

A Tale of Two Narcissists

1 Oct, 2010

Though I hope I am well on my way to recovery, I have possessed certain narcissistic features since toddlerhood, when I thought all toys should be mine. As an adult, I fail to entertain grandiose fantasies of success, but certainly display the sensitivity to slights, the need for admiration, the ability to be arrogant, and the envy for others, particularly those with nicer cars than me. As part of my healing, a patient of mine, whom I shall call Carlos, so overshadows my narcissism that I have begun to wonder if I could be totally wrong in my self-diagnosis. Compared to Carlos, I am masochistic, self-defeating, and avoidant. Here are some stories of the dance we do together, the final episode of which gives new meaning to the idea of seeing beneath a grandiose façade.

In one of our sessions, out of desperation to bring his narcissistic features to his attention, I took out the DSM-IV-TR and reviewed the criteria with him. He announced with pride that he met all nine criteria. Attempting to provoke some emotion, I then described the Kleinian triad of narcissistic features: Triumph, contempt, and control. Smiling wildly, he laid claim to these characteristics as well.

When Carlos first entered psychotherapy with me, which was in September 2007, he idealized me in such a fashion that he seemed to create a mirror of himself in me. Of course, he needed to see me as fantastic so that he could be so elevated. He called me the best psychotherapist in Pasadena. Because of what I admitted in the first paragraph, I fleetingly wondered if maybe he was on to something. He later referred to me as an "intellectual giant," a description that propelled my ego into the heavens. The next day, with a touch of admirable timidity, I asked my lunch date, Diane Laughrun, PhD, if my patient's assessment of me could be true. She replied, with admirable kindness: "Certainly not." The swift shattering of my ego, although painful, ultimately helped me to see the power of Carlos' personality style.

As yet another example of my humbling, Carlos quit drinking alcohol and abusing drugs *after* abruptly terminating treatment when I was hospitalized for endocarditis. Smarting from an acute sense of abandonment, he had written: "I will never pass through your doors again." I smarted a little myself. Recently Carlos returned after a two-year absence and boasted of his healthier, happier lifestyle with which I'd had absolutely nothing to do. But within a few weeks it became apparent that he had simply switched addictions and was intensely pursuing body-building. He had read books on the subject by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno. He attended Gold's gym on a seven day per week basis, two hours or more per day, and indeed looked much more muscular than he had in the past. He advised me, with the absolute certitude that Jacques Lacan claims is indicative of psychosis, that he would become the next Mr. Universe.

One day several weeks ago, while dressed in a T-shirt and sweatpants, Carlos was again bragging about his body. Then, without warning, he quickly removed his shirt and pants, rendering himself completely naked except for his black underwear. Needless to say, this was the first time this had happened in my 31 years of practice, and I was somewhat at a loss as to how to respond. He stood across the room in

front of me and began to display poses characteristic of body builders. Just as the psychoanalysts would predict, I felt not only surprised by his behavior, but suddenly like a 99-pound weakling.

Fortunately—or unfortunately—my ego is resilient. I immediately noticed that, despite his otherwise muscular physique, Carlos sports more of a pot belly than I do, though in admirable humility I should warn would-be admirers that my abs fall well short of a classic six-pack.