Natural Default Setting

In David Foster Wallace’s now famous speech entitled “This is Water”, Wallace masterfully depicts what young adult life is like to a group of newly graduated collegians. The bulk of his talk goes on to talk about how we, as humans, are naturally hard-wired to be selfish individuals. He describes this notion as our “natural, default setting”, but ironically enough there is nothing natural about it. Or maybe there is… Wallace tries to convey to his audience that after you graduate, you will soon experience the drags of the monotony of every day, young adult life, which he says most are usually not told of. Our natural, default setting is this deep-seeded notion that we (me, I, You, Us) are the center of the known universe because come on, what other perspective do we have besides us being the absolute center of it all?

Incurvatus in se – the Latin phrase St. Augustine used to describe how sin causes man to naturally turn into himself. Quite literally, it means to make everything about yourself. Again, our natural, default setting comes kicking in. The most devious part is that it happens ever so subtly, without even noticing a difference. The devil and his tricks man… So easy do we make every/any situation about ourselves and our needs. Our natural, default setting causes us to see from only one side of the coin, to only jump to conclusions that would make the other party at fault because it couldn’t possibly be because of what we’ve done. No, we are never wrong, we can’t make mistakes. Why did that person cut me off? Can’t they see I am 5 minutes late to my presentation I have for my boss that would lead to my inevitable promotion that has been a forgone conclusion since I said I deserved it.

It’s so easy to start falling into that mind set without us reminding ourselves day in, day out that its not all about us. So easy is it to make concrete, undisputed conclusions on people we pass by every day because it’s easier when things are black and white no? We love to simplify other people’s lives and motives, saying “oh I know why you’re like this” as if we’ve got any clue as to what they’ve gone through their entire lives. As if we know everything, like we’re the main character in their story as well. Reminders are necessary to sober our narcissistic tendencies to make it all about ourselves. We all need to be cut down to size.