

Transforming  
the World



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## Unmasking Narcissism: The Ultimate Act of Repentance in a Consumer Culture *by Chuck Romig (MA '79)*

Research has shown that much youth violence occurring since the late 1980s is retaliatory in nature, resulting from a way of thinking about relationships. Youth today are more easily offended, less likely to overlook offenses, and more likely to respond with severe and violent actions toward the the perceived offenders. If a youth perceives an experience to be an unjust injury, he or she may feel entitled, if not obligated, to retaliate. According to James Garbarino (1999), a leading expert on youth violence, "in our society, the idea of retribution through violence is a basic article of faith. Vengeance is not confined to some small group of psychologically devastated individuals. It is normal for us, a fact of value in our culture" (p. 133).

### Characteristics of the Culture that Promote Narcissism

Some social analysts believe that today's culture is characterized by youth who are obsessed with seeking self-fulfillment and are motivated by an exaggerated sense of self-importance. Overall, our culture values individuality as its highest priority, with individual freedom, personal choice, and individual rights at the core of what the nation stands for. It is possible that today's culture has become so individualized that narcissism—an

unhealthy overemphasis on self-importance, self-love, and self-esteem—is virtually the norm rather than the exception as a trait among citizens. Our primary way of approaching decisions in relationships has become so focused on our individual rights that such concepts as self-sacrifice, duties, or responsibilities toward others are largely forgotten.

A pervasive attitude of entitlement is present not only among today's youth. As distasteful as the idea may appear, no single generation in America has a monopoly on seeking personal fulfillment and demanding personal rights based on a sense of entitlement while simultaneously imposing obligations on others. The narcissistic entitlement thinking that many use to stereotype today's youth is really more a reflection of our culture in general, with today's youth simply living it out in a more extreme manner.

### Affluence and Narcissism

One consequence of our affluence, according to economist D'Souza (2000) is that "consumer vices produced by affluence will, over time, erode the habits of industry, thrift, and delayed gratification" and that people will "value things more than relationships." He further states that "capitalist production is based on virtues such as hard work, frugality, and personal responsibility, but the success of capitalism has produced a hedonistic consumer culture that is undermining these virtues."

Consumer economic systems thrive on the notion that the consumption of goods and experiences provide a sufficient basis for a fulfilling life. Jesus said, "Man cannot live on bread alone," but advocates of consumerism would counter, "Man lives quite well on bread alone, so long as he can be distracted—by means of entertainment and therapy—from asking imponderable religious questions" (Gay, 1998). From a consumeristic perspective, personal fulfillment becomes little more than seeking gratification through objects and experiences. Gay points out that because personal identity includes lifestyle, goals, sense of purpose, and values, one's concept of "the good life" and the personal values that support it are radically individualized. Without intentional direction and support, youth are highly susceptible to the twin messages of consumerism that say "you alone define who you are" and that "material objects" and novel "experiences" are the keys to gaining fulfillment in life. In fact, the accom-

panied by the belief is that individuals are entitled to such fulfillment. When individuals accept this message and observe that they are not getting what they think they deserve, they must assign fault somewhere. Violence may well be the chosen means for attempting a to correction of this discrepancy.

Affluence may allow a person to buy valued objects, have novel experiences, and experience a certain degree of security in this world, but numerous studies have shown that, once basic needs are met, additional personal wealth does not increase well-being (Myers, 2000). Consumerism must deny this reality by encouraging discontent with one's life, because contentment does not move sales along. Garbarino (1999) pointed out that this a consumeristic approach to life does little to sustain youth in times of crisis, yet the inherent weakness of this system is well-hidden when times are good.

### The Link to Psychology

Affluence will not necessarily lead to self-obsession and overindulgence as a way of life unless a culture's views of human nature and what constitutes "the good life" encourage it. Cushman (1995), in a stinging critique of psychotherapy in America, described the concept of the person among the upper and middle classes as being characterized by an absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning, resulting in a chronic and profound emotional hunger. Such an "empty self" is easily manipulated into believing that the consumption of material objects and novel experiences is the antidote. Such a cultural milieu virtually guarantees that most citizens, particularly our youth, will interpret the world through the lens of personal rights and entitlement. The standard for measuring justice easily becomes tied to access to desired material objects and novel experiences.

Youth will see "injustices" where they do not exist, exaggerate the significance of injustices that do exist, and refuse to accept responsibility for not getting what they think they deserve. In response to perceived or real injustices, they will believe that they are justified in responding with more extreme means, including violence.

Narcissistic entitlement thinking fed by consumerism may be a major causal factor for domestic violence, dating violence, road rage, sports rage, shopping rage, and so on. It creates unnecessary anger and unnecessary conflict, impairs forgiveness and reconciliation processes, and warps one's understanding not only of self but and of virtually all relationships. Such thinking also distorts a person's understanding of genuine injustices, usually typically by trivializing them.

### Solutions

Damon (1995) stated that youth will not thrive psychologically until they learn to dedicate themselves to purposes that go beyond their own narcissistic desires. He believes that youth must "acquire a living sense of what some religious traditions have called transcendence: a faith in, and devotion to, concerns that are considered larger than the self, including such profound matters as the meaning and purpose of life." Similarly, Garbarino (1999) believes that for youth today to gain a healthier perspective on who they are in relationship to others, they must transcend the value of the individual self. He called this basic process developing a sense of spirituality—a humbling that comes from seeing the reality of one's place in the bigger picture—be it family, community, world, or God.

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