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INHABITING BRILLIANCE

Wrestling the gifts of narcissism

Jeanine M. Canty

We are stardust
We are golden
And we’ve got to get ourselves
Back to the garden
Joni Mitchell,
“Woodstock” (1970)

The bleakness of our times is not subtle—we live in an age where our worlds appear to be unraveling with the disintegration of so many systems. There is an obviousness of collective and individual suffering—climate change, corporate globalization, unbridled consumerism, poverty, racism, extremism, violence, refugees, homelessness, mental illness, addictions, pandemics, sickness, loss, and death. And within many western societies, and in particular the United States, the focus of this essay, there is an underlying sense that a majority of folks are numb out to these realities and would rather live within the isolated stories of their selves. The narcissism of the United States parallels our love of individualism, self-interest, capitalism, and an extreme need to be special. The meme of collective narcissism is evident—we are essentially addicted to ourselves—our looks, identities, statuses, worldviews, our specialness—to such an extent that many have little time for anything else. This narcissistic meme, while most closely associated with the United States and other western cultures, parallels a consumerist globalized imprint that is unfortunately spreading across the globe.

For those of us who may be awake and alert, seeing these realities, and the lack of appropriate response, can easily extinguish our abilities to dream, create, and hope anew. Toward the end of the groundbreaking book *The Voice of the Earth*, social critic and academic, Theodore Roszak (2001) made a startling remark questioning whether the narcissism within our society might serve a purpose, leading us through and eventually beyond the unbridled consumerism and competitiveness found within corporate globalization, toward a focus on self-development and eventual reintegration within nature. Is our evolutionary destiny a clear failure or is it a pathway out? The narcissism of the United States parallels our love of individualism, self-interest, capitalism, and an extreme need to be special. There is an increasing body of research which claims that in order to address our collective crises, we need to shift
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from hyper-individualism and competitiveness to cooperative, relational modes of being. Is it foolish to believe that societies focused on competition and self-interest would voluntarily shift toward the good of the whole? Would we give up our sense of specialness and independence in order to be one of many? Within this essay, we will explore our collective narcissism as a pathway toward collective healing.

Brilliance, an expression of the word brilliant, often connotes a magnificence, a radiance, an excellence. While the more common definition is “very bright,” it also means “striking, distinctive.”\(^2\) It would be an understatement to point out that in our current age, there is a heightened desire to be special. We are each the stars of our own stories and, in western societies, particularly the United States, the focus on the self is perpetually reinforced. Our societal affluence is marked by our physical appearance (fitness, style, beauty), the persona we project through social media, our status (career, class), and relationships (friendships, followers, family, partners, etc.). We can spend our days from waking until sleep relishing (or anguish)ing about ourselves. It is easy to create a world to our tailoring, including the people, media, viewpoints, and experiences that reinforce who we desire to be. The self-care industry keeps us busy with workouts, therapists, life coaches, mindfulness practices, and beauty regimes; corporations use advertisements to prey on our self-obsession that translates into constant consumerism; and the forms of media and technology we choose tell us we are the good people, while others are not. The true brilliance we seek is illusive and replaced with collective narcissism.

The meme of narcissism surrounds us—we witness this within our leaders, reality stars, celebrities, and ourselves. There is a difference between healthy narcissism and either extreme narcissism or narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) (Malkin, 2016). The latter forms are marked by individuals who lack the ability to feel compassion toward others and have essentially dissociated from a reality that felt unsafe to them, replacing it with a false worldview where they are the central character and are superior to others, even omnipotent. While there are variances based upon gender, introversion/extroversion, race, class, and other influences, in general, these folks are marked by the following characteristics: a grandiose sense of self, arrogance, very low empathy for others, shamelessness, hypersensitivity to critique (fragile ego), and an overall constant need to feel more special than others. While extreme narcissism (including NPD) is often viewed as an individual pathology, it has expanded to a shared societal issue. Collective narcissism is evident in the growing numbers of folks that are self-obsessed and is fueled by the focus on the privatized individual, free to create one’s destiny within a system that is economically exploitative. Corporate capitalism functions best when people are numbed out to the world and are focused on their consumption of goods and services (Canty, 2022).

Extreme narcissism and NPD are typically caused by painful experiences in one’s early childhood where, according to object relations theory, the child’s primary caregiver either demanded the child focus on the adult’s needs and/or gave the child too little attention (Koger & Winter, 2010). In either case, the result is a child with a poorly developed sense of self, a combination of deep insecurity and high arrogance, and the inability to attend to the emotions and needs of others. This is an individual who has been deeply damaged and, as a result, often causes harm to one’s self and others. When we apply object relations theory to collective narcissism, the primary caregiver is replaced with the system of global corporatization, where the messages of our encompassing consumerist society keep us focused on the corporation’s desires for us to be consumers (Canty, 2022). From early childhood throughout adulthood, we are bombarded with advertisements and other forms of pressure that leave us alienated from an authentic sense of self, instead inhabiting a false self, shaped by larger society (Kanner & Gomes, 1995).

Much of the current psychological research on narcissism situates it as a cluster B personality disorder, a subcategory of personality disorders (mental and emotional dysfunctions)
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along with anti-social personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, and histrionic personality disorder. This view falls within secondary narcissism. It is worthwhile to delve into primary narcissism which roots back to Freudian psychology. Primary narcissism relates to a deeper understanding of healthy narcissism, where the unself-aware newborn “does not yet perceive his mother as having an existence separate from his own, and he therefore mistakes dependence on the mother who satisfies his needs as soon as they arise, with his own omnipotence” (Lasch, 1979, p. 49). For the child, the world of the mother, from the womb to the point prior to self-awareness is essentially a world of perfection. It is safe, sensual—a place of delight and wonder; it is a space of brilliance.

On a collective level, we can relate the state of primary narcissism, that of child to mother, to our original human relationship to Mother Earth. Here is the metaphor of the Garden of Eden—the garden of Earth—a place where all of our material and spiritual needs were met—a realm of sensuous pleasure and perfection. Earth as mother is not only a metaphor, it is a reality. She is our home, the place we are born from, the landscape from which all arises and falls. Ecopsychology roots our collective human pathology as well as the ecological crisis with our perceived disconnection from Earth. This perception developed in conjunction with the worldviews associated with western civilization—a mechanistic reality, the domination of people and the planet, fierce individualism, economic competition and monopoly, colonization (Davis & Canty, 2013). Within a secondary narcissism perspective that integrates our true parent, Mother Earth, we might view western civilization as supplanting our connection to Earth, replacing it with our current individualized, materialistic, narcissistic perspective (Canty, 2022).

Using the term, the primal matrix, psychotherapist Chellis Glendinning (2007) speaks to what our healthy psychological state consisted of prior to our split with nature; when humans lived in participation with the rest of the sentient realm, rather than dominating it. When we were understood both our dependence upon and responsibilities toward Earth. The primal matrix is comprised of three qualities: “a sense of belonging and security in the world, trust, faith”; “a sense of personal integrity, centeredness, capability of I”; and “the capacity to draw vision and meaning from nonordinary states of consciousness” (pp. 20–21). These qualities depict a state of being that is grounded, loving, transpersonal, and centers around a healthy sense of self. These primary states strongly indicate that our current collective pathologies and false selves produced by contemporary culture are unnatural.

While it is impossible for humans to return to the wombs of their mothers, humanity’s reintegration to nature is very possible. There are a growing number of us who sense that the ways we are living our lives and the systems we are inhabiting are wrong. There is the constant anxiety many of us feel due to the exhaustive messaging we receive through technology, the never-ending workdays, the corruption we witness with our leaders and corporations, the extremist viewpoints and fixed worldviews exhibited by a range of perspectives, the increasing poverty, and growing physical and mental illness of our societies. While there is collective suffering, as John A. Powell reveals (Powell, 2012), there are differences between those with surplus suffering and those facing existential suffering. The former marks those who are disproportionately affected by genuine material and institutional suffering, while the latter is by those who hold a distanced experience of suffering and may glimpse the larger picture yet are to a large extent sheltered from directly experiencing this. The privileged stance of denial so present in many western societies and our ability to go on with life as usual—a life centered around somewhat shallow self-interests, can be maddening on the backdrop of universal suffering (Macy & Brown, 2014).

While people’s levels of suffering vary based on their economic, geographical, and social locations, the collective suffering we are witnessing in the world is genuine. The existential
suffering most commonly found in western cultures seems to root back to our loss of the primal matrix—the loss of feeling a sense of belonging, a unique purpose in life, and the ability to encounter the transpersonal experiences of life. While there are ample offerings of religion and spirituality via second-hand experiences facilitated by religious figures, new age leaders, books, and seminars; many of us have forgotten how to experience first-hand transpersonal experiences—experiences of the immediate that bring us awe and spark our numinous, creative selves. Immersion in nature—from the truly wild, to the simplest of spaces, foster these—they bring us to sensory pleasures and the experience of an embodied, expansive self we so often forsake. Transpersonal states are also encountered through our creativity, spiritual and somatic practices, and even in our relationships.

The notion of the Great Refusal comes from German American political and social philosopher Herbert Marcuse who inspired many within the counter-cultural revolution that occurred in the United States and in other western nations during the 1960s and 1970s (Marcuse, 1955). The Great Refusal arises from “Freud’s insight into primary narcissism” and is “the rejection of a mad world’s dehumanizing values” (Roszak, 2001, p. 266). It is a point where the puritan work ethic and morals might be abandoned due to a high level of “affluence and leisure,” returning to a more sensual and liberating reality, as well as toward political change (Ibid, p. 266). However, instead of the counter-cultural revolution amassing into long-lasting transformation toward primary states, this point in time laid the path for what Lasch called the new narcissist—the individual who is highly self-involved and submerged within the closing decades of unbridled capitalism (Lasch, 1979). Instead of returning to an exalted state that mirrors our primal origins, we now witness a society addicted to itself—constantly pursuing shallow forms of self-improvement and self-aggrandizement. In essence, while the 1960s and 1970s were a powerful opportunity for change with movements focused upon feminism, environment, anti-war, freedom of sexual identity, and civil rights, much of the momentum of this time fizzled out, due in large part to the addicting levels of comfort found within western affluence. The Great Refusal was forsaken.

Yet we are in the midst of another period of turmoil that mirrors the potentiality of the Great Refusal. We are witnessing large portions of our society that are discontent and seeking change. While the forms and reasons for discontent are not necessarily unified, most of us acknowledge that something is wrong and we long for a different reality. A world that is filled with authenticity, self-actualization, belonging, and majesty seems like a birthright. Many of us feel this calling to something greater, yet often confuse this pull with a longing for individual greatness. Roszak (2001) poses that the narcissism we presently witness may be a longing for pleasurable states found within primary narcissism and that our modern narcissism “may be a necessary stage in the creation of an authentic personal identity” (p. 265). It becomes tricky to view collective narcissism, a trend that is so negative and detrimental to both people and the planet, as some sort of developmental stage. It is certainly not a positive evolvement, but something that has come to pass. Instead of ignoring our collective narcissism, it is important to identify and work with it as a means of transforming it. Roszak’s linking of narcissism to our longing for primary, sensual states is important.

Similar to Roszak, in viewing the work of Marcuse and some of his colleagues, psychologist C. Fred Alford contends that the “quest for reconciliation with nature in the work of the first generation of critical theorists is a quest for narcissistic feelings of lost impotence and wholeness” (1985, p. 174). The recurring theme that stresses that our narcissistic behaviors underlie a deeper need to reconnect with our primary states of conditioning—what could be labeled as transpersonal, creative, protective, and sacred—indicates an important pathway toward a healthier future for humanity and all beings. Marcuse (1955) viewed the Great Refusal
as a rejection of the “performance principle” exhibited in the work ethic emerging from the industrial age through the present with the desire to shift to a more creative, romantic, relational mode of awareness. Referring to the arts and literature, Marcuse believed our reunification with eros, our passion, would alleviate and transform the deep repression found within our society. Specifically identifying the Greek mythological characters Orpheus and the significantly relevant Narcissus, Marcuse saw these figures as reconnecting with our lost associations with phenomena such as “the redemption of pleasure, the halt of time, the absorption of death; silence, sleep, night, paradise - the Nirvana principle not as death but as life” (1955, p. 164). By tapping into these creative capacities, transformation is possible, moving from an unhealthy narcissism to a reverence for beauty, mystery, and connection to the greater whole.

It is clear that we can never go back to the garden, yet in tapping into our narcissistic longings, shedding some of the shallow manifestations and looking deeper, possibilities arise. A key distinction surfaces between the possibilities between the narcissistic isolated self and the fusion of a much larger self that identifies with the larger world. With the latter, the self longs to be connected to a much greater field of being and its omnipotence is interdependent, rather than self-alienating. The enlivening of our creative capacities called for by Marcuse in the context of reconnecting to greater beings is reinforced with some of the emergent research on creativity. For example, scholar and musician Alfonso Montuori (2017) links the emergence of collective creativity witnessed in newer generations with the potentials for our “collective enlightenment” (p. 147), illuminating that individual creativity or genius was the ideal within past generations, while the present and future points to collective genius.

There are no big stars. Everybody is a ‘performer,’ and the participants engage in a mass expression of collaborative creativity, creating a ‘temporary autonomous zone’ where everyone contributes to create camps, installations, and parties. The event exemplifies a much more distributed, relational, grass-roots creativity, where everyone is a star that is part of the Burning Man galaxy.

Montuori, 2017, p. 150

The above example of collective creativity within the Burning Man festival is just one of the infinite that is happening each day. Think of community gardens, the co-creation of rituals, participatory art, social movements, decentralized politics, group excursions within nature (camping, hunting, rites of passages), barn raisings—creativity is not exclusive to a political view, gender, geographical location, or any bound identity marker. It is something all of us have access to, yet it does require a silencing of our ego-bound identities and an opening to something greater, something transpersonal. In allowing something that is more than just the self, we connect to something greater—to a grace that merges us with a larger, supportive, often beautiful sense of becoming.

Yet a narcissistic society that is so habituated to self will not simply drop our ego attachments to reach a fuller, more authentic state. Gruber (2008) cautions that narcissistic personalities hold such strong resentments which result in the blocking of their creativity. Their unceasing self-reference bars the joining of collective potentials with others.

… narcissism not only prevents the attainment of an awareness that could see the events of one’s life as the unfolding of a field of interactive processes, it also forecloses the ability to meet the future creatively and imaginatively; instead, the future is determined by the past.

Gruber, 2008, p. 57

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The westernized US mentality identifies so deeply with the need to stand out above others, to be something unique and special—an unraveling of this competitive fixation must occur. There is much work to be done here. There is the work of challenging the lies of the false self, of being able to accept one's fallibility, and of forgiving oneself and others. There is danger that a narcissistic person who dives into transpersonal experiences will, like the newborn (yet conscious or subconsciously), identify their experience as once again more special than that of others, feeling like a godhead rather than one star among many other stars.

Fortunately, our collective narcissism is nowhere near the grim prognosis of a sole individual with NPD. For the latter, it is extremely difficult to heal. This work starts with identifying and witnessing our collective narcissism, acknowledging the woundedness that occurs with living in such a materialistic, exploitative society, and identifying with the aspects of ourselves that long for greater depth, purpose, and connection with all of life. From there, through tapping into our primary states and collective creativity, the possibilities abound to create societies where we are each one brilliant star among many brilliant stars.

Notes

References