

The ancient monastics learned that there cannot be love of others, much less love of God, where there is no self to do the loving. They learned that we are not free to ignore the needs of the self or to give it away while still being able to love the people we most sincerely desire to love.

The self is given by God. It is created in the image of God. Its identity is in God, and its primary relationship is to God. This is why Abba Alonius said,

*If a person does not say in his/her heart,
In the world there is only myself and God,
he/she will not gain peace.*

On first hearing this may sound selfish, narcissistic even. Roberta Bondi tells the story of a friend to help us understand Abba Alonius' point.

When her two children were small, the family had a difficult life as mom worked to support them as well as caring for them at home. Her older child resented her frequent but unavoidable exhaustion, believing that if she loved him better, she would be less tired and more available to him.

Her feelings of guilt told her that his unhappiness was caused by her failure to sacrifice more for him, and so against all reason she tried to "do better." Her renewed efforts, however, did not help.

When he was in his late teens, he devised the perfect way to punish her. He bought a motorcycle, and for two years she lived in a state of terror, rage, and further guilt. She feared the worst.

In mental agony she went over all she had done for him over the years, as well as all that she had done wrong. She was eaten up with her failure to be "a better mother." She begged him to give up the motorcycle, but to no avail.

Finally, she could take it no more. She had prayed to become a better mother, but nothing got better. All of a sudden, she could see that she must be missing something basic about Christian love. Like Jacob she wrestled with God to discover what that was.

Slowly she became able to see how her own identity, her desire to be a good mother, was linked with notions about pouring herself out for her children. In anguish and anger she came to see that in her trying to find her identity in motherhood she had lost not only herself but her son. She discovered that her identity rests only in God, not in being good in any form.

Love was not giving herself away for her son, whatever he may think. Emotionally she turned him loose, deciding that putting his life at risk had to be his decision, not hers. A great weight of depression rolled off her and she began to find peace.

Three weeks later, without any discussion, he sold the motorcycle. He not only found himself safer transportation; in other areas of his life, too, his behavior became less self-destructive. This does not mean that he reconciled with his mother. It does mean he finally assumed responsibility for his own life.

Pondering these things in her heart over many months, the mother finally came to understand how her conviction that she should pour herself out for her son actually had prevented her from seeing his real needs.

He needed her to stand over against him and say, "Because I love you, I will not allow you to tell me whether I am valuable as a person; *only* God can do that. Because I love you, you must assume responsibility for your own life, even if it makes you hate me."

When we allow ourselves to be defined by others, we can never find peace. When we fail to claim our identity in God, when we think our value is determined by the approval of others, we only know distortions of our true self that leave us wounded.

When we believe our real value lies in what we do and how we do it, our wounds are compounded and our capacity for love is compromised. These wounds prevent us from realistically seeing and responding to others, the world, and God, and prevent us from loving truly.

Who are you? You are who God says you are! A daughter/son of God, beloved by God, one in whom God delights. Learn to say in your heart that in all the world only God has the power to name you and you will gain peace.