

## **Guestwords: Caring for Oneself/Caring for the World**

**Gerald J. Gargiulo**

*Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?* asked the beautiful but evil queen. Actually the queen must have been very attractive for the mirror to answer, so consistently, that it was she. Can any of us forget the apprehension we felt when we read on and heard the queen's wrath at the mirror's reply that the mantle of beauty had fallen from her to the lovely Snow White?

Myths and fairy tales touch us where our dreams are born. We relegate their importance to children only if we no longer experience that knowing oneself is one of the rewards of life. So we can ask: what does this childhood tale tell us about the human condition? It describes the most pervasive of human foibles, that is, the human predilection for narcissistic specialness. Narcissistic specialness, unfortunately, has no natural release, no morning after awareness, so to speak. The fairytale relates the queen's narcissistic rage, her murderous wishes toward Snow White, whom she experiences as a threat to her self-worth. Upon hearing the mirror's reply she orders a huntsman to abduct Snow White, kill her, and bring Snow White's heart

back to her. Snow White, the innocent child in all of us, escapes such a fate and lives with the seven dwarfs, away from the queen's murderous face. In various versions of this tale, Snow White is sometimes the stepdaughter of the queen; in others, she is her biological daughter.

Why is the queen so captivated by mirrors? Why, in the Greek myth of Narcissus, is he enchanted by his image in a limpid poolside? This psychological need has its roots in our earliest childhood, when the first "mirror" that we looked into was our mother's face. Depending on how that face responded to us, we experienced ourselves as lovable and beautiful, or as ugly and empty. A consistently caring parent is necessary for a child to build an image of himself or herself as lovable. If a child has an experience of a mothering or fathering environment that responds to him or her as beautiful, then how others respond in later life becomes less important in experiencing one's self-worth.

An emotionally unresponsive environment, alternately, mirrors back a child's own fears of emptiness, resulting in the all-too-common feeling that he or she is being tolerated rather than celebrated. This is sometimes manifested in an adult who is quietly, reclusively living his or her life, hiding from the view of others. Sometimes, seemingly paradoxically, it results in individuals like the queen – ever hungry for constant praise,

intolerant of different opinions, excessively committed to outside appearance and approval. The fear that one is not lovable for oneself, that an inner emptiness will show itself to the world, propels such type of behaviour in a continuous self-alienating cycle. Behind such a facade there lurks, all too often, the deepest rage, as this myth depicts, as well as an unrecognized and unnameable sorrow.

Returning to Snow White's experiences we can conclude that the queen had deep emotional doubts about whether she was lovable or beautiful at all, therefore her constant recourse to the mirror. The tragedy of her conflict is that she is unable to recognize and love the beauty around her (i.e., Snow White); she desperately dedicates her life to covering up an inner emptiness by outside accolades. The conflict experienced with Snow White expresses itself negatively, namely, in the queen's jealousy and murderous wishes. Myth and fairy tale often present thoughts or feelings as conscious which, in reality, most people keep unconscious: for example, competitive or hostile feelings toward one's children, even though there are obvious and true feelings of love toward one's children. Parents do experience conflicts with their children; on occasion fathers are jealous of their sons and mothers of their daughters. A parent can either pretend that such feelings do not exist –

a dangerous course to follow – or be aware of them and avoid acting on them.

The story could have had different content, with the same psychological mechanism at work. The queen, for example, might have given Snow White all the material things she wanted and still have experienced her as no more than another object attesting to her own importance and power. In such situations, the queen would be using Snow White as a narcissistic extension of herself instead of being in an overt conflict with her. (The familiar refrain is often heard when a parent boasts that one's child will *get everything* they did not. One wonders, in such instances, if the child's needs are being met at all.)

Only when we feel lovable can we relate to others, respect them, and care for them. Only if we have been cared for can we care for the world. The Indian poet Tagore said it beautifully when he wrote that *we live in the world when we love it*. Implicit in this thought is the awareness that we make ourselves real, that is, feel alive, by loving, by going outside of ourselves. The world is not meant to be a mirror to our specialness but a playground for mutual growth and experiences. Erik Erikson speaks about the goal of human life as the achievement of wisdom, which he defines as the capacity

to give to the oncoming generation all that one has learned of life, while also recognizing the relativity of one's truths.

The evil queen was not able to give any wisdom to Snow White. All she experienced was despair and a murderous rage that life was moving on and that the ugliness and emptiness she unconsciously feared about herself might be true. Not being able to feel herself as loved, she could not get outside herself. She died, consequently, ignominiously, by falling into a ditch – with no one there. The fate of the narcissist is to be irrelevant.