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Narcissism: Fragile Bodies in a Fragile World. Part 1

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ABSTRACT *In this two-part paper, we explore how, in Western society, intensified consumer culture, playing on feelings of shame and inadequacy, can be seen as reactivating the 'narcissistic wound' while the recent growth of information technology increasingly provides access to a global spectacle and a virtual world that offer an escape from reality, fuelling the illusion of immortality and invulnerability to physical/emotional needs. We ask who benefits from this culture of unrelatedness and disembodiment and what are the repercussions in terms of participation in social life and organized response to global issues.*

Using material from our practices and from social life, we seek to identify the collective cost of maintaining a disassociation that can permeate not only the therapeutic process but also work, personal relationships and events on the political stage. We consider a view of Bush as a narcissistic president in a narcissistic culture with the Iraq war as a narcissistic misadventure, and we present vignettes from the consulting room, Dance Movement Therapy work in Holloway Prison, and the academic world of prehistoric archaeology to show how narcissistic behaviours are embedded in many diverse situations in Western society. We ask how the concept of narcissism in our media age can help us understand phenomena such as the rise of fundamentalism; celebrity cult; insatiable aspirations to 'self-improvement'; obsession with 'success' and consumer goodies; the denial of ageing; the upsurge in cosmetic surgery, body modification and self-harm; as well as growing addiction to alcohol and hard drugs. Finally we ask, how do the narcissistic fantasy of self-sufficiency, the disavowal of loss and the denial of the ultimate non-discursive reality of death affect our ability to respond appropriately to human injustice and the fragility of our planet? Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Narcissistic anxieties affect so many of us. Glen Gabbard (1983), in discussing his work with performers who suffered from stage fright, was 'repeatedly struck by the pervasive narcissistic concerns underlying all the dynamics of stage fright.' Gabbard does not believe that everyone who suffers from stage fright is suffering from a narcissistic disorder but that the act of performing in front of a crowd will activate the residues of universal

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developmental experiences of a narcissistic nature. We can understand how performing can activate narcissistic concerns but there are many other aspects of our culture that exacerbate and intensify our narcissistic tendencies. Nearly 30 years after Christopher Lasch (1979) wrote his well known book *The Culture of Narcissism*, we attempt to identify some of what is new and possibly more extreme in the narcissism of our times.

Otto Kernberg (1975) questioned whether the increasing prevalence of narcissistic disorders was largely the result of an increasingly narcissistic culture. He believed that a better understanding of personality structures was the main cause of the increase in the diagnosis. Yet Kernberg very clearly states that normal self-esteem is healthy and is linked to feeling effective and being successful in the pursuit of achievable tasks and ambitions. Friendship, love and compassion are identified as valuable and hence need to be valued. Normal adult narcissism enjoys success but does not crave admiration. Kernberg contrasts what he defines as 'healthy' narcissism to a narcissism that has remained at an immature level. Here you only feel valuable if you are admired because you are clever, beautiful, or able to acquire shiny new products, the function of which is to create admiration and envy in others. But what if the culture absolutely encourages and admires these characteristics, while qualities that are less marketable are ignored? Kindness, love and friendship, loyalty, compassion – these cannot be packaged or bought.

Emile Durkheim believed that the personality is the individual socialized and Alexander Lowen (1985, x) wrote 'We shape our culture according to our image and in turn we are shaped by that culture.' We cannot understand the one without the other. Each society has its own way of socializing: how we separate from mother and become individuals; how we compete or cooperate; how we love and attach; how we raise the next generation; how we find meaning; in short how we live and die. Letters sent to the problem pages of newspapers and magazines often mention feelings of emptiness and loneliness that are common symptoms of narcissistic disturbance. A study carried out at San Diego State University under Jean Twenge (Twenge, in press) assessed the response of over 15,000 college students between 1987 and 2006 to a test called the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. The study found 'an alarming rise in narcissism and self centeredness' in the intervening 19 years.

We would suggest that a crucial function of any viable culture is to incorporate an understanding and acceptance of our human limitations and – importantly – our mortality. How does contemporary Western society help us face inevitable ageing and death? Humans, as far as we know, are the only animals to have a conscious understanding of their own finitude, and the importance of that understanding has a deep impact on our psyche. Ageing can render us as vulnerable as babies, dependent and in need of care and protection. Each and every one of us has to come to terms with our own end. One could argue that death is the greatest injury to our narcissism because there are simply no exceptions and part of the diagnostic marker of the narcissistic personality is the need to believe in one's own specialness. In an earlier paper (Cowan-Jenssen and Goodison, 2004) we discussed our culture's obsession with celebrity and fame as in part a quest for immortality. It is not a new phenomenon that people have sought to evade death and to be remembered in perpetuity but until relatively recently it was only the most powerful who could make an enduring memorial to their time on earth through the medium of art or monumental architecture. Before the arrival of the camera, it was still only the affluent whose image could survive beyond their lifetime. Now, through the medium of photography and film, the possibility of our

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image living on after our death is available to all of us in the developed world. Part of the poignancy of the story of Narcissus is the transience of his mirror image as he gazes into the pool. With the help of a lens we can capture and fix an image, thus fuelling the temptation to deny the impermanence of our physical selves.

There are a number of other ways in which our culture offers us the illusion of defying death and vulnerability. In our 2004 paper we also discussed how we are sold this illusion, for example through the cosmetic industry, which has made it possible for us to be cut, stitched and botoxed so that the effects of the years of wear and tear are minimized. We are encouraged to pretend that 40 is the new 30 until we try to conceive naturally. Every so often a fertility expert will try to warn us that although we might look younger on the outside, on the inside it is as it has always been. Such voices are not encouraged because they run counter to the belief that technology can solve such problems. Indeed when the gynaecologist Dr Susan Bewley and her colleagues wrote an article in the *British Medical Journal* (Bewley et al., 2005) warning that women who put off childbearing until their late 30s were courting disaster, they were attacked as being hostile to the over-30s. Articles that mention IVF treatment rarely stress how poor the statistics are for the over-40s. The message is clear: the problems of ageing can be solved with enough effort and determination. But who helps us face reality when we can no longer pretend? Who helps us come to terms with a good enough life and who helps us die? All too often we cannot see ageing and dying as part of living. It is merely a nasty failure at the end of massive struggles.

NARCISSISM OF POWER

We can widen our perspectives and look at what might happen when the illusion of invulnerability is expanded and narcissistic fantasy is taken on by nations as a whole. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the current use of military power to reshape the world based on the belief that a nation as powerful as America should be able to remake reality as they would wish. In their thought-provoking paper, Clarke and Hoggett (2004) describe the American political psyche as displaying similar characteristics to those used to diagnose narcissistic personality in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-lV). These characteristics include fantasies of power, grandiosity and need for control. Other features are a difficulty in seeing another's viewpoint, a sense of entitlement, taking advantage of others for your own ends, thinking that others are envious of you and finally arrogance and a belief that you are exceptional.

Through the work of psychotherapists such as Kernberg (1975), Kohut (1982), Lowen (1985) and many others, we can understand that the inner world of the narcissist is a lonely place, empty of meaningful attachments, full of anxiety and rage. Similarly, underlying the enormous power of America we can detect a tremendous anxiety and sense of vulnerability. The American defence budget greatly exceeds the defence budget of the rest of the world combined. Why so fearful? Clarke and Hoggett argue that lying at the heart of a nation or an individual who believes in its own superiority is fear: fear of its own capacity for causing destruction to both itself and to others. Arising from this fear of destruction is consequently a fear of revenge. But neither the narcissistic individual nor nation can admit to such terrors; instead they employ the manic defence of omnipotence. With this comes the belief that you know best, that you are envied, that really everyone wants to be you. There is a splitting between the good (you and your friends) and the projection of the bad onto others who

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become, by necessity, your enemies. In the splitting between good and bad, there is no grey. You are good, you are special, you are exceptional. De Zengotita (2003) quoted Lieutenant General Jay Garner who was sent to Iraq in the early days of the current war. Speaking to his troops he had said, 'You ought to be beating your chests every morning. You ought to look in the mirror, suck in your bellies, and say "Damn, we're Americans".' Behind all the chest thumping lies a monumental wishful hoping for specialness.

On 11 September 2001 we witnessed America's vulnerability. It was a moment of tremendous shame and humiliation because it occurred in the full gaze of the entire world. The twin towers, that 110 storey iconic symbol of might and prosperity, had been destroyed by a handful of men. September 11th was, among other things, a huge injury to America's narcissism and one that would have to be avenged.

Gone was reflection, gone was the posing of serious questions and gone was an adequate assessment of political reality. After 11 September manic defence, revenge, magical thinking and denial were the order of the day and the results of the failure to assess the actual postwar situation in Iraq is what we are still witnessing. Successful government is based on what is achievable rather than on wishful thinking and it requires the ability to assess events as they are rather than how one wants them to be. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a display of the politics of narcissism. The problem is that whilst Narcissus was beautiful, and America is powerful, if you cannot relate to the complexities of the world and to the experiences of others, then you can only become tragic and create tragedy.

After 11 September America would have needed a wise President who could have helped articulate and hold the outrage of the nation. Such a president did not exist. Instead there was George W. Bush, a man who identified his vision as God's vision, one fundamentalist waging war on another with terrible results. One set of black-and-white thinking against the other. One side declaring *jihad* on unbelievers and the other a pre-emptive war on the 'axis of evil'. It is no surprise that Bush and his government disliked the UN. It offered no simple solution, no adequate voice for revenge. Arguably we have seen a conjunction of a narcissistic president with a culture that has powerful narcissistic tendencies. The qualities that mark the narcissistic personality were evident in Bush. He was grandiose in his claims and he had great difficulty seeing another viewpoint. The statement that you are for us or against us revealed his difficulty in understanding that there might be valid perspectives that are different from those of America. He had an enormous sense of entitlement not founded on ability, legitimized by his family background. His electoral campaigns indicated a ruthlessness and willingness to take advantage of others. In his disregard for international law Bush revealed his disdain for others and a belief in the exceptional status given to the United States and himself.

George W. Bush was raised in a fiercely competitive and hugely wealthy family. His mother, Barbara, has been described as strict and cold (Frank, 2004). She was the disciplinarian and Bush Senior was very much an absent father. When Bush was 7 years old, his 3-year-old sister, Robin, died of leukaemia. He had not been told of the seriousness of her illness and so when she died he had had no chance to say goodbye. There was apparently no funeral for the little girl, only a memorial service, and his parents, determined to carry on as normal, played tournament golf the day after she died. By all accounts he received little help with his grief and descriptions of him around this time tell of an anxious, hypermanic little boy. Bush's inability to mourn was noted by Mark Crispin Miller (2001, 322),

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who described Bush's reaction to the events of 11 September as 'an apparent incapacity for any show of sorrow, at least in public. Without a script he seemed unable to assimilate the tragic aspect of the crisis, or even face it, but would just look right on past it to the happy, happy day of our eventual revenge.' Erich Fromm (1964) describes revenge as having the irrational function of undoing magically what has been done actually.

Bush struggled academically, almost certainly with some form of learning disability. He described himself as the black sheep of the family. He drank to excess and he failed in a variety of business ventures. In such a family it would have been difficult to find a place that was considered good enough, or that reflected values different from those of the Bush family. 'Making it' meant having power or earning large amounts of money or both. If you are not successful you are a loser. According to fellow students at Yale, George W. Bush idolized his father whose achievements he could never match. Rather sadly, an examination of his father's personal letters show many more references to his son Jeb than to his namesake, George. David Halberstam (2007) described Bush as having a chip on his shoulder 'as if even simply being a member of the Bush family were too much for him. It was as if he needed to escape but also to put down those of his peers who had been more successful. From that mindset came his rather unattractive habit of bestowing nicknames, most of them unflattering, on the people around him, to remind them that he was in charge.' For example, he called Karl Rove, his political advisor, 'turd blossom', a name that expresses both familiarity and contempt. The devaluation of others together with a lack of curiosity about them is another characteristic of the narcissistic personality.

He found religion at a time when his personal life was in crisis. He had become suicidally destructive, flying a plane when he had no training and driving whilst drunk. Religion provided him with a solution that he desperately needed. He could become 'good'; he could become the worthwhile son because he could now serve a 'better' father. He could now dream of becoming even more successful than his own father. It had occurred to us that one of the great psychic pushes behind the Iraq war was not to avenge Saddam's attempt on his father's life as some have claimed but to prove to the world that he could do what his father in 1999 did not dare to do. He would invade Iraq and topple the dictator Saddam Hussein. This perspective was later confirmed in Weisberg's biography of Bush when he wrote that on almost every issue, 'George W took a stand that in some way drew a line under a limitation or fault of his father's' (Weisberg, 2008, 69). He was desperate to show his father and the world what he was made of. If we imagine the terrible pain and shame under this façade, we can see that psychically Bush could never back down and admit failure.

As support for his war waned, Bush has insisted that he would believe in his course of action, even if the only support came from his wife Laura and his dog. In the public defence of the war, there seems to be confusion, perhaps deliberate, between belief and fact. *Feeling* one is doing the right thing is not the same as *doing* the right thing. People rarely make decisions that they believe are wrong. An unshakeable need to believe in one's own vision regardless of the views of others can be deeply narcissistic. Peter Olsson, writing in 2005 on cults, cultish leaders and fundamentalism, describes how fundamentalists see their own way of thinking and believing as the one and only way. They are convinced that they have the superior moral, ethical and spiritual truth. There is no room for doubt or debate. Ron Siskind (2004) wrote of Bush that, whilst it was well known that he was personally very

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religious, there were profound consequences for his administration: 'The president demanded unquestioning faith from his followers, his staff, his senior aides, and his kindred in the Republican Party. Once he makes a decision – often swiftly, based on a creed or moral position – he expects complete faith in its rightness.' Another way of thinking about this is that his inner world is so fragile and full of anxiety that he cannot cope with dissent. Jacob Weisberg points out that the demand for full support included the Iraqi people who were not permitted 'to be ambivalent about liberators who replaced despotism with chaos'. In a TV interview Bush said 'I think the Iraqi people owe the American people a huge debt of gratitude. That's the problem here in America. They wonder whether or not there is a gratitude level that's significant enough in Iraq.' Weisberg (2008, 209) concludes, 'But the American people weren't wondering that; only Bush was.'

We found it revealing that when Alistair Campbell (2007) discussed the build up to the Iraq invasion, he wrote that everyone around Tony Blair expressed some doubt except Blair. Campbell claimed he never saw him express anything except certainty and a belief in the rightness of his moral case. But politicians above all have to hold onto a sense of what is possible. To quote Michael Ignatieff (2007), 'They cannot confuse the world as it is with the world they wish it to be.' A wise leader doesn't confuse his own 'good' intentions with inevitable good outcomes. *It is right because I feel it to be so.* This is narcissism. It is vital that leaders of countries understand themselves and their limitations.

Freud had argued this same view in an introduction to a psychological study of Woodrow Wilson written with his friend, William Bullitt. Freud admitted his antipathy to the deeply devout Wilson who, like Bush, believed that he had been divinely chosen to be President. Freud's anger was palpable as he, not entirely fairly, blamed Wilson and his ignorance for the utter failure of the Treaty of Versailles to bring lasting peace to Europe. He wrote of Wilson that 'it was natural for him in his thinking to ignore the facts of the real outer world, even to deny they existed if they conflicted with his hopes and wishes. He, therefore, lacked motive to reduce his ignorance by learning facts. Nothing mattered except noble intentions.' This would serve as an uncanny analysis of both Bush and Blair's defiant position on the decision to invade Iraq in 2005. Freud continued, 'As a result, when he crossed the ocean to bring to war-torn Europe a just and lasting peace, he put himself in the deplorable position of the benefactor who wishes to restore the eyesight of a patient but does not know the construction of the eye and has neglected to learn the necessary methods of operation' (Freud and Bullitt, 1966, xii).

Power feeds narcissism; keeping in touch with external realities and keeping feet on the ground is surely not easy but essential if serious consequences are to be avoided. Ignatieff (2007) writes, 'people with good judgement listen to the warning bells within.' In other words, they do not believe in their own grandiosity. He quotes the prophet Isaiah who said a leader must be 'a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53:3). This is a leader who knows pain but who can inspire hope for a better future. Bush and Blair have both tried to describe their struggles in Churchillian terms and it is an interesting question as to why the stubborness of men like Churchill and de Gaulle and their ability to keep going against the odds is seen as admirable. Or what about Nelson Mandela? Is keeping faith whilst in prison for over 20 years inspirational or delusional? When is stubborn determination seen as courageous and when is it narcissistic? This makes for an interesting area of discussion. We are not saying these are always easy or clear cut distinctions for the observer

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to make but we would argue that, for self-belief to be healthy, it would have to include a modicum of doubt, a realistic acknowledgement of limitation and a willingness to listen. We found Blair interesting in the context of the debate about healthy self-belief versus pathological narcissism. It is clear that anyone who goes into politics has to have quite a dose of self-regard, healthy or unhealthy. The saying ‘power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely’ is surely about a shift to pathological narcissism when what comes to dominate is the unchallenged internal reality of one individual. Blair shared some of Bush’s failings. Vision and belief were all, alternative views and detail therefore unimportant. One of the narcissistic characteristics is the need to ally and identify with someone more powerful than yourself. When the chance came for Blair to ally himself to the superpower America, to a president who admired his eloquence and ability, it was perhaps all too seductive. His previous forays into foreign policy in Kosovo and Sierra Leone had been deemed a success. Having been effective before, why not again? Former Foreign Secretary David Owen (2007) argued that often early triumphs would tempt leaders into believing in their own innate superiority. David Marquand (2007) described Blair as a ‘Man Without History’. According to him, Blair regretted his lack of historical knowledge and understanding. A sense of the past offers a perspective that can counterbalance the narcissistic vision of *me, here* and *now*. Blair talked of New Labour, a new Britain, a new world order and a young country. And yet the population of Britain has never been older. Leo Abse (1998) in his book on Blair, written when he was over 80 years old, called this the ‘narcissist’s erotic worship of youth’. Blair might have appeared different from Bush (more able, more nuanced) but there were similarities. Their religious vision gave certainty, even when other Christian believers differed. They also had a similar capacity for sentimentality, an ability to be seemingly emotional, tearful even, and then ruthless in their own self-interest. Despite their very different family backgrounds, there were other similarities. They both had powerful fathers who were often absent in their early years, and both had a younger sister who had a life-threatening illness. Blair’s sister had a form of juvenile arthritis and was ill for many years. Their similarity in certain areas might have contributed to a political *folie à deux.* David Owen argued that over Afghanistan and Iraq, Blair and Bush, each working with a small coterie of trusted advisors, seemed to ignite each other. Part of that *folie* is the shared narcissistic vision of themselves as noble, misunderstood crusaders for freedom and just causes.

Antony Seldon (2004), in his biography, commented that Blair had difficulties truly understanding those who disagreed with him. Blair talked of his belief in ‘natural law’ as if what he believed was divinely obvious. Like Bush, his conviction in his own righteousness made it hard to admit error. It was almost as if to deny their vision was to deny God.

When, on 10 May 2007, Blair finally announced the date of his departure he gave a speech using the revealing phrase that the British were ‘blessed’ and the world knew it. What fantasy is reflected in the strange choice of the word ‘blessed’? Was he trying to imply that we were blessed to have him as a leader? The politics of spin is condemned because it is the presentation of image over fact or rather the reshaping of the factual to present a preferred image. The politics of spin is narcissism in action. Heinz Kohut (1976, 56) suggested that there is a certain type of leader whom he described as ‘narcissistically’ fixated. Such a leader does not really understand people as individuals but has an almost uncanny ability

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to understand the fantasies, wishes and fears of a group in the area where the wishes of that group are the same as his wishes. When the wishes of the group change or do not spring from the same grandiose fantasies they have in common, then this is often the shortcoming that will result in his downfall. Arguably, this was true for Blair over Iraq.

NARCISSISM OF GROUPS

Individuals need to see themselves as part of a group with a sense of belonging. Our culture would see this as desirable and healthy. Terms like 'loner' and 'misfit' are contemptuous and indicate that being part of something is seen as normal and essential. One of the joys of being part of a group is that you can express narcissism without being seen as deluded. For example 'my football team/nation/religion/psychotherapy orientation is better than yours – in fact it is infinitely superior in every way'. The survival of groups does depend on a degree of narcissism amongst its members – this is why people bother to belong. But there is a malignant side to this. A society or group that does not provide adequately for all its members has every reason to fob them off with narcissism in lieu of anything more tangible. For example, you are great because you are French, German, Russian, American or British. Hitler's idealization of the Aryan German was an extreme example of this. Group narcissism can hide a pathology that would be immediately apparent in an individual. If you say that you individually are the most blessed and the most chosen, you are deemed mad. But if you are part of a group that claims to be the most blessed and most chosen, then it is called religious belief or patriotism.

We are seeing an explosion of religious fundamentalism that expresses extraordinary narcissism. The Christian Right believes in an Armageddon in which only they will survive. The Muslim fundamentalists hold that infidels and non-believers are inferior and disposable. It all says the same thing: 'I am special and only I and my kind will be saved and live on in heaven'. It is not hard to see that wounds and attacks on this level of narcissism will evoke tremendous rage and a desire to avenge the hurt and destroy the offender. We can even identify these tendencies in groups and institutions closer to home. Within the field of psychotherapy, different groups claim to be more successful or profound than their rivals. In the UK we have long witnessed the struggle between different orientations as they jostle for power and market share on the grounds of having a more accurate analysis of the human make-up: 'My theory is bigger and better than yours.' Where is the depressive position here? Where is the coming to terms with being good enough rather than claiming to be the one and only? Where is the acknowledgement of the limitations of any one approach? We mention this because we can all be guilty of holding beliefs that can become narcissistic and defy reason. Like the world of religion, the world of psychotherapy has its elitist and exclusive groupings that genuinely believe they offer superior understandings, although the reality of this is unproven. Just because we want something to be so does not make it so. Why are we not more concerned with emphasizing our common purpose rather than our differences? Psychotherapists have not yet gone to war but sometimes it has seemed close.

NARCISSISTIC DREAMS AND FAILURES

One might want to argue with the analysis given here of Bush and Blair and their cultural setting but the question that we are addressing is 'how much do we have to consider culture

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an influence on the problems of narcissism?' Psychotherapists, when considering their narcissistically troubled clients, can often see that among the many factors at play, the prevalent culture may play a significant role. When, on the larger public stage of politics, presentation and image are more important than the facts, when success is defined in narrow materialistic terms, when the realities of ageing, limitation and failure are held in contempt, then we are living in a society that will exacerbate narcissistic defences. John Steiner (2006) suggested that 'Patients who have achieved a narcissistic pride through introjective or projective acquisition of superiority are particularly likely to feel that their defences will be seen through and that objects who they have made to feel inferior will try to humiliate them in revenge.' This fear is clearly realistic. We only have to look into the newspapers to see the revenge in action. Yes, we admire you and think you look beautiful, but you make us feel less beautiful. We cannot attain your level of attractiveness or your wealth but you will pay a price for our admiration and the price is rather high.

All too often it is the narcissistically vulnerable who seek out fame and exposure. How can it feel to be at the receiving end of the admiring but often ultimately hostile gaze: appropriated, judged, and condemned. The specific target of that sadistic judgement, in our media spectacle, is all too often the body. A brief glance through the tabloid press and celebrity journals reveals an obsessive interest in body shape and ageing. The *Daily Mail* (10 May 2007) showed the actress Melanie Griffiths wearing shorts with the heading 'Melanie Griffiths loses her battle against ageing'. The same newspaper, continuing their interest in legs, compared the knees of Kate Moss and Angelina Jolie. The heading this time was 'Kate gives Angelina a run for her money in the knobbly knees stakes' (9 September 2007). Men do not escape this scrutiny. Two photographs of Mick Jagger appeared on his 64th birthday, side by side, one taken when he was young with his famous full lips and the other as he is now. The heading here was 'Why Mick at sixty four is looking down in the mouth' (*Daily Mail,* 26 July 2007). *Heat* magazine showed a picture of an older, plumper Jack Nicholson bare chested on a boat bold capitals proclaiming 'Jack grows actual boobies!' (21 July 2007).

The narcissistic dream offers hope for control, security and approval. To mourn the loss of perfection is the key but this is made more difficult when we are so often being lured by the promise that perfection is achievable if we would only try hard enough or consume enough. How are these issues of narcissism in the macrocosm of society reflected in the microcosm of clinical practice? Of course, they can and do take many forms and present quite differently. The following is a clinical vignette based on Sue Cowan-Jenssen's work as a psychotherapist.

A CASE STUDY

Marissa was a married woman in her late forties. She came for therapy suffering from depression. She identified two triggers as the cause of her current unhappiness. Her husband was suffering business setbacks and her daughter was pregnant and determined to keep the baby although the father of the baby was unsupportive.

My first impression of Marissa was of an immaculately presented, beautiful woman who looked considerably younger than her years. Her manner was reserved and she seemed resentful, almost angry, that she found herself giving personal details to a relative stranger.

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Her main feeling seemed to be that her husband and her daughter were letting her down and leaving her exposed to ridicule and humiliation. Her husband's business had been adequate, she assured me, but nothing more. She felt somewhat short changed because when they first got married he had been very wealthy. Now they could live comfortably but not in the luxury of some of their very wealthy friends. His current business problems, she felt, were a result of his weakness and lack of business acumen.

Their daughter, Rose, was now 25 and training to be a barrister. She described her relationship with her daughter as 'difficult'. Marissa thought that her daughter had great potential but was overweight. Her daughter, in turn, resented her mother's constant carping about her body. Marissa's husband, John, was far less critical and although he was concerned about how Rose would manage a baby on her own he felt that they should support her decision.

Marissa herself worked as a set designer and, although she had had some success, she was currently finding interesting jobs hard to come by. I gradually came to understand that by 'interesting', she meant those she considered prestigious. It was very hard to make any real emotional connection with Marissa. She maintained her cool, distant manner, keeping me firmly at arms length. She felt that she had been let down by her parents in the past and was currently being let down by her husband and daughter. I thought it would surely only be a matter of time before she felt let down by me. Yet something had brought her to seek help and something kept her coming.

She disliked revealing anything that made her feel vulnerable, and talking about her early years left her feeling exposed and angry. She had been raised in Oslo. Her mother was a journalist and her father an architect. They had met just after the war. Her father had been fighting with the British and he met Marissa's mother on his return to Norway. Marissa's mother came from a wealthy family that had fallen on hard times and after the war she moved from the north of Norway to Oslo where she found work and met Marissa's father. They were not well matched as a couple. Her father was a withdrawn, depressed man who had clearly suffered during the war. Her mother, more outgoing, found his depression difficult to cope with and they separated when Marissa was just three years old.

Marissa lived with her mother, who was more interested in socializing and boyfriends than in her daughter. She started to drink too much and would often fail to get Marissa to school on time or keep her clean and tidy. Marissa avoided bringing friends home and she became socially rather isolated. Her mother's life grew increasingly chaotic and money that should have been spent on food was spent on alcohol. When the daughter was 13, her mother's boyfriend made a pass at her and her mother's reaction was to blame her daughter.

Marissa went to live with her father, who by now had remarried and had another two daughters. Life was more stable, but her father was still depressed and unavailable. Her stepmother, who was very religious, resented her, and she would constantly warn Marissa against becoming a 'whore' like her mother. She had grown into a lovely looking girl but she still avoided close friendships or boyfriends. Instead, she found solace in the cinema, books and magazines. She would avidly look at the pictures that showed beautiful people living clean, beautiful, glamorous lives. When she was18 she left home and came to London to study. She met her husband, John, shortly afterwards and decided that he would offer her the emotional and financial security that she craved. He also adored her. Unhappily,

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she would find it difficult to accept the love that her husband and then later her child would want to give her.

She felt great shame when talking about her early years and experienced my empathy for the neglect she had suffered in childhood as unwelcome and humiliating. She despised showing 'weakness' and was angry when at one point I suggested that she feared exposing her emotional needs in case I too was neglectful and rejecting. Maroda (1987), when describing narcissistic patients, writes 'transference interpretations are often disdained, ignored, or perceived as egocentric intrusions from the therapist.' For Marissa any awareness of her past hurts was experienced as unbearably shameful. Her legitimate needs for attention and regard had been routinely ignored throughout her childhood. Her very being felt mortified and disregarded. She had developed different strategies to protect her wounds. She had denied her need for others so that they wouldn't hurt her and at the same time she tried to become so perfect that it wouldn't be possible to find anything to attack. Helen Block Lewis (1971), who wrote on the link between narcissism and shame, used the term 'field dependent' to describe the person whose self-esteem was excessively based on feedback from the environment. 'Field dependency' makes a person more susceptible to shame and depression. For a deprived young Marissa the dreams of beauty, wealth and glamour were irresistible and, for a time at least, had kept her going. I saw her only when the dreams proved hollow and unsustainable.

A client like Marissa can find therapy a shaming experience and Helen Block Lewis had identified therapy-induced shame as a major cause of therapeutic failure. I was not optimistic that Marissa would find therapy with me helpful. My interventions, empathy and interpretations tended to be rejected or ignored. Gwen Adshead (1997, 112) describes severely deprived clients who long for someone to soothe their pain but in fact 'experience care as a provocation'. This was Marissa, and with her defences up, she was often unlikeable and unreachable. I found myself feeling increasingly fed-up, stupid, rejected and not that likeable either. That this was also partly a projection of how she felt was clear but far worse from my perspective was that I noticed that on the days of our sessions I was taking extra care with my appearance. I chose clothes that I could feel 'thin' in. What was I to do with this realization, which I wanted to ignore?

In our work together I was trying to help her to look behind her perfect, carefully constructed façade and get in touch with the emotional debris and terrors that lay there. At the same time, here was I was admiring and envying this very façade. Her narcissism had been forged out of huge shame and neglect. She didn't trust me with her pain and I realized that unless I could own up to some of my own shame and narcissism our work would go nowhere. I didn't want to openly admit that I minded not being as beautiful or as immaculate as her but then she didn't like admitting things to me either. Karen Maroda and Emmanuel Ghent have both written about the role of 'surrender' in the therapeutic relationship. Maroda (1999) argued that a therapist's need to hold onto control contributes to the client's reluctance to let go of the control they are also holding onto. Ghent (1990) wrote 'there is, however deeply buried or frozen, a longing for something in the environment to make possible the surrender, in the sense of yielding, of a false self.'

As Marissa continued to bemoan her daughter's intransigence and her husband's incompetence, I interrupted her and said, ' I don't think you want to be like this. I think you want to be able to express some loving feelings for both of them but you are too scared to risk

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showing them. And I don't want to sit here feeling rather defeated and unattractive next to you but I do.' She looked stunned. After a long silence, she responded, 'That's what my daughter tells me she feels around me too. She hates that I make her feel badly about herself. She needs me to feel good about the baby but all I can see are the difficulties…And what's more, I don't want to be a bloody grandmother!' She stopped suddenly and looked at me 'There, I've said it. I don't want to be a grandmother. You must think I'm a monster.' I replied, 'You can feel a monster and I can feel unattractive so neither of us are quite as we would wish to be, but it isn't the whole story is it?'

There were no miracles from this interaction but something did shift for both of us. Again as Maroda (1987) wrote: 'The point of treatment is not to attempt to fulfill the patient's unrealistic compensatory fantasies of the perfect caretaker but rather to demonstrate that we are all indeed imperfect, but that doesn't mean we cannot be enough.' Marissa would gradually understand that she had to come to terms with ageing, enjoying her good but not perfect husband and her good but not perfect daughter. She felt the benefits of this realization with the discovery that the dreaded grandchild turned out to be an enormous source of pleasure for her. Through their shared enjoyment of young Tim, mother and daughter grew closer and the future did indeed seem less bleak.

We are not arguing that culture alone created Marissa's narcissistic personality and values but they were certainly fostered in our culture. We have perhaps all longed to be perfectly beautiful and perfectly loved at some time in our lives, but when such fantasies causes us to reject what is real and good, in favour of some unattainable, imposed ideal, then they become a curse. Marissa felt her reasonably successful husband was a 'loser' because he wasn't extremely rich. Her very able and talented daughter was a 'loser' because she didn't have a perfect, thin body. Marissa herself did have the perfect body but it could never be perfect enough to make her feel invulnerable. She also felt a 'loser' because despite being an able set designer, it didn't bring the fame or prestige she craved. Only when faced with depression and the loss of her daughter did she start to question the values that ruled her life.

ILLUSION VS. REALITY

Stephen Mitchell in his paper on narcissism (1986) gave the example of the beach at low tide. Do you build sand castles, throwing yourself into the activity as if they will last forever? Here is someone who denies reality and then is bruised and disappointed when the tide comes in. Or do you see the inevitability of the coming tide and build nothing? Here the preoccupation with finitude allows no psychic place to play and create. This person does not deny reality but is depleted by it. They cannot build if it will not last forever. (The client who asks 'Why bother, when we will die?') The third option is to regard life as a work of art to be conceived, shaped and polished, created and demolished. This person will build sandcastles even though they know they cannot last, but will enjoy the process. Nietzsche suggests that the richest form of life is the dialectical interplay between illusion and external reality. If you have to hold onto illusion at all costs you are immensely vulnerable. If you are trapped beneath the weight of the world's pain, you cannot play and create.

Narcissism with its illusion of perfection runs counter to what is possible. When real life hits then narcissism makes adaptation hard. What helps us truly enjoy living? A sense of belonging is surely important. We might feel alone in the universe but we are not alone in

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our aloneness. The ability to see things as they are has never been more important. Erich Fromm wrote

> If mankind destroys itself it will not be because of the intrinsic wickedness of man's heart; it will be because of his inability to wake up to the realistic alternatives and their consequences. The possibility of freedom lies precisely in recognising which are the real possibilities between which we can choose, and which are the 'unreal possibilities' that constitute our wishful thoughts whereby we seek to spare ourselves the unpleasant task of making a decision between alternatives that are real but unpopular, individually or socially. The unreal possibilities are, of course, no possibilities at all; they are pipe dreams. (Fromm, 1965, 142)

We are encouraged to believe in illusions and are accustomed to denying the reality of limitations. The consequences of this denial and the price we pay are profound as will be explored further in Part 2 of this paper.

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