

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Myth of Narcissus: Self-Love Is Not Idolatry

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome, everybody. It's good to be with you again. I hope you're having a good summer if you are in the Northern Hemisphere, and for our friends in the Southern Hemisphere, I hope that winter is going well for you.

Today we're going to be talking about the Myth of Narcissus and the difference between self-love and idolatry, or what in some spiritual traditions is known as self-cherishing.

This is quite an important subject, especially in a culture like ours where self-aggrandizement and inflation is the coin of the realm. Just think about it. Ten years ago no one had heard of a selfie. Now everywhere you turn people are photographing themselves and broadcasting their image across the internet with no self-consciousness whatsoever. The shameless focus on image and appearance and attracting the most attention from the greatest number of people have become accepted social norms.

I saw a fascinating documentary on TV that was called *Generation Like* on FRONTLINE, which is one of our programs. It dealt with the current widespread obsession with attracting "likes" on social media, those clicks of approval that you receive online, and how a generation, which includes people of all ages, have been brainwashed into believing that the more likes or friends you attract online, the more currency you have, the more value.

This is the essence of the narcissistic enterprise, to inflate oneself using the admiration of others, or in the absence of admiration, feeling worthless or non-existent. That goes to the center of our conversation today and why this topic is truly so valuable.

Now it isn't accidental, of course, that media growing out of a culture such as ours, would be focused on the same things that feed narcissism: the creation of a virtual identity, the manipulation of personal image, the trolling of adoration from the masses, and most of all, the invisibility afforded by virtual reality. This is comparable to the invisibility of a narcissist who looks out at the world through a one-way mirror and reveals very little of him or herself.

Narcissism survives on the kudos of others and is the antithesis of love, because it's self-focused and dismissive of other people, except as they are useful to the narcissist. In this way, narcissism actually blocks self-love, as well, by denying the things about ourselves that don't add up to the image we want to create.

Let me give you an example. I once worked with a guy I'll call Jake, who suffered from a pathologically inflated self-image. There were some biographical reasons to help explain this. He was the adopted son of an aging couple who had tried and failed for years to have kids. So, Jake was the miracle child who'd come to life, come to give their life meaning, and the object of so much over-weening love that he came to see himself as the heir-apparent, the center of the universe.

It didn't help that Jake's genes were also quite flashy. He was six foot three with blond hair, an athletic build, and an IQ that put him in the upper echelon of intelligence. He was undeniably a brilliant and beautiful guy. And Jake thought more highly of himself than anyone I've ever met, outwardly, that is.

Inwardly Jake's life was a very different story. For starters, he was in his mid-thirties and had never been in any committed relationship with a woman, although he claimed to want this more than anything. Women would glom onto him and Jake would try to do the mating dance, but there always came a moment when women would reach the breaking point and either leave Jake, if they were lucky, or have various kinds of nervous breakdowns, when they became either sickly attached or emotionally disabled and tried to trap Jake into the role of caring for them, which he was completely incapable of doing.

Besides his miserable love life, Jake had very limited friendships with people who adored him but whom he barely respected. He also had a track record of ending up with either the number two or the number three spot at his office in terms of hierarchy for reasons that he could never fathom. His test scores were great. He could out work anyone else. But still there was some kind of emotional ceiling that Jake couldn't seem to get through.

When he came to me for mentorship and self-inquiry, I asked him to begin by writing about what he feared the most, what it is that caused him the most anxiety. Because here is the narcissist's Achilles heel, not pride as many people think. And since Jake was a textbook narcissist, it seemed like the most logical place to start.

Jake began by listing all the things in the world or with other people that blocked him from getting what he wanted. He feared that his boss would never promote him. He feared that no woman would ever be able to love him the way that Jake wanted. He feared that the stock market would go bust, which it did coincidentally the following year, and that he would be forced to ask his parents for money, which scared him because it gave them leverage in his life. Jake was also secretly phobic of a number of physical threats. He was afraid of super viruses, he was terrified of chlamydia, and he was terrified of going bald, besides being afraid that he was going to die in a plane crash.

In his writing, Jake listed these fears without any introspection or elaboration, careful to keep his inner life out of the conversation. When I pointed this out to Jake and suggested that he now try a second writing, focusing on things that scared him about himself, he didn't seem particularly happy about that.

A week passed and I didn't hear from him and then another week passed without a word. Finally, I got an email from Jake saying that he was coming up dry and didn't really understand the question. Could I put it to him in another way?

So I decided to take a different tack. I asked Jake to explore something, anything, that had happened in his life that he did his best not to think about. That seemed to do the trick. He responded almost immediately with a five-page screed about his latest romantic failure with a girl he wanted to be his wife. He eviscerated her character. He blamed her for everything. He extolled how wonderful he had been to her and enumerated her complaints about him.

This is what Jake wrote: "She said I was self-absorbed. She knows nothing about what it takes to build a career. She said she didn't feel like I really saw her for who she was. She said I took

everything too personally and couldn't see her point of view, that I puffed myself up and tried too hard and got too needy. She said I seemed scared of intimacy. That's a joke. Intimacy is a piece of cake."

That last sentence was the giveaway, because anybody who knows anything about intimacy knows very well that it's not all frosting and angel food.

I suggested that Jake take some time to respond to these points that his ex-girlfriend had made one by one. Here's part of what he wrote: "I worked my way through the list like you said – self-absorbed, didn't see her for who she is, takes things too personally, tried too hard, I puff myself up. None of these really rang a bell. Then I got to the part where she called me too needy."

And this is where Jake's wall of narcissistic defenses began to fall apart. "One second I was looking at the word needy and the next I actually started crying, really crying like out of nowhere, because something inside me knew she was right. I am a needy son-of-a-bitch. I've been that way ever since I can remember, wanting everyone to look at me, to make me feel important, the center of attention, and when people didn't do this, feeling the need to put them down. What the fuck is wrong with me? I'm a god-damn fucking mama's boy. No wonder nobody really loves me."

I could hear the self-contempt in his voice and knew that we'd finally reached a level of truth, the level that Jake was most ashamed of. Because underneath his shiny exterior, in a part of himself that he never looked at, Jake actually despised and mistrusted himself. He hated that he was so needy with others. He hated that he felt so weak. He loathed being what he called a mama's boy with its implications of emasculation and dependency.

Jake was discovering that his neediness was just the tip of a dark iceberg when it came to things in himself that scared him. Over the next few months, he started to explore this submarine formation of beliefs and feelings that he had avoided admitting, his awkwardness with women, his performance anxiety, not only in bed but at the office where he tried too hard without being able to move forward, his cowardliness with friends and family whose emotional responses and needs left him feeling clueless, the superficiality which he recognized that kept Jake worrying about his reputation and the admiration of others.

Then he shared something unexpected that opened yet a deeper door into Jake's narcissistic dungeon. He wrote: "If I were really a good person, I would want to be a part of the world." That statement revealed two essential things. First, that at his core Jake did believe that he was a bad person. And second, that his deepest longing, beyond wanting a girlfriend or more status at work, was to connect with the world around him, to be part of something larger than himself, and to be seen, not for his greatness, but for his goodness. In turn, that would make him feel vulnerable.

Jake longed to step out from behind the mask of narcissism and truly join the human race. And when our mentorship finally ended, he had started to work with a psychologist and he was planning to look into meditation, in order to get friendlier with his own iceberg. I hope and trust that Jake has made a great deal more headway in his own healing.

In any case, his story is a clear illustration of the difference between self-love and idolatry, such as we find among narcissists. To be idolized is to become an object that others see in a limited dimension, in a controlled way, always shown off to its best advantage. To be an idol, i-d-o-l, is to excise your human parts and pretend they're not there and spend your life in an eternal pose, denying those things in yourself that you cannot or that you refuse to love.

This is a situation that most of us find ourselves in before we begin to question our own narcissistic traits, however extreme or minor they might be. We spend our lives building up an image, a personality, that we call ourselves, focusing on the desirable parts, rejecting the things that we don't like. The narrower our focus on image, the more limited our existence becomes, until we find ourselves maneuvering through our lives like someone holding a selfie stick, trying to find the perfect shot.

You must have seen those selfie sticks, where people hold the camera or the phone away from themselves so they can get the best angle and the best perspective, thinking that if we just show the face, then they won't see the belly. If the lighting is good enough, then they won't see the wrinkles. If the background is just right, then you're likely to look perfect or, in any case, you can always crop out the things that ruin the picture.

This selfie, so to speak, isn't just for others, of course. First, we construct it for ourselves, to build a self-image that we can live with. But here's the problem. You can never really love a self-image. There's always something to fix or something missing in an image. Even when we have moments of true satisfaction, they pass as quickly as day turns to night.

We struggle to love our constructed self but discover that it's impossible since its love is focused on the form, not the content of who we are. In other words, the self that we're trying to love is the wrong self. It's fine to have a healthy self-image, of course. It feels good and it helps us through life.

But, ultimately, this image will fall apart when the things we construct it with fail to deliver. When this happens, our self-esteem is damaged as well, seeing and experiencing that what we took as proofs of our self-worth actually can't be counted on. Only by turning our love to what lies underneath, that self that's beyond the personality, can we slip through the chains of narcissism and find a self-love that is true and lasting.

But how do we discover this true self? How do we find this affection that arises out of nowhere in the presence of our authentic being?

The answer is by breaking the identification with the goodies that the false self uses to build itself up, breaking the identification with those things that the false self, the personality, the image related self, uses to appear solid.

This stuff that we use to build up the image falls into three major categories, the materials that come to form our identity. First, what we know. Second, what we have. And third, what we do.

Knowledge, possessions, and achievement are the three pillars of the imagined self that we use to measure our personal worth. They're the currency of social acceptance and also the justifications for self-cherishing. They're also, of course, completely unreliable as foundation stones of authentic self-love.

Anybody who's gone through a loss in any of these categories, which would be just about everyone, knows just how flimsy what we call self-esteem becomes when life delivers its inevitable blows. If you look at your own existence honestly, you'll see that nearly all of your fear and anxiety and suffering come from real or perceived losses in one of these areas, what you know, what you have, and what you do.

Ask yourself, which of these areas are particularly wobbly in your own life? In what ways do you feel ignorant or poor or low on the achievement scale? And how does this self-judgment affect your need for approval or adoration from others? That's a very important question. How does your own self-judgment and the severity of your own self-judgment affect your need for approval and adoration from others? Finally, how do these perceived lapses in value affect your ability to love yourself, not as an image or as a creation or something for others to look up to, but on the basis of your essential goodness? These are critical questions to ask ourselves if we hope to awaken from narcissism.

As it happens, we soon become aware of a form of self-love that has nothing to do with what we know or what we have or what we do. We realize that there's a form of self-love or self-appreciation that's as natural as breathing and eating and being. It goes far beyond personality. It actually comes from a source that is much greater than you are as an individual. It's not subject to circumstance or the ebbs and flows of a personal fortune.

In truth, self-love, of the kind I'm talking about, is transcendental in nature. The more accurate description of this experience could be life loving itself through you, life loving itself through you, with no need of masks or poses or selfie sticks. This self-love is available to all of us and has nothing whatsoever to do with self-aggrandizement, because it's a birthright as a human being to love and to be loved for no other reason than that you are a piece of god and worthy, without doing a thing.

It's as if a narcissist turns from his reflection and the infatuation with his own appearance and looks out at the actual three-dimensional world. When he does that, he realizes he's been in a dream, and when that happens, he's overwhelmed with gratitude to have awakened.

The same thing happens to every seeker on the path of self-realization. The ego turns away from the inner mirror, where it preens and poses, and it turns to regard the miraculous world that's alive and pulsating all around it. Most of the time it takes a loss or a major change, some bout of suffering, to come along and smash the ego's mirror and turn one forcefully toward the light.

A friend of mine who's a recovering alcoholic, as well as a recovering narcissist, talked to me about getting sober and having his own mirror taken away. What he said has always stuck with me. He said, "It was the strangest thing. I realized that other people are interesting." He said it with a kind of disbelief. "When I was drinking, I lost interest in other people. I was trapped in an

alternative reality, the hallucination of drinking, and hating myself underneath the numbness. I felt more pain when I got sober,” he told me, “but also more pleasure. And I finally saw that people loved me.” I love that.

“I felt more pain when I got sober, but also more pleasure. And I finally saw that people loved me.” Finally. The sobering truth is that narcissists can’t feel love for either themselves or for other people. The very demands of sustaining a narcissistic ego are counter-indicated when it comes to forming mutual relationships with real human beings.

But, luckily, we have spiritual practice as an antidote to living in this ersatz dimension. As we learn to observe our own minds, and distinguish the internal witness, our unconditioned spiritual awareness, from the image that we carry about who we are, we free ourselves to open our hearts without fear. When we stop denying the things in the shadow, those aspects of ourselves that don’t fit our self-image, we expand our capacity for compassion and live with increased authenticity.

This is scary to the threatened poser within who wants nothing more than a pretty reflection, but it frees the part of us that longs for connection above adoration. And that’s the meaning of spiritual liberation, to know ourselves truly as part of the whole, and to realize that that is what we are born for.

Ask yourself, do you hide behind an inflated self-image? Are you able to attend to and also witness and care for other people with the same passion that you reserve for yourself? Are you able to accept your shadow and bless the parts of yourself that you’ve rejected? That’s a huge question to look at on the spiritual path. And if not, why not? Do you measure yourself by what you have or what you know or what you do? And how does this identification with possessions or with knowledge or with achievements, contribute to your lack of self-love?

These are such important questions to ask, either in writing or elsewhere, and I encourage you to do so. It can bring deep insight and open your heart and bring you down to the level of other human beings, because without humility, there is no love, there’s certainly no connection.

That’s what I wanted to say to you today about narcissism and idolatry and self-love.

