

Eros And The Shattering Gaze: Transcending Narcissism
by Ken Kimmel

A review

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Seldom do I feel compelled to write a review, much less actively promote a new book, on an old subject like Narcissism. So why now? And why this book?

Ken Kimmel is a Jungian analyst who has been in private practice here in Seattle for over thirty years. In *Eros And The Shattering Gaze*, Ken manages to provide, not only the cultural and historical context for viewing the trajectory of erotic love gone wrong, but through clinical vignettes and the use of contemporary film, he also offers current insight into the motivation and dynamics of male infidelity and the lesson so often learned the hard way: the hot fire of new passion burns out, leaving only ashes.

Ken begins this book with a retelling of the myth of Venus, Eros, and Psyche, thus setting the stage for his later assertion that the distortions and idealizations of misguided erotic love in the adult is grounded in the earliest attachment and dynamics with the mother. Whether it is the enactment of a relationship in which the boy is mother's "little prince," the invited replacement for a weak father, or the designated savior for an empty or depressed mother, the narcissistic male unknowingly replicates a pathologic early relationship. His wish for merger, control, or adoration blinds the infatuated man—not only to the less than angelic qualities of his new love interest, but also to the timeless wisdom of family and community: "When the ego is inflated and unconscious, the violent power of the Self can have a malignant effect upon it" (217). Affairs almost never end well. Some things risked are lost—forever.

And there is more in the book. Much more. Turning from the cultural and mythological record of tragic love, Ken turns his attention to the

exploration of its healthy manifestation. “The Capacity To Love” (Chapter 11) is, for me, the most satisfying chapter of the book. Drawing on the work of Levinas, Ken invites the reader to take in the “face” of the Other. To look into the face, the soul, of the other and claim it as the reader’s own—this, according to Levinas, is the true measure of love. To refuse to take in that face in all its frailty and vulnerability and to betray it instead, is to annihilate the other—but to experience *The Shattering Gaze*:

. . . an opportune moment in time may arise when a man is suddenly awakened and dislodged from his narcissism, perhaps by some unforeseen tragedy or trauma, perhaps by the stark, unbearable truth of the harm he has done in his life, a truth that—this time—he cannot escape. Sometimes the encounter is not so shattering but takes instead the form of a slow erosion of the false self, as in the analytic encounter. But in every case, he stands revealed before the gaze of the Other, glimpsed in the faces of those most naked, whose vulnerability stirs his torment and responsibility for them. His false self falls away, useless, as he feels the shame of his own violence” (261).

Whereas some books on Narcissism become bogged down in theory, others confine their attention to pathology. *Eros and The Shattering Gaze* is different—and refreshingly so. It offers insight—not only to the dark side of love relationships—but also provides a glimpse of what healthy love requires—and how it can be achieved.

I hope that, by now, it is obvious why I wanted to review this book. For me, it ranks among the most useful pieces ever written on Narcissism and the Male Ego. I invite you to give it your undivided attention and to commend it to your colleagues and friends.

Dr Knight was the Founding President for the Center for Object Relations in 1992 and has been recently re-elected to serve again as President to fill an un-expired term. He also served as President for two terms with the Northwest Alliance for Psychoanalytic study. He is a Clinical Psychologist in private practice in Seattle.