

Narcissism in modern life...and it's cure!

By Walter Zeichner aka Baruch

I recently read a post on an internet discussion board in response to an article entitled "[Turning Your Lawn into a Victory Garden Won't Save You -- Fighting the Corporations Will](#)" by Stan Cox. The poster wrote:

"Am I not entitled to get all I can if I want and if someone freely decides to conduct commerce with me?"

Actually no, we are not entitled to get whatever we want whenever we want. We are part of a finite global ecological and social community. We are not entitled to more than our share of the resources, nor to ignore how our actions affect others. One may couch an argument against my position in political theory but this isn't about politics, it's about common sense. What makes one person more entitled than someone else? Might makes right? That is a particularly un-evolved attitude that has led to countless wars and much suffering.

The poster was positing the basic capitalist ideal that "whatever the market will allow" is acceptable. I suggest that this is an attitude based in arrested psychological development, particularly in the areas of empathy and delayed gratification. This is normal and even healthy in a 2-year old, but in an adult it is immature and can be powerful enough to be considered a psychological disorder. The person who sees the rest of the world as essentially there to meet their desires, "consequences be damned," is what is commonly called a sociopath or a narcissist. It's the bully mentality. It's mean and must become obsolete in order for life on Earth to thrive.

Many countries are governed by people who lack empathy and the ability to tolerate delayed gratification. We see this certainly in the United States, but it is notable in despots and corrupt legislative bodies around the world. Since most of the dominant economic systems are based in capitalism, it behooves us to look at the connection between this "winner take all" political/economic mindset and the overall psychological health of those who govern. This, of course, also means we have to look at the psychological health of those who allow narcissists to govern.

A small child who is negotiating the narcissistic phase of development, and who hopefully proceeds through it to be empathic, able to tolerate delayed gratification, and conscious of their effect on others, needs the support of nurturing caregivers who also have limits and boundaries; standards of behavior defining what is and what is not acceptable in the culture of the family, the village, town, etc. In the United States, while there are many individuals who do possess these qualities and abilities, as a culture we have become increasingly infantile, increasingly

narcissistic. We have been infantilized by a culture of patronage. Those “at the top” dictate conditions and policies for those below them. Consumerism, as an example, is based in feeding the impulse for immediate gratification while generating huge profits for those at the top with little or no regard to the inevitable environmental consequences of the “pillage (the Earth) for profit” mentality. In this way consumerism is responsible for considerable environmental and cultural degradation. Hierarchical religions insist that people are subject to a creator that is parent-like, which casts humans perpetually in the role of the child who conforms or rebels, limited choices at best and at worst conditions that keep people stuck with the self-concept of being basically irresponsible and “not OK.” Perception rules, and when people see themselves that way, that’s how they behave. Ideologies - religious, political or economic, that require submission and surrendering of critical thought - reinforce the cycle of destruction socially and ecologically. Thus in the US the population has accepted things like binary elections, corporate role in government, losses of privacy, militarization of the society, massive polluting by profiteers, etc.

In the 20th century it was demonstrated that State Socialism and Communism, while stating lofty goals for human culture, suffer from the same ills as Capitalism. They are all systems that adhere to the mutual incompatibility of individualism and communalism, forcing people to adhere to one or the other. This black and white thinking is characteristic of that 2-year old, or the adult narcissist. A person who has essentially negotiated through their narcissistic phase, though aspects of it are a lifelong process, knows that rarely if ever in life are there only two choices. Binary thinking is part of early childhood development, again, and as a person grows they learn to see that there are many variations and possibilities in most of not all situations. Binary elections are a product of binary thinking. The idea that there are only two choices for a political office is ludicrous and keeps the dialogue about that office and its responsibilities in the form of a polarized/polarizing argument. That is not a good way to find solutions.

The reality facing our human nature is that we are simultaneously individuals and members of community. In order to function in ways that support individual integrity *and* community wellbeing, we each have to confront that seeming paradox and come to a balance within ourselves about how we serve both. By doing so there is a synergistic result that encourages individual growth and expression in support of the wellbeing of the community, and relationships within the community that are beneficial to individuals, thus creating mutual benefit. In psychological jargon “mutuality” is an important stage after narcissism. By maintaining the dichotomy of “self and other” we discourage individual development and the health and viability of the community. Again we see the inherent flaw in binary thinking.

What does this look like in terms of practical application? With economic and political systems in crisis the world around, we are presented with certainty of change. It could look like total disaster, and in many places it already does. It could look like the opportunity of a lifetime for our species. We are presented with the opportunity to take quantum steps in our collective development.

The mathematician Ilya Prigogine wrote about “The Theory of Dissipative Structures” which says that any open system, when bombarded with enough stimulation or input, can break down or can effect a quantum leap in its organization, resulting in a more complex and more functional system. We are certainly being bombarded with stimulation nowadays! There are plenty of regressive political, economic and religious movements that tell us to centralize power thus further abdicating individual responsibility to a narcissistic few. The problem with that though is further and continued centralization leads to breakdown. It is already happening. We see it in all of our human systems, from food growth and distribution to power generation to health care and on and on. Natural systems, however, do not work through centralized processes. Nature works and lives locally. Humans are part of nature and we would be smart to learn from the decentralized resource examples in nature. That would be, in Prigogine’s model, the system making a quantum step and reorganizing into a more complex and sustainable system. Decentralizing the things which are currently centralized would require mature people (who are not stuck in narcissism) taking solution-oriented action. The result would be more functional communities, and more respect for and sustainable interaction with each other and Earth.

Having more than enough can make it easy to forget gratitude, can lead to a sense of entitlement, which combine with narcissism to make a greedy person who doesn’t care about others. We see a lot of this in people working within the realms of politic and business. We aren’t entitled, though, to more than our share. In spite of cultural institutions like class-ism and racism, to reverse quote the pig from Orwell’s “*Animal Farm*” some pigs are *not* more equal than others. Having enough can inspire a sense of appreciation that is easily lost when one has more than they need. The feeling of appreciation is like a healing balm to a troubled mind. We can see, from the many public examples, that accumulation to excess and for its own sake has unhealthy effects on the human psyche.. Consider the model of the CSA, Community Supported Agriculture, where “customers” pay a certain “share” fee at the beginning of the season, and this entitles them to a share of what is produced that week. The farmers grow what they can and everyone shares the abundance or lack thereof. Risk is shared, produce is shared, no one profits at the expense of someone else. There is a mutually beneficial relationship between the farmers, the customers, and the Earth (if it’s an organic farm). This series of relationships is based on empathy and delayed gratification. The empathy is that everyone’s in it together. The delayed gratification comes into play with the farmer who plants and

waits for the crop to come in, and the customer who pays and waits for their produce. It is these relationships that create viable communities.

It is incumbent upon each of us to face our own narcissism, move through it and be part of the amazing creative genius that humans can be so that we can find and implement viable solutions. The goal is to preserve life on Earth by learning from the past, and valuing the ethos and depth of belief that comes from the past both ancient and recent, combined with unprecedented new sustainable ways.

The antidote to all this, to face one's own narcissism, is not difficult. Notice how you treat people. Notice when you view people as simply there to fulfill a function, like a cashier or bank teller or food server, the list goes on. Do you make eye contact? Do you say hello? Do you acknowledge the humanity of the other person? When you do you also acknowledge your own humanity.

Notice how you treat the people who are closest to you. It is said that "familiarity breeds contempt" and it does seem to be true that often we are least kind to those we care about the most. However, if you love someone, notice how you show it. Get feedback and consider it.

Notice how you treat Earth. Do you use a lot of non-renewables or stuff that is produced through toxic processes? Do you produce a lot of trash? When you spend money, where is it going? Who is making money from your participation in the economy? You can make choices about where your money goes, choices which come from your ability to practice kindness.

If you make it a regular practice to relate with the lives around you, you will move through more of your own narcissism, and you will be encouraging others to do so as well. If you think about and learn from the consequences your actions have for other lives, nearby or faraway, human or not, you will grow as a person in your ability to contribute to positive change.

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