
It's Not About You

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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"It's Not About You," was how a recent newspaper opinion piece by David Brooks was titled ([The New York Times, May 31, 2011](#)); the article reflected upon the journey of recent college graduates. Like many of you, I was attracted to Brooks' words, because they angled distinctively in a Christian direction. He noted that so many recent college graduates have been ill-prepared by their elders for how the world really needs us to lose ourselves.

Said Brooks, *"Worst of all, they are sent off into this world with the whole baby-boomer theology ringing in their ears. If you sample some of the commencement addresses being broadcast on C-Span these days, you see that many graduates are told to: Follow **your** passion, chart **your** own course, march to the beat of **your** own drummer, follow **your** dreams and find **yourself**. This is the litany of expressive individualism, which is still the dominant note in American culture. But, of course, this mantra misleads on nearly every front. College grads are often sent out into the world amid rapturous talk of limitless possibilities. But this talk is of no help to the central business of adulthood, finding serious things to tie yourself down to. The successful young adult is beginning to make sacred commitments to a spouse, a community and calling yet mostly hears about freedom and autonomy."*

Then, Brooks concluded his article with words that sounded a lot like the Bible:

"Today's grads enter a cultural climate that preaches the self as the center of a life. But, of course, as they age, they'll discover that the tasks of a life are at the center. Fulfillment is a byproduct of how people engage their tasks, and can't be pursued directly. Most of us are egotistical and most are self-concerned most of the time, but it's nonetheless true that life comes to a point only in those moments when the self dissolves into some task. The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It's to lose yourself."

Yes, that's a definite echo of Mark 8:35, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will save it."

But *The New York Times* was not finished offering opinion pieces that almost serve as essays on the Christian virtues. On [June 12, 2011, Ross Douthat \("The Online Looking Glass"\)](#) related a certain congressman's use of a Twitter account to the new narcissism of our culture; Douthat was trying to answer the question whether our new technological, social media activities incite our narcissism.

Douthat said, *"In a culture increasingly defined by what Christine Rosen describes as the "constant demands to collect (friends and status), and perform (by marketing ourselves)," just being a United States congressman isn't enough. You have to hit the House gym and look good coming out of the shower, and then find a Twitter follower who's willing to tell you just "how big" you really are.*

Writing in the late '70s, Christopher Lasch distinguished modern narcissism from old-fashioned egotism. The contemporary narcissist, he wrote, differs "from an earlier type of American individualist" in "the tenuous quality of his selfhood." Despite "his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem." His innate insecurity can only be overcome "by seeing his "grandiose self" reflected in the attentions of others, or by attaching himself to those who radiate celebrity, power and charisma."

"This is a depressingly accurate anticipation of both the relationship between [Congressman] Weiner and his female "followers," and the broader "look at me! look at meeee!" culture of online social media, in which nearly all of us participate to some degree or another."

"Facebook and Twitter did not forge the culture of narcissism. But they serve as a hall of mirrors in which it flourishes as never before" a "vast virtual gallery," as Rosen has written, whose self-portraits mainly testify to "the timeless human desire for attention."

Enough said. I quote extensively from these two pieces, and I salute any newspaper that seeks the truly virtuous life. "The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It's to lose yourself." But, I might add: in the mercy of God, that is exactly when we save our lives, too.

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