



LUKENOTES

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Holy Narcissism

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To speak of narcissism as holy may seem odd, or even contradictory, because we hear so much about narcissism as dysfunctional and even pathological. If you have had the opportunity to live or work with persons who are narcissistic, you know quite well their need for an audience to applaud, affirm, approve, admire, and adore. In addition, you may have also felt their wrath and abuse as they can easily exhibit rage when frustrated, contradicted, limited or confronted. So, how is it that narcissism can be healthy or even holy?

First, it is important to make a distinction between pathological or malignant narcissism and healthy narcissism or self-love. Most often when we say a person is a narcissist, we are referring to someone with a distorted sense of self which involves feelings of grandiosity and self-importance, being obsessed with fantasies of unlimited success, fame, brilliance and power. With a conviction of being special, narcissists often believe they can only be understood by others who are unique, special or of high status. Typically, they derive sustenance and meaning from the outside, and their inner life is best characterized as hollow or empty. Contrary to appearances, they experience not too much self-love, but an absence of true self-love. Paradoxically, narcissists compensate for lacks and deficiencies by exaggerating tendencies and traits. They prey on others for the satisfaction of their narcissistic cravings by either overvaluing or devaluing others. Narcissists may look good at a distance, while with those close to them, they are masters of hurtful or dismissive comments, and often punish by silence, ignoring, showing up late or forgetting.

Today, worldwide, unhealthy narcissism seems to be encouraged and is thriving. In contrast, healthy narcissism is healthy self-love. Every person develops healthy self-love early in life and will continue to manifest “healthy narcissism” unless it is rendered pathological by abuse. Abuse here is defined as “any refusal to acknowledge the emerging boundaries of an individual by smothering, doting, excessive expectations or by physical, emotional or sexual abuse” (Sam Vaknin). When children grow up in environments that are unable to offer unconditional love and an adequate empathic mirror, they will have difficulty developing a self-image of adequacy and value.

Healthy Narcissism or Self-Love

Healthy self-love—a necessity for relating to self, others and God—is a mature, balanced love of oneself, coupled with a stable sense of self-worth. It implies knowledge of one’s boundaries and respect for another’s boundaries as well as a realistic appraisal of oneself and one’s achievements.

Individuals with healthy self-love are capable of emotional involvement, not only in a love relationship or partnership, but also with colleagues at work and with friends. They learn to behave in ways that foster healthy mutual relating with others and they avoid self-defeating and destructive behaviors that readily dismantle relationships. Healthy individuals have just the right amount of self-centeredness to form relationships in which each person’s needs are met.

Two critical factors help to distinguish healthy self-love from narcissism: the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy and the capacity to empathize. Persons with a healthy self-love are realists; they need not be perfect and they are grounded in real achievements or merit. They also know their limits and deficiencies, and readily see the difference between who they really are and who they want to become. Because they have an honest self-appraisal, they have no need to escape into fantasy, pretensions or delusions of grandeur.

Self-loving individuals are able to be themselves and experience themselves, which helps them to be human and appreciate the humanness of others. They are capable of empathy, able to “walk in another person’s shoes,” an essential component in emotional intelligence and human relating, and a skill which is absolutely necessary for effective ministry. Healthy individuals are able to balance giving and taking. They use appropriate adult communication and have flexible and fluid boundaries.

Another important element in developing a healthy sense of self is having ideals that guide and give meaning to life and make mutual relationships possible. Transition to adulthood is based on a profound redirection from being fixed on self to being enlisted in the larger whole and being part of some worthy enterprise. This transition forms a new basis for self-esteem—enhancing the projects of others as well as the self. Healthy adults are able to perceive others as separate, with their own desires, needs and emotional lives. Healthy narcissism takes time to develop, requiring a series of transformations which lead to the development of an identity with appropriate self-love, the capacity for intimacy with others, and generativity, the ability to nurture what is new and sometimes fragile.

Developing healthy self-love is possible, even for individuals with narcissistic tendencies. Here are some key attitudes and behaviors that are critical for healthy self-love:

- A realistic self-appraisal, developed by seeking feedback and an openness
- to constructive criticism
- An increased capacity for empathy and compassion
- Self-care and other care, the ability to receive and give

- Being part of something bigger; realizable dreams
- Mindfulness of these defenses: anger, shutting down, minimizing, distancing
- and discounting others and issues
- Increased skillfulness, especially emotional regulation and dealing with conflict
- Flexible and fluid boundaries

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