The Children's Hour

IN THE BEGINNING

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A Life in Child Psychiatry

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In the Beginning

For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

-W.H. Auden

Hal, a thirteen-year-old boy, was referred to me by his mother, who was concerned about his constant, increasing misery. He was perpetually griping: nothing was right, nothing fit, everyone mistreated him. He quickly alienated friends. "Unfair" was Hal's motto; his eyes were fixed upon the empty hole in the donut. Both mother and son appeared pale, underfed and rumpled. Hal's clothes were not quite clean and worn slightly askew. His blond hair was long, rarely cut and never combed. His blue eyes were somehow tired and lackluster. Mother seemed long-suffering and inwardly bitter, her petite, almost emaciated body a siren of silent but reproachful pain. In her interactions with her son she often appeared lifeless, glancing off his efforts to make contact. Hal's appealing features were usually suffused with a scowl, and he entered life, as well as my office, like nobility manqué, with an angry, arrogant litany of complaints: there was nothing to play with; the office was ugly and too hot, cold, or stuffy; I was boring, unable to understand his distress and wasting his time for the sake of his mother's money. His repeated question: "What can you do for me?" If life failed to change, and, of course, it could not do so to suit his terms, he would rather die, a fate he often and seriously considered in contemplating the empty shelves of his inner world.

A little of Hal went a long way with me. Children like him deplete one's stores. Despite all my good training, Hal tested my patience and altruism. I began to dread the times of our appointments, knowing that I could never satisfy his appetites, knowing that he would devalue my efforts, my usefulness, my adequacy. I became easily fed up with him. Had he been my own son, he would have felt my wrath long before this. At times my anger obscured the realization that he was showing me his world—a gaping mouth that turned every home- cooked meal into too little too late. From Hal, and many others in my work, I learned that there is more than one route to being special: one can be uniquely good or uniquely terrible, ugly, stupid—or under-served. Both poles are singular and serve a similar need to stand apart

from all others, whatever the price (including death). The flip side of masochism is not sadism but narcissism.

In the beginning was not the word, only the speechless, raucous, self-centered self. Human character, to the extent there is one at the outset of life, shares its charm with more ugly sides. Infancy is dominated by greed, envy, voracious and immediate demands and murderous rage at frustration. All of these insatiable appetites rest precariously on the unswerving demand to be at the center of the universe, to be the only one. An infant's egocentrism is uncompromising. In the earliest months and years of life, not three but two is a crowd, and to the extent the outside world exists it does so to serve, promptly and precisely, the innate, inborn desire to be the one and only. More than many symptoms or syndromes, the gravitational pull of narcissism, insistent and resistant to change since it is both powerful and painless to its owner, serves as the underpinning of much unhappiness in childhood and later life. As a guide to one's future it is arrogant, impatient, rigid, omniscient, ignorant and unreliable. In a *New Yorker* cartoon an attractive couple is seated on a park bench, the man gazing at his reflection in an adjacent pond. His distraught partner asks, "Narcissus, is there someone else?" Narcissus, his youth and good looks notwithstanding, made big trouble for himself, ultimately drowning in his own reflected image as he indulged in its beauty. The lethality of this story line is in fact quite accurate. Gavin, an adult patient of mine, could only have sexual intercourse while looking at himself in the mirror. His intimate partner was himself, and while that was safe in one way, it left him totally alone. Despite several years of therapy, his growing sense of futility about change drove him ultimately to suicide. Suicide is one of the risks in this profession. I was aware of the depth of his despair, but there are times when the helper is helpless. His death continues to weigh on me—I wonder if there were ways by which I could have kept Gavin alive.

In most of us, the enduring demand to be the only one is grudgingly, reluctantly relinquished during the passage through childhood into adult life, in varying degrees traded in so that friendships, love and self-respect may play parts in our lives. In some, however, as can often be predicted by their childhood behavior, the habits of Narcissus persist, organizing the personality more or less exclusively around self-interest, a sense of entitlement, rage, vulnerability to depression with suicidal and/or homicidal impulses and an inability to put one's self in another's shoes. Narcissistic children, Hal among them, act "special" but suffer frequent and often total collapse of their brittle self-esteem. They lack self-respect and experience an excess of shame, sensing their own fragility of self. Their identity teeters

uneasily, a rickety house of cards. The sturdiness and intactness of this shaky structure depend almost entirely upon validation of worth from the outside world: without applause the show is a flop. Narcissistic children, like Hal, see themselves as treated unjustly by the world and tend to blame others for all of their misfortune, unable to see their part in determining the indignities they regularly suffer. One of my patients, an eighteen-year-old youth suffering his first episode of schizophrenia, put it poetically: "My eyes are turned inward." Many years later I understood that this was not an anatomical delusion but an accurate description of his consuming preoccupation with himself.

The narcissistic core wears many masks that may disguise its true colors: altruism, habitual self-denial, eating disorders, self-injurious behavior such as cutting, alcohol and/or drug abuse, and overtly psychotic phenomena reflecting a superabundance of narcissistic basalt, volcanic in origin, diamond-hard after cooling. Dana, a disarmingly mild and beautiful eight-year- old girl I saw in consultation, was plagued by morbid fears of what might befall her newborn and less than welcome brother, so much so that she hurried home after school, relinquishing friends and favorite activities, to stand guard at the door of her new sibling's nursery, protecting him from danger and lurking evil. Dana, unlike Gavin, was a sturdy youngster but, underneath all her outwardly altruistic behavior, she struggled to remain sole proprietor of her parents' love.

Her apparent devotion, her new job description as security guard, was protecting her from her own envious fury. "Who," I asked, "would think of harming an innocent baby?" She shrugged. Encouraged, I tried a monologue: "Newborns are a pain; they keep you up at night and take up a mother's time. Most kids want to send them right back." She nodded vigorously, concurring. "It doesn't feel right to feel that way when everyone is oohing and aahing; it feels mean and nasty, but that's some of what all big sisters or brothers feel." Dana moved from my monologue to our dialogue. Thereafter, she and I determined that the evils were internal and the risks minimal. Anyone, we agreed, who says he or she wants to stop being the only one is fibbing big-time. She relieved herself of guard duty as she came to better accept the inevitability of murderous rivalry and her need to be the admired big sister, the one and only apple of her parents' eyes.

The origins of narcissistic difficulties in childhood are complex; they seem in part related to deprivation of sensible, empathic parenting, though as yet undocumented genetic and constitutional

contributions must also exist. To mature with a healthy, necessary, and adaptive selfishness one needs to be parented with empathic hands that both give and take away, gratify and frustrate in the proper balance at the right times. Whether the infant-toddler's wishes and demands are granted immediately by parents who experience them as commands, are denied as if unreasonable, or are unheard, the end result can be a narcissistic child who feels entitled and/or unloved, unrecognized, uncertain of competence, dependent upon external affirmation while preoccupied with self to the exclusion of the surrounding world.

Spoiling is a well-chosen, often prophetic metaphor. The child who suffers an excessive diet of indulgence and the unwarranted praise of psychological grade inflation, experiences, often permanently, wilting of the self's capacities for joy or contentment in a flawed world in which "...the imperfect is our paradise (Wallace Stevens)." Marla, a respected attorney, whom I saw for three years, with limited success, visualized a recurrent fantasy of a childhood birthday cake covered with green snot, her own. This brutal, accurate, nihilistic representation of her habitual need to devalue good times, good moods, good relationships and life accomplishments was a metaphor that fueled the more unhappy aspects of her life. "Who needs a baker like that?" I asked; "He would never pass muster with the Health Department and have a lot of sick, unhappy customers." She was not amused. Under the frosting, out of sight, was the working principle that "if I don't have everything, neither I nor anyone else will have anything." Buried even deeper lay the concern that, in an instant, "all I have can be lost." Marla and Hal took pages from the same book, though she, unlike Hal, never got beyond the Table of Contents.

Hal's pervasive sense of entitlement and grandiose expectations seemed to have their origins early in his life. His father, a charismatic alcoholic, abandoned the family shortly after his son's birth, leaving his already vulnerable mother clinically depressed and overwhelmed with the prospect of parenting alone and unloved. While devoted to Hal, she mothered him from afar, seeing him through a kind of haze. Having him as her only sustenance in life, she was loath to deny his wishes for fear he would turn on her. I had two victims for the price of one. I agreed to work with her son, meeting weekly with him and regularly with her. Taking on narcissism is hard labor; Hal was not an easy read for his mother, his peers or me.

At the outset of our therapy I experienced a brief honeymoon before Hal discovered that I was

mortal. Coming in late for an appointment, I apologized to no avail: "Hal, I'm sorry, but I'm half an hour late; we can make it up next week." Silence, an angry glare and "You made me sit here. I've got better things to do than sit around waiting for this stupid meeting. I should have left, you should have called, you suck!" "Well," I said, "I hate waiting, too. It makes me feel like no one cares, and that's how you feel most of the time. But everybody needs room for things that come up, like for me today." Hal would have none of it: "You really do suck." Over the months of our weekly contact we experienced mounting frustration and despair, he with life, me with him. Hal's script in our sessions was repetitive, designed to fend off my patient suggestions by reducing them to rubble and me to helpless spectator of his demolition mode. My efforts to point out to him the connection between his insatiable wishes for everything and inevitable depression were met with scorn. My wondering if he missed having a father or a more responsive mother went unacknowledged. Helping him see that his need to "have it his way" put off friends, of whom there were few, fell upon deaf ears. To share, to consider the wishes of another was to lose his birthright. He seemed determined to retain his just due regardless of the cost. Coaching his mother in meeting his demands less agreeably was futile.

Freud opined that the sea was a symbol for mothers. Hal's one love was sailing and the ocean, about which he knew and taught me a good deal. At the time of his fourteenth birthday, having finally found a passion through which I might reach him, I wrapped and presented Hal with a small, beautiful replica of a sailing ship. It was opened hurriedly, without eye contact or enthusiasm, not acknowledged and abandoned or forgotten in a corner of my office as if it had never existed. My hurt and anger were hard to contain. When I remarked to Hal that my hurt feelings, which I shared with him, might mirror his own sense of being a devalued gift, a treasure thrown away, I was met with his usual derision.

Narcissism's vise-like grip is maddening to the therapist, fascinating as well, since its centrifugal determination to maintain itself flies in the face of logic, well-being and even life itself. A passage from J.M. Coetzee's annals of his own boyhood captures the essence of Hal's dilemma: ". . . he is still a baby . . . he tries to imagine his death . . . he tries to imagine the days wheeling around their course without him. But he cannot. Always there is something left behind, something small and black- dry, ashy, hard, incapable of growth but there. He can imagine himself dying but not disappearing . . . nothing can touch you, there is nothing you are not capable of. Those are the two things about him, two things that are really one thing, the thing that is right about him and the thing that is wrong about him at the same time. This

thing that is two things means he will not die, no matter what; but does it not also mean he will not live? He is a baby . . . his mother holds him up before her [and] everything turns to stone and shatters . . . he is just a baby with a big belly and a lolling head, but he possesses this power." These are the maladaptive reaches of narcissism, its protective functions, its immutability, grandiosity, immortality, isolation and omnipotent, destructive fury. Clearly, so burdened, one cannot hope to live, love or find repose, forever dwelling in an Eden overrun with weeds. Yet for Hal, or any child burdened in this way, to leave this garden is to be stripped of one's only armor against a worse fate: to face an alien world stark naked—not indispensable but irrelevant, tiny and helpless, unimportant, unlovable, alone.

I have always loved geology. It studies the developmental history of earth. In my office are many rocks, crystals and fossils. Children are drawn to them. Road cuts of the earth's crust provide useful metaphors to students of childhood, with their lines of varying formations continuous, thick or thin, warped or straight, sometimes fractured and always of many, often beautiful colors. Such are the developmental lines of children as they move through life into adulthood. Continuity, interruptions, delays or, sometimes, arrest are evident. There is a time, somewhere between childhood and adult life, when the soft, malleable sediments of sandstone may metamorphose into impenetrable granite, when previously pliant traits may petrify into rigidities of character. I was concerned that Hal had reached that time and place.

His summer vacation interrupted sessions with me for some weeks. He spent this time in a beach home that he was fond of close to waters that he sailed. But as is sometimes the case in New England, this particular summer was unusually rainy, windy and cold, a risk well known and accepted by vacationers on Cape Cod and the Islands. Over those gray weeks Hal became increasingly depressed and intractably surly, at times telling his worried mother that he would welcome death's oblivion to escape his fate (the bad weather). In my office he greeted me with sullen reports of a sullied summer, both within and without: he expressed fury at the sun for not shining as he expected, a cosmic indignity that seemed central to his clinical depression and its nihilistic ruminations. Would any weather, any world, satisfy such an insatiable appetite I wondered out loud with Hal: "Where did you get the idea that the sun should shine for you? Not even the weathermen on Channel Seven can swing that one; wow, that's a humdinger!" His eyes met mine but he did not acknowledge my query. He took pencil and pad in hand, beginning to draw with intense concentration for some fifteen or twenty minutes.

The end product of his sketch was a ship, in fact a houseboat with one large room. The perimeter was lined with sumptuous goose-down pillows while the central space was configured as a gym with post and hoop at one end. At the other end of the room was a McDonald's snack bar that, Hal explained, was open twenty-four hours a day to serve the wishes of its sole customer. There were no human occupants, no one to interfere with his whims, no crew to navigate. Here was Hal's Twentieth Century version of the paradise he had lost. The sea was still, the sun eternally fixed at high noon in a cloudless sky. Here a boy need have no wants, no ungratified longings, none of the disappointments of life to cloud his view. Here was both cure and disease. He smiled when his work was completed. In some therapeutic efforts with children there are instances when, somehow, things come together, integrate or converge so that, however briefly, a window opens in a previously boarded up residence—a child trusts, approaches. This drawing brought me a visceral epiphany. The eagle had landed smack in the center of Hal's Garden of Eden.

I scanned his drawing intently and smiled in return. "This," I said quietly, "is what you want life to be, how the summer should have been." Hal's eyes filled with tears and he wept, convulsively, for some minutes, flooded with what seemed a great grief. In staccato fashion he offered for the first time his perception that his mother had never loved him, wished he had never been born, was a make-believe parent. He hated her empty gestures of affection; he hated her for what she was, and, more deeply, for what she was not. And he yearned for his father, idealized in his absence, who had stomached enough of both mother and son to disappear from view, an imagined rescue ship that saw neither shipwreck nor lifeboat before fading over the horizon. Through this catharsis Hal had moved from the generalities of his malaise to the specifics, however distorted, of his life. Just as a surgeon cannot treat abdominal pain without seeing the size, shape and condition of the belly's contents, I had needed Hal to openly acknowledge the realities of his life, past and present, to me and more importantly to himself. Now we could begin.

He had let go of something. His mother immediately sensed a greater openness and availability in her son and responded to it with more empathy than before. She felt valued and could, in turn, reciprocate. For the first time Hal was ready to ask and she could answer, replay and correct his missing father's narrative, reducing it to scale.

I sometimes let others do my work for me. I gave Hal a copy of an Isaac B. Singer short story, "A Fool's Paradise." In this wonderful parable a young man, about to marry, falls ill with a strange illness. No one can help until a Rabbi from afar, wise in the ways of the world, puts the young man to bed, dresses the servants as angels, and tells him he is dead and in Paradise where the wonderful menu is unchanging and his bed rest unrelieved. Soon he tires of this perfect, suffocating existence and returns to life, accepting if not embracing its imperfections and blessings. Hal read but offered no criticism on this tale. With me, however, he indicated that he was now better able to accept his mother's manner as the best she could manage. He saw that he could make her a better parent with his own behavior and that her deficiencies were hers rather than a response to his failings. He became more flexible with others and made a friend. His mood lightened. These modest shifts took many more months of work and did not excise the narcissistic core of Hal. But like the sea glass on Cape Cod, its sharp edges were rounded, less harsh, less likely to do harm.

Wise and experienced clinicians know that the capacity to be helpful to a child increases when one relinquishes the illusion of cure. I was helpful to Hal, though the ballast of his narcissism remained. Such modest successes are often all one can hope for. I am passionate about baseball and, as many of my patients know, often use its vicissitudes to bring perspective to children preoccupied with narcissistic perfection. I love to say that the very best hitters are out two thirds of the time and that in this game of life, the glorious grand slam is rare. Wee Willie Keeler, a tiny Hall of Famer, got there by "hittin 'em where they ain't." The inglorious bunt, well executed, sacrifices the batter for the team and brings the runner into scoring position, increasing his odds of coming home. In clinical efforts with children it is the bunt that matters. Up against narcissism there are no grand slams. And more often than not, one strikes out. I struck out with Larry.

Larry, some six years Hal's senior, lost his adoring mother at five years of age. This short, pudgy, intimidating, self-important young man was filled with dread. On an August Sunday in Hartford, his car stalled on Interstate 84 amidst back-to-back traffic. Standing on the center strip, cars streaming by, he suddenly felt totally alone, lost and convinced that no one could see him, no one would help him. He could barely contain the urge to leave this psychological Devil's Island by running into traffic and ending his torment, while at the same time dramatically punishing the negligent, uncaring passers-by, forcing them to witness his bloody demise. This was the ugly, drastic, dangerous work of Larry's narcissism and

its trailer, the dread of abandonment. While his car was repairable, the faulty design of his psychological engine was not. Larry's entitlement was impenetrable, a barnacle-encrusted vessel hardened by the passage of years. The most we could manage was to make him more aware of his vulnerabilities, his extreme rejection-sensitivity, his blindness to others' needs, his own unreasonable neediness and the distorted rage that all of these might prompt in him.

To modify any aspects of narcissism in clinical work is a disappointing, Herculean task. Consider that Ebenezer Scrooge's therapists, the spirits of Christmas past, present and to come, were driven to show him Death itself, his own and Tiny Tim's, to gain his attention. It has always seemed to me that the brief sojourn of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden accurately parallels the amount of time each of us can legitimately spend, if we are reasonably lucky, in the normally egocentric phases of infancy and early childhood. Thereafter, the capacity to accept the vagaries of life on its own terms becomes an essential tool in coping with the sometimes bitter apples, the frustrations, disappointments and losses that are regularly and randomly handed out to us. The child who wants to remain in Paradise, or looks back upon it with longing, remains psychologically crippled: obsessed with being the one and only, mistaking heaven, so to speak, for the hell that it is. A wise colleague once commented that it takes children the longest time to want what they need: less, not more; something, but not everything. The grass, in Eden, is always browner.