

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
13 October, 2022
“Lamentations”
Word Count: 750

The Florida man stood in front of the remains of his house, ravaged by wind and water. All his precious items were ruined or lost. The man glared at the camera. He complained: “Who will help me? I lost everything.” We understand desperation. Who hasn’t experienced grief, loss? I blubber often these days, seeing children maimed by Russian soldiers, women beaten in Iran, folks dazed by loss of home and hope, friends fighting cancer or divorcing. Somehow you learn to live with a broken heart. When broken, rabbis say, that’s when the word of God tumbles inside. Yet this man’s complaint almost sounded like an irate demand, a command. My antennae sensed something wrong about him, even as he deserved sympathy. This may be unfair, but he seemed to be the kind of man who a week ago would have been bad-mouthing to his buddies government and the welfare system.

If all we have is lamentation, the temptation to become selfish only intensifies. Then we become mean. “My will be done, not thine” is the surest recipe for catastrophe, personally, socially.

A friend, a psychologist who counseled fire-fighters after 9-11, taught me that there are various types of narcissists.

Narcissism comes from the Greek myth of a fellow named Narcissus. He fell in love with his own image in a pool of water. He couldn’t take his eyes from his reflection. He wasted away. The gods took pity on him and transformed him into a flower.

Now, we’re all a bit narcissistic. It sure takes one to think people will read what he writes or listen to him preach. That being said, most of us are healthy narcissists. We all deserve being appreciated. We care about our image, our well-being – but usually not at the expense of using others. What we don’t want to be are unhealthy narcissists, taking our neediness to the extreme, exploiting people to make us feel important -- seeking credit, riddled by envy. Needing our egos filled, because we are insecure, frightened. Our society reeks of narcissism.

Malignant narcissism is oft overlooked as a factor in criminal behavior. Friends served as chaplains at two formidable prisons: Trenton and Rahway. Amazingly, each inmate with whom the ministered protested they were justified. “I did what I did because they disrespected me!” Feed me! That’s what you’re for – feed me!

An inverse form of narcissism gets its ego fed by good deeds, through charity, through giving away lots of money to causes. Why? To get their names into the papers or receive recognition and praise. These folks constantly need to give gifts, constantly need to please people. Feed my ego, that’s what you’re for.

How many egocentrics does it take to screw in a lightbulb? None, he holds the lightbulb up and the world revolves around him.

Do we really think we should be applauded or rewarded or get extra credit for doing what we should, for what is expected? Should the person expect to be rewarded for returning someone’s lost wallet?

Do police officers anticipate a trophy for doing their job? Or emergency workers in the middle of a Hurricane? Does a soldier seek a medal for doing his or her duty? Has lack of decent manners become so prevalent we think that we have to congratulate someone for having decent manners, for being polite? Are we so preoccupied with demanding that we have a right to be boorish and rude that we neglect to do what is right, to practice “voluntary charity?” Whence sacrifice, commitment?

Catastrophes can refocus us away from ourselves. There’s no time for selfishness when homes are flooded and destroyed. Yet, if all we have are lamentations, the temptation to selfishness intensifies. Then comes anger.

Who are the real heroes? Could it be those who don’t think themselves heroes? The ones who don’t keep looking around to see if everyone’s noticing them. Doing right is its own beautiful reward, as those who do wrong discover.

There is a scene in the gospels where Jesus speaks about what’s expected of his followers. The apostles admit they need more than they have. So the apostles ask Jesus: “Increase our faith!” This sounds laudable. Nope. As if it is Jesus’ responsibility to make them more faithful. That’s the problem. Actually, the verb is an imperative. They command Jesus to increase their faith. Drill-sergeant Jesus scolds them instead and tells them to do their job. Be loyal servants. You already have enough faith. You’re just not using it.