

1) *I want to do it ALL BY MYSELF!*

Parents often hear that line as their children struggle to burst the bonds of babyhood. Attempts to prove they CAN (more to themselves than to their parents)—

these efforts often produce results that are mixed at best—

but it's all a part of "growing up;" and more is involved than the mastery of a skill.

What teeth-gritting parents often call, "the terrible TWO's,"

developmental psychologists describe as: "The process of self-differentiation."

I'LL DO IT BY MYSELF! In these declarations,

children try to discover and determine the parameters of their personal identities.

I am NOT my mother, my father, my sister, or my brother—I am ME!

Children undertake a process, literally, of "sorting themselves out."

a process all of us carry forward into adulthood.

Facial features, fingerprints, interest and tastes, jobs and hobbies, achievements and awards—

"Who We Are" is widely regarded as that which differentiates us from everybody else—

what we are and do "ALL BY OURSELVES."

It's normal, necessary . . . and healthy . . . until it isn't.

2) Remember when then President Obama made a speech about the need for a social safety net?

Ticking off a spectrum of seeming individual achievements, Obama repeated the refrain:

You didn't make that by yourself!

The backlash, instant and widespread, was: *I DID SO! I MADE IT ALL BY MYSELF!*

A response one might describe as "self-differentiation run amok."

- In a society driven by economic competition, it's hard to keep in mind that, as a line in one of our prayers says, *what we achieve depends upon each other's toil.*
- In a political arena where partisan divisions multiply at metastatic speed, Benjamin Franklin's sobering line at the Continental Congress is worth recalling: *We must indeed all hang together, or we shall most assuredly all hang separately.*
- The Germans have a notable saying: *Ein mensch ist kein mensch—*
Loose translation: *An isolated individual is NOT fully a person.*

3) All this to say that the ALL BY MYSELF declaration most of us make at age two—

its influence gets injected into many domains of human discourse—and quite unhelpfully.

Not only in economics and politics, but also in religion and theology:

Question: Who is GOD?

Answer: God is The Being who has the metaphysical muscle to do things ALL BY HIMSELF.
Either a solitary sovereign who sits above the universe as Sole and Ultimate Power Holder.
Or a panoply of competing claimants, all in quest to be king of the cosmic mountain.

4) The Judeo-Christian religious tradition begs to differ from both of these GOD definitions.

Jews and Christians see God as “relational”—

related to human creatures—yes, but relational more deeply still—INHERENTLY relational.

In a way we can’t pin down with explanations,

but only gesture toward in images and phrases—

Jews and Christians affirm a signature and surprising feature of God’s own character.

There is, for us, One God, but THAT God is NOT a God who flatly declares:

I do things always and only ‘all by myself’.

God’s own reported “I statements,” often come out sounding like “WE statements.”

- In the Genesis creation story:

Let US make humankind in OUR image, according to OUR likeness.

- Immediately following up on that God declares:

It is not good that the human one—our image bearer—should be ALONE.

So God’s act of creation culminates in seeding humanity as community—in God’s image.

Still another ancient Hebrew poet records the words of Wisdom—

that is, the distinctively feminine dimension of the divine:

When God marked out the foundations of the earth, she says;

then I was beside him—like a master worker;

I was daily God’s delight, rejoicing before him always,

rejoicing in his inhabited world, delighting in the human race.

The mysterious energy of divine mutuality—infused at the outset into the life of the world.

5) Listen, as a Jewish Jesus, in language Christians now employ—

listen as Jesus describes the dynamic of mutual giving and receiving in the heart of God:

The Spirit of truth will guide you into all truth, says Jesus. He will glorify me.

All that the Father has is mine . . . The Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Paul picks up on this continually interplaying energy of Divine Interconnectivity:

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, he says.

God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

6) Whatever else we might envision when we name God as “Trinity;”

it is a reminder that God is NOT a “rugged individualist.”

God is One in Three and Three in One—Don't get tangled in the seeming muddle of the math.

This claim is a bold affirmation that the power of divine creativity

is a dancing dynamic of shared vulnerability.

It is THIS kind of power both BY WHOM, and IN WHICH WE are made.

And it is the ONLY kind of power dynamic THROUGH which we can we thrive and prosper.

It is within, and only within, a matrix of mutual giving and receiving,

that our efforts in self-differentiation are even possible.

Children rely upon their parents in order to be different from them.

Self-differentiation does play a vital role in our identity and our relationships.

But not to set us apart from each other in self-contained silos—

Not to encamp us in warring tribal factions of identity politics—

NO, healthy self-differentiation helps us discern and celebrate

how our distinctive identities are shaped

through layers upon layers of richly interwoven God-graced human connections.

7) In short—if even God doesn't say: *I do things ALL BY MYSELF.*

Why should you and I even try?

In the Name of God—Father, Son, Spirit

God beyond us, God beside us, God within us.

In each and all, God Really Present to each and all of us—

Setting us free from self-fixation to be really present to one another.