

“The Lake Wobegon Effect”

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Romans 12:1-3

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Brian McLaren is one of my favorite authors. I find some of his ideas to be quite unique & original. One of the things that McLaren says is that, The purpose of religion is to help us evolve as a species. Our Creator came up with this idea of evolution. That's how God did it. That's apparently how you & I got into the shape we're in And I would think that would be a very interesting way for God to do it. Maybe it's even part of free-will, that the creatures are given this ability to change, adapt, mutate and grow. I would think the creativity in that and the co-creating of humankind would be a delight for the Creator to watch and participate in. But that's just my puny mind wondering for a second what it would be like to be the Creator the universe! (I believe that's called “grandiose thinking”)

McLaren says that God inspired the great religions of the world to help us evolve as a species.

- the Noble 8-fold Path of Buddhism
- the 5 Pillars of Islam
- the 10 Commandment of Judaism
- the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus are all designed to help us evolve, to grow us as individuals and a people and a species - the one species that is specifically designed to be a reflection of the Creator - made in the image of God, according to scripture.

The Apostle Paul would not have described spiritual growth as evolution, but I think that's what he's getting at in Romans 12. *“Present your selves as living*

sacrifices offered to God. Seek God's goodness, and the holy and beautiful ways of God." *"Give God your best and your all. Be all in,"* as we say today. That's the point about a living sacrifice. All in. *"And don't conform to this world, to the present age."* Oh, you can conform a little bit. We're not expected to walk around in First Century tunics and sandals. But where the present age is not a reflection of God's Kingdom we're to be transforming agents, to demonstrate God's ways to the world. We're to be the change that God desires for the world. We're to evolve. *"Be transformed by the renewing of your minds."* So you can think higher thoughts and live life at a higher level of creativity, compassion and love. I have a friend who read some of McLaren's thoughts and he often says to me, "How's your evolving coming?" "Slowly. Evolution is a long, slow process."

In the movie *"As Good as It Gets,"* Jack Nicholson plays a rather crazy guy who falls for a beautiful waitress, played by Helen Hunt. Nicholson's character gets healthier and more functional the more he develops a relationship with her. At one point he says, "She makes me want to be a better man." Isn't that what great beauty does? - great art, great poetry - they inspire us to do better, to be better, to grow. Spirituality does the same. The more we see and experience the beauty of God's love, the more we want to grow in love - to love others as we have been loved by God.

"Present yourselves to God. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

But then he adds this strange comment: *"Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think, but instead, think with sober judgment."* It's almost like he's heard of the Lake Wobegon effect. Have you ever heard of the Lake Wobegon effect? It comes from Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* and "The News from Lake Wobegon" - *where all the women are strong, all the men good looking and all the children are above average.*

The Lake Wobegon Effect is the natural human tendency to overestimate one's capabilities. It's also called Illusory Superiority - the illusion that we're superior. It's the tendency of human beings to overestimate our good qualities and underestimate our not-so-good qualities, especially in relationship, in comparison with others. You'd be amazed at all the studies that have been done on this.

Cornell University professor Thomas Gilovich surveyed one million high school seniors. 70 % of them thought they were above average in leadership ability. Only 2% felt they were below average. 100% of the students felt they

were above average when it comes to the “ability to get along with others.” 60% of them felt that they were in the top 10% of their class in this ability. 25% of them thought they were in the top 1% of their class.

Now you might think that this phenomena just shows itself with the younger generations. But the tendency to overestimate ourselves has been observed in CEOs, hedge fund managers, presidents, coaches, drivers, parents, state education officials and preachers. 85% of all pastors think they’re above average preachers. That is statistically impossible!

93% of drivers rate themselves as better than the average driver.

94 percent of college professors say that they do above-average work.

In a survey of faculty at the University of Nebraska, 68% rated themselves in the top 25% for teaching ability.

People are unrealistically optimistic about their own health risks compared with those of other people. Most of us think we are less susceptible to the flu than others.

Most Stock brokers believe that the stocks they buy are more likely to end up winners than those of the average broker.

If you think that self-enhancement biases exist in other people and they do not apply to you, you’re in good company. Most people believe that they are more likely than others to provide accurate self-assessments.

Studies show that most of us are more racist than we think we are. They also suggest that most of us think we nicer than the average person, and better looking than average.

Illusory superiority is often referred to as the above average effect. Most of us believe we are above average, and that is a statistical impossibility. It’s also problematic when it comes to spiritual growth and humility. What incentive is there to grow and evolve if we all feel we’re ahead of the curve? Another dangerous aspect of this tendency is how we tend to judge ourselves with great mercy and judge others with harshness.

For instance, if someone pulls in front of us on the road, we say, “That person is a total jerk.” When we make a driving mistake, we say, “I was thinking about

something really important. I was distracted. I was having a lousy day and that RARELY happens to me.” When someone is harsh with us, we say, “That person is nothing but a mean bully. What a jerk!” When we lose our cool with someone we say, “I had a right to be upset. There were many factors that went into that moment.”

I wish I could say that these reflections were just my opinion, but they’ve been widely researched and proven over and over again in the field of social psychology. We tend to overestimate ourselves. *“Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think, but instead, think with sober judgment.”*

GK Chesterton said that he wondered why anyone would doubt the doctrine of the sinfulness of man, since it was the only part of Christianity for which we have proof.

Friends, this is why we have Lent. This is why we have a season of repentance. This is why our religion started with John the Baptist preaching a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” and why Jesus first public sermons were on repentance. It’s that critical for spiritual growth, to break through “illusory superiority,” the illusion that we’re superior to others. This is why we confess our sins. This is why in many Christian traditions they begin every worship service with a confession of sin - so that we can try to put aside our illusions and get honest-to-God, so we can grow and evolve.

In the Reformed Tradition there used to be an old confession liturgy based on the 10 Commandments. It was always used the Sunday before a Communion Service. The idea is to evaluate one’s life in light of the 10 Commandments.

Am I coveting?

Am I worshipping man-made things?

What am I putting before God in my life?

Am I truthful with others?

Am I reverent and respectful?

The confession liturgy is prayed together as a church. And then folks meditate & reflect on it all week so that the following Sunday they come to communion repentant, cleansed and ready to be filled. Lent has the same purpose - to cleanse us so that Easter might fill us.

Let me close by reading the words of Romans 12 again:

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by

*the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect. . . . and do not think of yourself more
highly than you ought to think, but think with sober judgment*

Think about it. Let's pray about it.

*Holy Spirit of God, break through our illusions, renew our minds, cleanse our
hearts, and fill our souls; that we might better reflect our Creator's glory. Amen.*