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Escape From Narcissism

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We all started out as narcissists. When we first became conscious, the universe seemed to revolve around us. There were parents hovering over us attending to our every need. When we cried out, the world promptly responded, as though our own feelings were the only ones that mattered.

Unfortunately, the outside world doesn't work that way. In reality, we are only one human of billions, and for the most part no one gives a damn about us and our needs. We gain the attention of others only by noticing their needs and providing some sort of service to them.

Intellectually, we can accept that we are not the center of all creation, but emotionally it is very hard. It's a long, painful journey from egocentrism to globalism. We have to unlearn the self-serving habits of our youth and learn to see the big picture.

Narcissism isn't "self-love" as much as self-centeredness. There are some very unhappy narcissists who do not love themselves, but they can't step out of themselves long enough to see what others need. Therefore, they miss cues from others, step on people's toes and don't get what they need from them. A narcissist is a bull in a china shop, because he doesn't "get" how the world really works.

The narcissist expects others to serve his needs just because he has them. "I'm hungry, so feed me." He assumes that if something is important to him, it must also be important to others. He thinks others exist only to give him what he wants. After all, that's how things worked in his childhood.

When this theory fails to get results,

he tries leverage. He throws a tantrum or uses some other threat, bribe or seduction to try to coerce compliance. If being "needy" doesn't get him what he wants, he tries power instead.

While power and neediness may both work on occasion, they aren't nearly as effective as a third method: understanding the inner needs of the person you are dealing with and giving them what they need in exchange for what you need.

This is the conceptual leap the narcissist is unable to make: Others have needs! When other people hurt us, it isn't because they want to but because our needs conflict with theirs. Finding a middle ground requires subtlety and grace that the narcissist doesn't have. He is so blinded by his own needs that he can't truly grasp someone else's.

The narcissist makes a good swindler, but he is also easily swindled because he can't grasp the hidden motivations of the people he is interacting with. He automatically assumes that his goals are the same as everyone else's, and he is shocked and surprised when that's not the case.

The self-centeredness extends not just to people but to systems. To truly understand, say, an electrical system, we have to step outside ourselves and see what the system wants. What are its own independent rules? Although we may have goals of our own (Become an electrician and make a lot of money.) the electrons don't care. To become a good electrician (and one who doesn't kill himself), you have to understand the inner needs of the electron.

Take another system: photography. Most people's vacation photos are terrible – because of narcissism. Their

snapshots may be meaningful to them but they are dull and bland to the rest of us. This is true even in a supposedly interesting location like Times Square or the Grand Canyon.

The photos are boring because the photographer can't see what actually appears in the viewfinder and evaluate it on its own merits. He thinks, "This is a very special moment, so if I take a picture of it, the photo will be special, too." He fails to see that camera is an independent system that has to be understood on its own merits.

You can tell a person's relative level of narcissism by watching them compose photos at a tourist attraction—or indeed by watching him do anything anywhere. Does he take the time to understand the system or person he is dealing with, or does he plough ahead blindly, expecting the world to cater to his needs?

We are all narcissists to some degree. We are all trapped in one body that is the center of our perception. We mature, however, by learning there is bigger world out there. Yes, we have needs, but often they are best served by setting them aside and understanding the needs of others. With that knowledge, we might find the key that unlocks the others and eventually gives us what we want.

You may be hungry right now, but it's not the end of the world. If you can set aside the sensation for a while and learn about someone else's hunger, you might find a way to solve both of your problems at minimal expense.

—G.C.

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