



"Narcissism and Spirituality"

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I begin our exploration of narcissism with a story: *The Myth of Cassius*, modified in [Narcissism, A New Theory](#) by Neville Symington.

--- The Myth of Cassius ---

A young man called Cassius was lost in the wilderness. He wandered this way and that but was unable to find his way back to human habitation. He feared he would die. Then he came to a fertile glade. Around him he found trees laden with luscious fruit of all kinds, and there was a well with beautiful, clear, bubbling water. So satisfied was he with his surroundings that he gave up the idea of trying find his way back to civilization. He spent all his days roaming in the glade, sleeping, eating, and drinking. As quickly as he ate the fruit, new ones ripened. Even sexually, he was at peace: whenever the sexual urge arose in him, a nymph appeared and fondled him in all the places that gave him pleasure. Then, he would fall asleep, and the nymph would vanish. The nymph also ministered to him in other ways. When he longed for music, the nymph would play beautifully for him on a variety of instruments. When he wanted literature, the nymph would read to him as he lay back in a cool bower. He passed his days in blissful abandon and believed himself to be the luckiest man in the universe.

When Cassius had been living in the glade for about a year, he woke up one morning with a headache, and the nymph was unable to do anything about it. He began to feel a strange restlessness. He could not understand what it was he wanted. He wandered around the glade, eating fruit and drinking the sparkling water, but he was dissatisfied. Just as he was going to sleep, he realized that he was longing for a friend. He knew the myth of Narcissus, so the next morning he went and looked at himself in the water, but he still felt lonely. He even tried shouting, to hear and echo, but that offered no comfort either. The next day when he woke, he decided that he would walk in a

straight line out of the glade, until he found someone. "I am bored with myself," he said. He walked and walked until he came to a broad stream, and on the stream he saw a girl rowing a boat. He called to her and asked her name.

"My name is Miriam," she called back.

"Please come to me," he called. So she rowed up close to him. "Take me in your boat," he begged. "I want to be your friend."

"But you don't know me," she said.

"Tell me where you live," he pleaded.

"I live a long way from here, in a garden I've constructed all by myself with great effort. I've built a canal from this river to water the garden. Each day, I get up and put manure on the desert soil. I dig and plant seeds, and I harvest the wheat, grind the grains, and make flour. Each day, I bake bread. I grow fruit trees. I have made a violin out of the wood of a chestnut tree: I fashioned the strings from hemp soaked in resin. I play the violin after I tend the garden. In the afternoon I sit down at a desk in the little house I have made and I write my novel. In the evening I cook myself a meal."

"Let me join you," said Cassius.

"I worked hard to build my garden," Miriam replied. "I'll only let you come provided you give me a baby."

"I don't mind giving you a baby," said Cassius.

"I will tend the baby. You will have to rise early in the morning, fertilize the soil, bake the bread, and play the violin to me, while I'm nursing our baby."

"I can do all that," said Cassius, breezily.

"One last thing I must tell you," said Miriam. "It's the law of the wilderness. Once I take you in my boat across the river, I shall burn the boat, and you can never return to your glade. You will have lost it forever."

Cassius frowned at this, and his frown summoned the nymph. "What do you want that for?" asked the nymph. "I can give you all that she can give. When you want music, I give it to you. When you want sex, I provide it. When you want beautiful literature, I read it to you in a tuneful voice. When you want food, it is there in luxurious abundance in the glade."

The nymph led him back around the glade and showed him all that he would lose. The nymph was cunning. "You can have all that she offers without having to leave the glade, without having to cross the river. I'll show you." The nymph then rubbed Cassius' body all over with a perfumed unguent and

said, "Now, if you call whatever name you care, the most beautiful companion will come to you."

Cassius thought for a moment. He wanted to call out "Miriam," but the word did not come out as he intended. Instead, it came out "Marian." Instantly, a beautiful girl appeared who accompanied him everywhere. For a year, he lived in the glade with Marian, but then one morning when he awoke he found that she had vanished. Only then did he remember Miriam. He rushed to the river where he had seen her in the boat, but she said that it was too late. She had found another man and now had a baby. Cassius returned to the glade and went straight to the well and drowned himself.

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God once asked St. Peter, "Where can I hide the secrets of mankind?" St. Peter said, "Try the top of Mount Everest, your highest mountain." In time humans found their way up and by and by there grew a cataclysmic trail of litter along the way. So God again asked his Rock, where to hide the secrets. He wanted man to work hard to find them after all. "I know. How about the moon?" "Actually, the traffic there looks to be becoming a bit much. Nothing really to overcome any more." God finally says to Peter, "I know where no one will ever look! I'll put my secrets, my Truths, inside the hearts of my People. That is the last place they'll look." Embarrassingly, this is true.

We are all on a spectrum between absolute narcissism and absolute spirituality, and we must look at our narcissism to save the earth and ourselves. That is to say, we must look inside ourselves, and self-reflect.

Narcissism is the state of being absorbed by one's own pain. It is such a preoccupation with that pain that it excludes the other. So engrossed by emotional pain, it only hurts more to self-reflect.

Sigmund Freud actually coined the term for his fellow professional's use *only*, and he meant it with all due compassion. He was influenced by Frederic Nietzsche, who was fascinated with the Greek myths and how they told the stories of our everyday lives. Freud saw in the myth of Narcissus this common state of preoccupation with one's pain.

Narcissus was a handsome Greek youth who rejected the desperate advances of the nymph Echo. Among the many depictions in art is painter, John Waterhouse's *Narcissus & Echo*, which hangs in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, England. As punishment, he was doomed to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Unable to consummate his love, Narcissus wasted away over time and changed into the flower that bears his name, thus losing his humanity.

Primary narcissism is the first developmental stage of human life. Why not? When the infant is born the good caretakers focus on fulfilling all the needs of the child. The child has no clue of the needs of others and how could she? Through ordinary life, the child learns eventually the frustration of having to wait for needs to get met, delaying gratification until that occurs. Healthy parents understand, allowing a 'healthy' amount of frustration. We are born into this narcissistic state and spend the rest of our lives moving to the other end of the spectrum.

Pathological Narcissism, on the other hand, is a result of the growing child being wounded beyond the child's ability to make sense of it. Freud postulated that the wounding occurred because the child received uneven parenting, when the parents were preoccupied with their own pain and suffering.

The child is at best neglected or worse, abused verbally, physically, and/or sexually. In this case, the child, who naturally wants to love his parents but can't trust them to hold his love, regretfully begins to take himself as the love object, as did Narcissus. He retreats into himself, creating his own reality along the way. He bestows upon himself honors and awards that compensate for the love and dignity that would otherwise be given by wholesome parents. This false self-manifestation, which is primarily unconscious, is a protection from the child's harsh environment. He may seek

power over others instead of love and companionship with others. For the Harry Potter fans, Voldemort is a great illustration of this.

At one end of the spectrum is absolute narcissism, but the pathology exists all the way along the spectrum in descending degrees until it disappears. I've never met anyone at either end of the spectrum. I suspect that someone at this end would die (examples being Narcissus, Voldemort, Cassius, Hitler). Someone on the other end would turn into a ball of light. I'm not sure, because I've yet to meet anyone who is wound-free. Some are so paralyzed by their early childhood wounds that it yields them non-functional at one end of the scale. They can't love and work. There are those toward the other end of the bell curve who pass us by with all the good works they do in the world.

Narcissistic characteristics come about honestly. ALL of our pathological symptoms come about honestly. This requires that these characteristics and symptoms be understood, and not judged.

We are all somewhere on this spectrum. We are all wounded, and where we are on the spectrum depends upon the amount of woundedness. The narcissism we all have arises not only from familial and parenting patterns, but schools, religion, society, and life all have a hand in it. To get in touch with what it is to be emotionally wounded, imagine our thumbs smashed in a car door. As long as our thumbs stay swollen, pounding and painful, we will be preoccupied with our wounds. Our emotional woundedness isn't any different.

Until sufficient self-examination and wound licking takes place the wound will persist, preventing us from widening our perspective beyond ourselves. Where we are on the spectrum depends upon the amount of woundedness, how we and our families together handle these psychological wounds and our own built-in constitutions. Other mysteries are involved as well. Freud said

that we know when our therapy is complete, and we are at our healthiest, when we can love and work, fully.

Narcissism is the inability to live in cooperation with another. In the story, we see that Cassius lived in his own world. He could hardly tolerate the world of the other that Miriam offered to him. It is a dramatic story. He lacked a sense of the other, choosing his fantasy life, which in practical terms could be addiction, work, and avoiding relationship. For many of us, we have a very difficult time being a cooperative part of something bigger than ourselves. I find it hard to be married, for instance. I have to remember to think of my partner, to decide together, plan, vision, and coordinate for our greater good. When I do get this accomplished, it is quite rewarding. I feel like a strong man, desiring more adult behavior from myself.

Other symptoms include the inability to tolerate criticism, the inability to self reflect, seeing one's own part in a conflict, the inability to face and work through healthy conflict that inevitably arises in intimate relations or in organizations such as church, work, community, and family. Envy is a tip off that we are in a narcissistic state.

Here is an interesting caveat to the notion of narcissism; there is the God/worm perspective. Many, in a defense against what others may describe as "he-thinks-he's God" - arrogant, superior, aggrandizing self, create a worm persona. One of my mentors, [Neville Symington](#), whose brilliant book entitled [Narcissism: A New Theory](#), inspired this talk, suggests when we dare not be God. We may behave in the opposite way, yet another layering of false self protection. We may grovel, always act as if we are less than others, and in spite of our innate abilities and gifts may attempt to hide them, as Jesus once noted, "under a basket." One of the most famous of the symptoms is a sense of entitlement. It exists more obviously when people express themselves as God, not the worm side of the coin. It exists in the worm expression, but it is well hidden.

In my growing up I often played the worm. I hated my extended family's characteristics, which I later came to characterize as narcissistic. My mother, bless her heart, would over analyze me. She'd say, "you are always trying to get attention". Of course I'm trying to get attention. But you were too anxious and depressed to give it to me properly. I'd ask her to rub my back, "but then you'll want me to do it more!" she'd say. "You always have an answer for everything" "Don't get smart, now young man" OK, I'll play dumb to get you to love me.

We aren't narcissistic every "square" moment we breathe necessarily, nor are we in an enlightened state at all times. So I used the expression, "narcissistic state". [Otto Kernberg](#), the famed psychoanalyst at [Columbia University](#) writes that we pay a disservice to ourselves and to patients when we render them a diagnosis because it creates in our minds a static state of existence. He prefers we use the term "state" after a term such as narcissist or the other well-known disorder of character, the Borderline Personality, calling it a borderline state. This suggests dynamic motion, which means we may move in and out of certain states be they dark or light.

Most of us function well enough. But we know the majority of us are not at the Buddha end of the scale. And if we are not enlightened, we are still licking our wounds. All too many are not good stewards of the environment, not loving when really challenged, and not involved in fulfilling work whose product is best for humanity as a whole. I'm getting ahead of myself talking about what the spiritual end of the scale looks like. We know we are not healthy as a society as we have allowed leadership which weakened our standing in the world, corporate greed, turning a blind eye to people in need, and increasing global warming, which threatens the planet with mass extinctions.

Sometimes narcissism reveals itself as self-aggrandizing, arrogance, and a lack of compassion for others. Therefore, it is difficult for us to see through these unnatural and mean behaviors to see through to the wounded person behind the behaviors.

I used to turn off the most narcissistic of my clients. They'd get upset and quit. I didn't know why. I didn't realize I wasn't seeing through their behavior to their pain and their real desire to love and be loved. I thought I was truthful. It wasn't until I understood my own narcissistic behaviors that, along with good supervision of my work, I could keep these people engaged in their own treatment.

Here's a good story from psychologist and Buddhist teacher [Jack Kornfield](#):

In a large temple north of Thailand's ancient capital, Sukotai, there once stood an enormous and ancient clay Buddha. Though not the most handsome or refined work of Thai Buddhist art, it had been cared for over a period of five hundred years and had become revered for its sheer longevity. Violent storms, changes of government, and invading armies had come and gone, but the Buddha endured.

At one point, however, the monks who tended the temple noticed that the statue had begun to crack and would soon be in need of repair and repainting. After a stretch of particularly hot, dry weather, one of the cracks became so wide that a curious monk took his flashlight and peered inside. What shone back at him was a flash of brilliant gold! Inside this plain old statue, the temple residents discovered one of the largest and most luminous gold images of Buddha ever created in Southeast Asia. Now uncovered, the golden Buddha draws throngs of devoted pilgrims from all over Thailand.

The monks believe that this shining work of art had been covered in plaster and clay to protect it during times of conflict and unrest. Kornfield goes on to say that in much the same way, each of us has encountered threatening situations that lead us to cover our innate nobility. Just as the people of Sukotai had forgotten about the golden Buddha, we have forgotten our essential nature. Much of the time, we operate from the protective layer. The primary aim of Buddhist psychology is to help us see beneath this armoring and bring out our original goodness, our Buddha nature. This is the first

principle of Buddhist psychology: see the inner nobility and beauty of all human beings.

In the early years of my training in Washington, DC, I discovered the N-word in myself. I would become envious of some of my fellow students. They seemed to get closer to my mentor than me, they said something more witty than me, seemed more scholarly, just seemed MORE, period. We learned in [Melanie Klein's](#) work, [Envy and Gratitude](#) that envy is a good sign of inner wounds. We become distracted from our lives and get invested in what the other guy has. Gratitude, she says heals the envy.

Which brings me to our current culture. [Christopher Lasch's](#) most famous work, [The Culture of Narcissism \(1979\)](#), sought to relate the hegemony of modern-day capitalism to an encroachment of a "therapeutic" mindset into social and family life. Lasch posited that social developments in the 20th century such as the post World War II rise of consumer culture gave rise to a narcissistic personality structure in which individuals' fragile self-concepts led, among other things, to a fear of commitment and lasting relationships, a dread of aging, a worship of "youth culture," and a boundless admiration for fame and celebrity (nurtured initially by the motion picture industry and furthered principally by television).

We become worried about our wrinkles, want some plastic surgery, keep our sexual dynamism through drugs, worship money and status, and lose track of our desire to love and be loved with the ones we are with.

Many of the well-known therapists of our age who like to diagnose national figures have agreed that our last two presidents are seriously narcissistic with sociopathic features, meaning they think they are above the law and break it. Arguably, President Bush and many of his companions have a notable inability to self reflect, living as Cassius, in a world of their own making. They ignored such facts, which we've all seen in contradiction to the

evidence, just as the child saw the Emperor was naked in the story of the *Emperor's New Clothes*.

President Bush said there is no evidence for the theory of evolution. He was once quoted saying, when vetoing the bilingual bill the Texas House and Senate spent so much time hammering out so the many Spanish speaking civilians in Texas could ease into American life, that "if English was good enough for Jesus Christ, then it is good enough for me". This, by the way, is the sort of thinking that has me convinced that Jesus Christ will never return. Why would he ever want to come back to a place that has maligned him so?

Now we will move on to Spirituality, and *how to heal narcissism*.

Spirituality concerns the structures of significance that give meaning and direction to a person's life and helps them deal with the variations of existence. Thus says Webster's New World International Dictionary. To me, it is embracing something larger than ourselves and recognizing ourselves as part of a whole. Just as the Earth is a part of a whole galaxy, we are a part of the whole of life of Earth. What is larger than me includes such vital dimensions as the quest for meaning, purpose, self-transcendence, meaningful relationships, love and commitment, as well as a sense of the Holy among us.

In healing there is a conscious promise: Love is the spirit of community, it includes the quest for Truth, it involves a commitment or a covenant. It means dwelling together in peace, therefore we work boldly to face conflict, not flight or fight – and owning our part in it. In yoga we study Non-Harming before we study Truth. Truth delivered in a destructive manner defeats the purpose, doesn't it? And like the Buddha, who returned from his solitary enlightened state, to "*help one another believe more fully in Life*", until "the last sentient being achieves enlightenment".

The process of healing, which takes us along the spectrum away from narcissism and into our spirituality, is a long and arduous process. It comes through self-reflection. That is key because our trouble has to make sense; we come to it honestly, and when we take the time to look and connect the dots, things come together in our minds that allow us to forgive ourselves and to forgive others. One of my favorite mythological examples is that of Jesus hanging on the cross and in the end able to forgive humanity for "They know not what they are doing."

As with Jesus, our personal pains and fears become less important when we see ourselves in the context of the whole. We aren't overwhelmed by the task before us and we do our part. We are nothing without the whole. It isn't about amassing riches and worrying about our own corner of the world; it's about taking care of the whole. That is stewardship.

We can look at Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Lao Tsu, Gandhi, Mandela, or Mahadevi Akka, the female naked saint of India, to name but a few. These are remarkable heroes who chose death, exile, jail, or torture for the sake of truth. At tremendous risk to their own lives, they found a way to convey truth in a loving, yet strong, persevering fashion. Their actions illustrate the truth. We who enjoy the study of the history, know there is a lot of evidence that these people weren't perfect. They sinned.

I believe that if evolution is what is, then there is only process. There is no end to our travel towards greater good. We must help one another believe more fully in life in a hurry, though, as we have evidence there will be a BBQ we cannot reverse. The planet could go. All life can be wiped out with the weapons and mindless paving we have today. Now is the time for each of us to illuminate and live the truth inside our own heart.

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