For Personal Reflection

?

1. What does it mean to me to ‘possess my own soul’? How would I describe this?
2. In what ways am I “self-possessed?” Please be specific.
3. What would it look or feel like to me to not be in possession of my own soul? How might this be a problem for me or for others?
4. In what ways might I be self-absorbed? Be specific.
5. What are some strategies that I could employ to be more self-possessed and less self-absorbed in my life?

Further Reading

Spiritual Conferences. St. Francis de Sales. Translated under the supervision under the Abbot Gasquet and the late Canon Dom Mackey, O.S.B. The Newman Press: Westminster Maryland, 1962.

Introduction to the Devout Life. St. Francis de Sales. Translated by John K. Ryan. Image Books, Doubleday. 1989. Part III, Chapter 3.

De Sales

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Self-Absorbed?

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

...Or Self-Possessed?

What is the self? "(1) The total, essential, or particular being of a person; the individual. (2) The essential qualities distinguishing one person from another; individuality. (3) One's consciousness of one's own being or identity; the ego. (4) One's own interests, welfare or advantage." (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language)

The reality — and awareness — of self is a critical part of what makes us human. The dictionary lists no fewer than two hundred variations of "self-": self-abandoned, self-contained, self-help, self-regard, self-worth.

However, as we know from our own self-awareness, some ways of being and experiencing "self" are more helpful than others. Push come to shove, one's sense of "self" can be reduced to one of two categories: unhealthy, or healthy.

Self-absorbed, self-involved, self-interest, self-centered: these ways of being "self" speak of being inordinately (perhaps even *exclusively*) selfish about my own advantage, my own concerns, my own needs, my own goals, my own plans. This way of being "self" implies that I am clueless, indifferent and/or hostile when it comes to the needs, concerns, dreams or hopes of other persons.

"Life as we know it has its share of ups and downs; triumph and tragedy; success and setback."

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales writes about a very different way of being "self": "It is a great happiness to possess one's soul, and the more perfect our patience the more completely do we possess our souls."

Being self-possessed is the state of experiencing self-possession. The dictionary defines self-possession having "full command of one's faculties, feelings and behaviors."

What in the world does our experience of "self" have to do with our spiritual life? In a word, *everything*.

Life as we know it has its share of ups and downs; triumph and tragedy; success and setback. What distinguishes one person from another is how he/she deals with the joys and pains of life.

Those who are self-absorbed are concerned only about their own plans, their own needs, their own convenience, their own program. In general, such folks tend to want what they want when they want it regardless of the impact that such expectations have upon other people. They tend to have a very low tolerance for frustration or delay of gratification. When anything — regardless of how large or small the issue — fails to go their way, all hell breaks loose: "They wish others to accommodate themselves to their humors, moods and will but will not accommodate themselves at all to those of others. They allow themselves to be carried away by their own inclinations and private affections and passions but see absolutely nothing wrong with their attitudes or actions." (Conferences, page 34)

"The self-absorbed display an inability and/or unwillingness to demonstrate real self-mastery."

In short, the self-absorbed display an inability and/or unwillingness to demonstrate authentic self-mastery: they are emotionally whipsawed by the ups and downs of life. They seem to be forever stewing in a state of turmoil and have a penchant for stirring up turmoil in the lives of others.

Contrast the self-absorbed with the self-possessed: with those who are in full command of their faculties, feelings and behaviors even as they are aware of the needs, concerns, likes and dislikes of others: "It is said that the wise person, that is, the one guided by reason, will render himself the absolute master of the stars. What does this mean? Such a person will, by use of reason, remain firm and constant amid all the various events and accidents that occur in this mortal life. Let the weather be fine or let it rain, let the air be calm or let it blow, the wise person (*i.e., the self-possessed person*) pays no attention to such changes...In short, in all kinds of events, in prosperity or adversity, such people remain firm, steadfast and constant in their resolution to aspire and to strive after the enjoyment of eternal blessings." (*Ibid*, pages 32-33)

With an eye to the example of the life and legacy of Jesus Christ, Francis de Sales writes: "We must often recall that our Lord has saved us by his suffering and endurance and that we must work out our salvation by sufferings and afflictions, enduring with all possible gentleness the injuries, denials and discomforts we experience." (IDL, III/3)

"It is a great happiness to possess one's soul, and the more perfect our patience the more completely do we possess our souls."

There is a great paradox in all this. The self-absorbed seem incapable of considering the needs of others or successfully pursuing their own. They are doomed to be carried through life of the waves of vicissitudes: they are ultimately self-defeating people. The self-possessed, by contrast, know who they are but not at the exclusion of knowing the needs and concerns of others. Comfortable in their own skin, they are able to blaze a trail in life in ways that help them pursue their own happiness while also respecting — perhaps even promoting — the happiness of others.

Make time for a self-check from time to time. Ask yourself these questions: Am I the master of my faculties, feelings and behaviors? Can I take ownership of myself and place who I am at the service of others?