

Hey, look at me

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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My friend Bob and I were sitting on the bleachers just outside the racquetball court and trying to catch our breath between games. A group of race-running, soccer-ball kicking, tricycle-riding, and twirling-dancing preschool children spread out across the basketball court set the air abuzz with an energy I envy and filled the gym with squeals and laughter.

Several brave and curious children came near us and looked at us as if we were bears in a zoo. A couple of them growled at us. A few said, "Watch this!" or "Hey, look at me," as they tossed a ball in the air and caught it, or ran a few yards and slid as if they were stealing second-base, or pedaled their trikes away in high gear. Of course, we told them that what they did was "amazing."

I've been thinking about how often grown-ups say a version of "Watch this!" and "Hey, look at me." All of us long to be seen and heard for who we truly are, to have our gifts affirmed and our talents validated, and to hear people whom we respect and admire (or whom we fear and envy) tell us that we've gotten their attention in some way.

I sometimes feel like I am back in third grade on "show and tell" days: I keep presenting evidence to the class and to the teacher that I've done something impressive or unique or cool. Or, I'm like a kid in a youth camp talent show who's looking for the applause of the other campers and, especially, for the smile and congratulations of the very cool college-aged counselor who produces the show. And, sometimes I am put in the position of the teacher or the camp counselor.

We yearn for affirmation of our identities and confirmation of our abilities. It's a legitimate yearning. We also have the opportunity to bless others by recognizing and relating to them as God's beloved and delightful children. We have the chance to celebrate the ways in which people make creative and life-enriching use of their capacities and capabilities.

Most of us know that the yearning for affirmation, while legitimate, and the longing for validation, while authentic, can twist and bind us. When we play our lives for the approval of powerful and influential people, we end up saying what we think they want us to say and doing what we think they want us to do, rather than what we most deeply think and feel. Their causes become ours; tragically, sometimes, even their fears become ours. Or, to avoid the risk of their disapproval, we fall silent when we should speak up and become passive when we should be active and engaged.

We get particularly confused when different people, all of whose “attaboy” or “attagirl” we crave, take positions which set them against each other. What do we do then? Who *are we* then? To use a hackneyed cliché: we’re like chameleons on plaid material, unsure how to appear, because we are uncertain about our identities.

These days, it seems, a lot of posturing and position taking comes less from open-minded listening and open-hearted loving and more from the positioners’ and position-takers’ fear that they will become invisible and inaudible if “they”—the others—are seen and heard as equal and valuable members of the human family.

“Watch this” is behind a lot of angry rhetoric. “Hey, look at me” is the motivation which drives many ambitions.

We don’t rise by putting others down, or shine by consigning other people to the shadows cast by our fears, or find freedom by confining people in our harshness.

I wish we knew how much God loves us and cherishes us—and everyone else. And, I wish we trusted that affirmation, recognition, and blessing are generous and abundant gifts, which are never in short supply. God gives them to us freely; we don’t have to take them from other people. We gain them as we give them, and we give them because we have them already by grace.

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