

When Narcissus Teaches: Teaching, Mentoring and the Danger of Narcissism by Carol Lakey Hess

“A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.”

According to psychoanalyst Martin Bergmann, “Narcissistic love is a love for a person other than the self, perceived subjectively as part of the self.”¹ A person relates to someone “narcissistically” if he or she experiences that person *not as the center of their own independent activity* but as part of his or herself. If the person does not behave as the narcissistic one expects or wishes, he or she may be disappointed, offended or even enraged; the narcissist feels, as Alice Miller puts it, “almost as if an arm ceased to obey us.”²

The term *narcissism* comes from the myth of Narcissus, a tale that, in its many renditions, focuses on a young man who unwittingly falls in love with his own image in a pool. Recognition of narcissistic love patterns, particularly in terms of romantic attraction, goes back a long way. Plato alluded to Narcissus’ self-mirroring romantic love when, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates speaks of the lover who “is his mirror in whom he is beholding himself, but he is not aware of this.”³ In the last century, Freud wrote of narcissism both as a stage in child development and, interestingly, a characteristic of most parenting.⁴ He, perhaps reductionistically, argued that parents narcissistically invest themselves in their children, seeing their offspring in terms of themselves. Recently, Alice Miller has identified ways in which parents and therapists can turn their own narcissistic wounds into an intergenerational issue. A therapist can relate to a client narcissistically. An analyst, writes Miller, manipulates the client---especially an intuitively talented one who has ‘antennae’ for the wishes of others---when the analyst rewards the client for mirroring rather than being mirrored. “The patient satisfies [the] analyst’s narcissistic wish for approval, echo, understanding, and for being taken seriously when [the patient] presents material that fits [the] analyst’s knowledge, concepts, and skills, and therefore also [the analyst’s] expectations.”⁵

In this paper, I want to extend the concept of narcissism to a discussion of *educational* relationships. Narcissistic teaching is teaching persons who are subjectively (but unconsciously) perceived as part of the self. Narcissistic mentoring involves the love/approval of another person because that person mirrors the self. Miller’s work is especially helpful because she identifies the way in which talented individuals --- those with particular gifts for intuiting the expectations of others and for selectively attuning to those expectations --- are susceptible to narcissistic patterns.

In terms of the title of my paper --- When Narcissus Teaches --- the emphasis of this paper will be more on the “when” and “teaches,” the process of teaching, and lesser

so on Narcissus himself. That is to say, I will focus on *narcissistic patterns in teaching relationships* rather than on identifying teachers with “Narcissistic Personality Syndrome.” While we will consider both the mythological character of Narcissus as well as the specific characteristics of the Narcissistic personality “disorder,” these considerations will be for the purpose of uncovering dynamics, not for the purpose of diagnosing individuals. In fact, Sophie Lowenstein’s words in 1977 still pertain today: “theoretical writings on the subject [narcissism] have remained checkered, highly technical, and often confusing.”⁶ Furthermore, just as some psychoanalysts believe that “all people are narcissistic; the difference is only one of degree,”⁷ it might be said that all or most educational situations reflect the dynamics of narcissism, the difference being in degree. *Mentoring, in particular, is highly vulnerable to the dynamics of narcissistic approval.* I want to do two things for teachers: name processes that inhibited our own creativity and which may have left residual pain; name processes that we might inadvertently be heirs of, carrying into our educational relationships.

I. Origins of Narcissism: Reversal of the Narcissistic Flow

According to psychoanalytic and object-relations theory, an infant goes through a narcissistic phase which requires adequate mirroring from the caretaker in order for a healthy self to develop. The caretaker allows herself or himself to be “cathected narcissistically” and “at the child’s disposal” during this period.⁸ D.W. Winnicott even spoke of the need for the parent to be a “useable object” who survives their own destruction vis-à-vis the child, that is “stays put” in the face of the child’s increasing autonomy.⁹ While early discussions of narcissism described a period of fusion or symbiosis between the caretaker and child, recent studies in infant development suggest that there is never a time of complete symbiosis or fusion. From the start, there are signs of a “readiness for relation” that imply a rudimentary sense of self and other.¹⁰ So, complete mirroring, ala Narcissus, is never needed. Nevertheless, the child needs to see or sense itself reflected---and, by implication respected as other with integrity---in the presence of the caretaker. Heinz Kohut coined the term “selfobject” to describe the empathically responsive persons who mirror and support the child’s growing sense of self.¹¹

While Freud, working from drive-theory, viewed normal narcissism (“primary”) as transitory stage of infancy, which can, but ought not, evolve into pathological narcissism, Kohut identified narcissistic needs throughout the life span. According to Kohut, although the nature of the empathy changes throughout human development, the need for selfobjects continues throughout life.

“In the view of self psychology, man lives in a matrix of self-objects from birth to death. He needs selfobjects for his psychological survival, just as he needs oxygen in his environment throughout his life for physiological survival. . . . what we have begun to study, therefore, and what we hope, in the future, to investigate . . . is the sequence of self-selfobject relationships that occur throughout life..” Thus, in addition to the empathy

needed in infancy, Kohut looks to how “the selfobject milieu” responds through the life cycle.¹²

While empathic needs continue throughout life, the normal direction of the narcissistic flow (my own term) can become reversed. That is to say, adults who should be empathic mirrors (parents, teachers, therapists) for others sometimes reverse the pattern and seek instead to be mirrored. Winnicott described how this reversal leads to the development of the False Self.

Spontaneity, Compliance and the Emergence of the False Self

Winnicott contrasted the False Self to the True Self, the latter of which was *linked with the spontaneous gesture*. Winnicott argued that the False Self has its origins in the suppression of spontaneous expressions during infancy. “Periodically the infant’s gesture gives expression to a spontaneous impulse; the source of the gesture is the True Self, and the gesture indicates the existence of a potential True Self.”¹³ When the caretaker fails to meet the gesture and instead “substitutes her own gesture which is to be given sense by the compliance of the infant,” the stage is set for the False Self. If this process is repeated often, the True Self goes into hiding, spontaneity diminishes, and *compliance and imitation* become the central impulses of the self.

James Fowler, writing on shame and the origins of the “false self,” puts, it: “The caregiver, instead of serving as a mirror for the forming sense of self in the infant, can require that the infant serve the function of ratifying and gratifying his or her own deep neediness.”¹⁴ Adults who operate narcissistically look to the child or student with reference to their own needs “and not in such a way as to experience a confirming acknowledgement of the child’s separate and uniquely valuable selfhood.”¹⁵

Thus, when the normal flow of narcissistic mirroring is disrupted, there is “narcissistic deprivation” (Alice Miller), which is connected to shame, the creation of a “false” or “as-if” self, and, in Fowler’s poignant terms, “loss of access to one’s own heart.”¹⁶ Again, Fowler puts it well:

“In order to gain the approval and affirmation of the people the young child most depends upon, he focuses attention upon meeting the program, values, and behaviors they require. This approval, so indispensable to the child’s sense of worth, comes at great cost. The child pays the price for this approval and esteem in neglect of his own evaluation of experiences and his developing sense of inner guidance and desire.”¹⁷

The gaining of approval and the capacity for compliance is not all bad. In the healthy self, according to Winnicott, there is still a role for compliance, or compromise between the social expectations and inner impulses. Winnicott spoke of the “healthy polite aspect of the self” that is a part of normal development. Health, in fact, is tied to “the capacity of the individual to live in an area that is intermediate between the dream

and the reality, that which is called the cultural life.” Some of the creativity of the authentic self is diverted to cultural expression. Nevertheless, Winnicott also noted, that in health “the compromise ceases to become allowable when the issues become crucial. When this happens the True Self is able to override the compliant self.”¹⁸ Of course, if there is not sufficient health, compliance wins over authenticity, and the capacity for spontaneity is lost.

The narcissistic deprivation resulting from parenting, on the one hand, leaves the child vulnerable to subsequent narcissistic leaders, and on the other hand leaves open the possibility of passing on the legacy.

The sequence of self-selfobject relationships that occur throughout life

Returning to Kohut’s understanding of the life-long need for empathic selfobject milieus, and to his concern regarding how those milieus respond to “subsequent stations in life,” this paper looks at education as one of those subsequent stations, which require empathic attention. Kohut states: “If, however, the requisite selfobject matrix is absent later in life, whether in adolescence, adulthood, late middle-life, or in old age, then the self will be endangered, may lose its cohesion, and, as pride and assertiveness are gone, creative-productive activities will cease.”¹⁹

We will look at ways in which the self becomes endangered, at risk of losing its cohesion, and susceptible to the cessation of creativity. In Kohut’s language, we will consider two questions: 1) how is the primary selfobject (i.e. the teacher) responding to the learning self? 2) What is the nature of the self-selfobject relationship (i.e. the self and the teacher)?

A mentoring situation, can exploit, or perhaps recreate, the kind of conditions that lead to the development of a “false self.” It is my view that *in teaching and mentoring situations, even those involving two adults, the narcissistic flow should favor the needs of the learner.* Now, in saying this, I wish neither to infantilize the learning self nor to deny that teachers and mentors have empathic needs---I will address issues of appropriate expectations regarding ‘mutual mirroring.’ I merely claim that educational milieus (at least as they are now constructed), inevitably involve mirroring dynamics that either promote or inhibit the ongoing growth of the self.

Thus, as Alice Miller writes of the “poisonous pedagogy”²⁰ in child rearing, I am interested in delineating and exposing “narcissistic pedagogy,” particularly in higher education. The core of narcissistic pedagogy is that the teacher experiences students “not as a center of their own activity” but as a part of the teacher’s self.

To explore this, I will first turn to the myth from which narcissism gets its name. Next, I will examine narcissistic educational dynamics more fully. Finally, I will suggest ways we can avoid being part of the problem---ways we can “reverse the reversal of narcissistic flow.”

II. The Gaze of Narcissus

The tale of Narcissus interweaves with the tale of Echo. Echo was a nymph endowed with the capacity for conversation, or sometimes-just talkativeness. One day, Echo detained Juno [Hera in Greek versions] while the latter was trying to catch Jove [Zeus] in the act of infidelity, and Juno punished Echo by taking away her power to form her own words. As a result of Juno's curse, Echo could only repeat---"double"---the last words of others

One day Echo saw Narcissus, and her "heart was fired" by him. Narcissus, a youth born as a result of the rape of his mother, "seemed both man and boy." He was desired by many, but "hard pride ruled in that delicate frame."²¹ Echo trailed behind him, hoping to hear a word she could repeat. "She might not speak the first but---what she might---waited for words her voice could say again."

There follows a two-and-fro of Narcissus' voice and Echo's partial repetitions. [Apparently, Echo still retains minor power over her speech; she seems to be able to decide where she will begin the echo, rather than being forced to repeat everything another says verbatim.²²] She runs and throws her arms around Narcissus, and he repels her:

"I'll die before I yield to you," he recoils.
"I yield to you," her partial repetition.

Toward nightfall, Narcissus, with Echo close behind, came to a quiet pool. Narcissus was thirsty, so he leaned over to drink. But, "while he slaked his thirst, another thirst grew." He saw in the surface of the water the most beautiful face he had ever seen, and the face reflected back to him every smile he bestowed. At last, he'd found one worthy of his attention and love! He thought it was the face of another, perhaps a water nymph. He didn't realize that it was his own image by which he had been smitten. So, he kept trying to embrace the image, but every time he reached for it and grabbed, it fragmented and disappeared. He'd wait for the waters to become smooth again, and reach once more for his elusive love. So smitten, though, was he, that he forgot to take in any nourishment; his single-minded devotion was to his image. Finally, with no outside sustenance, he wasted away and died. But, even still, in the Underworld, he gazed upon himself in the Styx's pool! A lovely Narcissus flower sprang up where Narcissus had been sitting, and Echo stood beside the flower and grieved until she too faded away.

This myth, at times uncannily, reflects the dynamics of narcissistic pedagogy. Narcissus' condition is that he mistakes his own image for that of a separate being; *he thinks he loves another, but he only loves a reflection of himself*. In fact, in some Greek versions, the central conversation between Narcissus and Echo emphasizes the narcissistic theme more poignantly²³:

"I love you," Narcissus said to the beautiful face in pool.
"I love you," repeats Echo, who has followed unseen to the pool.

But, Narcissus doesn't see that the voice comes from Echo, he only sees the adoring face in the water. And so, he thinks that the voice belongs to the reflection, which he in turn believes to be a person other than himself.

As long as Narcissus is gazing at the pool and receiving an admiring gaze back, he feels passion. But, when the admiring gaze breaks up, he feels empty.

Echo's condition is that she has little voice. She is drawn by the charm of Narcissus, and she waits to hear a word she can repeat. But, nothing short of his own reflection engages and satisfies Narcissus, so he spurns this would-be-devotee who does not adequately reflect his image back. Or, alternatively, Narcissus loves his words repeated by another, failing to notice that the echoing other is merely a mirror of himself.

Let's imagine the following learning environment. The charismatic Professor Narcissus attracts varieties of students, including vulnerable students like Echo, who have previously had their voices quelled, and who are seeking words of wisdom to repeat. Professor Narcissus, largely unconsciously, looks out on the sea of students before him. He fails to notice most of them, and he turns away from those for whom he has little use. Echo and her likes are briefly noted, but their words are inadequate, lacking, not fully satisfying. They do not say enough of what he wants to hear. But then, his gaze falls on one student who seems extraordinary. That student admires him, and that student mirrors back to him all that he values in himself. His thirst for admiration and mirroring from this student knows no end. He thinks he has found a protégée, another to engage and relate to. He thinks he admires this other in return, but what he doesn't realize is that he really loves a repetition of his own words. And, he does not admit that he will only stay connected to this protégée so long as Mini-Narcissus mirrors what he seeks. He has unwittingly fallen in love with himself and admired his own reflection.²⁴ And, little does Professor Narcissus realize that he is starving, rather than nourishing, his intellect. With no independent ideas to engage with, he is not in genuine intellectual relationship. His vitality and creativity waste away.

III. Narcissistic Pedagogy: Narcissus and Mini-Narcissus

It is not hard to see why the personality disorder termed Narcissistic got its name.²⁵ The fourth edition of the Diagnostic Statistic Manual of Mental Disorder (DSMIV) lists the following characteristics: a grandiose sense of importance; preoccupation with success, power, brilliance, and perfect love; exhibitionist need for constant attention and excessive admiration; sense of entitlement with expectations of favorable treatment; interpersonally exploitive; lacks empathy; is envious of others; shows arrogant, haughty behaviors; either indifference or rage in face of criticism.²⁶ Relationships alternate between idealization and devaluation.

Like the Narcissus of the myth, Narcissistic personalities are an ambiguous blend of "hard pride" and "delicate frame," "man" and "boy." The Narcissist is self-absorbed, but easily wounded if admiration and attention are not forthcoming. The Narcissist

craves admiration, and often gets it, but is always thirsting for more. The Narcissist searches for ideal love, but the love object is either idealized when there is mirroring or abandoned when the mirroring is imperfect.

Here I return to the two questions left us by Kohut's understanding of the "selfobject milieu" 1) how is the primary selfobject (i.e. the teacher) responding to the learning self? 2) What is the nature of the self-selfobject relationship (i.e. the self and the teacher)? There are two central dynamics that make up what I call "Narcissistic pedagogy": the teacher's need for mirroring (reversal of the normal narcissistic flow) and the teacher's corresponding lack of empathy.

Narcissistic Pedagogy

Consider the actual case of Professor Juno. She had grandiose dreams of uncovering the order of the universe. She loved being center stage in the classroom, and she drew large numbers of students to her classes. She would offer her theories with charisma and energy, and she had a way of making electrically charged eye contact with students who gazed at her enrapt. Many students were drawn to her energy, and they too became inflamed with passion for grand questions. Some students, though, were clearly preferred. Those who most perfectly, in terms of ability and accuracy, reflected the positions of Professor Juno were the chosen ones. Many vied for the spots, but few were able to reflect her views perfectly enough. Those who came the closest were singled out to have their papers placed on library reserve, in the file labeled: Exemplary Papers. Those few learned not to criticize Professor Juno, and they learned that they would be especially loved if they tore apart the theories of Professor's Juno's intellectual adversaries---some of whom she deemed "demonic." She was uncomfortable with theodicy (questioning God); she claimed it was presumptuous. Thus it was, that neither she nor God (as she portrayed *Him*) could be challenged. Professor Juno occasionally allowed others to lead a discussion in class, but she always intervened and redirected the discussion if it was not headed toward her theoretical agendas (which were fairly circumscribed). She was especially on the look out for an heir, but time and time again as she grasped her heir, the heir fragmented before her eyes and fled. One heir-apparent, a successful mirror to Professor Juno, started echoing less and began to speak her own voice. Professor Juno withdrew all support and went in search of another heir.

A narcissistic teacher expects that his or her students will mirror his or her needs, especially needs for admiration and loyalty. Because of the power dynamic inherent in educational relationships, students can easily become "narcissistic supplies" at the teacher's "disposal." When the students don't perform this function, the narcissistic teacher shows disappointment, offense, and subtle forms of rage (non affirming eye contact, tense body language, withdrawal, etc.).

Students in narcissistic learning environments, in order to survive, learn to "accommodate" to and gratify the teacher's needs. Usually, this also requires suppressing their own intellectual needs and ideas. This can prevent individuation and lead to "false-self" dynamics.

In extreme situations, the relationship between the teacher and the students can become almost cultic, a leader-devotee dynamic. In such cases, narcissistically vulnerable students idealize the teacher as powerful, brilliant, and historically important. “Interaction with the ideal confirms the devotee’s own personal worth, indicating that he or she deserves to be connected with someone who has extraordinary powers.”²⁷ The leader provides emotional gratification and the promise of personal transformation (based on his system), in return for (and so long as there is) unquestioning subordination and admiration from the devotee.

Mini-Narcissus

One of the particularly insidious dynamics, as described in the case above, is the process of preference. Drawing on the work of Helm Stierlin, Sophie (Lowenstein) Freud differentiated between two kinds of narcissistic attitudes on the parts of parents toward children: the expelling and the delegating. The delegated child becomes a narcissistic extension of the parent, absorbing him or herself in the pursuit of the parents’ ideals. The expelled child, contrarily, is rejected because he does not adequately reflect parental ideals.²⁸

This kind of narcissistic cathexis, wherein the teacher selects preferred or “chosen ones” who most perfectly mirror the teacher’s needs, particularly leads to alienation from core self for the learner.

Interestingly, as with Echo in the myth, in a narcissistic learning environment, the harshest rejection may be toward those students who show promise (initial echoing which produces *idealization*) but who subsequently disappoint (the repetition proves to be only partial, which leads to *devaluation*). Otto Kernberg noted that such devaluation is one of the defenses of the narcissistic personality. “If an external object can provide no further gratification or protection, it is dropped and dismissed because there was no real capacity for love of this object in the first place.”²⁹ This means that a deep level, a narcissistic learning environment is never safe; a teacher with narcissistic traits cannot be trusted.³⁰

Lack of Empathy

Narcissistic learning environments lack the proper flow of empathy; the teacher caught up in narcissistic patterns fails to consider, respect and understand the learner’s emotional needs and intellectual point of view.

In addition, with Narcissistic Pedagogy, the teacher does not foster either spontaneity or particularity. Spontaneity involves originality---gestures or ideas that are creative, experimental, and deeply gripping to the developing person. A spontaneous moment is a moment of discovery, a joyous sense of having made a genuine insight into oneself or an authentic connection between oneself and something else.

In Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, the protagonist---whose story we will pick up again later in this paper---Dr. Victor Frankenstein, narrates the evolution of his fascination for science. He starts with a poignant moment in his boyhood.

I chanced to find a volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa . . . A new light seemed to dawn upon my mind, and bounding with joy, I communicated my discovery to my father. My father looked carelessly at the title page of my book and said, 'Ah! Cornelius Agrippa! My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash.'³¹

The father's behavior is repeated by one of Victor's teachers, but placed in contrast to another. The wise old M. Waldman notes, "these were the men to whose indefatigable zeal modern philosophers were indebted for most of the foundations of their knowledge. . . . The labors of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind."³² Waldman's response managed to achieve empathy while still promoting intellectual development.

Empathy in teaching involves the capacity to support spontaneity and particularity. Empathetic teaching empowers learners to hear their own particular voices, to respect the wisdom in their own voices, and to then critically examine their voices without either fear or defensiveness.

Recall that, in terms of the life long need for empathy, Kohut remarks that lack of empathy may lead in later life to a fragmenting of self-cohesion and loss of creativity. Fowler argues that:

"Much so-called burnout in the adult years can be traced to a person's need to free the self from the parental or child-culture script or program he adopted to meet his family's and social group's conditions of worth. Healing comes through his being helped to reclaim access to his own suppressed heart and crippled will."³³

Parker Palmer, in his book *Let Your Life Speak*, witnesses to the fact that "it is indeed possible to live a life other than one's own."³⁴ As he exposes the ways in which many of us are shaped to listen to the voices of others more than (or to the exclusion of) our own, Palmer too tells tales of burnout and depression. For Palmer, like Fowler, the key to healing is accessing one's heart and will. "Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

Juno's Curse

In the tale of Narcissus and Echo, Echo is rendered nearly voiceless and dependent. When her repeated words are unappreciated, she first pines and then withers away. "To be unable to start a conversation is a symbolic way of saying that Echo lacks an independent self."³⁵ This "curse" of voicelessness, though, has origins prior to Echo's

encounter with Narcissus. Similarly, narcissistic vulnerability can precede a student's encounter with a narcissistically inclined teacher.

Both Sophia Freud and Alice Miller note that gifted children are particularly vulnerable to narcissistic cathection. Giftedness can render one more vulnerable to and more successful at meeting the narcissist's needs. Because they have intuitive and empathic abilities---“antennae” for the unconscious wishes of their caretakers---gifted children can be exploited early in their lives. Since this process often operates at an unconscious level, adult children of narcissistic parents may be drawn to narcissistic teachers and learning environments. And it may also be that in such an environment, the most gifted will fall into a re-enactment of those family dynamics. In the language of the myth, Juno's curse of dependency and voice deprivation can be re-enacted several times--in educational, religious, and other inter-personal contexts.³⁶ Echo may simply move from one Narcissistic pool to another.

In the middle years, some people come to graduate school as a result of burnout. If the cause of their burnout is narcissistic deprivation, they may be vulnerable to repeating the dynamics of false-selfhood that is, unconsciously, so familiar to them. These are often gifted folk, well-trained in and unconsciously attuned to the narcissistic needs of others. Thus, even though they may change directions in life, they can easily return to the underlying pattern that lead to burnout in the first place.

Narcissistic patterns in education can be relational *processes*. Thus, it may also be the case that narcissistically deprived children who are gifted empathically will seek and encourage narcissistic dynamics.³⁷ Alice Miller described the deftness with which patients (Miller's term) can inadvertently support an analyst's narcissism:

“An analytically talented patient, one with ‘antennae’ for his analyst's unconscious, reacts promptly. He will present the analyst with a complete picture of his ‘Oedipus complex,’ with all the affects and insights [as] required.”³⁸ It is easy for the analyst to simply accept this mirroring, and to assume that she has done superb work with the client. The problem is that the patient has displayed an “as-if” Oedipus complex, a complex constructed to meet the analyst's needs for mirroring---which leads to the approval that the patient seeks. What the patient really needs is the “time and space to develop his ‘true self,’ to let it speak and to listen to it,” and then any insights into an Oedipus or other complex will be authentic.

When there are *narcissistic traits* in a teacher (grandiosity and need for admiration) and *narcissistic vulnerabilities* in the student (the need to be attached to an idealized person who approves and confirms worth), the two will mutually reinforce narcissistic pedagogy. The learner gains approval; the teacher gains compliance and admiration.

However, it is not the case that all students---or even most---who succumb to the pattern actually invite it. The fact is, especially in higher education, there are power dynamics at play. A student may get caught up in a narcissistic pattern as a means of

surviving in such an environment. Those who have a high level of awareness can choose to either exit the system or “play the game” (while retaining a sense of self); those, however, who get drawn into the pattern unconsciously are susceptible to developing a False Self.³⁹ In her discussion of the “seductive” power of Narcissist’s at work, Sandy Hotchkiss describes the way in which unsuspecting persons can be drawn into the system.

Narcissists, who are convinced of their own specialness, often exude a special charm that makes others feel pumped up too—at least initially. When they shine their light on you, even for only a brief moment, you may walk away feeling happier, more inspired, or just elevated in some indescribable way. It is as if you have been sprinkled with pixie dust, and life just feels a little brighter.

Those who are left out of the glow, however, will feel deflated. And, thus, when these students or employees exhibit the kind of adoring and compliant behavior that includes them in the glow, they get *seduced into the system* of deflation and inflation.

The aura that surrounds the Narcissist often creates envy and competition. You may be aware, on some level, of wanting to be a part of what’s going on, regardless of whether you actually like the person or not. The process of being deflated and the opportunity to be inflated (if you capture the Narcissist’s attention in some positive way) may have all entered your life unbidden. It is within the Narcissist’s power to create this atmosphere simply by manipulating others’ experiences of inflation and deflation.⁴⁰

Though some learners may inadvertently get sucked into narcissistic dynamics, others may be inherently excluded.

Gender and Race Implications

It is obvious that in a narcissistic environment, the gender of the teacher will influence the gender of the most likely protégée. Male teachers will see themselves most perfectly reflected in younger males; female teachers likewise. While the lack of—or unacceptable imperfection in—a same gender devotee will open up possibilities for the other gender, those of the same gender have an advantage. Because there are more men in positions of power in higher education, in those institutions which foster narcissistic pedagogy, women are decidedly at a disadvantage. The same is true for learners from a cultural or ethnic group that is different from the dominant group in an institution.

Women and men who have too strong a (non-echoing) voice or who are too different from the mentoring figure may be excluded because, even if psychically vulnerable, cannot (by virtue of eradicable differences) project an adequate mirror to the mentor. Similarly, young men and women from the margin, who come with deep questions and the capacity to resist authority, may face the choice between being quelled and being rejected. In a system with a high number of narcissistic power players, questioners and resisters will find no entry.

Theologies that Support Narcissistic Patterns

As was the case with Professor Juno, the suppression of questioning and appropriate forms of resistance is can be reinforced by Narcissistic understandings of deity.

It is striking, and helpful to this essay, that Walter Brueggemann briefly engages Winnicott's False-Self theory in his discussion of the role of lament in theology. Laments, especially as expressed in the lament psalms, are complaints to God voicing that: things are not right, they need not be so, the injustice is intolerable, and it is God's obligation to change the situation.⁴¹ Where there is lament, the person is able to take initiative with God and so engage in authentic relation with God. Brueggemann argues that when lament is absent, and when only praise of God is allowed, the people become "voiceless." They worship a narcissistic idol, not a compassionate God. Doxology that is silent with regard to injustice "is finally a practice of denial, cover-up, and pretense, which sanctions social control." There is no covenantal interaction; there is only mindless submission. Brueggemann further contends that if questions of justice cannot be brought to the throne of God, they will also be deemed improper in public places, including schools; if praise and obedience are the only acceptable offerings to God, they become the only acceptable behaviors in society.

This is, according to Brueggemann, analogous to the False Self that develops when an infant cannot take initiative with the caretaker; when an infant is forced into compliance and obedience. It leads to psychological inauthenticity and social immobility. Narcissistic theologies promote and are reinforced by narcissistic pedagogies, and both contribute to inertia, apathy, and injustice.

IV. Undoing Juno's Curse: Restoring the Power of Conversation

In all educational situations, the teacher shares words, ideas, art forms, and processes that matter to her. It is the teacher's passion for these things that motivates her. And, there is nothing wrong with a teacher having self-esteem or even some charisma.⁴² This sharing and these passions *per se* do not implicate the teacher in narcissistic pedagogy! Similarly, exams, papers, and projects that require "conversation with course materials" are not narcissistic tools in themselves. [In fact, I surely hope that when we discuss this paper, the conversation will be about the issues raised herein---and I don't think that suggests a narcissistic pattern!] Some repetition of the teacher's ideas, forms, and processes are intrinsic to education.⁴³

Echoing is, therefore, a part of education. And yet, in order to avoid the dynamics of narcissism, it is important for a teacher to nurture the student's "conversational competence."

Conversational Education

The goal of education, especially higher education, is not pure mirroring on behalf of the student. Empathic needs *do change* as a person matures. What was needed in infancy is not needed in adulthood. Still, good education does include empathic response from the teacher. By empathic response, however, I do not mean unchallenging affirmation.⁴⁴ In terms of adult education, empathic response involves *the commitment to see the student as a separate (but related) person in pursuit of her own ideas even as she engages the ideas of her teacher.*

The central problem with narcissistic education is that *there is no real other with whom the teacher relates.* If narcissistic pedagogy involves the teaching of persons who are subjectively perceived as part of oneself rather than a center of their own independent activity, then conversational education involves the teaching of persons who are subjectively perceived as “valued-others” operating with voice and integrity. .

Although Juno (of the myth) nearly quells Echo’s voice, she doesn’t vanquish it altogether. There are traces of voice, in that she chooses what she wishes to repeat, and in doing so, communicates something of herself. Here is a starting point, educationally speaking, for “undoing the curse of Juno.”

This would include:

- a teacher’s capacity to support spontaneity,
- a teacher’s sensitivity to the “signals of voice” inherent in partial repetition,
- a teacher’s capacity to survive her own displacement

Know Thyself

According to Ovid, Narcissus’ mother, Leiroke, consulted a prophet to find out whether her son would reach an old age. The seer answered, “Only if he never knows himself.” C.R. Edwards suggests that Ovid was making an ironical play on inscription on the temple at Delphi, “Know Thyself.” Of course, when Narcissus sees himself in the pool, falls in love with his image, and then realizes the futility of his infatuation, he does indeed die a young age.

And it is true: the “death” of narcissism does indeed come from self-knowledge!

Conversational education does begin with the teacher gazing into the silvery pool! It is important for teachers and mentors to know what they unconsciously look for and prefer as they engage learners. At the first level of critical examination, the teacher makes herself aware of places she may need to discipline her unconscious, and unfair, preferences.

At the next level, the teacher can promote a healthy learning environment by exposing the “bounds of the silvery pool” to the community’s awareness and examination. That is, there are always boundaries in classrooms (for instance, I tell students I expect inclusive language), and it’s helpful to name those “shores” so people

have a sense for the pool in which they are playing. But, the bounds of the pool are larger than the mirrored image of one's own face!

At yet another level, the teacher shows her face, so to speak. She offers her cherished ideas and values for both gazing and critical examination. And, she seeks to have the offering respected, though not so much admired. There is a difference, however, between offering from the sheer pleasure and joy in one's passions and expecting to have those passions imitated ---- energy for the subject-matter rather than echoing of the perspective is the goal.⁴⁵ Yet, the teacher also allows for learners to partially repeat her words, to add to or correct her words, and all this on the way to speaking their own voice. Even in a relationship as close as a mentoring relationship, the ultimate role of the mentor is to help students articulate their particular voice. When the mentor is also able to receive from the voice she nurtures, conversational education takes place. Kohut himself offers an example of conversational education that is mutually respectful:

“If there is one lesson that I have learned during my life as an analyst, it is the lesson that what my patients tell me is likely to be true---that many times when I believed that I was right and my patients were wrong, it turned out, though often only after a prolonged search, that *my* rightness was superficial whereas *their* rightness was profound.”⁴⁶

Echo's Lament

It is interesting that in Ovid's myth, upon her shame and rejection, Echo hides in the lonely caves, grieves and weeps, and finally her body and bones waste away. “Only her voice” is left. Echo hides in the woods and hills, “for all to hear, alive, but just a sound.”

Only her voice, for all to hear.

That's not so little. We can summon the dangerous memory of Echo's lament; we can hear the voice, still alive, of our own laments.

Teachers who wish to “check” narcissistic patterns can call Echo from the woods and caves, hear the sound of her cry, and even restore her flesh and bones! These teachers can look at their own education, note where it was narcissistic, and mourn the suppressed aspects of themselves----some of which, even years later, are still hiding, disembodied, in the caves and woods. By facing their own wounds, they can avoid passing them on. And, by hearing the echo, they can reclaim the lost parts of themselves.

Such teachers can look back at their “echoing.” Where were the words they repeated expressions of self? Where were they not? Where are there hidden clues to their authenticity in the partial repetitions? Where were spontaneous discoveries and delights abandoned?

V. Reversing Reverse-Mirroring: Seeing the Other in Ourselves

The opening quote of this paper is line by Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's famous novel. The dynamics of narcissistic pedagogy are eerily implied in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.⁴⁷

Early in the story, Victor Frankenstein comes across as rather grandiose. "The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine. Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture, as they were unfolded to me, are among the earliest sensations I can remember." Victor decides to create new life, and he imagines, as the opening quote reflects, that his creation will bless and praise him.

Thus, as different from Narcissus, Dr. Frankenstein seeks to create a mirror rather than find one. He carefully selects what seem to be perfect parts for his creature, and he puts them together and infuses them with life. Though the parts themselves are beautiful, the animated creature repulses Frankenstein. "The beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart." The eyes are dull, the skin is ugly, the motions are convulsive. In fact, in images reminiscent of Echo, the creature opens his jaws, utters "some inarticulate sounds" with a grin on its face, and stretches a hand toward its creator. The creator, Dr. Frankenstein, in a display of utter lack of empathy, rejects and then abandons the creature that does not adequately reflect the grandeur of his creator. The creature never even receives a name.

Many interpretations can be given for Frankenstein's horrified and enraged rejection of his creature. He was disappointed that his creation was imperfect; he was frightened when he realized that the animated creature would take on a life of his own⁴⁸; he looked face to face at a reflection of his own imperfection or a projection of his own shadow. As Berman writes, "The grandiose self demands absolute control and perfection, devaluing those individuals unable to fulfill its demands."⁴⁹

All three of the above named interpretations of Dr. Frankenstein's rejection of his creation suggest parallels in educational environments. For the purposes of this paper, I want to focus on the first two.

As noted earlier, idealization and devaluation are common patterns in narcissistic education. A teacher with narcissistic traits will look for a perfect reflection of his ego-strengths, and he will be approving when he starts to see it. When the student, however, shows signs that she can not or will not continue the perfection, the teacher will go from praise to rejection.

The teacher will also be afraid of the student taking on a life her own. It is interesting that in the story of *Frankenstein*, the creature is faster, stronger, hardier, and more clever than his creator. So, there is likely a *blend of disappointment and of envy*. To translate this to the educational realm: *it is very frightening for a teacher with narcissistic traits to face a protégée who turns out to be an imperfect reflection (vis-à-vis the teacher's wishes)---but an "imperfect one" who simultaneously has areas of greater*

ability and talent than the teacher himself. The result will be that the Narcissistically inclined teacher will develop *an intensified commitment* to his own strengths and *an intensified devaluation* toward those alien talents embodied in the student. This is, both in the story and in the classroom, a monstrous turn of events. But, also in both situations, the monster is the creator.

I'd like to consider Victor Frankenstein's relationship to his creation in contrast with the artist Andrew Wyeth's relationship with one of his painting subjects.

Consider the painter Andrew Wyeth. In his biography of Wyeth, Richard Meryman describes the "pristine romance" between Wyeth and Christina Olsen, the subject of Wyeth's most famous painting, *Christina's World*. The first time I saw the painting, I was drawn to the yearning posture of this woman in a field. I've had the print hanging in my house for twenty years. For those of you who don't know the painting, it's central feature is a dark haired woman, back to the viewer, in the middle of a brown grassy field, leaning toward a gaunt, steeply pitched house. Though I didn't at first notice, her hands are gnarled and her bony elbow is poised for struggle.

It was several years after I bought it, however, that I learned that Christina was actually dragging herself across that grassy field, disabled by a muscular deterioration which immobilized her lower body. Wyeth's eye was caught one day by the apparition of Christina "crawling like a crab on a New England shore."⁵⁰

Wyeth didn't simply receive the image and assimilate it into his own world. He spent a lot of time with Christina in her environs, opening his imagination to her life and her experiences. Both Christina's life and Wyeth's life were mixed into the oils that became a painting.

Meryman describes the long friendship between the painter and this woman with the "long, ruined face, with its hugely arching nose, and the oily strings of her lank hair." Wyeth would visit Christina in her dirty house with grimy walls and fetid air, and he would see her dignity. "This tenderness for unappreciated people reduced by life—his reverence for self-sufficiency and perseverance—is a fundamental energy in Wyeth's work." His encounter with this woman who was different not only stirred his imagination, but it also tapped into his own differentness. As Wyeth himself tells it: "There was a very strange connection. One of those odd collisions that happen. We were a little alike; I was an unhealthy child that was kept at home. So there was this unsaid feeling between us that was wonderful, an utter naturalness." Wyeth also notes that he felt her loneliness, and in it he saw his own loneliness as a child.

These encounters with Christina humbled him as well. "When you get next to something that's as mammoth as Christina, all the dirt and grime and slight things evaporate and you see before you the power of the queen of Sweden sitting there, looking at you. Our measly minds pick up a speck of dirt on her leg or her bare thigh and we're clouded by that. She puts things in their proper position. All the feeling of ourselves and

our little delicacies disappear. Knocks me right in the teeth. It's as though someone came up and said, 'Andy, your work is crap.'"

Now and then, when Wyeth painted Christina he would say, "I'd better wash your face." "All right," she would reply. "As he moved a cloth into the folds of that heavy, wrinkled face, up around her ears, he once said, 'Christina you have the most marvelous end to your nose, a little delicate thing that happens.' On her face was a smile close to rapture."

Wyeth, interestingly, had his own narcissistic wounds. His father "would practically lay out" his "palette," and this got to be such a problem that Andrew took to painting in secret in order to keep "himself self from his father's officiousness, from his spell."⁵¹

Wyeth is an artist, not a teacher. And yet, his attention to otherness during the painting of *Christina's World* teaches us much. He brought empathy to his passion for painting. As he related to Christina, he saw dignity in brokenness, and he found his own self in the one who was strange---and, to the world, ugly. Christina's yearning, her struggle, her particularity were honored.

And here (pace Freud) I find health and wisdom in the artist. Perhaps the most important way that we can teach in a way that avoids narcissism is to reverse the reverse mirroring that is the core of narcissism. That is, rather than look for ourselves in others, we can look for the "otherness" in ourselves. We can make connections with the strange and different and even the ugly in others.

VI: Narcissus' Nemesis

I turn one final time to Ovid's myth. In the myth, Narcissus' self-love is actually a punishment for his disdain toward all those who loved him. The hill-nymphs and water-nymphs and "many a man" had sought Narcissus' attention, and he mocked and scorned them all. "Till one scorned youth, with raised hands, prayed, 'So may *he* love and never win his love!' Ovid tells us: "Nemesis approved the righteous prayer." And, it is after the youth's plea that Narcissus falls for his own image, a fate that leads to his death. "Alas," he cried to himself, "I loved in vain." Echo's voice, still heard, repeats Narcissus' "farewell" to himself.

Farewell Narcissus.

NOTES:

¹ Martin Bergmann, "The Legend of Narcissus," *American Imago*, 41 (1984): 394.

² *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Ruth Ward transl. (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 31. A revision of this book was done in 1997, but I prefer the earlier version.

³ P. 255, Jowett transl.

⁴ "On Narcissism," *Standard Edition*, 14:90-91.

⁵ *Op cit*, 24. See pages 20-21 of 1997 edition.

⁶ "An Overview of the Concept of Narcissism," *Social Casework*: March 1977: 136. It is interesting to note that Reuben Fine attributes "some of the obscurity and inconsistency" in Freud's seminal essay on the topic to "his frustration with his departed disciples" [Adler and Jung], taking place during the writing. Sandor Ferenczi wrote that Freud was "fuming with rage" over their defections. While many --- perhaps following Freud's own emphasis on Oedipal issues --- have noted the ironic oedipal dynamics of these sons attempting to overthrow their father, few have gone further back and noted the narcissistic implications of Freud's identity being merged with psychoanalysis and his rage in the face of criticism. See Jeffrey Berman's discussion in *Narcissism and the Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 10-12.

⁷ Reuben Fine, *Narcissism, the Self, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 67.

⁸ The literature still focuses on the "mother," even when it gives a passing nod to the fact that the primary caretaker may be a father.

⁹ *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971, reprinted 1999), 89-90.

¹⁰ Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (Basic Books, 1985). "Infants begin to experience a sense of an emergent self from birth. They are pre-designed to be aware of self-organizing processes. They never experience a period of total self/other undifferentiation." There is no confusion between self and other in the beginning or at any point during infancy. They are also pre-designed to be selectively responsive to external social events and never experience an autistic life phase," p. 10.

¹¹ Both Kohut's definition and promotion of empathy (defined as "vicarious introspection") have been controversial in psychoanalytic circles. For a summary of the discussion, see Kohut, "Reflections on Advances in Self Psychology," in *Advances in Self Psychology*, Arnold Goldberg, ed. (New York: International Universities Press, 1980), 482ff.

¹² Heinz Kohut, "Reflections on Advances in Self Psychology," in *Advances in Self Psychology*, Arnold Goldberg, ed. (New York: International Universities Press, 1980), 478-479.

¹³ "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self," in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), 145.

¹⁴ *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 115.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 108.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 114.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 150.

¹⁹ Kohut, "Reflections," 482.

²⁰ *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), 79-90.

²¹ I am following, for the most part, Ovid's (circa 1 – 8 C.E.) version "Narcissus and Echo," from Part III of *Metamorphoses*, a collection of cultural myths. The translation I am using is by A. D. Melville, 1986. Numerous versions are extant, and the telling of the story varies.

²² Martin S. Bergmann, "The Legend of Narcissus," *American Imago*, 41 (1984): 390.

²³ See Ingrid and Edgar D'Aulaires, *Book of Greek Myths* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 92.

²⁴ In Pausanias' second century version of the myth, it seemed "perfectly silly, that a man old enough to fall into the snares of love did not know the difference between a person and the reflection of a person," so he conjectures a lost twin sister whom Narcissus projects onto his own image, giving him comfort for the loss.

²⁵ Until 1980, when the disorder was catalogued in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-III, the term "Narcissistic Personality Disorder" was used in many different ways.

²⁶ Summarized in James Masterson, *The Personality Disorders: A New Look at the Developmental Self and Object Relations Approach* (Phoenix: Zeig, Tucker & Co, 2000), 71.

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- ²⁷ Marion Goldmann, "Alice Miller's Insights into Religious Seekers," in Janet L. Jacobs, and Donald Capps, eds., *Religion, Society and Psychoanalysis: Readings in Contemporary Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 209.
- ²⁸ Discussed by Sophie Lowenstein in "An Overview of the Concept of Narcissism," p. 141.
- ²⁹ *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975), 33. Compared to Kohut, Kernberg took a rather dimmer view of narcissism and narcissistic needs.
- ³⁰ I thank Jeong Oh, a student at the Claremont School of Theology, for articulating the importance of trust.
- ³¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: or The Modern Prometheus* (1831), forward by Walter James Miller, (New York: Signet, 2000), 24.
- ³² *Ibid*, 34.
- ³³ *Op cit*, 114.
- ³⁴ *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 2
- ³⁵ Martin Bergmann, "The Legend of Narcissus," 394.
- ³⁶ Marion Goldman similarly suggests that Alice Miller sheds light on the relationship between children and religious seekership. "The narcissistic vulnerability that Miller delineates may be a key element in intense religious seekership and the desire to devote one's life of a charismatic leader." In Janet L. Jacobs, and Donald Capps, eds., *Religion, Society and Psychoanalysis: Readings in Contemporary Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 203. I thank Grace M. Mazhandu, a student at the Claremont School of Theology, for bringing this essay to my attention.
- ³⁷ I owe this insight to Alima Shermann, a student at Claremont School of Theology, who raised this issue during a discussion of the first draft of this paper.
- ³⁸ *Drama*, 1981, 23.
- ³⁹ In her book *Why Is it Always About You? Saving Yourself from the Narcissists in Your Life*, Sandy Hotchkiss includes a section with "Guidelines for Survival with a Narcissist in Power." These guidelines are for those who choose to remain in relationship with a narcissist (eg. at work). Hotchkiss notes that, in survival situations, it is crucial that a person know the difference between the image that he or she must put on and the real Self. "When dealing with a Narcissist who has power over you, it is naïve to expect to be yourself and not be eaten alive." (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 144.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 136.
- ⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," in Patrick Miller, ed, *The Psalms: The Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 105. I am indebted to William Miller, a participant in a doctoral seminar at CST, who brought this helpful essay to my attention.
- ⁴² I appreciate John Ellington, a student at CST, pointing this out.
- ⁴³ I thank Seungjun Park, a student at CST, who raised this issue during a discussion of the first draft of this paper, for nudging me to clarify this point. I also thank Morelli Niuatoa for affirming the role of the teacher in a conversational educational environment.
- ⁴⁴ I have written previously of conversational education being composed of "hard dialogue and deep connections. See *Caretakers of our Common House: Women's Development in Communities of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), Chapter 6.
- ⁴⁵ I thank Bob Mitchell, a student at CST, for naming this in this manner.
- ⁴⁶ *How Does Analysis Cure?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 93-94.
- ⁴⁷ I am drawing on the work of Jeffrey Bermann, who has analyzed this novel for its narcissistic themes. *Narcissism and the Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1990). I am making the connection to pedagogy, a connection I have only begun in this draft, and which I plan to develop further.
- ⁴⁸ I owe this important insight to Becky Bane, CST student.
- ⁴⁹ Jeffrey Berman, *op. cit*, 70.
- ⁵⁰ *Andrew Wyeth: A Secret Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 7-13.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*, 174. I need to admit, however, that I think his relationship to the famous Helga showed a great deal of narcissism. See esp. p. 336.