcissus. He was transfixed by his own image reflected in a pool of water. Narcissism has the undesirable effect of causing lack of empathy for others, taking advantage of others, spurning those one considers less gifted than oneself and, worst of all, failing to recognize or tell the truth whenever it does not enhance one's own image. It is not a rare human failing.

Hear what Shakespeare said about himself in Sonnet LXII. *“Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye, and all my soul and all my every part. And for this sin there is no remedy It is so grounded inward in my heart.”* Shakespeare goes on to spell out what it is like for him. *“Me thinks no face so gracious is as mine. No shape so true, no truth of such account. and for myself mine own worth to define, and all other in all worths surmount.”*

There is a big difference however. Shakespeare goes on in his sonnet to say *“But when my glass shows me myself indeed... mine own self-love quite contrary I read. Self so self-loving were iniquity.”* The difference is recognizing the truth about oneself and others. Shakespeare's honesty shows clearly the difference between truly narcissistic self-love and healthier self-love that can include love of neighbour.

Shakespeare had extraordinary grounds for recognizing his own excellence. He was arguably the greatest writer in his era or perhaps of all time. But he, like anyone else, was not perfect. His honesty was another measure of his greatness. He was great not least because he was able to see the truth in many different characters in his diverse plays and poems but because he acknowledged the truth about himself.

Truth is perhaps most difficult to sustain when we are in a heated discussion with someone with opposite opinions about the issue under discussion. If, in frustration, they say to you “It’s all about you, isn’t it?” they might be at least half right. The truth we see is often coloured by self-love and thereby stops being entirely true.

Jesus said ‘The truth shall make you free,’ and he also said ‘Blessed are the meek,’ by which we can assume he meant those who are truthfully modest, not excessively apologetic or excessively defensive. The Second Great Commandment or Reciprocity Principle is not easy to maintain. It requires some of the honesty shown by Shakespeare.



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