

Opening the Unseen Heart

Book Review of Kenneth A. Kimmel's *Eros and the Shattering Gaze: Transcending Narcissism*. Fisher King Press, 2011

By Elizabeth Clark-Stern, copyright October, 2011

What a feast for the mind, to encounter Kenneth Kimmel's timely book. I was in the airport this past May, and saw the cover of Newsweek. A quite innocent-looking baby pig stared out at the camera. The title: What Makes Men Act Like Pigs. I bought the issue, and kicked myself when the contents provided no substantive analysis. I was hungry for an exploration beyond a re-cap of the public behaviors of famous men. I also wanted a narrative that offered a larger vision of the historic human malady of the narcissistic male.

Eros and the Shattering Gaze is that book. Kimmel takes us on a sumptuous journey, using the vibrant medium of myth, movies, clinical vignettes, and contemporary portraits of such luminaries as Carl Jung and Bill Clinton, both of whom struggled with their own narcissism. Down, down we go into the shattered self that begins at the doorstep of the wounded mother-son relationship.

And yet, this is no linear Oedipal tale. The beauty of Kimmel's approach is its multi-dimensionality. I found myself reading the book as if entering a series of caves or tunnels connecting to vitally diverse castles, shaman's huts, or suburban houses above ground. Just as I thought I had come upon a "definitive" theory, a new chamber would open, and an unconsidered perspective enriched all that had gone before.

Kimmel does give us candles, even brilliant flood lamps, to light our way. He achieves true innovation in mirroring the

diverse theories of Carl Jung and Jewish French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. This gives us a new way to interpret the ancient, destructive mother complex, and see how this plays out in the development of the under-seen male.

As I descended deeper in the journey, I realized how profoundly I was relating to this material, not only as a scholar or psychotherapist, but as a woman. How mystifying it is, for so many of my sex, to encounter the withdrawn heart, depression, and dependency of the narcissistic male, so often wrapped in such a charming, intelligent, and charismatic package. The narrative peels away the initial reflection, “what was wrong with him?” revealing to the female reader, “What was wrong with me that I chose such a man?”

For women whose choices of a wounded narcissist lodge in the past, this journey is a revelation of the bones of that choice that undoubtedly resonates in the present. For women currently in a relationship with a man who is harming her, neglecting her, shaming her, or betraying her, ***Eros and the Shattering Gaze*** is an invaluable tool for seeing that the remedy lies not in the man, or in the stars, but in ourselves.

What allows the reader to gaze deeply into the mirror of her own soul? I credit Kimmel’s ability as a storyteller. How could I, as a woman, not identify with Psyche, mortal heroine who falls victim to the mother complex acted out at her expense between Eros and his mother, Aphrodite. The labors of Psyche correspond to the efforts of both men and women to complete the impossible task, to please Mother and earn the way to true love.

Kimmel explores the complexity and paradox of the search for other, offering diverse interpretations, from Nietzsche’s “tragic man”, to his own interpretation of the story of Jacob. I was most relieved to read the latter. In Kimmel’s model, the rigidity of narcissism must be shattered for the opening of the heart to true, un-idealized love, to follow. This can be a major event, such as the public

humiliation experienced by a Strauss-Kahn, a heart attack, as with Jung and Bill Clinton, or the more gradual eggshell crack of analysis.

With the shattering comes an awakening to the true messiness and unpredictability of life and love. Nietzsche's tragic man is the one who steps forward to build his sand castle of imperfect human love, knowing that the tidal wave of change and loss is inevitable. Levinas goes further to describe that once the delusions of narcissism are exposed, the man can find his worth, not in making everyone around him the Same, but in celebrating the other and placing them before himself.

This last phrase, "placing the other before self" took me aback. As a therapist I often support women in reclaiming a shattered self that was sacrificed to a projected all-powerful other. How could Levinas advise either partner in a relationship to put the other above the self?

Happily, as soon as I felt my torch waiver, Kimmel offers illumination in the story of Jacob. In the book of Genesis, Jacob has come to Canaan to make peace with his brother. He is afraid his brother will kill him the next day for a great wrong Jacob did to him twenty years ago. That night he camps alone, and is ambushed by a powerful stranger, either an angel or a devil. What brilliance that the fable allows for reality of both! Wrestling with, and asserting oneself with the Shadow (the split-off negative aspect of our character) is the necessary enemy we all need to struggle with hand-to hand, for integration of the soul. At dawn, after a full night of wrestling, Jacob is blessed by the angel. He must become whole before he can kneel before his estranged brother and say, "I am here." As so it is in the relations of romantic love. For men, and for women, once we deeply embrace our imperfect completeness, there is no loss of self in this surrender.

Is this not what we all long for, to kneel before a compassionate beloved and say, "I am here."?

How tempted I am to send a copy of ***Eros*** to Andrew Weiner, John Edwards, and all the rest. Copies should be placed in the foyer of every office in Washington D.C., and in the tribal headquarters of those African chiefs with so many wives. Narcissism, in all of its subtle and destructive forms, expresses the wounding of the ages. Surely, if the powerful could do the hard, comprehensive work required for wholeness, there would be no need for an enemy, in the form of a negative mother figure, or a mother country so different from our own.

Eros and the Shattering Gaze provides a welcome road map for men and women on the journey to the whole: a pearl tossed gracefully onto the violent shallows of our time.

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