

Freedom from self-consciousness

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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Several years ago, I realized that, for a long time, I had been fighting back tears whenever I would see children run gleefully around a playground or hear them squeal with delight as they played, or notice their wonder over wildflowers, squirrels, and birdsong. It would happen, too, when I listened to a choir of children sing at the top of their lungs without embarrassment or when I saw a kids' soccer team take the field with buoyant energy.

For a good while, I assumed that the tears must have welled up in me because I was grieving something I had lost in childhood but couldn't quite name as an adult.

Then I noticed, though—and I know this is odd—that I would also get misty-eyed when I saw big men (having been big most of my life) doing outrageous things—sometimes consequential outrageous things and sometimes silly outrageous things. When John Goodman would waltz around the kitchen on *Roseanne*, or John Belushi would sing and dance like a wild man in his *Blues Brothers'* routine, or Willard Scott would dress up like Carmen Miranda or Ronald McDonald or take off his toupee on national television, or Luciano Pavarotti would sing without restraint, I could hardly contain an odd mixture of joy and sadness.

What, I wondered, did playful children and these big men doing outrageous things have in common? For a few moments at least, they forgot themselves; they were free from the burden of *self-consciousness*.

Jesus said we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves; and it's also true that we should love ourselves as we love our neighbors. It's right and good to include ourselves in our circle of wise and tender care. Self-care, though, is not the same thing as self-consciousness.

When we are mired up in self-consciousness, we worry constantly about how we will appear to others, what they will think of us, and what they will do to us. We live cautiously and carefully, not taking risks, because we might fail, and not dreaming dreams, because they might not come true. Self-conscious people learn to defend

themselves and hold themselves back from life.

When Jesus calls us to “deny ourselves,” he’s inviting us, in part, to let go of our false selves. I also think he’s offering us the gift of freedom from the burden of self-consciousness. He’s pointing us toward the exhilarating experience of losing ourselves in marvels, mysteries, joys, and wonders, which are greater than we but which graciously include and welcome us.

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