

# Narcissism, Spiritual Pride, and Original Sin

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**ABSTRACT:** Narcissism has roots in childhood and a broad impact on society. Parental abuse, neglect, or exploitation result in unmet emotional needs that leave low self-esteem and patterns of longing for affirmation. When these needs are not gratified, interpersonal conflict ensues. At the extreme, torture, wars, and other conflagrations can be seen to have roots in narcissism, which is thus construed as the psychological explanation for what religion defines as original sin. The cold, dark pain of narcissistic woundedness comprises an abyss in the soul. Spiritual resources, including mysticism and surrender to divine love, may offer deep healing for those wounds.

There is an ancient prayer that says:

I adore thee, Divine One  
and I offer thee my affections,  
my thoughts and my actions.  
*May I be a pure nothing*  
That Thy adorable will be fulfilled  
Now and always.

*May I be a pure nothing:* What can that mean? Surrender is an important aspect of most spiritual paths, but it tends to fly in the face of what we know about current Western culture.

## *Cultural narcissism*

We are often taught from early childhood onward that we should *be a somebody*, that we should make our parents and teachers proud of us. What Christopher Lasch wrote in 1978 is even more true today: narcissism is a social phenomenon. He describes the narcissist as a type of personality easily recognized by observers of the contemporary cultural scene: "facile at managing the impression he gives to others, ravenous for admiration but contemptuous

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of those he manipulates into providing it; unappealingly hungry for emotional experiences with which to fill an inner void; terrified of aging and death" (Lasch, 1978, p. 38). Terror at the idea of death; terror in brief encounters with the inner void—contrast that to the welcoming surrender: "May I be a pure nothing"! What does that mean for us today? Is it possible that the spiritual quest provides the only true healing for our narcissistic terrors?

Many social scientists have observed and written about the narcissistic phenomena in our Western culture. Ernest Becker, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death*, tells us that human beings fear death, not so much because we fear extinction per se, but because we are terrified at the thought of "*extinction without significance*." Humanity's age-old dilemma in the face of death is really, at the root, a question of *meaning* (Becker, 1973). It seems to me, for that reason, that death offers us a perspective on the ultimate issues of narcissistic wounding, the fear of abandonment, and the yearning to matter, to have impact on the world. Becker writes in *Escape from Evil* about this narcissistic phenomenon as being deeply rooted in the human condition. He describes what anthropologists call "the moiety organization," which he says is "a stroke of primitive genius" in setting up a society that provides "ready-made props for self-aggrandizement." Of the dynamics of "status forcing," Becker writes:

people try to come out of social encounters a little bigger than they went in, by playing intricate games of one-upmanship. . . . There are rules for status . . . for coming out of social groups with increased self-inflation. Society almost everywhere provides codes for such self-aggrandizement, for the ability to boast, to humiliate, or just simply to outshine in quiet ways—like displaying one's superior achievements (Becker, 1975, p. 13).

The "grandiose conception of self" and the "blind optimism" that Lasch describes are, for Becker, simply an aspect of "the burning desire of the creature to count, to make a difference on the planet because he has lived, has emerged on it, and has worked, suffered and died" (Becker, 1975, p. 3).

So narcissism is endemic to the human condition, says Becker. Humans need a sense of meaning and purpose, but must get that sense of "self" from others. Often, it is at the expense of others:

Man needs to work his magic with the material of the world, and human beings are the primary materials for the image wrought by social life. . . . Man can expand his self-feeling . . . by any kind of triumph or demonstration of his own excellence. He expands his organization in complexity . . . by mental tricks of all types; by boasting about his achievements, taunting and humiliating his adversaries, or torturing and killing them. Anything that reduces the other . . . and adds to one's own size and importance is a direct way to gain self-feeling; it is a natural development out of the simple incorporation and fighting behavior of lower organisms.

. . . [The human being] is in an almost constant struggle not to be diminished in his organismic importance. . . . To be outshone by another is to be attached at some basic level to organismic durability. To lose, to be second rate, to fail to keep up with the best and the highest sends a message to the nerve center of the organism's anxiety: "I am overshadowed, inadequate; hence I do not qualify for continued durability, for life, for eternity; hence, I will die" (Becker, 1975, p. 11, 12).

Inherent in our humanity is the fear of death, which we often deny; and along with that fear goes the compulsive effort to build and maintain a self-image that tries to defy our mortality. But herein lies the essence of our failure: ". . . man's natural and inevitable urge to deny mortality and achieve a heroic self-image are the root causes of human evil" (Becker, 1975, p. xvii). *Narcissism as the root cause of evil* is an idea to which I will return later, suggesting, in the light of Becker's argument, that torturers like Hitler and Sadaam Hussein were often abused as children and could be diagnosed as suffering from narcissistic personality disorder.

First we will look at the myth of Narcissus and at the psychodynamic interpretations of narcissism; then at the pervasive tragical consequences of interpersonal conflicts based on narcissistic wounding. Next we will look at the Christian concept of original sin and will end with a discussion of spiritual pride.

### *The Narcissus myth*

The term "narcissism" is taken from Ovid's tale of the beautiful young huntsman who tragically fell in love with his own reflection. In this myth, the nymph Echo fell passionately in love with Narcissus, but he could not reciprocate because "his soft young body housed a pride so unyielding that neither boys nor girls could touch him." He spurned Echo and she was turned to stone, with only the sound of her echoing voice remaining. Many people had been scorned by Narcissus, and one of them prayed to the gods: "May he himself fall in love with another. . . . May he too be unable to gain his loved one." This prayer was granted, and one day Narcissus, weary from the hunt, lay down by a silvery spring of water to quench his thirst. There "he was enchanted by the beautiful reflection he saw. He fell in love with an insubstantial hope, mistaking a mere shadow for a real body. Spellbound by his own self, he remained there motionless." In anguish, he realized he could never have the fleshy object of his desires, and so he prayed for death. This prayer too was granted and, as he pined away, all that remained of his beautiful body was a small yellow and white flower that forever after grew on the spot by the silvery pool where he lay (Ovid, cited in Jacobi, 1990, pp. 8–12).

Mario Jacobi points out that the death of Narcissus represents a transformation—one that we might, in fact, call spiritual. Certainly the human di-

mensions of pride, scorn, shame, and rejection are central themes in this myth about "self-love." Echo's admiring calls confused him and his own reflection deceived him, because he saw only his "perfect beauty" and not the whole real self with its flaws as well. Narcissus's passion for his false self not only made it impossible for him to have any genuine relatedness but also prevented his full self-acceptance and *real* self love.

### *Subtle meanings of narcissism*

There are many meanings that have been ascribed to the term "narcissism" since Freud discussed the myth in 1914. In current psychiatric usage, a narcissistic personality disorder is one that includes the following symptoms: Fragile self-esteem, impairment in interpersonal relations, a sense of entitlement, the belief that one's problems or one's successes are unique, constant need for attention and admiration, and an exaggerated sense of failure when something goes wrong (Spitzer, et al, 1980, pp. 315–317). When we see that constellation of characteristics in a patient in therapy, we can rather quickly deduce that we are dealing with the narcissistic region of the personality. (I want to emphasize this point now, because it is rather clear that we *all* have narcissistic aspects in our personalities. In that, Becker's comments ring true about the ubiquitous nature of the narcissistic dynamic as it is perpetuated by human societies.)

Freud took a developmental perspective in his 1914 paper, "On Narcissism: An Introduction." He used the term narcissism to describe "self-love" as contrasted to "object-love." He theorized that a child's natural self-love becomes disturbed when s/he is exposed to a narcissistically disturbed parent. This happens because over-valuation of the child dominates the parents' emotional attitudes so that they ascribe every perfection to the child while at the same time trying to obscure and forget his/her various shortcomings. Freud recognized narcissism in parents who see their child as a "center of creation," or in those who insist that the child carry out the unfulfilled dreams of the parents, or in those who expect the child to have a better life than they did, one devoid of problems. Freud viewed these parents as likely to over-protect, over-value, and over-invest in their child. The resulting dynamic is that the child provides emotional sustenance for the parents rather than the parent sustaining the child.

Many of Freud's followers have discussed subtle variations on this theme. Kernberg, for example, viewed narcissism as a defensive response to a frightening world that is often dominated by cold, narcissistic parents. He saw pathological narcissism not as exaggerated self-love (as it may appear), but rather as self-hate or self-shame. Kernberg theorized that narcissistic grandiosity is a defense against pathologically low self-esteem, and he described the feelings of rage that may erupt as a defense against feelings of disgrace.

Kohut also devoted a great deal of attention to issues of narcissism, which he characterized as labile self-esteem, coupled with extreme sensitivity to failure, disappointments, and slights. He thought the weakened, defective sense of self was central to the narcissistic personality, and he viewed aggression as the response of the vulnerable self to injury, or to an unresponsive environment. Kohut theorized that a young child needs two things to develop a sound sense of self. The first is a "mirroring self-object," i.e., a parent who will mirror the child's accomplishments with a gleam of admiration and encouragement in the eye. Second, the child needs to have an idealized parental-*imago*, i.e., parents to whom he or she can look up in order to maintain a sense of tranquility and security. Good parents provide the soothing environment that the child internalizes as self-soothing, which is essential for a stable sense of self.

All the post-Freudian theorists agree that difficulties arise when a child does not have reliable, loving parental-objects to provide for their needs. All tend to agree that the intergenerational continuity of narcissistic personality structure occurs when narcissistic parents are unable to provide the loving attention each child needs.

I think Alice Miller is the most clear and articulate in her beautifully written, empathic description of the narcissistic personality's dilemma. Her book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, is enormously popular, a real rarity amidst the psychoanalytic literature, because she speaks to the child who has been neglected, abused and exploited. (And, to some degree, isn't that all of us?)

In essence, Miller writes about the gap that occurs in the upbringing of a child—the gap between what the child needs and wants in terms of attention and affection on the one hand, and on the other hand what the child receives. Since no parents are perfect and no parents (even if they were perfect) have sufficient time and energy to meet all the needs of their children, there is a gap in which the child sometimes feels unattended, unloved, rejected, even unlovable. This gap, this empty place in the psyche, is what one psychotherapy client called "the hole in the soul." This is what analysts would call "the narcissistic wound."

Miller writes of "the extent of the loneliness and desertion to which we were exposed as children, and hence intrapsychically still are exposed as adults" (Miller, 1981, p. 5). She is speaking here not just of the extreme cases of obvious desertion, trauma, or marked exploitation. Rather, she says:

Apart from these extreme cases, there are large numbers of people who suffer from narcissistic disorders. . . . They enter analysis in the belief, with which they grew up, that their childhood was happy and protected. Quite often we are faced here with gifted patients who have been praised and admired for their talents and their achievements. . . . According to prevailing, general attitudes, these people—the pride of their parents—should have had a strong and stable sense of self-assurance. But exactly the opposite is the case. In everything they under-

take they do well and often excellently; they are admired and envied; they are successful whenever they care to be—but all to no avail. Behind all this lurks depression, the feeling of emptiness and self-alienation, and a sense that their life has no meaning. These dark feelings will come to the fore as soon as the drug of grandiosity fails, as soon as they are not “on top,” not definitely the “superstar,” or whenever they suddenly get the feeling they failed to live up to some ideal image and measure they feel they must adhere to. Then they are plagued by anxiety or deep feelings of guilt and shame” (Miller, 1981, pp. 5–6).

Emptiness, self-alienation, guilt, and shame—these are the profound feelings from which the narcissist runs. Behind the perfect persona lies a tremendous sense of failure and a terror that one is, in essence, unlovable. Here is the abyss of the soul.

This abyss is often well hidden and people with narcissistic personalities spend a great deal of time and effort shoring up the persona so that no one knows the anguish they feel. Any sign of indifference, any slight or rejection causes them great suffering (and often defensive rage). Least of all do they want to know of, or to deal with, this “hole in the soul.” The resistance here is high; too much honesty exposes them to the most dreadful feelings of abandonment.

When working in depth, these narcissistic issues almost invariably come up with each client. In some cases the “hole in the soul” is enormous. These are the cases of true narcissistic personality disorder. In other cases, the narcissism is much more mild and may be well-disguised, but I propose that, at some time, it must be addressed in any individual who hopes to make progress on the psychospiritual journey.

Here is an example. A nun I saw once a week, for one year of therapy, was pleasant, creative and committed to religious life. She earnestly explored her past and present relationships, but we kept hitting up against a place of resistance. There seemed to be a tremendous emptiness that terrified her. At such times, she would avert her eyes, toss her head and change the subject, usually putting forth some platitude or discussing something that would imply that she was “OK,” “a good Christian,” “a leader,” or “an excellent student.” This toss of the head became a marker for me. I could almost feel her as a young girl with ringlets, tossing her head in pride and stand-offishness. (It seemed to be what Maltzberger calls the schizoid withdrawal from the narcissistic wound.) It was not hard to see the source of woundedness in her history. She was one of the youngest of eleven children. Although she was surrounded by people throughout her life, she was starved for individual attention. Only by being very, very good could she sometimes win enough parental approval to warrant a few moments of special attention. Her older sisters were often critical and perhaps jealous of her; she must have been a very pretty child. Rejection and fear of rejection became a recurrent theme throughout her course of therapy. She would often feel depressed, but a little

exploration would reveal that she had been slighted in some way. (The depression would lift quickly when someone showed her appreciation.) Usually this nun would sidetrack the discussion whenever the narcissistic issue arose, but a strong sense of shame remained. Rarely would she talk about her younger years in her religious order; she might briefly allude to having had interpersonal difficulties back then, but she was unwilling to explore them in any depth.

As I began to confront—ever so gently—the avoidance I was seeing, her sense of shame became almost palpable in the room. We were standing at the edge of the void, and she was afraid of falling in. Gently I began to talk about her narcissistic wound; with this naming of the issue (which I often do, along with a recommendation to read Alice Miller as bibliotherapy), she could finally put aside her “good girl” persona and reveal her deeper pain and feelings of shameful inadequacy. With this breakthrough came a new sense of her own inner power and a budding appreciation of wholeness. Not again did she avert her eyes and toss her head to brush aside her real self. The work with her became deep and rich and delightful. Only in the termination session did I see again the cardboard image of the false self. When I voiced an interpretation of the way I was experiencing her again, she was able to admit her deep fear of losing the true self that she had found in therapy; she was terrified that the end of therapy would mean the end of her ability to connect with her true feelings and to *be* her true self. That admission allowed us to move into creative discussion of ways she could nurture her own essential self, so that no one could ever again force her into a mold, into playing a role that was not authentic for her true self.

Alice Miller explicates the intergenerational continuity in narcissistic personality dynamics. As she sees it, to avoid losing parents’ love, a child must gratify the parents’ unconscious needs at the cost of its own self-realization. This move may prevent the child from being itself throughout life. Certainly in a family as large as eleven children, there is far too little parental attention, and often parents may rely on parentified help from the children. (But this same dynamic may occur in a family with an only child, when the parents are narcissistically disturbed or over-focused on the child.)

Miller says that parents are often themselves like “insecure children.” They may see in their offspring a weaker creature that, in contrast, makes them feel strong. Many parents may attempt to over-control the child, out of the parents’ own feelings of being helpless, weak, or afraid. In such situations, parents are unable to fulfill the child’s primary narcissistic needs because the parents grew up in an atmosphere where their own narcissistic needs were never met. Thus the parents themselves were deprived and throughout life they have been searching for what they did not receive—someone to admire and attend to them. They look to their children for gratification of their own needs. In this tremendous focus on parents’ needs, parents tend to reject a child’s “true self.” They often reject the child’s negative feelings with the re-

sult that the child often admits only to feelings that the parents approve. The cost is depression and emptiness which is often covered over by grandiosity. In similar manner, narcissistic rage may occur as a defense in a child whose parents were unavailable or in families which rejected some part of the child's true self.

Miller perceives the "narcissistically abused" personality as differing only in degree from what we have been discussing here. Such personalities show marked tendencies toward a sometimes obsequious meeting of the needs of other people, with a sense that one's own needs are "unimportant." Some such narcissistically wounded offspring may feel a strong obligation to fulfil parental demands, to shield or even protect their parents from all forms of emotional upset. Most have ongoing problems with the issue of belongingness.

Although Miller, like other psychoanalytic thinkers, recognizes a form of "healthy narcissism. . . . the ideal case of a person who is genuinely alive, with free access to the true self and his authentic feelings," she contrasts this with the narcissistic disorders where "the true self's solitary confinement within the prison of the 'false self'" (Miller, 1981, p. xx) often manifests as a tragic loss indeed.

#### *Narcissism as root cause of human tragedy*

How many conflicts, great and small, have been carried on because one or both parties have been defensively protecting their narcissistic wounds? Historians agree that one of the major causes of World War II was the Treaty of Versailles that left a German nation humiliated after the Allies' victory in the first World War. It seems that forcing one's enemy to "come to his knees" inevitably leads to more warfare. In similar fashion, President Bush's more recent "ultimatum to withdraw" could have nothing but an incendiary effect on a narcissistic personality such as Sadaam Hussein. Now, I do not pretend to have expertise in analysis of world affairs, but I do suggest that it is people who run countries, people who wage wars, and it would be wise for us to be cognizant of the particular narcissistic wounds of people who are in positions of power. Most crimes of violence, whether organized or individual, are fueled by the rage that arises in defense against feelings of humiliation. I would venture to guess that most crime, whether against individuals or whole societies, carries within it a kernel of narcissistic rage—a kernel of vengeance—in the heart of the perpetrator.

On a far smaller scale, it can be seen that marital conflict also frequently centers around mutual (often unconscious) efforts to "get back" at the partner because of feelings of shame and belittlement. In these "intimate conflicts," each partner can recognize all too easily where lies the "soft spot" of the opponent—the vulnerability of the narcissistic wound. Family therapists would be



wise to delve more deeply into the narcissistic dynamics of the marital partners they see. It would seem that many of the centuries-old male-female conflicts also stem from deep narcissistic wounds that are passed on from one generation to the next.

Narcissism was also the primary emotional factor that led to the Freud-Jung split (narcissism on both sides), and it is likely to be the primary factor that perpetuates that split among their analytic followers. How many other professional turf battles and power struggles may be heightened by lack of respect and (conscious or unconscious) jabs at the narcissistic wounds of the other side? Whenever groups battle within societies, we might come to greater understanding of the conflicts if we looked to the dynamics of narcissism. And whenever instant, blinding rage erupts in interpersonal relations, there is likely a narcissistic issue behind it. When the narcissistic wound is touched, the feelings of humiliation and shame are extraordinarily primitive and strong! The abyss of feeling unlovable is so full of anguish and terror, that the psyche quickly mounts its counterattack. Hateful things are said or done that perpetuate the vicious circle of contempt. In essence, the picture of one individual claiming power over another harks back to the experiences of humiliation in childhood.

Miller writes:

Contempt is the weapon of the weak and a defense against one's own despised and unwanted feelings. And the fountainhead of all contempt, all discrimination, is the exercise of power over the child by the adult. . . . What adults do to their child's spirit is entirely their own affair. For the child is regarded as the parents' property, in the same way as the citizens of a totalitarian state are the property of its government. Until we become sensitized to the small child's suffering, this wielding of power by adults will continue to be a normal aspect of the human condition (Miller, 1981, p. 69).

Miller, in *The Untouched Key*, gives numerous examples of historical figures, both artistic and political geniuses, who suffered from severe narcissistic wounding in childhood. She writes, for example:

For Stalin—who, like Hitler, was born after the death of several siblings—there was nothing but loneliness, the constant threat of beatings, the belief in his own ostensible worthlessness and guilt, and *nowhere another human being to protect him* from constant persecution and abuse, to tell or show him that he was not guilty. There was no one of influence in his life who could avert his fate, just as there was no mercy later for the millions of prisoners in the Gulag Archipelago (Miller, 1990, p. 68, emphasis added).

What makes the difference in the manifestation of narcissism in these historical figures, is the presence of a single, compassionate caretaker. (We

might wonder, also, how often do we as therapists fulfill that role for our clients?)

A single empathic, compassionate individual can make the difference between a Hitler and a Picasso, or between a Stalin and a Nietzsche. The cruelty or the creativity is fostered in the crucible of life. The narcissistic wound often leads to grandiosity, and its outcome may be terrible or eventual greatness. The path that a wounded psyche follows depends, not only on talents, but also on the availability or lack of "another human being to protect him." The circle of contempt can be broken, says Miller, only by an understanding soul who shows compassion in the face of the narcissistic wound.

Miller and Becker here seem to come to a point of agreement: narcissism is an individual dynamic, but it is fostered by societal pressures, and it impacts the larger community in often surprisingly powerful ways.

Narcissism, with its intrapsychic roots in the longing of a small child for comfort and affection, has tremendous impact on the welfare, or the tragic suffering, of countless people. As Miller says:

When a child's boundless powerlessness never finds sheltering arms, it will be transformed into harshness and mercilessness. . . . Then millions of human beings are marched to Russian prisons or to Nazi gas chambers without knowing why, because once a little boy didn't know why he was being punished. How long are we going to tolerate these senseless marches now that we finally are in a position to discover their underlying cause?

### *Original sin*

Ernest Becker has suggested that narcissism, with its constant efforts to achieve a heroic self-image, and its denial of mortality, may be a root cause of the evil and suffering seemingly inherent in the human condition. Let us look now at what religion may have to say about this issue of narcissism and its accompanying evils. In the Judeo-Christian myth, original sin is said to stem from the pride of Adam and Eve which was expressed in their eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Their sin was hubris: wanting to be omniscient, as God was omniscient. Similar was the sin of Lucifer, that dark angel who fell from God's grace because of his pride and desire for power. We have the colloquial saying: "pride goeth before a fall," certainly true for Adam and Eve as well as for Lucifer, who became known as Satan. Are we not here talking about the dynamic of narcissism in the human soul?

Biblically, it is also written that: "The sins of the fathers are visited on the sons." That seems to be an early insight into what we are referring to as intergenerational continuity. In psychological terminology, we might revise that just slightly: The genetic loading of the mothers and fathers, their personalities and patterns of behavior, and the family-system dynamics deter-

mine the personalities, behavior patterns, and predisposition to physical and emotional dysfunction in the succeeding generations.

Or, to follow Alice Miller's theories, we can say that parents who themselves grew up in an atmosphere where their narcissistic needs were not met are unable to fulfill their child's narcissistic needs. They attempt to control the child and reject the child's "true self." Because the parents feel helpless, weak, or afraid, they search throughout life for what they did not receive, i.e., a person to admire them. The children become objects for the gratification of parental needs. In doing so, the children hide their "true selves," admitting only to feelings their parents approve. The children may grow up with narcissistic rage at parents who were unavailable or who rejected some part of the child's self.

So, generation by generation, "the sins of the father and mother are visited on the daughters and sons." Thanks to psychoanalytic and social-psychological understanding, we have a growing keen awareness that narcissism is at the root of what has heretofore been called "original sin." Narcissism is passed down from one generation to the next when the unmet affectional needs of the parents lead to their failure to meet the needs of their children. The children become narcissistically wounded and act out their own defensive rage whenever a slight or a rejection occurs.

This happens in each of us, in ways large or small. We all play our part in the tragic human drama. We are all essentially so needy! The small child who was left alone has inner yearnings for total acceptance, total security, a total sense of belongingness. In adulthood, when we are injured in any small way, when we are criticized or when that particular spot of vulnerability is touched in our souls, we sense again the great abyss of feeling unloved, unworthy, unacceptable, UNLOVABLE. We hover on the edge of the abyss, terrified of falling into a sense of deep despair. Wounded and hurt, we often retreat into solitude or else we may lash out unthinkingly. Defensively, we blunder once again. Our failures strewn around us, we struggle mightily to rebuild our shattered self-esteem. The conflicts we create are just added evidence of our ineptitude, our inadequacy. Unconsciously, we so often try to avoid looking at the total picture, we avoid looking at our part of the drama, avoid seeing the hurt in the eyes of the other. We avoid recognizing the tragic component in our small piece of the human web of interaction. So often we break off communications out of an intense desire to protect our wounded pride, but without openness the very healing grace of dialogue cannot occur. We suffer alone, confirmed in our despair and in our separativity.

This all too human dynamic has found commentators in many cultures and many religions. In Buddhism, the narcissistic region of the personality would be symbolized by the realm of the Hungry Ghosts. Buddhist mythology depicts the metaphor for life as a great cosmic wheel with six regions. The realm of the Hungry Ghosts is a realm of falsity, insubstantial living, and a realm of deep yearning. Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, reminds us that the

world is full of people who act like hungry ghosts. And each of us lives, for some period of time, in that haunted region. Thich Nhat Hanh's classic words are: "Hungry ghosts long to be loved." That, I think, is the epitome of the narcissistic wound. Deep within, we are all hungry ghosts longing to be loved.

Sara Teasdale, in her poignant poem "The Broken Field," writes:

My soul is a dark ploughed field  
In the cold rain;  
My soul is a broken field  
Ploughed by pain.

What healing may there be for this region of cold, dark pain? C. G. Jung maintains that there can be no real psychic healing, no fully successful psychological "cure" without attainment of a new spiritual attitude. This meta-noia often entails abandonment of previous religious or irreligious attitudes. A conversion, it seems, is necessary. Mario Jacobi writes that it was

. . . Jung's conviction that there is one central, telling question in a man's life namely: "Is he related to something infinite or not?" Only by being in relation to the infinite can we, according to Jung, avoid concentrating on futilities and leading a life that has no meaning (Jacobi, 1990, p. 135).

### *Spiritual responses to narcissistic need*

William James, the premier American psychologist of religious experience, writes dramatically about the affect accompanying the narcissistic wound. He adds to our perspective in understanding the ubiquity of our anxiety over failure.

Failure, then failure! So the world stamps us at every time. We strew it with our blunders, our misdeeds, our lost opportunities, with all the memorials of our inadequacy to our vocation. And with what a damning emphasis does it then blot us out! . . . The subtlest forms of suffering known to man are connected with the poisonous humiliations incidental to these results. . . . And they are pivotal human experiences. A process so ubiquitous and everlasting is evidently an integral part of life (James, 1961, p. 119).

If yearning for success, with its accompanying accolades, and fear of failure are both integral to life and central to the narcissistic dynamic, then one attitude change that may calm our fear and ameliorate our suffering is a spiritual surrender of such desires. To work for a cause without concern for the outcome of that effort is spiritual work indeed. It requires an inner transformation, perhaps one not unlike the mythical death of Narcissus and the coming to life of the familiar yellow and white spring flower. When we work without undo concern for the outcome, we are living a spiritually surrendered life.

It has been said that Judaism is a religion of justification, Christianity a religion of salvation, and Islam a religion of renunciation. With respect to healing the narcissistic wound, renunciation may offer the most helpful outlook for change. In fact, most of the mystical traditions emphasize renouncement as an important prelude to a full sense of union with the Divine.

Thus in the field of mental health do leading theorists such as Emmanuel Ghent at New York University and John T. Maltsburger at Harvard write about the psychological importance of surrender and renunciation. Maltsburger emphasizes that a capacity for renunciation is a sign of maturing narcissism. He describes Winston Churchill, for example, as a leader who had “narcissistically rooted courage.” But renouncement is a spiritual act, and there remains a capacity to refuse compromise on questions of right and justice. In such a person, he says, there may be humor, wisdom, and creativity in the face of difficulty. There is a strong will—to seek, to strive, to prevail—but not to yield to the force of evil (Maltsburger, 1988).

No one can doubt that our difficulties in life are inevitable. Increasingly these difficulties must be accepted with equanimity, as we mature. But our difficulties, our challenges, and our failures may also be viewed, from a spiritual perspective, as aspects of our unique call, our vocation.

### *Spiritual ascent and spiritual pride*

We have glimpsed some of the ways that surrender, or the voluntary setting aside of one's own ego desires, may be an essential aspect of healing the narcissistic wound. It seems that there is nothing short of God that will fill the “hole in the soul” in any more than a temporary way. As the prayer St. Augustine uttered says, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” This is the fullness—or kataphatic—form of spiritual goal. On the other hand, in the Buddhist tradition, it is the emptiness itself—the apophatic way—that is seen to be the royal road to enlightenment.

So, in our reflections, as pastoral counselors, psychologists, or other mental health practitioners, exploring our own varied spiritual paths, we may rejoice in the hope that our inner spiritual work may serve to heal our own narcissistic wounds, even as we strive to ameliorate the wounds and buttress the self-esteem of our patients and clients. But, lest we become too complacent or self-satisfied, there is one other danger we must recognize. That is the risk that our narcissism, rather than being healed by the spiritual work, may be transferred onto the spiritual domain itself. When that happens, a holier-than-thou attitude arises that may become quite blatant or so subtle that it is difficult for individual spiritual practitioners to see it in themselves. For this reason, it is helpful to have a spiritual director or group of spiritual companions who can give honest feedback when necessary.

Spiritual pride is an inevitable hurdle that must be transcended in every

spiritual journey. In fact, spiritual pride is an obstacle that is only too likely to be encountered again and again. With our well-conditioned aspirations for "progress" and "success," our ambition may often kick in so strongly that the slightest movement forward will be accompanied by the feeling "Ain't I great!" This response in itself tends to set us back two steps for each step forward. The only thing to do is to pray for humility and try to break the habit of assessing or judging our every move.

One of the things I find helpful during silent retreats is to participate in the manual work in silence. During those periods, I begin to hear my own thoughts more clearly as they arise. Almost invariably I hear myself thinking something along these lines: "Did I get that venetian blind clean enough? Am I doing that task quickly enough? Will the retreat director be pleased with me? Will my spiritual director be angry if I don't do it well enough?" When I hear these thoughts arising, I do what behavioral psychologists call thought-stopping. I say to myself: "Nonsense! That's not the point here." The point is to do the work without judgment, without resistance; to do the work in participation with others around the world who do similar manual work each day. The point is not to please others, not even to please God. (No spiritual brownie points here!) The point is to be present, to humbly go about life's tasks. It is really remarkably freeing to change those lifelong attitudinal habits that have been aimed at pleasing others.

To just *be*, to be present, without judgment and without striving: such moments are freeing and in them, I sometimes sense an inner healing and transformation every so slowly working itself out. In the freedom of the non-striving moment, a glimpse of the value of being a pure nothing may occur. The egoless state may in fact be a prerequisite to deeper spiritual experience. Angelus Silesius, a seventeenth-century Christian monk, said it well:

God, whose love and joy  
are present everywhere,  
Can't come to visit you  
unless you aren't there.

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