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So much religious advice seems to be about becoming something other than what we are, other than what is even humanly possible.

Rather than inviting us into meaningful relationships, people sell us impossible goals in order to keep us on the hook.

One of my friends fell into a purist cult when she was in college.

They told her that it was absolutely necessary for her to remain “pure” at all times.

The implication was that, otherwise, God would not love her.

For the cult leaders, God was like a narcissistic parent, one whose ego must be fed and, of course, only they knew how to feed it.

The reality is that God does not need us for narcissistic supply.

A *good* parent starts out loving his child.

A *wise* parent knows that a particular child will have to learn various lessons on her own.

He can advise her about how to deal with difficult situations, he can plant the seeds, but the child must be willing to face the problem and to learn from the experience.

We are from the very beginning the beloved children of God.

Of course, as Richard Rohr reminds us, we need to recognize that God’s love is more like an earthquake than a nice uncle.¹

¹ Richard Rohr, What the Mystic Knows: Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2015), 16.

God sets us up to go down challenging paths where we may grow in depth.

Growth is not a function of becoming perfect or pure, but is instead about learning from our experiences how to work together, how to function as a member of the body.

It takes time for us to learn to thrive in rich soil.

We can put one of our local Venus flytraps in fertile soil, but it will soon die.

The flytrap needs nutrient-free, mineral-free soil.

Unlike the flytrap, however, we change over time.

We adapt to new soils, especially if we practice awareness, if we go through life, that is, paying attention to what *is* rather than how we would like it to be, or would like to imagine ourselves to be.

We must start where we are.

Unlike the purists' assertions, we do not banish our darkness to create pure light, but learn how to use all that we are, light and shadow, in constructive ways.

We cannot love others when we hate part of ourselves.

What this means is that God knows all along what God is doing.

Rather than focusing on our particular proclivities, those who see God as a narcissist tend to focus on the challenges we face, as if God determined each and every one

of them as a reward or punishment—the death of a friend for one, a serious diagnosis for another, financial collapse for a third.

I suspect that most of what we experience is actually random, like when we set a child free on the playground to climb and to fall, to make friends and enemies, and generally to learn.

God does not intend us to be pure or perfect, but intentionally gives us a particular mix of individual strengths *and* weaknesses, of light *and* shadow, and sets us into the world to learn the lessons we need, to mature in wisdom and love.

It is our particular strengths and weaknesses that God intentionally determines.

Those who see God as a narcissist also tend to focus more on our decisions than on our awareness as drivers of growth.

They think that we simply decide to be better, but wisdom and growth come more from our being aware and setting intentions than they do from our decisions.

One can decide successfully not to pursue an addiction anymore, but wisdom does not arise until one understands how the addiction affected others.

Just to be clear, I *am* saying that God intentionally sends some of us to earth with addictive tendencies, because that will provide the exact conditions that those specific people need to grow.

It sets them on their paths.

Others of us will be narcissistic, or obsessive compulsive, or whatever the case may be, and this will help us to learn specific things, if we pay attention.

Some will even have particular characteristics where following the rules will be a significant part of their personality, like the purists, so that they may eventually learn which rules need to be broken.

The point is not to overcome ourselves, to become superhuman, as German philosophers Nietzsche and Heidegger thought, but to become humble enough to admit to ourselves what our gifts and limitations are so that we can understand how we fit into the whole.

Those who desire human perfection or utopias are seeking the impossible and are avoiding what is essential.

Depending upon our particular weaknesses, we might join in the labor of the vineyard early, a little late, or very late.

God knows this and takes us on whenever we are ready for labor.

No matter whether we arrive early, at midday, or late in the day, God invites us to share in the work.

Given our particular imposed limitations, some are bound to join later, so God rewards us all the same.

We get there when we are ready to get there.

God is gracious.

Notice that Christ's parable about the laborers in the vineyard is *calculated* to remove fear.

Advice that sets fear in our hearts is not from Christ, but is about power, about controlling us.

I keep thinking of those signs on 17 that say, "Say this: Jesus forgive me for my sins."

It purports to be a simple path to salvation, but I suspect that, even if we say it, we will still be afraid.

Did we mean it enough?

Was that the right formula or did the person who posted the sign get it wrong?

Does it even work?

We descend into being anxious about earthly things rather than loving things heavenly.

I suppose people would tell us, "You just need to have more faith!" which would only increase our anxiety.

Christ taught us through the parable of the vineyard that meaningful spiritual guidance leads us away from fear and anxiety into embracing who we are just as God embraces us.

We are not set here to become other than what we are, but to become fully who we are.

Our proclivities help us to learn from our experiences.

Our awareness helps us to make use of it.

God knows exactly what God is doing, so be not afraid.