

Unfolding the Myth of Narcissus:
Towards a Process Oriented Approach to Working with Narcissism

by Bill Say

Illustrations by Amaroq de Quebrazas



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Abstract

Narcissism is a syndrome that has been diagnosed, treated, and, to some degree, pathologized in mainstream psychology. Process Work (or Process Oriented Psychology), the approach to individual and collective change developed by Arnold Mindell and his colleagues, has mostly resisted using diagnostic terms and methods to work with the Process Work client. This paper describes psychodynamic, Core Energetic, and Process Oriented approaches to work with narcissism. I also present my own personal and professional experiences and views to enhance this description. This project is a composite of theoretical, experiential, and case study material. By presenting this material, my intention is to help Process Workers, interested professionals, and laypeople understand narcissism and suggest ways to help people who struggle with narcissistic tendencies.

Acknowledgments

This paper represents a body of experience, learning, and mental/emotional struggle that has consumed me for many years.

At the heart of the narcissistic injury is a process of becoming a human being. In gratitude for being able to take this faulty and amazing journey, I acknowledge my mother and father, sister and brother for helping me to start it.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Narcissism: A Modest Overview.....	4
Ovid's Tale	4
My Story.....	6
Narcissism's Roots in Psychology: Clinical Diagnostics.....	8
DSM IV Criteria for Narcissism.....	9
Chapter 3: Roots of Narcissism: A Core Energetic View	10
Core Energetics: A Brief Overview	10
Bioenergetics	11
Core Energetics and Its Basics	11
Core Energetics and Narcissism	12
Chapter 4: Roots of Narcissism: A Psychodynamic View	17
Etiology of Narcissism	17
Narcissism: General and Classic.....	18
Good or Bad? Real and False Selves	19
Adding Insult to Injury.....	21
Child Caretaking, Authority, and Trust Issues	22
Chapter 5: Roots of Narcissism and Adult Tendencies.....	24
A Constellation of Qualities	24

Perfection and grandiosity.....	25
Authority.....	25
Isolation.....	26
“Weakness” and symptoms.....	26
“Help.”.....	27
Mistrust and betrayal.....	28
Emptiness.....	29
“My way.”.....	30
Wrong.....	30
Polarized Qualities.....	32
Who Is Narcissistic?.....	32
Humanity as a Marginal Process in Narcissism.....	33
Chapter 6: Process Work: Some Basics.....	36
Process Structure.....	37
Content.....	38
The Therapist’s Process.....	40
Process Work: Map and Process.....	41
“Narcissism” as a Map.....	42
Drawing the “Map”.....	43
Maplesprout and Firestone; Process Work and Psychiatry.....	44
Process Work Subsumes Paradigms.....	45
Process Work, Narcissism, and Roles.....	46
To Pathologize or Not: That Is the Question.....	47

Narcissism and Systems Thinking	48
Chapter 8: Generalizations in Process.....	52
Presenting Problems	53
Common Primary and Secondary Processes.....	53
Addictions and Addictive Tendencies.....	55
Relational Patterns.....	56
Chapter 9: Process Work/ing with Narcissus	57
Beginning	57
Starting the Therapeutic Relationship	58
A First Session	60
The Next Session.....	65
Third Session	71
Chapter 10: Process Work: Relationship Work.....	788
Process Work with Relationship Issues	788
Levels of Work	799
A Session with a Couple	80
Chapter 11: Narcissism, My Son, and Me.....	877
Two Years Later.....	888
November 3, 2009.....	888
Chapter 12: Closing: Narcissus and the World	911
Narcissism and a World Tendency.....	911
Last Thoughts	933
References	966



Chapter 1: Introduction

Narcissism is a subject that has interested me for many years. Personally, I have struggled considerably with it as an issue. Professionally, I have studied it and focused upon it as a prime issue in my therapeutic practice. I see that narcissism is a basic human issue and that we are all affected by it. Narcissism is part of healthy human development. It is also a hugely problematic syndrome that causes much individual, relational, and collective suffering.

As narcissism has been an important subject of my life and work, because Process Work has not focused much attention on it, and because I am a student of Process Work, I want to offer this project. Process Work's tendency has been to avoid diagnostic terms in its thinking and approach. I value this tendency and I also see the potential benefits of sharing psychodynamic and Core Energetic

knowledge of this syndrome with Process Workers, other practitioners, and interested lay people. Lastly, I am seeking to describe a Process Work approach to work with narcissism.

Process Work is an approach to working with individual and collective change that has roots in Jungian psychology, Taoism, systems theory, modern physics, and shamanism. Process Work has been applied to a vast array of human problems, including a considerable body of work with people suffering from extreme psychiatric states and conditions. As the word “process” implies, Process Work helps with the journey of our various life experiences rather than simply focusing upon particular destinations, outcomes, or therapeutic agendas.

In approaching this study, I need to reconcile at least a few disparate paradigms. One, Process Work, works with people in a phenomenological way that avoids pathologizing and diagnosing people. The others, which include traditional and updated psychological theories and practices, psychodynamic ones, and Core Energetics (a neo-Reichian, body-oriented approach to human development), have defined, diagnosed, and treated the syndrome known as narcissism.

In this paper I describe narcissism from three points of view: Core Energetics, psychodynamics, and Process Work. In doing so, I hope to offer a broader perspective on this syndrome than might be had through only one of these approaches. Part of this study also attempts to reconcile the paradigm clash that seems to exist between Process Work and modern psychology with

regard to narcissism. This paper will achieve these goals by offering: a brief overview of narcissism; sharing psychodynamic and Core Energetic material about narcissism; highlighting key Process Work terms, concepts, and applications with regard to this syndrome; and using fictionalized “case studies” to elucidate how Process Work can work effectively with narcissism. Now, let me offer a brief overview of narcissism.



Chapter 2: Narcissism: A Modest Overview

In this chapter I will offer a brief overview of narcissism, from the poet Ovid to the DSM-IV description.

Ovid's Tale

The Roman poet Ovid told the story of the Metamorphoses, including the tale of Narcissus. Narcissus was born of the God Cepheis “abusing” the nymph Lirope. Lirope asked a seer, Tiresias, if her child would have a long life. His reply was “yes, if he never got to know himself.”

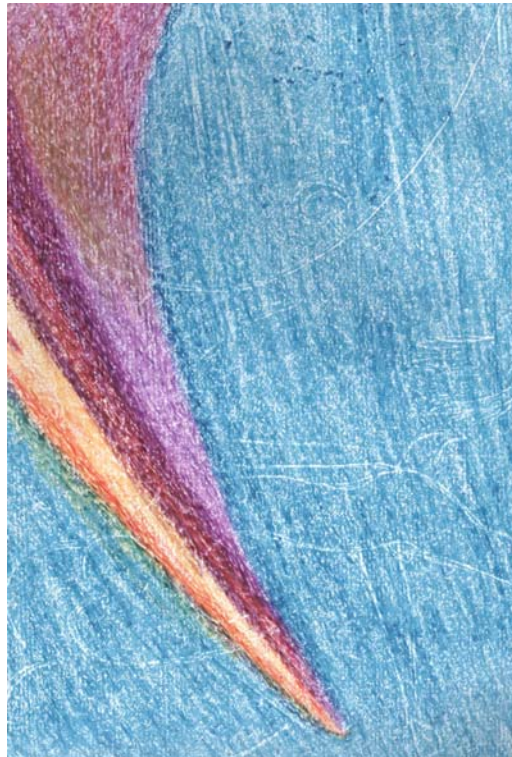
Narcissus was a handsome, proud, and self-absorbed young man. One of his many would be lovers took her complaint to the goddess of vengeance, Nemesis, who made Narcissus fall in love with himself, but at the same time be incapable of accepting his own love.

One day Narcissus drank from a clear pool. He saw a beautiful image in the pool, and never having seen himself before, falls in love with this image, this reflection. He tried to kiss and embrace it but could not. He eventually realized he was in love with his own reflection. Narcissus gradually deteriorates, stricken by his inability to obtain the object of his affections. In his demise, his body is transformed into the flower to be known as the narcissus.

My interpretation is that in Narcissus' extreme pursuit of self "love" he dies to his self-centered nature and transforms into his essence, the flower. This suggests to me that born of this death is beauty and that one answer to this syndrome is a radical shift in identity. Yes, this is a sad tale, yet it is one that includes redemption.

Now, here is my story. I will also return to my personal experiences in later chapters, where I will speak of my version of "transformation."

My Story



From 1990 until 2001 I was involved with the Institute of Core Energetics. Core Energetics is a neo-Reichian therapy that works deeply with five main character structures. Character structures take root in the earliest developmental stages of human life, based upon how the parent/caregiver or environment relate to the young child. They are deeply ingrained patterns that affect the physical body and its formation, one's deepest emotional and relational tendencies, and often, one's central perspective of life.

After some period of study and after I had begun my private therapy practice, I noticed that the character structure called "psychopathy" was becoming more and more compelling to me. After a few years of private practice, I noticed that several of my clients fit the description of this pattern. Furthermore,

I observed that many of the important people in my life also seemed to fit this pattern.

What Core Energetics refers to as psychopathy, traditional psychology terms narcissism. The main point I'm making here is that in my study and practice of Core Energetics began my fascination with narcissism. I saw it in my private practice, in various family members, and in my most disturbing relationships. I also noticed that when I began to read books on the subject, I could only read a little bit before I would have to put the book down. It took me several years before I realized that the pattern that I was focusing on outside of me also existed inside of me.

The psychological and relational pattern of narcissism has had a truly profound impact on my life. I have worked deeply enough with this pattern to be able to say that it has helped me to realize who and what I am (and this clarification of being may be the deep gift of narcissism). I'll expand on these subjects a bit later, but will briefly state that this deep pattern that exists in my own psychological and relational tendencies is one that has greatly impacted my daily life and how I experienced it.

Over the years I have worked with many individuals who struggled with this syndrome. I have assisted them, witnessed their struggles and pain, helped them with their isolation and mistrust, and have seen many instances of the deep (and often hidden) beauty that exists inside these people.

I want to bring Process Work and narcissism together. They represent roughly two parts of me. There is the Process Worker in me, and there is the

one in me who holds the narcissistic pattern in his therapeutic and personal schema.

But how can I marry them? The Process Worker in me aspires to just follow and unfold nature as it emerges. The other part values the recognition of the pattern known as narcissism. Though I may flounder in my attempt I know I am also resolving or trying to resolve something conflicted in me. So I write this paper for myself, my son, my family members, my clients, my colleagues, and for a world where narcissism is indeed present. Now, let's explore some of the roots of narcissism in psychology.

Narcissism's Roots in Psychology: Clinical Diagnostics

In modern psychology, Freud was probably the first to use the term narcissism. Later, some of the main people who forwarded the foundational theories about narcissism were Heinz Kohut (1966), developer of the school of self psychology, and James Masterson (1981) and Otto Kernberg, (1974) of the object relations school.

Here is a brief description from James Masterson:

The Clinical Picture

The main clinical characteristics of the narcissistic personality disorder are grandiosity, extreme self-involvement and lack of interest in and empathy for others, in spite of the pursuit of others to obtain admiration and approval. The patient manifesting a narcissistic personality disorder seems to be endlessly motivated to seek perfection in all he or she does, to pursue wealth, power and beauty and to find others who will mirror and admire his or her grandiosity. Underneath this defensive façade is a feeling state of emptiness and rage with the predominance of intense envy. (1981, pp. 7-8)

DSM IV Criteria for Narcissism

The following is a description and criteria from the DSM-IV (2000, p. 717) defining what they term as narcissistic personality disorder or NPD.

A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

- (1) has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)
- (2) is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
- (3) believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
- (4) requires excessive admiration
- (5) has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations
- (6) is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends
- (7) lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others
- (8) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her
- (9) shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

The DSM-IV is a “Bible” of sorts for the psychological and psychiatric community. This description and criteria in my view is at once a clear, pathologizing, and limiting description. Next, I will talk about some of the etiology of narcissism, and describe a Core Energetic view of this syndrome.



Chapter 3: Roots of Narcissism: A Core Energetic View

Core Energetics: A Brief Overview

Core Energetics is a body-oriented therapy that has roots in the work of Wilhelm Reich (1949). A contemporary of Freud, Reich focused his analytic work on the deeply held emotions and energies in the bodies of the people he worked with. Reich developed a model of character analysis, based on deep patterns he observed in his patients. Character patterns are formed in early childhood relational dynamics beginning in infancy and spanning the first several years of life. Character, for Reich, was a defensive pattern that affected the physical, emotional, and relational development of individuals.

Here is Wilhelm Reich writing about the function of character.

The character consists in a chronic alteration of the ego which one might describe as a rigidity. It is the basis of the becoming chronic of a person's characteristic mode of reaction. Its meaning is the protection of the ego against external and internal dangers. As a protection mechanism which has become chronic it can rightly be called an armor. (1949, p. 145)

Reich sought to “break through” these defenses so that his patients could experience a free flow of energy, emotion, and sexual experience. His methods included: analytic work that helped elicit awareness about one's psychological tendencies, and body-oriented work that addressed the “armoring” that Reich saw as a limiting factor. The bodywork included cathartic movement expression, breathing, and deep massage-like work.

Bioenergetics

Two of Reich's students included psychiatrists Alexander Lowen (1975) and John Pierrakos (1987). Together, Lowen and Pierrakos founded a school of Reichian-type therapy they termed Bioenergetics. They expanded upon Reich's work with character by formulating five main character patterns: schizoid, oral, masochistic, psychopathic, and rigid. As a demonstration of their knowledge, they sometimes offered to the psychiatric community “body readings” of patients whom they did not know. They conducted these readings without verbal knowledge of the histories of these people but were able to offer DSM type diagnosis based on what they observed in the bodily structures they saw.

Core Energetics and Its Basics

Later, Pierrakos founded the Core Energetic school which combined Bioenergetic methods and the spiritual/psychological insights derived from the

spiritual guide Eva Braun, who later became Eva Pierrakos (1990). It was in the Core Energetic school that I became acquainted with narcissism or what Core Energetics calls psychopathy.

Core Energetics views these character patterns as defenses that include the protective layer of the “mask” or social persona, and the level of primal negativity or “lower self.” Core Energetics aims at transforming negativity in order to contact the essential spiritual level of the “higher self.” Core Energetic work seeks to bring awareness to the mask, integrate and transform the negative intentions and energies of the lower self, and help the individual to center and live from the higher self.

Here is John Pierrakos writing on the beginning stage of Core Energetic work.

My experience is that most people seek a therapist’s help with their character defenses firmly in place. If they have some intuition of their center of energy, they cannot mobilize the movement, claim it, join it, and work with it. An unfathomable burden of obstructions has accumulated around the core, obstructions in the form of snarled knots of conflict and functional blocks. (1987, p. 210)

Core Energetics and Narcissism

Core Energetics includes as one of the five main character patterns “psychopathy” or what most psychological traditions refer to as narcissism, the term I will use from now on. Though Core Energetic thinking about narcissism is very related to that of other psychological approaches, there are some differences that may be confusing to the reader. In the service of clarity I will focus on what Core Energetics shares theoretically with more traditional

psychological schools in regard to narcissism. Though having similar theoretical ground, what is distinctly different and important about the Core Energetic approach is the emphasis on the body, energy, and spirituality.

Core Energetics posits the central injury in narcissism to be one of betrayal. The child is betrayed in various ways but most centrally by not recognizing the true nature of the child but rather manipulating the child to be something she is not. This betrayal is one that marginalizes the deep feelings and needs of the young one. Frequently there is a concomitant “seduction” that is part of manipulating the emergent being to be something for the parent’s benefit (e.g., a “partner” for the unfulfilled parent). This seduction offers allure and even power and many young people will invest themselves in an identity that is both captivating and addictive. I think of one client who was “seen” by his mother as a hero and invested himself in this image at the expense of many of his other needs and facets of his being.

Often vulnerability is sacrificed in the name of grandiosity. This seems to correlate with the rapprochement subphase of child development where vulnerability and grandiosity are two main life experiences that are seeking integration (Johnson, 1987).

Pierrakos writes about the narcissistic pattern.

The ego and the faculty of rational thought take prominence, to the deprivation particularly of sexual functioning but generally of all the feelings, those of the inner self and those of other people.

The peripheral self is inflated and over controlling, and the mask grasps for power: “I’ll prove I’m right, and then, my way or else. I don’t believe in anything except what I say is real.” (1987, p. 98)

Alexander Lowen writes on the etiology of narcissism.

The most important factor in the etiology of this condition is a sexually seductive parent. . . . A seductive parent is always a rejecting parent on the level of the child's need for support and physical contact. (1975, p. 162)

Core Energetics focuses a lot of its attention on the energetic formation and functioning of people. In the narcissistic pattern, the tendency is towards a buildup of energy and mass in the upper part of the body and a deprivation in the lower part (Lowen, p. 160). This may correspond to a buildup of a "special," charismatic, or controlling self and a lack of development in terms of the more vulnerable and even "normal" aspects of being human. This "special" self is often part of a weak ego structure that needs continual assurance. I think of one former client who was heavily invested in being special and yet explored on one occasion being "normal." She disliked the feeling of being just like others without being able to "stand out from the crowd."

For the above reasons, part of the Core Energetic therapy assists the client in "coming down" into his lower half of the body and the often vulnerable and frightened feelings that reside there as well as the needs that are often marginalized. This bodily and emotional process of coming down is part of a deeper grounding in something more substantial than a weak ego image. Lowen notes that, "There is in all psychopathic characters a great investment of energy in one's image" (1975, p. 159).

One of the great strengths of this approach lies in the direct bodily work to help the person ground in more basic realities such as feelings, pleasure, and

needs. This is in contrast to how “. . . the psychopathic personality . . . turns against the body and its feelings” (Lowen, 1975, p. 159).

Frequently there are major trust issues encountered in this “coming down” process. There is often historical material that emerges which explains how the client could not be vulnerable in her upbringing, and could not trust her caregivers. I remember working with a workshop participant in an exercise exploring two parts: a child part lying down on the floor and a parental part standing above. Lying down he was terrified of the parental one above who would surely stomp on him. Standing up, he then contacted the parental figure who indeed wanted nothing more than to stomp on this “weakling” child. Going back and forth between these two parts evidently created a great shift in his relationship life as he wrote me some months later to report about it.

In my years of practicing Core Energetics I often found amazing and beautiful vulnerability in my clients with narcissistic injury. I was often able to affirm in a positive way for the client these human qualities though it was often not initially experienced by the client in that light. This is a key part of the narcissistic injury where tender human feelings and needs are seen as a liability due to injury.

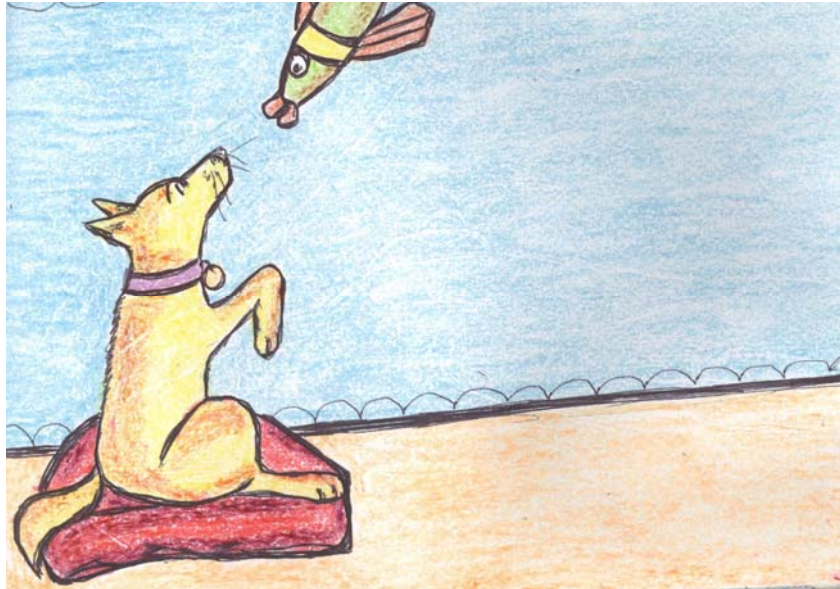
There is also in Core Energetics cathartic work that seeks to bring to awareness the “negative” emotions and intentions that may range from the desire to control, dominate, or even crush others. Core Energetics theorizes that the negative energies are connected to more basic positive ones and this deep cathartic work with negative emotions often leads to positive feelings and

connection to the essential self of the person, the higher self. Not infrequently there can be an inner quality or energy of emptiness that the client will complain of. Here, my experience is that this troubling sensation can often be linked energetically to a spiritual essence. Core Energetic's focus on energetic phenomena can be quite helpful in distilling energetic experiences that linked to spiritual realms. Many of my clients were able to take these experiences and connect to something that they could trust in and call their own Self.

Pierrakos speaks about the latter stages of Core Energetic work.

The fourth focus, which actually moves inward and outward, calls on the person to trust the environment—the whole universe—as the setting for his or her individual growth. I said before that the core reaches for infinity. This is not a metaphor. In terms of the mass of the person's energy, the repercussions of its outward movements have no end, according to the theory of the expanding universe, just as the energy surrounding it has no practical exhaustion point, according to the subdisciplines of physics. (1987, p. 226)

Now let us look at a psychodynamic view of narcissism.



Chapter 4: Roots of Narcissism: A Psychodynamic View

Psychodynamics is a study of the psychological forces that underlie human behavior. It is a helpful lens with which to study the etiology of narcissism and I will use this view to further look at the roots of narcissism.

Etiology of Narcissism

A. H. Almaas writes on one of the main factors that contributes to narcissistic development.

The child is not seen for who he is. Being seen is probably the deepest narcissistic need; the child needs this external mirroring not only to confirm and solidify his arising sense, but even to know this sense in any definite way. (1996, p. 189)

In Stephen Johnson's *Humanizing the Narcissistic Style* (1987), he wrote about the rapprochement phase in child development, citing this time as one when two main polarities are seeking integration.

I find it useful to think of Mahler's rapprochement subphase as the one in which two basic human polarities are first presented to the young child for eventual integration. These polarities are (1) unity-individuation and (2) grandiosity-vulnerability. Even under the best of circumstances this integration is not simple. Significant human psychopathology arises out of those familial situations in which any part of either polarity cannot be freely experienced and then integrated. Obviously, the symbiotic character arises more out of blocking the first polarity, whereas the narcissistic character arises more out of blocking the integration of the second. (1987, p. 42)

Johnson says that what is trying to be reconciled during this developmental phase is the magnificence of the child and her weak and vulnerable nature. If the familial atmosphere can somehow support both polarities, the "self" is free to be itself. If however, the environment needs the child to be substantially other than what she is, then narcissistic injury is created.

Johnson writes about degrees of narcissistic injury.

The injury is a deep wound to the experience of the real self. In the more extreme cases of narcissistic disorder, the injury is so deep and the compensations so tight that the person has no residual experience or comprehension of the real self. In the less extreme variations of this disorder, which are endemic to the culture, there is often a veiled awareness of the real self but a concomitant rejection of it. Even though narcissism comes from the Greek myth superficially understood to represent self-love, exactly the opposite is true in the narcissistic personality disorder or narcissistic style. The narcissist has buried his true self-expression in response to early injuries and replaced it with a highly developed, compensatory false self. (1987, p. 39)

Narcissism: General and Classic

Though narcissistic injury in a generalized sense can occur at various developmental stages, narcissism in the classical sense (e.g., as defined in the DSM-IV as narcissistic personality disorder), has its point of origin in the rapprochement subphase (Johnson, 1987). Narcissistic injury, whether general or classic, results from the environment/parent needing the child to be something

other than who he or she is. For the purposes of this psychodynamic review, I'll focus mainly on the classical injury.

Good or Bad? Real and False Selves

I was taught by my first therapist that a human being is partly divine and partly deeply faulted. In narcissistic injury this question can easily fall on the lines of “am I great or am I wrong/bad?” Frequently for someone with injury here there is a chronically shifting process between these two poles rather than an integration. That said, a way to describe the central need of the child in the rapprochement subphase of life is to be *seen* and supported in her greatness and in her vulnerable human condition. There is somehow room for both states, and the “good enough” parent provides enough of that “seeing” and support. The delivery (and reception) of that is partly what builds ego strength. In narcissistic injury, this kind of parenting is not provided in enough measure to secure this kind of development. The central motivational structure underlying a narcissistic wound is an underdeveloped ego that needs affirming (Johnson, 1987). One measure of ego health is the degree that the “real self” of the child is seen, supported, and therefore experienced by the burgeoning being. Without enough of this support a child may be at a loss as to her sense of self, self-esteem, and who she is relative to others.

Of course, “real” and “false” selves are distinctions that can be debated. For the purposes of this psychodynamic description on narcissism, I venture a rough defining line that ascribes “real” to more innate qualities of being, and “false” to more learned personas. I see that making meaningful delineations

between real and false selves is challenging, subjective, and is perhaps only useful as it suggests a demarcation between parts of the self and identity that seem to support self esteem in a sustainable way and those that may break down more easily.

James Masterson quotes D. Winnicott.

6) What is there that could be named a true self? A self-representation that is whole, both good and bad and based on reality, that is creative, spontaneous, and functioning through the mode of self-assertion to regulate self-esteem in an autonomous fashion. (1981, p. 107)

Here, A. H. Almaas writes about the need to be seen accurately.

When a child's manifestations, actions, motives or expressions are interpreted incorrectly, this misunderstanding has a deep wounding effect on the child because he is not related to as who and what he is. The child will not only feel hurt and betrayed, but is likely to become confused and uncertain about his sense of himself. The child's self not only needs to be seen and related to, but seen accurately and responded to accordingly, for his sense of self to develop accurately. (1996, p. 191)

G. and R. Blanck, wrote on the relationship of narcissism in regard to object relations.

Self-esteem, if sacrificed in favor of excessive valuation of the object, will remain fixated in primitive form while organization, now skewed, will proceed nonetheless toward disturbances in identity formation. If the imbalance is in the other direction, narcissism will grow in exaggerated form at the expense of capacity to love will reflect, in adulthood, its infantile distortions. (1974, p. 179)

I think what the authors are saying here is that if the child has to choose between "love" relationship and her own self, that there will be considerable consequences in her development.

Adding Insult to Injury

If not being seen is central to this pattern's origin, what often accompanies this is the injury to vulnerability, to one's basic humanity. Frequently, what is combined with the injury of not being seen and supported in one's basic nature is a relational pattern of attack, manipulation, seduction, or in some sense "using" the child for the parent's own needs (Johnson, 1987, pp. 35-36). This creates a further incentive to distance oneself from this realm of one's being. In addition these attacks and manipulations make mistrust a likely outcome. The other side of trampled vulnerability is power/specialness that is over-rewarded. Here I think about how our culture sides with values of power and achievement, glamour, and superiority.

Narcissistic injury often results in a kind of "splitting" where some aspects of the self and personality are marginalized, or there is an oscillation between two or more parts of self. For example, there may be a split between "good" and "bad" parts of self. When one part is present the other may be very far removed. When the person feels "bad" the goodness may indeed seem very far away. Marion Solomon wrote on "splitting."

Splitting occurs as the child comes to believe there are "bad" things inside that must be gotten rid of. These are split off from awareness. They may be consciously forgotten and not allowed to grow or develop. They survive but are denied and hidden away in the unconscious. Such feelings may include envy, hatred, fear of dependency, loss of identity, etc. Love and rage, good and bad, may become polarized, with only one or the other allowed into consciousness. Much energy must be directed toward keeping these feelings from coming into conscious awareness and finding places to lodge them safely. (1989, p. 87)

Again, what is “real” and “false” may ultimately be a subjective decision. What works in a cultural or relational context may also be an important consideration. In Hollywood, for example, a degree of narcissism may indeed be an asset. Let me continue with another common pattern in the roots of narcissism: caretaking.



Child Caretaking, Authority, and Trust Issues

I have observed in my 20 plus years of private practice a common tendency in people with narcissistic injury to have been caretakers of their parents/guardians. Early experiences of the child caretaking the parent seem to accompany a deep sense that the parent is not “there” just for the child. Role and authority issues result and powerful relationship tendencies form around these themes.

If a child has a substantial role in caretaking a parent, this implicitly requires that her own needs will be wanting. The caretaking role is one that often

extends into adulthood with concomitant marginalization of one's own needs or even awareness of these needs.

Authority confusion arises as no parent can wield credible authority while asking the child to be the parent. Simultaneously, the wounding in these patterns of relating is such a blow to the child's basic trust (not necessarily consciously), that the question of whom to trust can be a truly profound and disturbing one.

Another variation of the parent/child pattern is when the parent attempts to live through the child's achievements with the "stage mother" being one example. The opposite also certainly occurs where the child's success is thwarted because it arouses so much jealousy/envy in the parent. Now let us continue our look at the psychodynamics involved with narcissism and adult tendencies.



Chapter 5: Roots of Narcissism and Adult Tendencies

In this chapter I will describe narcissism and adult tendencies using a constellation of themes I have observed. These themes at once elaborate on childhood situations and depict adult patterns.

A Constellation of Qualities

As I have worked with narcissistic injuries over the years, a kind of “dot” constellation has formed for me. These “dots” are like those that when connected with a pencil become the “kitty cat” or some cohesive picture. As part of the “dot” constellation, I want to offer a list of words that frequently comes up in working with narcissistic injury. These are: perfection, isolation, mistrust, control, “my way!” (implicit or explicit expression), betrayal, seduction, right, wrong, failing/falling, weak /strong, vulnerability, authority, help (often quite disavowed) emptiness, “special,” need (often implied or disavowed), and “narcissistic,” (often a complaint the client has towards a parent, partner, or some significant person).

I will address a few of these qualities now, some later on in the paper, and also cite some of the common polarities I see.

Perfection and grandiosity. These examples are from Masterson.

He elaborated further his anxiety about exhibiting himself: "It would be noted that I'm not perfect; I would be doing something wrong, i.e., not perfect, and I would be judged and condemned forever."

"That's why I'm not married. It's the other side of the coin. I would be the judge entrapped with someone I found unsuitable, i.e., not perfect, would be unsuitable for ever. I feel frightened about what people can do to me."

He buys things not for the personal pleasure but rather to show them off to others—his musical instruments, his records, his trips; however, he feels that if he does exhibit himself, he also has to defend himself, to keep his guard up and try to be perfect. In this way, inside he feels that sooner or later he will make a mistake and that it will reveal itself. (1981, pp. 90-91)

Perfection is one manifestation of a person striving to avoid powerful feelings of low self-esteem. It is also a result of a kind of familial support to be something perfect. One flavor of perfection is grandiosity with its implicit lack of connection with reality.

Authority. Authority issues are often central in narcissism. In the client's history there is often chronic authority problems where the parent/caregiver was either too authoritative or too "weak" in authoritative expression or some combination of both. Here is an excerpt of a case history offered by James Masterson.

His father was described as a loud, boisterous, extraordinarily self-centered traveling salesman who was rarely home. . . . The mother idealized the father and supported his behavior. . . . She felt the father was always right and that he would brook no interference on the part of anybody else in the family. The patient felt that his father knew everything but was withholding it from him. (1981, p. 52)

Early authority issues can easily translate into chronic problems with authority, both external and internally. If early authority can not be trusted, who can be trusted? This question can persist with no easy answer including not trusting inner authority.

Isolation. Isolation is a common complaint of one who suffers from narcissistic injury. Because of the deep and early injuries to trust, being “used,” made “special,” being manipulated to be something other than what one is, the adult and not infrequently the child subjected to such conditions isolates. This is of course a problem but when the injurious relational history is considered, isolation can be seen as an attempt to salvage some integrity by not subjecting oneself to conditions that risk compromising the self even if that self is quite murky. With the common injuries to one’s vulnerability, isolation is a protective measure that seeks to preserve that.

Marion Solomon quotes Fritz Perls (1969) to speak of cultural loneliness, finding his poem to be a “recipe for narcissism, with its concomitant loneliness and emptiness” (1989, p. 11).

I do my thing, you do your thing
I am not in this world to meet your needs;
You are not in this world to meet my needs;
If by chance we meet, it’s beautiful
If not, it can’t be helped. (Perls, 1969, as cited in Solomon, 1989, p. 11)

“Weakness” and symptoms. Let me speak about a common tendency in regard to narcissism. “Weakness” is often a process that is projected or judged in others, or manifests in symptoms or in accidents. I had a client who had identified herself as a strong, capable woman. She was successful in her work as an artist.

Then she had a nearly fatal accident and has been unable to work as this accident affected her profoundly.

Her “friends” turned out to not be loyal to her. They were not her true friends in that they simply went away after her accident. She could not provide them with what she did prior to her accident. The main quality with which she identified, before, and even after the accident was strength. “Weakness” was a marginalized process. Weakness also manifested as a physical symptom, and one that had become pronounced since her accident resulting in a physical condition that made her feel weak physically, and sometimes emotionally. When she explored this weakness, she found it also opened her up to emotional realms that she had tended to avoid but began to find meaningful.

“Help.” “Help” is another important and disavowed process in narcissistic injury. Here is another excerpt from a session with James Masterson and his client which illustrates the etiology of difficulties with gaining help.

He reported: “I had to be miserable to get my parent’s attention. I have to be in a state of intolerable suffering, helpless, powerless, abandoned, to please them. The evil of it is staggering.” (1981, p. 191)

Crying, asking for help, and showing deep vulnerability are ways of surrendering to oneself, to the care of others, to life, and to spiritual help. Yet we may deeply avoid this act of surrender. It may repulse us or severely frighten us and yet, it seems life will not grant us certain experiences if we do not or will not surrender to its terms. So, with regard to narcissism, it seems that surrender is a key marginalized process. This is where I think that narcissism has at its potential heart, processes that have to do with our most essential human experiences

such as spirituality, care, love, humility, generosity, selflessness, and spiritual emptiness. I think also that this syndrome, when deeply worked, creates deep community experiences around our common humanity.

Mistrust and betrayal. Because mistrust and betrayal are such common themes with narcissism, the role of the one who cannot be trusted is often very haunting. With some clients I see the betrayer as a chronic “other.” With some clients there is more identification with being the betrayer and the “other” being the one impacted by betrayal, which implies massive hurt being displaced onto others.

Early childhood circumstances of betrayal vary yet adult themes of betrayal often include instances of sexual/romantic betrayals by partners or being the betrayer in such situations.

While the seductive behavior of the opposite sex parent may in some ways be desired and welcome, particularly in an otherwise bare existence, it is also overwhelming and disorganizing. In such situations, retaliatory or rejecting behavior of either parent is often the reality and that is similarly overwhelming and disorganizing. Wherever the sexual response is split from the loving response, either in the parent’s behavior or the child’s response, there will result the very common effect of such splitting in adult life. (Johnson, 1987, p. 36)

Other common themes I’ve found are where a trusted friend or business partner “betrays” the individual in ways that often echo earlier betrayals. I subscribe to the Freudian notion of Oedipal dynamics and see that they certainly can exist here and that triangular relationship patterns and problems are common related issues.

Many clients with such fundamental trust issues will tend to err on one of two sides. She will either keep her trust held in so tightly that there is no one in

the inner circle of trust, and therefore no intimacy. Conversely the other pole is the client who overtrusts, misjudges a lot, and it is serially betrayed, furthering the degradation of the trust process.

Emptiness. James Masterson offers from an interview with a client.

Nevertheless, this led to expressions of the fragmented self: "It's like a big empty shell, like an egg-fragile on the outside, empty on the inside—I'm missing a piece; I'm not full except for one time when I got over my anxiety about playing music in front of other people." (1981, p. 91)

Emptiness, is for me one of the more interesting and potentially hopeful symptoms of narcissistic injury. At one level, this common inner symptom is an indication of the emotional deprivation that was experienced. On the other hand, emptiness can be seen as a doorway into what the person may ultimately need: a release from the false self even though this may involve ego death. As I have been in progress on finishing this paper, I have simultaneously been in a process of ego death. As I have explored this impulse, and the agonizing feelings I have here, I have found that "dying" has brought a form of emptiness, a spiritual detachment that has brought relief and a solution from what has been for me a somewhat torturous existence. As in the myth of Narcissus, I think of the deep redemption that comes from ego death and becoming the flower of one's spiritual essence. As emptiness is a widely recognized spiritual quality, and certainly one that I have grown to deeply appreciate, I want to suggest that this symptom holds great promise in healing from this difficult syndrome. Later, I offer an example of a client working with the experience of emptiness.

Here is A. H. Almaas writing on emptiness.

This emptiness will evoke all kinds of issues and reactions, but eventually it resolves into something more peaceful: spaciousness. The mind feels expanded and open to experience, without identification or attachment to any particular content. This spaciousness in the mind allows for a deep awareness of the fundamental ground of experience, or presence, which may be felt as emptiness. (1996, p. 30)

“My way.” Some of what psychology and Core Energetics focused upon in the pattern of narcissism is the tendency to not care about others. Related to this tendency is the tendency that the person expresses that things must be his or her way. This one sidedness is often times forceful and there can be a considerable amount of energy expended in supporting “my way.” Not infrequently this also corresponds with a greater, upper physical mass in the body that also seems to translate into a certain kind of power, force, or will. The expression of “my way” can at times seem like an intractable, inexorable drive with any sense of surrender being very far removed and resisted. Conversely, the lower part of the body is often found to be less substantial, sometimes even with a sense of frailty, or immaturity. This part of the body seems to correspond with what is more marginal: the “weak” vulnerable, young, and needy part that was often historically subjected to someone else’s “way.”

Wrong. With strong self identity confusion, the possibility is never too far away of having one’s “self” jostled or upset. Criticism, exposure of a “weakness” (which ironically can actually be more substantially connected to a more “real” part of the self, though disavowed), and slights are all potential threats to the “false” self. Again, I refer to “false” and “real” in the context of how narcissistic injury lends itself in having the person invest in more of a persona such as the

performing part of us versus the feeling, needing, loving parts of us. This is of course a subjective and debatable line but in practice it is a line that causes much human suffering. In the following interview excerpt, a client of James Masterson speaks of “needing people to feel right.”

He said “I have to be very careful and watch out. If I do anything wrong, you or anyone else points it out and I cave in. It’s like being exposed, seen and being called a fool. I’d much rather hide.” (1981, p. 88)

In other situations what is required to upset this “false” self takes much more force when the defenses are strong. Here it seems that various factors can conspire to expose this person’s “human” side including catastrophic ones, and incidents where the person’s experiences “getting into trouble,” or somehow being “wrong,” or “having the rug being pulled out.” This is “life” seeming to enter into the work. Related to exposure is the process of failing, falling, or being taken “down.” Sometimes this happens literally with physical falls, and other times it is an emotional or financial fall that can give the sensation of the “rug being pulled out.” Hubris and divine retribution come to my mind here. I think of Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, other modern ones who have fallen, and more common “powerful” people brought to their knees. For this reason, falling can be a movement process to watch for, and curiously, the prayer or “surrender” position where one is actually on one’s knees. In Core Energetic therapy the prayer position is suggested at times and I have seen people in that physical position begin to struggle terribly with the sense of surrender, sometimes wanting to surrender, and being agonized with not being able to let go. I have also seen others who try out the position and express a

deep unwillingness to ever surrender. I have seen still others who break down and weep with such a moving and implicitly unique expression of relief and surrender to something other than their own control.

Polarized Qualities

There are some common polarities I have found in connection to narcissism. They are the following: powerful and weak, good and bad, success and failure, control and surrender, trust and betrayal, right and wrong, up and down, masculine and feminine.

Maybe all of us contain polarities. In narcissism I find the occurrence of such polarities indicative of a sharp division of human experiences. For example: “I must be right; I cannot be wrong,” or “I must be strong; I cannot be weak.” Now, I’d like to touch upon the question of narcissism, identity, and parts of the self.

Who Is Narcissistic?

Who is the one who has narcissistic tendencies? In my experience, there are parts of the self that may have narcissistic tendencies, and there may be other parts of the self that do not or are more at the relational effect of another part that does have these tendencies. To varying degrees this “other” is an important figure inside of us to integrate. It is often a chronic enemy found in the family of origin, found in later relationships in the form of friends, lovers, bosses, and so forth. It is found internally in the form of critics or some harsh inner figure when the main identity is more “weak.” When the primary identity is more “strong” the internal, troubling figure is often the “weak” one. And these two types may

take turns being the disturber one in life. People with narcissistic injuries often complain of narcissistic people.

Quite frequently people with narcissistic injuries come in with quite legitimate complaints about their narcissistic parents and/or other figures in life. Role awareness work that helps the person begin to come to terms with the impact of such parental figures while also starting to explore how that parental “other” exists inside is important. Part of the role work is naming and enacting the roles (e.g., “self-centered” parent, “used” child, etc.), and also playing with role switching that can be part of helping the client realize that part of what is needed is to grow the part of herself that is represented by these “others” (e.g., becoming more “selfish” in a healthy sense vs. living the chronic role of the caretaker). Or if the “other” has been an abusive power figure in the client’s history, beginning to take steps to integrate the often disavowed power that the client has thrown out with the rejection of the abuser, like the “baby with the bath water.”

Some clients come in with the issue that others leave them because they are found to be too selfish. Mostly, the person with stronger narcissistic tendencies does not seem to know this tendency, in this sense is in denial. As in alcoholism, the trademark of the narcissism is often denial. This denial seems steeped in trauma, being made “wrong” and a severe lack of self-acceptance. Now, let me touch upon one of the central processes I have observed.

Humanity as a Marginal Process in Narcissism

Here I would like to generalize about a common though marginal process for ones who suffer from narcissistic injury. This process is simply one’s deepest

humanity and the multitude of expressions, feelings, and needs that accompany this realm. I realize that in naming “humanity” I am implying there are parts of human experience and expression that are not somehow of this realm. Still, I see or choose to see a rough division between “adaptive” ways of human expression and more “natural” ones, and between expressions that create divisions and those that foster connection. In cases of strong narcissistic injury this “humane” realm can be strongly marginalized. My bias is seeing that there is a human “underbelly” that belies our presentations to the world, our social masks, and that this more vulnerable and often tender part of our existence is often marginal.

In a lecture that the psychologist Stephen Johnson gave on narcissism, he cites the Mary Oliver poem, “Wild Geese,” and its first stanza as holding some of the main prescriptive elements for healing narcissistic injury.

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves. (1992, p. 110)

Following this poem, the advice for the one with narcissistic injury is, “you do not have to be good.” Rather, “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” For that will be healing from all the tendencies to gain satisfaction from life in ways that merely support the “false self” or the image that was constructed out of narcissistic injury, in contrast to the “real” self that is more connected to emotional/relational needs and spiritual essence.

I think of the large number of men and women I have seen in my practice who hold strongly to their “strength” and control, and simultaneously detest their

“weak” emotional nature, their needs, and more tender feelings. This manifests in many ways and yet, there is a depth and profundity apparent when this “humanity” is revealed. These revelations of humanity give me hope for the process and the people involved because this issue, at its heart, is so much about humanity. The flip side is that this pattern creates so much suffering in the world, in relationships, and in individuals when this “humanity” stays marginal. Then, tremendous acts of uncaring get inflicted on self, others, and the world. In the following chapter I would like to introduce Process Work and some of its basic ideas.



Chapter 6: Process Work: Some Basics

Process Work is an evolving modality, a “path made by walking.” Its development is best understood as Arnold Mindell's lifelong quest to piece together the mysteries of human consciousness, physics, and psychology. Starting out as an attempt to incorporate physical experiences and body symptoms into Jungian psychology's primarily dream-based method, Process Work has grown in unforeseen directions. It has become an awareness modality with applications in areas such as organizational and community development, diversity and leadership training, spiritual practice, individual psychotherapy, relationship counseling and group work. (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 1)

As I have mentioned, Process Work is a multidisciplinary approach to individual and collective change. As a modality it has developed and evolved over several decades. It is an approach that is rich in complexity and yet has a simple elegance at the same time. Here Diamond and Jones describe Process Work and process.

Practicing Process Work involves understanding “process” as the flow of experience in oneself and in the environment and following this flow in a differentiated way. (2004, p. 18)

For the purposes of this paper I will briefly describe some main areas of focus in Process Work when conducting individual work. One format delineates process structure, content, and therapist process. Now let me describe process structure.

Process Structure

Following the process is like flowing down a river and noticing those experiences that are close to, and those far from, our intended course. (Mindell, 2002, p. 42)

Process structure refers to the form that the client’s life expression/ problem takes. This structure includes primary and secondary processes. Primary processes are those life processes that are in one’s awareness (at least to some degree), intended, and identified with. Secondary processes are the opposite, happening to some degree outside of awareness, intent, and one’s identity. For example, a person may have a primary process of being peaceful and be coming to therapy because of uncontrollable rage that is emerging, which is the secondary process. Process structure includes those identities and roles that are enacted or being interacted with (e.g., the “peaceful one” and the “angry one”).

“Edges” are the communication blocks to these secondary processes and experiences. “The edge represents the limit of the known identity as well as a point of contact with unknown experiences or identities” (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 20). For example, the “peaceful one” may have an edge to his anger and therefore become very hesitant when beginning to express it.

Process structure includes channels of perception such as: visual, auditory, kinesthetic (movement), proprioceptive (bodily feeling), and the composite channels of relationship and world. Processes arise in various perceptual channels. Using the example above, this person's process of anger may arise in the proprioceptive channel as a feeling but may also arise in the relationship channel in his interactions. It may arise in the world channel when the client is bombarded one day with witnessing several angry interactions between strangers.

Continuing this structural analysis, the Process Work therapist pays attention to sensory grounded information that she gleans from the sessions. For example, the therapist notices physical postures, movements, vocal phenomena, and assorted behavior including how the client relates to her. These sensorial bits of information, which can occur in any of the sensory channels begin to show how the dream of the client is emerging in the session itself. And this is the entry way to work with the dream in the moment! Now I'll speak about content.

Content

Content may include: presenting problem, relationship and world, dreams and stories, addictions/medications, past therapy, and body symptoms.

The presenting problem is the problem that brings the client to therapy, at least as it is articulated by the person. It is the issue that she wants to address. Of course what actually occurs or gets addressed may differ considerably from the stated goal but it is usually a telling place to begin in what is intended as well as in what is implied.

Relationship and world are depictions of the client's relationship situation, past and present. It includes her relationship to and view of the world as the world is one context which is often important to consider in therapeutic work. Relational history/situations are important in part as the client's process will often emerge and be seen in her relationships. Process Work addresses how life processes, both subtle and gross, emerge in various realms of life and relationship.

Dreams and stories are symbols of life processes, as well as being processes in themselves. They can be short term or long term in their nature and those often correspond to topical and chronic processes. As symbols they can show both how life might unfold and what the themes may be. For example, I had a recurring childhood nightmare that has accurately predicted what I would struggle with in adult life as well as what would bring resolution.

Addictions/medications are often powerful indicators of what issues are at hand. Chronic addictions/use of medications imply large life issues and processes that are seeking integration. Addictive impulses may link to vital "missing" experiences and community problems that force the individual to seek addictive substances and behavior for gratification. Medications may interact with physical issues that can contain important life processes while also constituting medical problems. Later, I will expand upon addiction processes.

Past therapies show prior work as well as being a reflection in a myriad of ways. It may show how the client has evolved, his "edges" to certain experiences, and relational processes. For example, if the client has left other

therapists, what have been the circumstances? If the client was not satisfied, how so?

Body symptoms may be chronic or topical and have as part of their makeup important “dreaming” material. Arnold Mindell’s (1982) early work with clients and their symptoms demonstrated that symptoms have dreams embedded in them and that dreams display symptoms. Mindell, early in his career, had a client with stomach cancer who had an “exploding” expression and emotional process that showed up in his dream as a bomb that was a pill for his terminal disease (1985, p. 7). Next, I’ll address the therapist’s process.

The Therapist’s Process

The therapist’s process is often an important diagnostic for the client’s process as well as an important area of focus when, for example, it is clear that the therapist needs to work on herself to be optimally helpful.

As secondary processes are necessarily disavowed ones, the therapist is at times in a position to experience that which the client is not yet aware of. For example, Process Work describes a phenomenon called “dreaming up” which is akin to projective identification where marginalized processes of the client are “projected” upon the therapist whereby he gets to experience them.

Dreaming up is a term initially proposed by psychotherapist Arnold Mindell to describe a unique form of counter transference, the totality of feelings and reactions a therapist has toward his client. Mindell discovered that the unexpected, mysterious, and possibly discordant thoughts and feelings he experienced during therapy were reflected in the dreams, physical symptoms, and non-verbal communications of his clients. (Goodbread, 1997, p. 15)

One Process Work approach to working with narcissism follows.



Chapter 7: A Process Work Approach to Narcissism

Can there be a Process Oriented approach to working with narcissism? Does knowledge of narcissism help the Process Worker? Or does it simply lead to preconceived notions of what a process should be? Does diagnosis prevent the Process Worker from staying faithful to what step needs to happen at any moment or can this sort of knowledge help in any way? Does knowing the general dream help with the individual dream? Does knowledge help one to detect patterns or does it make one more vulnerable to interpretation? These are some of my questions.

Process Work: Map and Process

In my view, Process Work is conducted when the Process Worker has both a “map” or process structure loosely in mind at the same time that she is following an experiential unfoldment of a process. Process structure/”map” and process are closely related as the map is not one that implies where a client

“should” go but one that shows what is occurring and in that sense where he or she is already trying to go, or where her process is leading her. Let me touch on the particular map of narcissism.

“Narcissism” as a Map

The aforementioned clustering of tendencies, which can include early family dynamics, intrapsychic phenomena, and relational tendencies formulate a pattern called narcissism. This gestalt is valuable for many reasons. It provides a map of a living process and provides clarity as to why certain experiences may be secondary, avoided, or disavowed.

Therefore this map may function to alert the Process Worker as to common secondary experiences and potential hazards that might not be obvious. For example, it can be helpful to know that breaches of trust, even relatively minor ones, can rupture a therapeutic relationship when narcissistic issues are involved. It's helpful to know that trust and vulnerability may be very secondary, and this might be only implied yet be quite crucial. It's important to know that authorities have been overly weak or strong. This constellation has key points and in knowing them you will know both helpful directions in work, probable secondary material, and possible pitfalls.

The use of “maps,” such as the pattern of narcissism, in practicing Process Work is not a common one to my knowledge. I can see how such a map may be helpful and how it may hinder. As has been stated, the map is not the territory. The map is not the living, breathing reality. Used with compassion, alertness, and skill it can be useful. Using a physical map during travel does not

fate the traveler to preconceived, static travel but used too rigidly, it may. More, the map can illustrate possible directions, pitfalls, and help the wanderer/process worker to deepen perceptions of the potential or real terrain. For example, knowing that on the map of narcissism, that there is often a place of emptiness lets one be alert to that part of the domain and that it is often a vital one to explore. A map here is akin to a seasonal travel guide who can help ensure you see things that might ordinarily be missed. On the other hand, the map can be like a jaded travel guide, who shows different groups the same things over and over again because she has lost her beginner's mind and therefore the ability to see anew. Map and the *actual* process of a client need to be quite related or the map is not useful.

Drawing the "Map"

The description of narcissism is a depiction of the pattern, a "map" of sorts. How this pattern is actually lived by any one individual is a living process and how narcissism is worked with using Process Work methodology is also a living process. The structure of one's life myth (a Jungian-based term that describes the overarching theme or "dream" of one's life) constitutes a pattern. Then unfolding this pattern at any given moment is a process.

A part of how Process Work approaches individual work, especially in a beginning phase is like mapmaking. As stated before, the Process Worker makes note of the presenting problem of the client, her relationships and world, important dreams and stories, medications and addictions, past therapies, body symptoms, etc. In all this, the Process Worker notices what is primary and

secondary. For example, in the case of a client who does suffer from narcissistic tendencies, he may complain of a physical symptom of weakness, speak of being addicted to gambling and winning, and talk about “narcissistic” people in his life who bother him. All these are potentially important secondary processes to explore. In this example, the client’s narrative goes on to describe himself as “not much of a social person, just trying to get ahead in life,” alluding to his primary process and identity. This structural analysis is basically mapping out the general dreaming process of the client. In my understanding, the life myth is the overarching theme or “song” of a person’s life.

Life myth is a useful concept for understanding long-term edge work because it frames the personal growth journey in an impersonal way. (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 148)

The general dreaming process is how this song is unfolding in life which may include relationships and relational problems, symptoms of various sorts, life issues, mental and emotional processes, and dreams themselves. Now, I’d like to address the question of therapeutic approach through the myth of Maplesprout and Firestone.

Maplesprout and Firestone; Process Work and Psychiatry

In Arnold Mindell’s (1989) retelling of the Iroquois myth of Maplesprout and Firestone, both twins lie within the womb, Maplesprout content to wait the organic way while Firestone bursts out, killing the mother. The Iroquois favor Maplesprout and so do I but I also understand that the world needs Firestone as well. For me, Maplesprout and Firestone initially represented, respectively, the

process oriented and the diagnostic/treatment approaches. I think I have grown to see how both can be parts of a larger therapeutic process.

Process Work has had the tendency to avoid the diagnostic way and may limit itself in so doing. Psychiatry may limit itself by its emphasis on diagnosis and treatment. The “mother” holds both children, Maplesprout and Firestone, process and diagnosis/treatment. At least in my own mind, Process Work has been more Maplesprout, less Firestone. But if Process Work is to be more the holder and facilitator of all the parts and processes, it can also embrace diagnosis/treatment as well as its own process orientation. Now let me address a Process Work tendency.

Process Work Subsumes Paradigms

One of Process Work's great powers is that it subsumes processes and paradigms. In its evolution, Process Work has become more comprehensive by integrating other major perspectives such as Taoism, systems theory, family systems work, shamanism, and quantum physics, to name its main components. In approaching the formation of a process oriented way to work with narcissism I am necessarily looking at the larger field in which the work happens.

Process Work has mostly avoided being a diagnostic approach and this may be part of what needs integration or subsuming to fully work with the syndrome of narcissism. My suggestion here as a burgeoning Process Worker and writer is to advocate that Process Work also subsume the diagnostic/treatment approach and therefore expand Process Work. To continue this larger viewing of the social context in which narcissism lives, I'll look at a few roles that

occur.

Process Work, Narcissism, and Roles

One of the ways that Process Work works with relationship situations is by exploring and facilitating roles and their interaction. One role, in regard to narcissism, is the person who is being pathologized and in response denies the accusation. Another part is the one who diagnoses and says, “you are the narcissistic one, the one who is self-centered, craves attention, and does not care.” That role is sometimes filled by the parent, sometimes by a social figure, a psychiatrist, the “writers” of the DSM-IV, or society. There is the one who is accused who may indeed not see their own tendencies though sometimes this is an adult who behaves in “narcissistic” ways and sometimes it is a young child who is accused of being selfish.

Process Work works well with relational processes because it is able to subsume roles and thus is able to truly facilitate these roles as they are not “others.” These roles are, to some degree, integrated and understood. Process Work works with individuals but in the Process Worker’s mind, that individual is also part of a network of relationships, and is part of the world.

To my mind, the Process Worker, in working with the client with narcissistic issues, necessarily works with the above roles, sometimes explicitly and sometimes not. For example, I often see in my work with narcissistic issues that there are two intrapsychic parts in an individual: one is “narcissistic” and one is suffering at the effect of that narcissistic one. The Process Worker may

facilitate that inner or outer relational situation as part of this overall work.

To Pathologize or Not: That Is the Question

To begin to describe a Process Work approach to working with narcissism, I propose a Process Work education that includes knowledge of some of traditional psychology's understanding of narcissism, combined with Process Work's ability to see the structure of processes, follow and unfold these processes, and its desire to depathologize. It is particularly these abilities that distinguish the Process Work approach and differentiate it from traditional psychology and psychiatry's tendency to diagnose, treat, and pathologize. It is both ironic and extremely telling that one of the hallmarks of narcissism is denial and one of the hallmarks of traditional psychiatry is diagnosing (and not infrequently pathologizing). This circular relationship almost guarantees that one will never be rid of the other and no real healing can occur unless that relation is healed.

Process Work holds great promise here in that it tends to be a humanizing approach that embraces the totality of individual and society, and can thus facilitate interactions and processes in a deeply democratic fashion. This "deep democracy" (Mindell, 1995) gives equal regard to "narcissist," "psychiatry," "diagnosing," and "denial," to give all people and processes support to exist. In a therapeutic setting, deep democracy may allow space for thoughts, feelings, and processes that might otherwise be condemned or marginalized. For example, the narcissistic tendency towards grandiosity which consensus reality (CR) ordinarily

frowns upon, might be explored aided by the attitude of deep democracy. In contrast, conventional psychiatry tends to diagnose those with psychiatric and psychological conditions and makes them the “identified patients” for a society (Mindell, 1988).

Narcissism and Systems Thinking

Process Work has the very powerful gift of being able to see the problems and symptoms of life in a larger context and this I feel is very important in regard to work with narcissism. For example, in its work with individuals with psychiatric conditions Process Work has the view that the psychiatric patient is a “shadow” process/ patient for the city. I’ll say more about this shortly.

As the organizational development writer Peter Senge notes, we must look deeply at the system at hand or “yesterday’s solution will be today’s problem” (1990, p. 57). I see narcissism as essentially a relational syndrome, not an individual problem. To have a deeply sustainable “solution” of narcissism, the whole culture must be addressed with its skewed and superficial values, double standards, and collective deceit. Shy of that, we must at least look at the interrelationships between weak and strong, self-centered one and caretaker, the one who is “right” and the one who is “wrong,” betrayer and betrayed, and the one who is “full of oneself” and the one who is empty. Otherwise, “yesterday’s solution” of focusing on the “narcissist” at the exclusion of the social context will exacerbate the issue. To continue this view of the societal context for narcissism, I’ll look at Arnold Mindell’s idea of “city shadows.”

City Shadows

I think Mindell's (1988) concept of "city shadow" is vital and germane to the subject of narcissism. His idea of "city shadows" states that what is marginalized in the culture will show up in the individual's behavior and problems. As the identified patient in a family system carries the disavowed process for his family, the individual struggling with extreme states is an "identified patient" for the city.

Mindell's work with people facing "extreme states" (a state of mind that is antagonistic or unusual for a given community) includes a "two state ethic" where both extreme state and consensus reality are given their due respect.

Encouraging clients to follow only one part of themselves is always less useful than helping them contact all of their parts. . . . Thus, encouraging a client to be God when he is proclaiming that he is God and that the "authorities" are evil would be less useful than enabling him to get in contact with his own inner authorities. Once this is done, he will be able to take simple and helpful directions from others and will even be able to give them to himself. (Mindell, 1988, pp. 27–28)

This work helps individual and society by tapping into the wisdom and information that may be embedded in the extreme state and bringing this back to the "normal" self and CR, and in bringing CR information back to the person who may be removed from those realities. Because people experiencing extreme states are frequently missing a metacommunicator (a Process Work term for a part of one's mental process that observes and can comment on one's own states of mind), the Process Worker may act as that metacommunicator, and as facilitator for this process and help the client develop this ability as well.

Process Work has worked with a wide spectrum of extreme mental states including those related to psychiatric diagnosis. Here Mindell wrote about certain “city shadow” tendencies related to some of these conditions.

The client of the city often appears to be the identified patient of the community; he channels its repressed and unrealized psychology. This shadow is like the city’s dream portraying its neglected gods, the hopelessness it will not admit, its withdrawal from superficial communications, its suicidal tendencies, mania, addictions, murderous rage and hypersensitivity. The shadow reminds us of the smoldering revolution we normally perceive only in the dark of night or in the impinging quality of physical symptoms. (1988, p. 162)

In the case of narcissism, what the U.S. culture partly negates is selfish, inflated, grandiose behavior. On the other hand, the culture is also “preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty . . .” (2000, p. 717). However, if an individual crosses a certain line, he or she is deemed “narcissistic.” Narcissism is actually heavily supported in the ways our culture expresses its ideals, values, and forms of entertainment. But who gets cultural caché? The entertainment figure, the rich, and the famous get that status, briefly.

I believe that the core of the narcissistic injury/process is one’s spiritual essence. Clearly defining what is spiritual and essential in this regard is of course difficult and perhaps impossible without also being subjective. Here I am relying on my observation of the “empty” nature of many clients, the deep human beauty I have witnessed in them, combined with my own strong sense of the spiritual quality of my own “empty” nature. Process Work posits three levels to life processes: consensus reality (CR), dream land, and the essential. CR is the phenomena that most people could agree to (e.g., a headache). Dreamland is the realm of the psychological (e.g., a hammer-like nature when the headache is

explored). The essential is the root of phenomena when it is just starting to be experienced as something manifest (e.g., the hammer-like root being an energy of expansion). In the example of emptiness, it is already moving into the subjective or dreamland when this is the reported experience. Likewise, when exploring the root of that dreamland experience of emptiness in myself or the many others I have helped with this empty state, I have often found a still, clear, essential quality that I hold as a spiritual one. Again, this is a view that I will not be able to substantiate too easily, especially as it is at least partly based on my own sense of self! If the Process Work paradigm is correct then what is essential will always be found at the root of any life experience, narcissism included.

With this view I see the individual working on such issues personally, but also for our society at large. My work with people with narcissistic issues confirms this when I witness individuals who struggle with issues of, for example, power and control and then find and reveal a bare essential self that touches everyone around her. At a microcosmic level the individual may be working on collective issues in facing what keeps us fixated on superficial “success” and realms of power and then finding the essence that is the “real self.” That may be the “city shadow” work of Narcissus. In this next chapter I will name some process tendencies where narcissism is concerned.



Chapter 8: Generalizations in Process

Next, I will present some general information as to common presenting problems, primary and secondary processes, and transference and counter-transference reactions, addictions, and relational tendencies when narcissism is concerned. This kind of generalization about tendencies is not the way that Process Work normally conducts itself, at least to my knowledge, but to explore how Process Work may work with narcissism, such generalizing may be important to consider. This venture of naming tendencies in Process Work with

narcissistic issues is a key point of integration when I consider a Process Oriented approach to work with narcissism. This integrative gesture takes the psychological mapping of narcissism and combines it with Process Oriented methodology.

Presenting Problems

In initial work with a client, the Process Worker may hear in the presenting problem issues such as: isolation, mistrust, control, difficulty with loss of control, serial betrayals (given or received), weakness (emotional or physical, often secondary but sometimes primary), intimacy (emotional or sexual), a relationship problem with a “narcissistic” one such as a parent or partner, impending disaster (e.g., being “found out” in some alarming way), or perfection. In implicit and sometimes explicit ways perhaps the greatest overarching issue is self-esteem and the problems arising from deficiencies there.

Common Primary and Secondary Processes

The Process Worker may observe primary processes (again, those processes that are more identified with and in awareness) such as: control, superiority, insecurity, mistrust, isolation, obsession with success or failure, social anxiety, and so forth. Secondary processes (or those that signal potential areas of growth) may be: weakness, power, need, vulnerability, failing, surrender, intimacy, trust, love, “being seen”, and the “real” self. Some of the above contradictions are due to the main identity of the client. For example, two people may have very similar histories and one may have power and control as more primary processes and the other may have more weakness in his primary

process but both suffer from the same syndrome.

Transferential and Countertransferential Reactions

Typical client transferential reactions include: competition, putting him/herself above or below the therapist, trust issues which can include precipitous withdrawals from therapy due to some infraction, putting the therapist on a pedestal and then yanking him off it (overvaluing and then devaluing behavior), seeking “special” status with the therapist (e.g., by becoming valuable, perhaps by providing the therapist with many referrals), or questioning the ability of the therapist to be a worthy authority.

The therapist’s countertransferential reactions could include: feeling inferiority or superiority, feeling “special,” feeling insignificant, fear of attack or vulnerability, competition, feeling seduced, feeling helpless, feeling “needy” or weak, having cruel impulses towards the client’s show of “weakness,” or judging the client as being self-centered or “narcissistic.” As noted before, part of the therapist’s experience may belong to realm of “dreaming up” where the client’s disavowed dreams, symptoms, and processes are experienced as a special form of countertransference.

Denial is a common expression of narcissism and the temptation to confront the client can be strong. Here is James Masterson on confronting the narcissistic client.

The confrontation of the harmfulness of the behavior in reality is experienced as an attack and has to be defended against by denial, devaluation or avoidance, as was the original reality incident. Consequently, therapeutic technique emphasizes interpretation of the patient’s vulnerability to narcissistic disappointment of his grandiosity and need for perfection (1981, p. 31)

Addictions and Addictive Tendencies

Mindell (2000, p. 163) refers to addictions as “a state of mind in which you take more and more of some food or substance to get the same desired effect, and that this state of mind endangers your health or relationships.” An addictive tendency is similar but hasn’t yet endangered health or relationships.

In contrast, “behavioral addictions are patterns of behavior, which follow a cycle similar to that of substance dependence” (Hartley, 2008). Many of the addictive tendencies I have witnessed in my work with narcissism have the trait of a behavioral addiction versus other ones that include use of substances or food.

Arnold Mindell’s work (2000) with addiction addresses this problem at both the community level and at the “sentient” level. Mindell sees inextricable links between individual addictions and community problems. Furthermore, he addresses the “tendency or impulse that exists before the addictive tendency arises . . .” as the “sentient” root of an addiction (2000, p. 169). In my experience working with people with narcissistic issues, behavioral and substance oriented addictions are common, linked to wider community issues, and have “sentient” roots to them.

In my work, I have seen gravitations towards particular experiences that I view as addictions or addictive tendencies. Sometimes they do seem to affect health and relationships and sometimes they are not yet at that point. The common themes I have seen are: power, control, winning, domination, attention, and feeling special. Any of these can arise in a disturbing way for the client. For

example, a client may complain of a compulsion to gamble that disturbs a marriage. When this is explored, the client may find that underlying the impulse to gamble is the feeling of winning. Explored at a deeper level, the client may find that this winning feeling is connected to a feeling of goodness that she had not known but has desperately needed.

Relational Patterns

Relationship life may indicate patterns of isolation, mistrust, betrayal, control, being involved with “needy” ones or “narcissistic” ones, intimacy problems (emotional or sexual), being accused of being “narcissistic,” being found inaccessible, feeling “weak” or needy, and issues with authority.

Vulnerability and the need for help, especially emotional help are often a removed or secondary process for the person struggling with narcissistic issues. For example, I had occasions when younger when the word “help” would come up in an emotionally difficult time and I could barely utter the word and if I did, would break down emotionally or feel suicidal. In the following chapter I will explore actually working with “clients.”



Chapter 9: Process Work/ing with Narcissus

In this chapter I write about the actual work of using Process Work with people with narcissistic tendencies. I'll be utilizing "case studies" to illustrate this work. All "clients" are actually composites of many clients to ensure confidentiality and allow me to illustrate various components of this pattern in an economical way. Now let's look at how the process may begin.

Beginning

So, how to apply Process Work with a client? Because of your experience, training in Process Work, training in psychology, or through the descriptions given here or elsewhere you see certain tendencies and signals. Process Work has much focus on the awareness of signals that arise in verbal language; paralinguistic phenomena such as tone and volume; bodily posture and movement; relational experiences (e.g., between client and therapist); and the facilitator's experiences, reactions, countertransference, and dreaming up

experiences.

You as the Process Worker may have a relational feeling that alerts you. Or in an initial session, your client utters a word or two that arouses curiosity as to the matrix of which it is part. In early work one or several of the constellation points I have named might be in the environment or in the dialogue you are having with the client. She may bring to you right from the start that she cannot feel trust, and she cannot trust you. Pronounced mistrust often is combined with trauma or abuse. There may be an immediate issue with vulnerability. Again, either in the immediate experience or in a discussion, marginalized needs may be central. A client may caretaker others, whereas her own needs go largely unmet. Issues of being seen or seen as special may arise. As stated before, these kinds of generalizations are not typical to Process Work yet they may be if a hybrid approach is used that borrows from the “map” of narcissism. The above examples are indicated initially by some sort of signal. For example, vulnerability may signal itself in the form of the client being reluctant to speak.

In addition to any verbal information the client gives the Process Worker/therapist, when it comes to a Process Oriented approach, the work is based on awareness of the signals that arise in the session. Again, these can be verbal ones or nonverbal, and could occur in any of the channels of perception including the relational channel.

Starting the Therapeutic Relationship

Using the hybrid Process Work/"map" approach the Process Worker begins a process of slowly forming a supportive alliance with the client. Care for the client may be best expressed nonverbally as overt expressions can be taken poorly, even of a sign of the therapist's ineptitude or "weakness," and inability to see the "real" (bad) self. Preemptive work in preparation for the day when the therapist makes an error that hurts the client can be useful, very important, and very challenging to do well enough. At least two roles probably need to be continuously in mind, the "up" role of power and control, and dominance, (and also the one who may "cut " the relationship in a given moment), and the "down" role of need, vulnerability, betrayal and hurt. The Process Worker may be working with and caring about the "down" side and needs to keep the "up" side in mind as that part may not feel so great about that work, with negative repercussions. Ultimately the client needs help integrating both poles, with the "down" side of vulnerability, need, and hurt usually being more secondary. There is often a level where the "up" side is also secondary in regards to its full range of expression, power, dominance, uncaringness and also greatness. These poles need to learn how to relate to each other which can be dynamic, powerful and also subtle work. (An example of this "up" and "down" work will be presented shortly).

The Process Worker needs to be able to peer inside and see the person and have the metaskills (In Process Work, metaskills are the deepest feelings and values that she brings to the work) to impart that reflection in ways that help. The Process Worker may need to help the client become accepting of her own

intolerable feelings and vulnerabilities and greatnesses. Here is a session.

A First Session

In this section I'll describe Process Oriented work with a client and provide commentary, in parenthesis. A client (CL) walks into the office, looks around the room appraisingly, and says "Yeah, I used to have an office this size." (The Process Worker is taken aback, registers the demeaning comment, and makes an internal note as to a few roles that are involved here: the one who puts down, the one who is put down.)

CL: "I mean, I have grown my business to have bigger things, but that's not really my problem," he says and then slumps into the chair. (Movement as evidenced by the slumping may be an important process to unfold or explore.)

Process Worker: "Oh, what is your problem?"

Client is silent for a moment. "I'm lonely." And his eyes moisten.

The Process worker feels touched, and says "I see you have feelings about that and I feel touched hearing that." (This quick yet emotional exchange may be a marginalized experience in the client's life.)

The client rises up a bit in his chair, tenses, and says sternly, "please don't get mushy on me." (As well as the client's reaction there is another movement process.)

Process Worker: "Some part of you doesn't like mushy. Is there also another part

of you that is more mushy?"

Client slumps again and says in a low voice, "Yeah," pauses, and continues, "but I hate that weak shit." (This somatic response of slumping looks like positive feedback to the suggestion of being mushy.) "Positive feedback" in Process Work terms is the strengthening of a signal in response to an intervention (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 26).

Process Worker: "You hate him?"

Client pauses, and then says, "Yeah." And looks down and slumps more.

Process Worker: "Yes, lower yourself down even more. I encourage you."

Client says nothing, looks confused, but slumps a bit more and says in a surprisingly small voice, "I'm lonely." (More positive feedback in the form of movement, vocal change, and the emotional expression of loneliness. Often, in cases of narcissistic issues, there is a lowering or deflation process in therapy that brings the client down into marginalized emotional, and not infrequently physical, parts of the mind/body that have been vacated.)

Process Worker is emotionally touched again, and encourages the client to feel even more. (The Process Worker has a small inkling that this work may be going too quickly, too soon, but marginalizes this. In narcissistic injury there is often a great split between weak and strong and powerfully accessing the weak part can create backlash including a client leaving therapy. He also considers that his own caring experience may be a missing experience or a missing role in

the life of the client.)

Client hesitates, makes a sound that sounds like a cry, and then holds his breath for several moments.

The Process Worker ventures, gently: "Maybe one part is OK going into the weakness, sinking down, and another part hesitates, stops it." (In suggesting the part that hesitates, the Process Worker gives more opportunity for the work to slow down, hesitate, and integrate. In speaking gently the Process Worker is indirectly trying out the caring role.)

Client breathes a full breath, makes a sound that almost seems like crying, grimaces.

Process Worker notes the full breaths, crying, and grimace, and again encourages, "Yes, go ahead and feel that part of you. It's an important part of you." (The Process Worker is making a blank access statement, a vague way of encouraging experience without naming what that experience is. He is also continuing the experiment with the role of the caring one.)

Client begins to tear and shakes his head from side to side.

Process Worker ventures: "Yes, one part feels these feelings, and another part says 'no.'"

Client: "Well, yeah. I hate that weak shit," in a voice that sounds both disdainful

and yet more faint. (The disdainful one may be a bit marginal at this point.)

Process Worker: “Keep feeling that weak part of you.”

Client says “Um,” and is silent for awhile and continues in a desperate tone, “Yeah. When I feel that weak feeling I feel like killing it or feel like dying.”

Process Worker notes the secondary weak feeling and the edge figures that want to kill it (edge figures are psychic figures that come into action when a person approaches an edge) and encourages: “Stay with that weak feeling.”

Client responds by tearing more and holding his breath again before trying to voice words but cannot. “I, I, I, I . . . ”

Process Worker notes this edge to communication (Process Work uses the term “edge” to describe a block in allowing any given process or communication), to being able to express, wants to help, and ventures, “You, you . . . ?”

This brings the client to controlled sobs, and he wraps himself tightly with his arms, rocking, and crying very quietly.

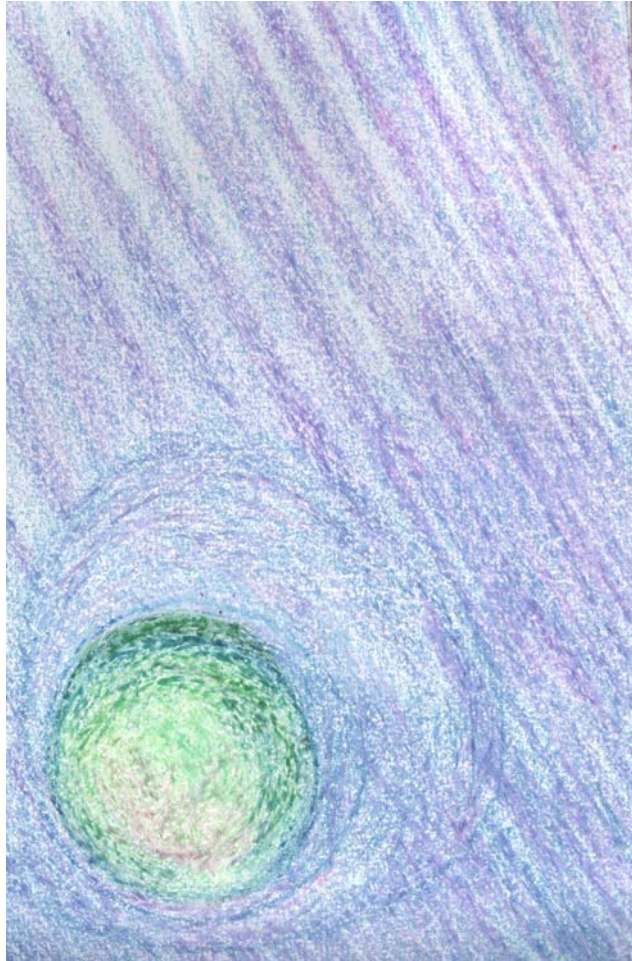
The Process Worker, tentatively, lightly joins the client’s arms with a gentle touch and says, “yes, let us hold him together.”

The client’s arms seem to “listen” to the touch of the Process Worker and then proceeds to weep and cry more audibly, rocking himself, and holding himself very tightly.

Process Worker, “Yes, let’s hold him. Hold him tightly. Don’t let go of him,” and holds the client more firmly.

The client nods his head, but stiffens and the Process Worker retracts his touch. The client continues to hug himself tightly and cries. The Process Worker says “Yes, that’s right, you do the holding. You hold him. That’s the right thing.” The client listens quietly, pauses, nods, and relaxes a bit.

The session ends, the client schedules another appointment and then cancels it the morning of the appointment. Then 6 months later he calls and after some difficulty negotiating a time with the therapist, settles on a time that is somewhat inconvenient for the therapist but better for the client.



The Next Session

Client enters and sits with an air of being removed. The therapist waits. After almost a minute the client speaks.

CL: "I don't want all that crying stuff this time. I didn't come back till now because though it's probably good for me, I felt totally out of control with all that crying.

OK?"

Process Worker: "It was too much for part of you?"

Client looks confused, hesitates, "Yeah."

Process Worker: “That makes sense. One part of you has all these crying feelings but another part really has a hard time with that and feels out of control when it happens.

Client looks mistrustful, like he might be tricked, “Yeah, like that.”

Process Worker: “Maybe it would be good to stay with the part that hates the weak crying part?” (The Process Worker is missing some of the negative feedback coming in the form of mistrust and hesitation.)

Client looks scared, hesitates, hardens, and says “Hey, let’s just slow down here. OK?” (Fortunately, the client catches it and slows things down.)

Process Worker: “That sounds like a good idea. I appreciate how you use your awareness to do what’s right for you.”

Process Worker and CL sit quietly for a few minutes, the Process Worker having a bit of the feeling of having done something wrong. (This “wrong” feeling may be a “dreamt up” reaction, a Process Work term that describes the process when the therapist begins experiencing a marginalized part of the client while in relationship to her.)

Process Worker: “I think I may have been pinning you down with how I was phrasing or framing things. If that is the case, I apologize.”

Client suddenly looks strong in his posture, and says in a condescending way: “That’s OK, we all make mistakes.” (The Process Worker notes the strength

apparent in the client and his own feeling of subtle helplessness.)

Process Worker pauses and then asks: "So, what does bring you back?"

Client takes a while, seems quite tentative, and then says, "Well, I am lonely and I think isolated."

Process Worker: "You seem quite tentative, would it be good to slow down and explore that?"

Client looks even more tentative, and even becomes stony and says harshly, "I don't want to go into all this feeling stuff." (The client is saying quite clearly that going into feelings is not desired. In this he is expressing his own authority in the situation. The Process Worker is also noting the "stony" nature being expressed.)

Process Worker: "You sound quite clear and I appreciate your authority in saying what is right for you." Process Worker pauses and watches for feedback.

The client pauses as if weighing the sincerity of the Process Worker's statement, stares

directly at him, and says, "Do you really mean that?" (The Process Worker wonders if this direct question is an expression of the "stony" one.)

Process Worker pauses and says, "Give me a moment to check myself."

Client, in a hard tone of voice: "I'd appreciate that."

Process Worker says "As far as I am aware, I do mean what I said. I think you

are being quite clear about not wanting to go into feelings. And I think that you were expressing your authority in that and I think that that is important.”

Client: “Well, it’s funny you use the word ‘authority’ because I see you as an authority and I generally have a difficult time trusting authorities. And I guess in that moment I was not sure I trusted you.” (The client is sitting very upright and looking very strong.)

Process Worker: “And what is your sense? Do you trust me now?”

Client: “I’m not sure yet.”

Process Worker: “I appreciate you staying true to where you are.”

Client looks tentative, hard, and says: “I do think this authority issue is a big one.”

Process Worker: “How about you explore that role in yourself with my support? It’s possible that the issue with the authority and mistrust may be an important part of the isolation issue. So addressing it inside yourself may help with the issue in life.”

The client is looking quite nervous and says, “OK, but I need to know that I have control of how this goes.”

The Process Worker takes a moment and says, “I want to honor what a big deal this is to explore. So yes, you should have absolute control here of how it goes.”

Client takes a breath, and sits up even straighter. “Thank you. I think that is

important somehow.”

Process Worker: “Let’s try and go quite slowly and please let me know if anything doesn’t feel right.”

CL: “OK, that sounds good.”

Process Worker: “How about checking out if the feeling or role of the authority is happening inside of you now?”

CL gives the Process Worker a hard stare and says “What?”

Process Worker: “Yes, feel that way you look at me and also your posture. I think the “authority” may be right here in you.”

CL doesn’t respond but continues to stare at the Process Worker in a way that the Process Worker finds somewhat unnerving.

Process Worker: “That’s right, keep feeling him.”

CL continues to just stare at the Process Worker and then says: “You feel just like a little bug to me. I could just step on you. And I’m a little shocked at what I’m feeling.”

Process Worker: “That’s right. Just feel that feeling.”

CL: “Oh, I am.” Client starts to look a little sad.

Process Worker: "You look a little sad to me. Is that going on?"

CL: "Hmm, I don't know," but he then starts to tear a little.

Process Worker: "What's the feeling?"

CL: "Not sure," in a small voice and has tears running down his face now.

CL: "I feel very much like I did a long time ago, when I was a kid and my father would treat me like shit. God I feel like that now," he says in a small, faraway voice and his crying stops.

Process Worker gently: "Just feel that."

CL starts to cry again, hesitates, and then says in a hard tone: "I hate this."

Process Worker: "The authority hates the feeling part."

CL cries again, bitterly, "Yeah, just like my dad. God, I didn't know this was all still inside of me. Shit."

Process Worker is quiet.

CL sits and looks very sad, "You know, obviously I am very sad about all this but you know, the funny thing is that I feel somehow better. Shit, that is weird."

Process Worker: "Really? How so better?"

CL is quiet, crying still, and then says, "It's kind of like when I feel this part of me that I always try to avoid, the weak crying little part of me, that I actually feel more

human. That's what it is."

Process Worker is touched and somehow sees wholeness in the midst of the client's sadness, "Yes, you look whole to me somehow even though you're also sad."

CL: "I feel that."

The session ends.

Third Session

In this third session, the Process Worker has gotten into a relational conflict with the client. He pressed for an exploration of power dynamics that were starting to occur in his relationship with the client, backed off, but not before the client entered into a defensive mode. This session illustrates working relationally with the client in difficult moments, and also "picking up" on a power process that occurs in the work.

Process Worker is feeling slightly out of control, irritated, and is afraid it's showing.

Client looks put off, pauses, and says "I'm not sure this is going anywhere. Is this what you always do with your clients?"

Process Worker pauses, feels a bit scared, and physically weak, like he's about to be abandoned and says, "I can see that I'm losing you or missing you. I

wonder what is right for you?” (The Process Worker also considers that his experience of fearing abandonment may be a secondary experience for the client, perhaps one that the client experienced at one time.)

CL, a bit aggressively: “Hey, you’re supposed to be the therapist here.”

Process Worker: “OK, I need to take a moment here and go inside myself. Is that OK?”

Client nods. (The client was expressing some aggression and the Process Worker is tempted to be tough in turn. However, he is also aware that he is in some level of reaction.)

Process Worker goes into himself, feels some shaking and becomes aware of fear. He sees an issue of power here in the aggressive mode of the client, his own aggressive impulses, and in his fear. He tries this: “When I pause I notice that I feel afraid, and I’m struggling a bit here with trying to be helpful. And maybe I was trying too hard to help. And in that, I think I was too forceful. I think that there may be a struggle between a strong part and another part that feels affected by that one.” (Repairing therapeutic injuries and missteps is generally a difficult task and seems even more delicate when narcissism is involved. I think the stark polarities and often severe trust issues make ruptures very challenging to repair.)

Client seems relieved, “That sounds OK. I mean, I hope you didn’t think I was criticizing you. I mean I think you are actually already addressing stuff that

nobody has ever addressed with me. I just can be kind of gruff sometimes.”

Process Worker pauses and then asks: “That is OK. Shall we explore your ‘gruff’ nature?”

Client pauses and says, “OK.”

Process Worker pauses and ventures: “Then I am going to suggest you get into contact with the gruff part of you and notice what happens when you do.”

CL: “I think you’re going to have to help me know what that means and how to possibly do that.”

Process Worker: “That’s OK. I’ll help you. For a start, just relax, and imagine the gruff part of you. What happens?”

Client pauses, looks confused and scared, makes a fist, and says, “Yeah, but I still don’t know what to do.”

Process Worker: “You’re doing fine. Just feel what’s happening in the body right now, both in whatever feelings you’re having and in your arms and hands.”

Client looks scared, but closes his eyes, fist still clenched, “I don’t really feel anything.” (The fist is a secondary process.)

Process Worker: “That’s OK. Stay with the body and just notice your right hand and the sensations you feel there.”

Client unballs his fist and opens his eyes, clearly scared. (In Process Work terminology, the client here is at an “edge.” Here, it is signaled by the fear, hesitation, and the fist that balls but without awareness, intention, or the identity that could support it.)

Process Worker: “Your right hand was like this a moment before. Here, I’ll join you in exploring it. It looked like this.” (He makes a fist and shows this to the client.)

Client balls his fist back and says uncertainly, “Like this?”

Process Worker: “Yes, like that! Now, just close your eyes and feel that.”

Client closes his eyes and says, “That scares me somehow.”

Process Worker: “Wow! You’re doing it. That is a bull’s eye.”

CL: “Really?”

Process Worker: “Yeah, stay with that. Just close your eyes and feel that fist.”

Client closes his eyes and stays with this for quite some time and then says “That feels like someone who is like a killer. I almost can’t believe this is happening.”

Process Worker: “That’s the bull’s eye, the killer. Just stay with that killer, the fist, and mostly the feeling of it.”

Client closes his eyes again and now his fist starts to shake subtly.

Process Worker: "Just keep feeling it."

CL: "I just feel like I could fucking kill everything. Everyone. Me. Everything. The whole fucking world."

Process Worker: "That's right. Feel that deeply. Stay with that."

CL: "I feel it."

Process Worker: "Now notice what happens if you imagine killing everything. Everyone. You. Everyone. The whole fucking world."

CL: "Well, I'm not sure," he falters.

Process Worker: "No, really. This thing is the important thing. Believe in this killer. Feel what would you feel if you killed everything. Everyone. You. The world. All of it.

CL: "OK, yeah. I feel it again. Actually it feels kind of like a relief. Just to kill off everything."

Client is quiet for quite a while, body shaking subtly and then becomes quieter, and his fist unballs and both arms slip to his side.

Process Worker: "Yes, just feel this. Take your time. Feel it deeply."

Client stays in this quiet place for some time, a bit of tear forming at his eyes.

Process Worker: "Yes, just feel it. Stay here. Take your time. Even imagine a

whole world that is just about this feeling, that supports this feeling.” (The Process Worker is not sure what the client is experiencing but encourages him through this vague “blank access” statement which supports the client to just feel this feeling without prescribing what exactly to focus upon).

Client stirs, wipes the tear from his eye, and says “I think that this may be the happiest feeling I have ever had. I feel that everything was erased, all the pain, the crap, the worries, everything, everyone, me, you. And that in its place was just this incredibly simple, empty, clear feeling.”

Process Worker: “Just take your time and stay with that feeling.” The client closes his eyes and stays quiet for several minutes but then seems to have had enough and comes out and looks at the Process Worker.

Process Worker: “I want to venture to say that I think that that feeling is one of the immense gifts that the killer brings. But what do you think?”

Client pauses in his slow deep mood, “I think I would agree with you.”

The session ends.

Now let’s look at work with relationship work.



Chapter 10: Process Work: Relationship Work

Process Work with Relationship Issues

Process Work holds as its most central idea that nature shows the way. So, the work that follows the naturally arising phenomena of the relationship as it emerges is the most sustainable. Related to this is the idea that every relationship has its own culture and that it is simply respectful and helpful to honor this culture even as it may be troubled by itself.

The relationship channel is often a key channel of work and process for narcissistic issues. It is often an unoccupied channel (Process Work distinguishes those channels that the individual “occupies” with awareness and intent from “unoccupied” channels which are ones where the client is more apt to feel the effect of the channel experience).

Levels of Work

Process Work focuses upon various levels of relationship work including: communication, myth, systemic or field, mood, and the individual level. The communication level is indicated when the couple says or shows that communication is a problem. This work is carried out by working with signals intended and unintended; incomplete communications; double signals or messages (a double signal is one where there are two signals, one being unintended, e.g., saying “I’m peaceful” with a closed fist); and rank issues to name a few major items. Practically, some couples need to work out “rules of engagement” to make communication workable. I have also utilized communication forms such as Non Violent communication when couples have needed a form to communicate.

The mythic level is indicated at beginnings and endings, when the big picture of the relationship is the focus, or when the relationship is in question, and so forth. A few ways this is addressed is by reviewing the beginning of the relationship (often a time when the myth of the relationship is expressed in its basic elements), or by asking the couple to create a fantasy of what two people are doing together.

Mood work is indicated when there is a relationally moody or difficult atmosphere, frozenness, when verbalization is difficult, or when addiction is problematic. A few ways how mood work can be addressed are by addressing high and low dreams (Process Work names our relational dreams and hopes of what might be our “high” dream, and the “low” dream that occurs when these

hopes and dreams are not realized, or as an expression of our deepest fears and concerns), by exploring the ghost who creates the mood (“ghosts” are a Process Work term for a role that is implied and impactful but not embodied by any of the parties concerned), or by exploring the addictive impulse and what experience this may be trying to bring into the relationship.

Systemic work is indicated when the couple is stuck in identified roles or when both are feeling the same in some problematic way. A few ways the system can be addressed are by working with roles and ghost roles, exploring the edges of the system, or by addressing the context within which the relationship operates (e.g., a same sex couple might address the relation happening in a culture where same sex relationships are marginalized). Next, I’ll present a fictionalized session with a couple.

A Session with a Couple

In this session, a heterosexual married couple in their 50s comes for couples work.

Process Worker: “So, what brings you? How can I help you?”

Man gestures for the woman to start. (Process Worker notes what may be a rank signal where the man has the woman start.)

Woman hesitates, seems shy at first, and says: “I called because we need some help. I can’t stand it. We’ve been married for 15 years and it’s more like we’re roommates at this point. No, actually it’s like I live with my boss. There’s no

intimacy, there's no feelings, plus he always has the final say in everything!" (The rank issue gets more explicit.)

The man looks at the Process Worker, and rolls his eyes as if to get support from the therapist.

Process Worker registers the signal, decides not to pursue it, looks at the man and asks: "What would you say? What brings you?"

Man shrugs and says, "I'm just here because she says we have a problem that has to get addressed."

Process Worker: "So no reason for you to come otherwise?"

Man: "Nope."

Process Worker: "Well, this may be the first problem. One person says there is a problem to be addressed and other says there isn't. Is that the situation?"

Woman: "That's exactly the problem! If he doesn't have a problem, there isn't supposed to be a problem. It's like my perspective doesn't matter!"

Process Worker: "Well, sounds like there may be some democracy or rank issues at hand here." Looks at both of them and asks "Who has more power in the relationship?"

The man smiles and the woman responds, "He does. He always pulls rank on me. Rank is the right word."

The man sits back in a fashion that looks regal to the Process Worker and doesn't speak.

The woman looks angry.

Process Worker: "Maybe it would help to have a talk about how social rank enters into your interactions and how it affects you both including right here in the moment?"

Woman: "That would be great! God, I need this. That is one thing too. I'm always the one who needs something. He never shows me that he needs me!"

Man gives her a disdainful look, maintains his posture, and says: "God, you are pathetic sometimes."

The woman says nothing but sinks down in her chair, collapsed, and looking pained.

The Process Worker sees a strong discrepancy between their respective postures and says: "I notice you two have very different physical postures and wonder what you notice about them."

The woman looks at the Process Worker and says, "See, you can see it. He just sits there lordling it over me. He doesn't respect me. I feel like I'm supposed to be the subservient one."

Process Worker: "Do you see something in his posture that 'lords' it over you?"

The woman says "Yes, just look at the way he sits there, like he's the boss."

The man rolls his eyes and says, "Well, someone has to be the boss. If you insist on being pathetic I guess it's going to be me that's the boss."

Process Worker addresses the man: "So, you say you need to be the boss. I do wonder if there are benefits to being that but also whether there are problems with that as well. How about feeling how the boss is showing up right now? For example, how is the boss sitting right now?" (The Process Worker is seeing chronic roles that may be causing problems at a systemic level. So he is exploring these roles even though they are partly aware of them already.)

The man shifts his posture and looks uncomfortable with the question. "Well, I mean I may be the boss but I'm not sure what you're getting at here."

Process Worker: "Your wife is complaining of you being the boss. You say you need to be the boss because, as you stated, 'she's pathetic,' and yet these roles of boss and the subservient one seem to also be in conflict. I can see how it may be helpful to explore these roles, see what is good and helpful about each, and also see how you two can negotiate a way for these roles to interact better." (The Process Worker feels one-sidedly in support of the woman and wants to see if he can support the man here.)

The man pauses, looks guilty, and says, "How there may be something good

about being the boss?”

Process Worker: “Yes. And how there may helpful and not so helpful things about both roles and how they interact with each other.”

The woman is smiling and looking stronger in her posture and the man is looking uncertain and less “regal” in his posture.

The Process Worker looks at the two of them and says, “And, sometimes the roles may switch or shift and who is powerful may change from one moment to the next. I wonder who feels powerful right now?”

The woman says, “Wow. I am so used to feeling less than and subservient but right now I feel that what is being addressed empowers me somehow. It’s like I’m getting validated for something I’ve tried to point out but never gets quite confirmed.” (The Process Worker looks at the woman, and with her feeling and shift in posture, she almost looks like a different person. The man also looks like a different person in his uncertain facial expression, and fretful movements of his hands.)

Process Worker looking at the woman, “I think it’s quite important that you also get to experience your power in the relationship. I wonder how this is for both of you?”

There’s a pause and the man looks a bit uncertain and says, “Well. I must say that I almost never feel like I’m not the powerful one. And what if she has the

power? Will she just use it against me?"

The woman says, "Well, to be honest there is a feeling in me that is a bit vindictive and pissed off here. But I also love you and know that you do have this scared, vulnerable side. And so even if I get powerful I totally want you to know that I am going to care for you and consider your feelings."

The man begins to tear and covers his face.

The woman looks over at him and flushes.

The Process Worker feels touched and says, "I have to say I feel touched. There is something quite beautiful happening here and I want to honor it. Let's just go slowly here."

The couple are both crying more openly and start holding each other for several minutes.

The woman says, "I think I only have been able to hold you in this vulnerable open way when we were first together. I just love you and hope you'll continue to let me in like this."

The man says, "I think I made up a story that I couldn't trust you. That you were weak and I had to be strong. But I can see now that I've been afraid to open up with you and be trusting. This is scary but I can also see that I am walling off from you if I don't open up and try trusting you." Both now look equal somehow.

Process Worker: “I greatly appreciate the work you both did. I want to support more work that explores the roles of boss and subservient one, the rank and power in your relationship, and how that can be problematic but also helpful. How does that sound?”

They both agree.

In the next chapter I'll explore narcissism through my relationship with my son, and my own experiences.



Chapter 11: Narcissism, My Son, and Me

I'm back from camping with my son, Gabriel. Am I am seeing him more clearly? Is his "narcissism" a projection of mine? Is it simply age appropriate behavior? I am disturbed. Am I clear? What do I see? What I see in my son is a tendency to not quite take me in or respect me as a parental authority, refuse to be "wrong," insist on having things his way, and display strong upset when things don't go his way. My son displaced me in relation to his mother, and I think he knows it. And it creates a power imbalance. I see it in his tendency to isolate, and pull away when he has hurt or upset feelings.

Then I see my own narcissistic tendencies. I can see it in my need to have him approve of me. My narcissistic wounding appears when I try to be "seen" by him, which further gives him power and reverses what the natural order should be. When compared to his connection to his mother, my connection with him is

more inconsistent and may also create more space or latitude for who and what he can be. These moments, these questions create agony for me. I doubt myself. I wonder how I may be contributing to his problems.

Two Years Later

It is coming up on 2 years since that camping trip. Where am I? Where is he? I still have similar struggles. I can see some of his struggles. And yet the main thing I notice with the theme of narcissism in mind is that I think I accept and see more of who he is. I think I can see when he is more and less connected to his self. I think I can see my own moments when I am more in myself. The question I had about his narcissistic tendencies has lessened. I know he has some and I feel more relaxed about it. At least right now I do. I think I am closer to some of my narcissistic injuries and being closer I am also less concerned on the one hand and more pained on the other. Part of my answer to the question "Am I narcissistic?" is "No, I am in pain. I lack self. I am floundering. I am drowning. And now I am getting back to some ground of self. Now I love." In another moment I face the process of being "wiped out" by my inner father/critic and want to die. Then I find emptiness and peace in ego death. The issue and experience of narcissism also dies for the moment.

November 3, 2009

I am coming to a close on this paper. The past year has been marked by a strong process of identity death. A part of me, a lot of "me," keeps wanting to die, and something remains or is born that feels empty, whole, peaceful, free. I feel at times so fortunate for this process, that it is my fate to have this "death," this

rebirthing that so utterly relieves me. In fact, what I begin to realize and experience is that in “dying,” in giving up completely, I come alive. In death, I come home. In “life” I tend to not feel at home; I am not happy, nor alive. The narcissist in me lives life based on pretenses and so is of course tremendously vulnerable.

Narcissus of course despairs because his life is based in illusion, superficiality, and duality. I too despair when I attempt to live my life based on CR values. I can't do it. So I want to die. In death, I begin to find the nondual, and in that realm I live. Narcissus is a relatively extreme manifestation of duality. His gift to us is showing us the folly of living life at the level of appearances and superficiality and how to redeem ourselves through transformation.

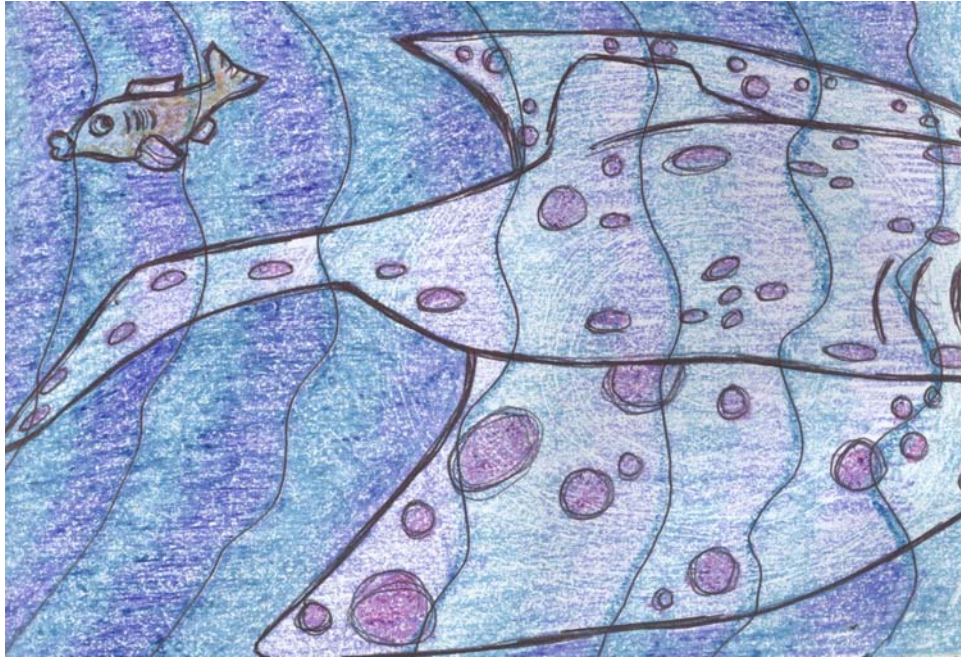
As I follow this process, I consider narcissism, and how Narcissus dies and becomes the flower. And I consider how the narcissist in me may want to die and how emptiness takes his place. This feels like such a deep, vast healing. But I also experience confusion when I feel less interested in people, friends, my son, “me.”

I recently watched the documentary “Derrida” about the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Here is Derrida speaking:

. . . a much more open welcoming and hospitable narcissism, one that is much more open to the experience of the other as other. I believe that without a movement of narcissistic reappropriation the relation to the other would be absolutely destroyed. It would be destroyed in advance. The relation to the other, even if it remains asymmetrical, open, without possible reappropriation must trace a movement of reappropriation in the image of oneself for love to be possible. Love is narcissistic. (2002)

When I consider Derrida's words I wonder if we need a bit of narcissism to be relational human beings? I don't know the answer. Here I trust one of Process Work's "parents," the Tao. Will I find love? Will I dissolve my ordinary life in emptiness? Let the Tao decide. Let the nondual find the way.

I'll conclude with some thoughts about narcissism and the world in the next and final chapter.



Chapter 12: Closing: Narcissus and the World

Narcissism and a World Tendency

As I conclude this thesis, I would like to say that this pattern of narcissism represents a very important tendency in the world. It's important because narcissism informs how people see and experience themselves and each other, and therefore how we then care or not for each other and our world. It also seems to describe a certain cultural/political pattern in the US, which prizes achievement, physical beauty, power, and demonstrates "arrogant, and haughty behavior" (APA, 2000, p. 717).

Narcissism, most generally, is a condition that is created when a child somehow has to be something or someone that she is not. I think our culture has deep roots that are predicated on being something other than who we are. Popular culture and particularly movies and movie stars come to mind here, as

do politicians, and that, to my knowledge, American anomaly, the actor/politician. Our culture prizes appearance, the surface, achievement, good looks, physical beauty, a good act, or “good face.” People publicly humiliate themselves on national television for a few minutes of “fame” and look surprised when the blow happens.

Our political agendas, international and domestic, have the common flavors of the cover-up, the unapologetic abuse of power, hubris pushed to the limits, and then now, apparently, the fall. I think of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, Richard Nixon and Watergate, 9/11 and the abuses in Iraq, Abu Ghraib prison, and Guantanamo Bay. The vulnerable take a beating in the world of narcissism. Child abuse seems to have reached unprecedented depths of severity and distortion. I think of Jon Bonet; child fashion shows and murder; betrayal at the deepest levels; gurus who abuse their power flagrantly; and drivers who cut me off and then give me the finger. This country has a tendency to marginalize humanity, to exploit it, abuse it, make it criminal to be human, to have human needs, and it enrages and discourages me at times.

I began this thesis during the dregs of the Bush years and am finishing it at the start of Barack Obama’s presidency. It is perhaps too early to say, though I am very hopeful of the fact of this nation electing its first African American president. I am optimistic that our president is one who writes so honestly, intelligently, and humanely in his book, *Dreams From my Father*. If betrayals of the real self are indicators of the roots of narcissism, and if narcissism is taken as at least partly a phenomenon that arises in a societal context, then this collective

event may be a hopeful sign that as a people, we are voting for someone, something more honest and real.

Here again is Masterson's description:

The main clinical characteristics of the narcissistic personality disorder are grandiosity, extreme self-involvement and lack of interest in and empathy for others, in spite of the pursuit of others to obtain admiration and approval. The patient manifesting a narcissistic personality disorder seems to be endlessly motivated to seek perfection in all he or she does, to pursue wealth, power and beauty and to find others who will mirror and admire his or her grandiosity. Underneath this defensive façade is a feeling state of emptiness and rage with the predominance of intense envy. (1981, pp. 7-8)

In this description, I see a significant aspect of our national personality that has been embodied in our foreign policy and by some of our presidents. In Obama I see an important shift, a movement towards something more real and transparent, integral, and honest.

Nations come and go, rise and fall, yin and yang. If narcissism can be likened to national tendencies as well as to individual patterns, then maybe there was a full expression of one half of this process; and now the shadow of narcissism, its sister emerges, the sibling of humane, real, and vulnerable being. That is my hope.

Last Thoughts

In my earlier thinking about narcissism and community, I favored a community that supported the "real self" over the "false" one. Now I see that making distinctions between "real" and "false" selves and favoring the "real" may simply create more divisions. What I am now considering is a community that can

hold a dynamic space for the dialogues between all its elements, perspectives, and people.

Here, I look at the models and examples of community that Process Work exemplifies. Process Work communities, as one of its leaders Max Schubach implies, are not “love communities,” but rather “hash out” communities (i.e., ones that “hash out” their own problems, face their own diverse natures, and create room for the lack of agreement that some “love communities” seem to frown upon).

In so doing, Process Work supports a process that it calls “deep democracy” which rather than being a static structure, is a live process that seeks to include all people, processes, feelings, and mind states (Mindell, 2002, p. 13). It is the Tao, practiced by our deeply democratic spirits and attitudes. If anything exists, how is somehow also right? If anyone or anything manifests, how does she/it also have an essential nature?

“Democracy” as a social structure and mental attitude may create diagnostic criteria for narcissism. It may influence me in desiring a community that supports the “real self,” and it may ultimately want to put wire fences around the narcissist, imprisoning him as another of its enemies of state. If therapy relies upon “democracy” to function, Process Work relies upon deep democracy to live, richly, fully, and inclusively.

Can Process Work work with “narcissism?” I think so, though it needs its central metaskill of deep democracy. Perhaps the Process Worker needs to remember that the Tao that can be spoken is not the Tao. The syndrome that

can be named is not the true process. It can only be an approximation. Without deep democracy I fear that my “work” with narcissism, even using a “Process Work” approach, is still prejudiced, conceptualized, and ultimately isolating for Process Worker and client. Deep democracy can help us be awake and alive in the face of experiences and phenomena that are not defined, diagnosed, or part of the “map.” Deep democracy can help us be companions and hosts to the myriad processes that want to live regardless of their appearances.

My “ally,” my decimating, omnipresent father still presses me to go towards emptiness, transcendence. I’m going . . . but I’m learning, very slowly, that it is not a one-time decision. It is a movement, a process that has great complexity, even with its consistent message: transcend, transcend.

I draw a similar parallel with narcissism and Process Oriented work. Even with consistent tendencies, let us proceed honoring the great complexity involved, and know that there is no one decision to be made.

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