

# CAN A SELF GROW OUT OF EMPTINESS?: THE TREATMENT OF NARCISSISTIC WOUNDING

A Review of the Book *Trapped in the Mirror: Adult Children of Narcissists in Their Struggle for Self* by Elan Golomb, Ph.D. New York: William Morrow, 1992.

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When the patient is a narcissist, the course is extraordinarily difficult. Most of the child's natural behaviors meet with disapproval. The child is always trying to please, yet never finding out what is effective and acceptable . . . He does not learn to please himself. (p. 49)

As I continue to learn and grow as a psychotherapist, I have come to see more and more that the treatment of the adult child of a narcissistic parent forms the basic paradigm for defining the task of therapy with the majority of my patients. The therapeutic task so often is to assist my patients in finding and defining a self, which in some cases means giving birth to something that seems not to have ever existed before. As Elan Golomb writes,

All this has to do with knowing our buried selves, so far out of range that sometimes we feel nonexistent at the core and strangely empty. Are we centerless and different from other people? Can something unfelt exist? Can a self grow out of emptiness? (p. 219)

I'll share with you some of the steps which led me to Dr. Golomb's book. In July, 1992, I began therapy with an intelligent, educated patient who was being controlled, emotionally abused, and on occasion battered by her husband. Several years into the therapy work with her, she suggested that I read the book *When Love Goes Wrong: Strategies for Women with Controlling Partners*. After reading it, I also began to think about my other female patients, and realized that of the sixteen adult women in my practice, every one either had been in the past, or was now with, a controlling, narcissistic male partner.

Many of these women felt socially isolated and without adequate support as they struggled in their individual therapeutic journeys. I decided to offer a therapy group for women who were partners or ex-partners of controlling

men, beginning in September of 1994. During the next two years of leading and co-leading this group, I learned more about the enormous task it is for the partner of a narcissist to develop a reliable self and to reach out for and utilize peer support.

At the same time, I was also seeing more narcissistic-dependent couples in my office, and struggling to develop more empathy for the narcissistic partner's approach, in order to do effective couples treatment. Rod Kochtitzky, in my peer consultation group, continued to gently challenge me to find a less pejorative description for my therapy group than "Partners of Controlling Men". This past June, I was in Park City, Utah, for the Summer Conference of the American Academy of Psychotherapists. One of the members of my Academy peer group, who knew about my Partners of Controllers group, said to me, "Phil, there's this book you'll want to read. It's title is *Trapped in the Mirror: Adult Children of Narcissists in Their Struggle for Self* by Dr. Elan Golomb, a psychologist."

So I returned to Nashville, ordered *Trapped in the Mirror* and began to read. Over lunch at The Merchants, with my co-therapist Jordan Lee, I showed her the book I was reading. I said to her, "Jordan, we should think about doing a group for adult children of narcissists." To which she immediately responded, "Aren't we already running that group?" Of course, she was right. We had been leading a group for women who are children of narcissists, who then married narcissists. As Dr. Golomb writes,

Our parents . . . greeted us in temper, saying, 'How awful you are.' They ignored, threatened, yelled at us . . . We echoed their point of view and thought, 'I am unworthy of love.' We took acceptance of their point of view a further step, and rather than see them as rejecting, turned their hurtful behavior into love. Scolding, forgetting, demeaning, aggrandizing, demanding--all their destructive ways were labeled love. . . We grow up to seek love from similar people. (p. 109)

As herself the daughter of narcissistic parents, and having treated many similarly wounded patients, Dr. Golomb is able to write with special clarity about the particular agonies of living with a parent who needs the child to do

everything the way that the parent does. Dr. Golomb lays bare the process whereby a child in this situation must abandon his or her own needs, feelings, and self.

It becomes automatic for the child to conform to the parent's viewpoint in order to avoid disapproval . . . The habit of agreeing with the parent becomes ingrained . . . Even a grown child . . . can still find herself abandoning her own perceptions and goals and joining the parent . . . Narcissists . . . methodically wipe out their children's attempts to develop their own perceptions. (pp. 35-37)

In one of the book's most wrenching chapters, Dr. Golomb describes a weekend visit to her father's winter home in Florida, to visit an aging aunt. Despite her best efforts to maintain a separate perspective during this visit, Dr. Golomb at this point in her own recovery is not able to escape her father's narcissistic domination:

My father spoke. Now we have the moment of the body snatchers, the moment when the daughter surrenders her personhood in order to become an acceptable extension of the all-knowing one . . . I had crossed my father, contradicting one of the laws of the narcissist, namely, 'I know what's best for you, even if it includes depriving you of your humanity and your human needs, including the right to know and make up your own mind.' (pp. 39-42)

The initial chapters in this book frame the dilemmas of the child of a narcissist, followed by case studies of her own, her patients', and her friends' efforts to survive emotionally in the face of narcissistic parents' demands. The final chapters of the book outline Dr. Golomb's view of the recovery process--of the painstaking work, usually requiring much personal psychotherapy, of building a self. She advocates group therapy as an important part of this process:

Where and how can we see ourselves at all? We need a reliable mirror in which to look, to be accepted as we are, to achieve a sense of being . . . Group therapy is often useful . . . Out of our terror, we learn to speak our minds. We start to feel our temper . . . We find that we have identities of our own . . . We learn that there is someone inside us .

. . . In group, you find out that you are not the only one with a hideous self-image that was put in place by endless parental demands for change. (pp. 220 & 245)

Seven weeks ago, Jordan Lee and I held the first meeting of our "Trapped in the Mirror" group. While many of the ten women in this group have had years of psychotherapy, for most if not all this is their first opportunity to sit and share deeply with others with whom they feel such resonance. As they listen to each other, at times the group members alternate between appreciation at hearing their own thoughts put into words by another, and anger that a member has had to endure such awful treatment. At last week's group session, one member spoke of feeling "inflamed" at another's story, while she still struggles to experience her own anger at how she herself was often dealt with. As this group continues, it is Jordan's and my hope that we can provide an environment for continuing to build a positive self. In Dr. Golomb's words,

To improve a self mangled by rejection and improper use, we have to experiment with being. We need situations in which to practice the reality of a self, places that reflect our dreams and fantasies, where we can behave in a way that shows who we really are and what we feel . . . We are like bonsai plants with prior years of confinements, suppression, and reshaping. What is our natural shape? It takes years to uncover, as we revert by degrees to growing. (pp. 186 & 148)

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