Inside/Outside: Narcissism & Maturity Today

by Gerald Gargiulo

Jerry Gargiulo is a psychoanalyst practicing in New York City and in Pound Ridge. He is on the editorial board of The Psychoanalytic Review and writes a bi-monthly column on psychoanalytic technique for the N.P.A.P. "New and Reviews." He is also on the Board of Directors and faculty of the N.P.A.P. psychoanalytic institute.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" asked the beautiful but evil queen. And, of course, the queen probably was rather striking for the mirror to have answered back, so consistently, that it was she. Can any of us forget our delighted, yet fearful, apprehension when we read on and heard the queen's wrath at the mirror's answering back one day that the mantle of beauty had fallen from her to the lovely Snow White? We may presume, although the story does not mention it, that Snow White was actually the queen's daughter and, therefore, that the queen's competition with Snow White was what we would call, in today's psychological language, a narcissistic conflict. This type of conflict has its emotional roots in everyone's earliest childhood, and it can, consequently, unleash the most powerful of forces as, for example, in this fairy tale the queen's murderous wishes toward what she experienced as a threat to her self-worth.

The story goes on to detail these murderous plans in the queen's orders to the huntsman that he is to bring back Snow White's heart. And, luckily for us, since we identify with the lovely Snow White, she escapes this fate and lives with the seven dwarfs and, we might add, away from her mother's now murderous face.

I would like to try to translate some of the symbols from this deceptively simple fairy tale into contemporary psychological language. Myths and fairy tales touch us where our dreams are born. They are an important vehicle in man's quest to find out who he is. Unfortunately, it is only when we no longer understand that the task of life is to "know thyself" that we can believe these myths and fairy tales are just for children. If we could understand their lessons, we might have less generational distance, and perhaps a bit more
A narcissistic conflict in death between the generations. The mirror, the looking glass, and, of course, the ever-present "impeccable reflection," all can be symbolic of man's psychological need to see himself reflected back to him. This need, we know today, is imprinted in our earliest childhood when the first "mirror" that we looked into was our mother's face. An depending on how that face responds back to the child will he or she emotionally see himself as lovable and beautiful, or the opposite of these, as ugly and empty with some dead weight inside. We know today that a consistently caring, respecting and, even very early in the child's life, idealizing parent is necessary for a child to build up an emotional experience and image of himself as lovable. For those as lovable has had a "good enough"mothering environment, an environment which saw the child as beautiful for his/her own sake, then for such a person how others see him, in later life, becomes less important in maintaining self-worth. For those who are unsure of their self-worth, however, of their good insideness, whose mothering environment was perhaps emotionally distracted or unresponsive, for such persons their only defense, frequently, is to desperately cling to outer appearances, to find themselves mirrored in the acclaim of others -- telling them repeatedly how beautiful, or smart, or virtuous they are, while inside they feel empty and needy. In other cases, they may have to tell themselves how they really need no one, how they are totally self-sufficient. If we look beneath the surface, however, we can see the same themes here we have just alluded to. Now in our story, in order to appreciate Snow White's situation, we have to understand that her mother is clearly emotionally in doubt about whether she is lovable or beautiful at all. The tragedy of the queen's conflict is seen clearly in that she is unable to recognize and love the beauty around her, because she must so desperately dedicate her life to covering up any emptiness inside her with outside accolades.

In this story the narcissistic conflict which the queen has with Snow White expresses itself negatively, namely, in the queen's jealousy and murderous wishes. All parents, however, experience some narcissistic conflicts regarding their children; on occasion fathers are jealous of their sons and mothers of their daughters. A parent can either pretend that such feelings don't exist, a dangerous experiment, or be aware of them and then, consequently, avoid acting on any momentary impulses. The story, we can recognize, could have had a different content, with the same psychological mechanisms at work. The queen, for example, might have given Snow White all the toys, or beautiful clothes, or vacations which she wanted and, for all that, not experience that there was another person there at all. In this situation, the queen would be using Snow White as a narcissistic extension of herself instead of being in a narcissistic conflict with her.

Only when we feel lovable can we relate to others, can we respect them, can we care for them; only if we have been cared for can we care for the world and others around us. Freud, in his essay "On Narcissism" reminds us that we make the world real, emotionally, by loving it. Implicit in that is the fact that we make ourselves real by loving, by going outside of ourselves. There really is, in terms of psychological maturity, little difference between caring for ourselves and caring for the world; only two different vantage points. Erik Erikson speaks about the developmental goal of the human life cycle as the achievement of wisdom, and he defines that as the capacity to hand on to the oncoming generation all that we have learned of life, while recognizing the relativity of such truths.

The evil queen was not able to give wisdom to Snow White; consequently, all she could experience was des-
pair and murderous rage that life was moving on and that the ugliness that she unconsciously feared about herself might come to be. Not being able to feel herself as loved, she could not get outside herself; consequently, she dies, ignominiously, by falling into a ditch — with no one there. The fate of the narcissistic is to be irrelevant. And, yet, one cannot simply "blame" the queen; for until parents achieve a level of loving respect and caring, another word for boundaries, for their children, narcissism will go on from generation to generation.

Copyright Gerald J. Gargiulo 1979