Raising Narcissus

Lowell Monke

Not long ago, I began teaching a college course on social media by asking my students to consider the old adage, "To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail." I then offered variations on the original adage and asked them to finish the sentence using other tools—a camera, a book, a computer. When we got to: "To a teenager with a cellphone…" it was not surprising that the students, all in their freshman year, began with a variety of affectionate responses. But when one student stated that she felt "naked without it," the tone changed. And when another stated that it often made him feel like he was in a "portable prison," what followed was a torrent of frustrations, even exhaustion, with the constant demands flowing through these extensions of their social selves. When I asked how often they shut the phones off, most admitted that outside of class they never turned off their devices. They couldn't pull away from them out of fear that their social lives—even their friendships—might wither and die.

As in the case with earlier technological innovations, the reaction by older generations to social media has been the typical confused mix of awe at the skill displayed by their offspring and fretful worry that their brains are turning to jello. Parents worry about online bullying; teachers complain that texting erodes writing skills (even as they and other role models do it themselves—often eroding their driving skills). We all get annoyed that young people seem to prefer to speak with someone who isn't present.

These types of common complaints have merit. But as my students' comments suggest, it is important to dig deeper. New technologies are generally shy about revealing their long-term influences on culture. Their greatest impacts tend to come through gradually rearranging all of our relationships. Who would have thought at the beginning of the 20th century that the internal combustion engine, for example, would so rearrange relationships in our physical environment that our entire planet would begin heating up. The most crucial question we need to address in thinking about social media is how they might be heating up the cultural environment. The answer to that question will go a long way toward helping us understand why social media has the kind of influence it does over young people's lives, why their relationship to it seems out of proportion with the rest of their lives.

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Ironically, a good place to start this investigation might be with MTV, the TV channel devoted to feeding, and exploiting, the cultural appetites of American youth, and now of the youth worldwide. To that end, the channel employs experts on youth culture to get inside the heads of their consumers. Occasionally they let slip what they find.

In 2007, for example, Judy McGrath, then CEO of the channel, stated that youth would flock to its new online social games because ''MTV speaks uniquely to a group of people who are endlessly fascinated with watching themselves.''[1]

One need not be an expert in Greek mythology for this comment to evoke the image of young Narcissus, sitting at the edge of a pond, transfixed by his own image. Nor must one be young to be aware that one of MTV's own most popular shows in the last decade, *Jersey Shore*,

serves as exhibit A in the rash of a "reality" programming that follows the lives of young narcissists.

There is plenty of evidence that narcissism is heating up in our culture. The number of diagnoses of the severe pathological Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) has doubled in the last decade.[2] More importantly, there is evidence of a substantial rise in narcissistic traits in the general population. A review of the research on narcissism conducted by psychologists Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell indicates that "narcissistic personality traits rose just as fast as obesity from the 1980s to the present."[3]

It is this unprecedented increase in narcissistic tendencies across the entire population that is cause for concern and should push us past the trivializing pop-culture notion of narcissism as simply being in love with oneself. Vanity, self-promotion, and self-absorption, traits easily linked to self-love, are certainly typical features of narcissism. But so too are callous manipulation and use of others, difficulty in forming close relationships, a sense of entitlement, and aggression in response to criticism.[4]

It is important to note that these traits are not something that one either has or doesn't have. Narcissistic traits tend to expand and then recede in everyone, as we go through stages of seeing the world more, and then less, as an extension of ourselves. In fact, a large subset of these qualities almost defines adolescence. Even after that period of semi-insanity subsides, we need to retain a dash of these personality traits in order to feel some sense of power over our environment. Rather than a simple either/or condition, narcissism is shorthand notation for a complex set of personality traits that have gotten wrenched out of proper proportion with each other.

The term *narcissism* is derived from a Greek myth with which we are all familiar: A beautiful but cold-hearted boy loves and leaves many a girl, until the gods are asked to punish him for his callousness. Nemesis obliges, leading Narcissus to the quiet pond where he falls in love with his reflection. He becomes so transfixed by his own image that he can't pull away, sitting there until he withers and dies.

Widely known only in this skeletal form, it is not surprising that it is perceived as a cautionary tale against self-love. But this simple interpretation leaves out the most crucial detail of the story: Narcissus doesn't recognize that the image he is falling in love with is of himself. It is his lack of self-awareness that betrays him. Lacking internal knowledge of who he is, Narcissus mistakes his external image for another person, one who seems totally responsive to his every gesture and declarations of love. By the time he finally realizes that he has fallen in love with his own image, the bond created through this interaction (what we might refer to in today's hi-tech lingo as a feedback loop) is too strong to break.

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This feature of the myth is far more helpful in explaining what is happening today than the more straight-forward story of self-love. Contrary to popular perception, narcissists typically have high self-esteem.[5] But with no stable or well-developed inner sense of self, they have to constantly replenish that esteem by looking for favorable images of themselves in the reactions of others, using everyone around them as reflective mirrors. Thus, for narcissists, creating impressions is more important than producing results, making every encounter a performance, keenly tuned to elicit a favorable reaction from others.

None of this requires social media, of course. But that should not prevent us from considering

the possibility that these tools not only support narcissistic tendencies but might thwart efforts to move beyond them at the very stage in a young person's life when it is most important to exert that effort.

Marshall McLuhan suggested such a connection between media and narcissism fifty years ago. Sometimes called the godfather of media studies, McLuhan saw in the myth a metaphor for the way that technologies—mechanical extensions of ourselves—subtly desensitize engagement with the world. Noting that "Narcissus" was a play on the Greek word *narcosis*, McLuhan says of the boy:

> This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system.[6]

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McLuhan draws our attention to the numbing effect of the water's surface, the mirror that seemed to Narcissus a window to a larger world. What he never understood was that it was also a barrier to fully engaging others in it.

Tools tend to make us numb because they always stand between us and the environment we are shaping with them. Philosopher Don Idhe vividly illustrated this with his description of the benefits and detriments of a simple apple picker.[7] This long pole with a small cage and hook at one end extends our reach, allowing us to pick many more apples from a tree than we could by hand. But we lose our sensual feel for the apples in the process and are thus prone to pick more bad ones. This characteristic may be what inspired playwright Max Frisch to define technology as "the knack of so arranging the world that we do not experience it."[8] It is probably what my own father sensed when, after 50 years of farming, he told me that as much as he appreciated the power of tractors, he enjoyed farming more with horses and mules because "I could feel the ground under my feet."

All of this was weighing on me as I listened to those first-year students bemoan their inability to get away from their cell phones. Without much forethought, I cut off the conversation, asked them to set all of their electronic equipment on the tables, and sent them outside with instructions to find an isolated place in the large wooded area at the center of campus. There they were to sit isolated from human contact for just 20 minutes.

With their treasured digital devices held ransom in the classroom, they all eventually returned to class. I feared they would say that it had been a waste of time. Instead, one after another expressed not just approval but gratitude for a respite from the incessant urge to check in. One student offered that it was the longest stretch of time he had been totally "alone" since ninth grade. I was struck not just with how eager they were to talk about how rare this experience has been, but by their difficulty in labeling it. The term I finally offered, "solitude," seemed as foreign to them as what they had just experienced. And they begged for more. So twice a week for the rest of the semester, in good weather and bad, these first-year students dropped off their electronic equipment and went to their special spaces for what became known as their "fifteen minutes of solitude."

These few repeated moments of time alone allowed my students to notice things—squirrels, bugs, the blueness of the sky, even a large fountain—they hadn't noticed before. They also noticed why they had missed them: Like

the students they were now observing from a distance, they had typically walked across campus talking or texting on their cell phones or listening to music on their headsets (often while walking with another student doing the same thing). They also noticed, to their surprise, how rarely students, absorbed with their media, greeted other students they passed by as they walked. When we eventually came upon McLuhan's passage, my students had no trouble recognizing how these and other digital tools made them numb to the creatures and people sharing the physical space around them.

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Of course, it wasn't the numbness that first captured Narcissus. He was held in place by the flattery of a beautiful person's slavish response to his every gesture and word. According to media critic Thomas de Zengotita, today's media is characterized by this same type of flattery.[9] Whether it is the silky-voiced actor/shill assuring you that you deserve the happiness her product will bring you, or the celebrated anchor relaying today's news as if he is sitting in your living room, or the ease with which one can collect Facebook "friends" like baseball cards, the underlying message behind so much of our media interaction is, "I stand at the center of my own electronically-constructed universe. This is all about me."

We shouldn't be surprised, then, that the most savvy marketing media company on Earth, Apple, years ago began putting an "i" at the beginning of the names of its products. Nor should we be surprised that Mark Zuckerberg once told his Facebook staff to organize users' news feeds by keeping in mind: "A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa."[10] Zuckerberg may have been speaking in the spirit of acting locally, but there is no indication of an accompanying urge to think globally—or to think about anyone else at all. This is the elevation of personal interest to pathological concern. It is the logical outcome of a culture so driven by flattery (and the consumerism it serves) that only what reflects our personal interests matters.

Flattery is, at best, superficial. And though we often go online seeking some kind of intimate contact, the effect seems to be just the opposite. Facebook, for example, has grown to over a hundred million subscribers in the U.S. alone, each with, on average, 130 "friends," yet the number of Americans who say they have no one in whom they can confide has increased in the past ten years, to one in every four.[11] Being connected is not the same as being close.-

Nor does the ability to share intimate moments lead to greater intimacy. The oft-noted ease with which children today perform in front of the ubiquitous camera may indicate something other than just an ability to carry on as if the camera isn't there. It may indicate that they have adapted to performing as if the camera is always there.

It's easy to see why young people sense that they are living their lives on the screen. The latest data from the Kaiser Family Foundation research indicates that the average time that youth between the ages of eight and 18 spend using entertainment media has increased to over seven and a half hours a day. But because they often use more than one medium at a time, "they actually manage to pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes' worth of media content into those 7½ hours."[12] That's a lot of time performing, a lot of time consuming and tending to images.

Given such a total saturation of youth culture, the common defense—it's not the technology that's a problem, it's how you use it—sinks of its own weight. What Winston Churchill said about buildings, that "we shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us,"[13] is more generally true of technologies than most of us want to admit.

When our youth spend so much of their lives in virtual habitats constructed to reflect, reinforce, and exploit rather than diminish adolescent narcissism, it no longer matters so much how they use them as *that* they use them. The great need today is to direct Narcissus' gaze away from the pool.

Of course, that is no easy task. As most parents will attest, the power offered by social media is so seductive, so convenient, so much a fixture in youth culture that figuring out how to get their eyes directed away from those digital pools can seem an overwhelming challenge. Well-intended advice nearly always meets with skepticism. Years ago, I gave up suggesting specific activities to counter the lure of technology and quit offering rules for media use by children. I realized that demanding that children act differently in relation to this cultural force is futile and even unfair, unless they first are able to see their culture differently.

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The late Neil Postman argued that the first, most crucial—and typically ignored—step in helping children develop a healthy relationship with digital media is to offer them a powerful narrative about how they fit into the world, one compelling enough and worthy enough of their great energies that they can find a healthy home for technology rather than make technology their home.

Religion once provided such a narrative for most children, with stories and rituals that helped them make sense of the world. It still works for some. Patriotism has served that purpose for others. But neither is faring so well against the competing story conveyed to them today by technology, which is all about asserting power over the world.

That narrative has been causing trouble for our relationship with the physical world for a long time. And for decades now, efforts have been made to teach children a different worldview. When we help youth move away from seeing nature as something to gain power over toward understanding how they fit within it, we are teaching the counter-narrative of ecology.

The key to developing a healthy relationship with social media is recognizing the parallel that runs between technology's older impact on the natural environment and its newer impact on the social one. Indeed, Christopher Lasch suggested that the "culture of narcissism" he documented is an outgrowth of an out-of-proportion reaction against feelings of "helplessness and dependence" on nature, fueled in large part by technologies forged during the Industrial Revolution, the revolution that gave us the illusion of God-like power over nature.[14]

Thus, the modern Narcissus, who puts himself at the center of the universe, who thinks of others as objects for his own use, is essentially extending to his social relationships the pervasive industrial age attitude toward nature: alienated, exploitative, ill-at-ease with intimate contact but constantly flattered and encouraged by his technically-enhanced ability to manipulate and control the surrounding environment.

Lasch believed that developing an ecological consciousness could not only cure our delusion of god-like power over nature, but also cool off narcissistic tendencies. It is indeed difficult to be a narcissist while acknowledging the vicissitudes of nature, which doesn't cater to our whims or, indeed, treat us as special at all. The sense of humility that comes from recognizing that nature offers no unearned praise, nor even a hint of entitlement, helps situate us in the world. Indeed, this humility is our inner world's vow of fidelity to the external world.

Ecological consciousness may be the goal, but is there a narrative, a compelling story that we can pass along to our children that can get them there? I believe there is. There are likely many, in fact. The one I want to suggest here is captured, imperfectly but helpfully, by a concept perhaps as old as the Narcissus myth: It is told by the narrative of stewardship.

Stewardship is most closely affiliated with a sustainable use of land. It is a term not all environmentalists embrace due to its legacy, stemming from medieval times, of viewing the natural world as a resource we humans can manage for our own use. When I worked, right out of college, for a community of Mennonite farmers in central Kansas, their extensive use of the term contained none of that exploitative connotation. Perhaps because of their unusually strong emphasis on the social gospel, or perhaps because they extended the use of the term to their church and community relationships, stewardship meant for them a responsibility to lovingly and humbly tend to the health of all to which they were related: the earth, their families, the community, and particularly those in need.

That is the way I use the term here. Its adoption as a lens through which we view the world counters the narcissistic urge by fixing our attention not on how best to use others for our purposes, but rather on what best serves to preserve and strengthen our relationships with them. It reclaims the notion of community from the trivializing online idea of a loosely formed common interest group, reaffirming the commitment and hard work needed to maintain a web of complex relationships spun together in a common space.

Similarly, friendship from a stewardship orientation is not based simply on good times together. It is rooted in a deep sense of affiliation, commitment, and mutual responsibility grown from the seed of shared experience. It has nothing to do with hooking up or hanging out. It has everything to do with holding on and hanging together.

Thus, friendship is evidenced not just when your friend helps you get where you want to go, but also when she refuses to let you drift away from your true calling. It is evidenced not just when a friend "has your back," but when he calls you back to your best self. This is, in fact, the concept of a friend that moved Aristotle to claim that its opposite was not an enemy but a flatterer.

Mentoring is a type of friendship that spans generations, and is thus an inherent quality of stewardship. Mentors provide the mature guidance youth need to get their social relationships in proper proportion: to discover that to feel needed is as important as getting your own needs met; that seeking to be admirable in the eyes of a role model is the foundation of a moral life, whereas trying to impress whoever comes along is its abdication.

Unfortunately, too many of us have bought into the narrative that in a rapidly changing, high tech society our children live in a different world from ours, a world which somehow we have no right to help shape. Too often our own remote jobs limit our halting efforts to be role models and guides. And way too many of us seem unwilling or unable to turn our eyes away from our own reflective screens.

Thus, the first step many of us will have to take is to put the digital media away ourselves and invest the time needed to find our way back into the depths of our children's lives. Reaching that depth takes not just a few moments of quality time but lots of time from lots of grown-up people: time for humility, gratitude, compassion, selfless acts of kindness, generosity, and civic duty to slip uncelebrated into the fabric of shared daily activity.

Perhaps the most difficult change we will have to make as good stewards to the next generation is to let our children lie fallow for certain stretches of time. By this I mean we need to resist the temptation to focus all of our children's energies on activities that are calculated to reap some reward, be shown off on a Facebook page, or used to impress college recruiters.

Rousseau argued that the most important thing for a child to do is waste time. I certainly would not go that far. But narcissism flourishes on a diet of instrumentalism, where every action expects a payoff. We need to make more space and time for things such as free undirected play, telling stories, and just wandering around, not because it increases creativity or promises higher test scores but because these are things that we have long associated with a healthy childhood.

And sometimes, far more often than we realize, young people just need rest, to withdraw inwardly, to take inventory of their oft-wounded souls if they are to come to terms with who they really are and weave that insight into their relationship with the world. One of my own wise mentors once told me that contrary to the teacher's commandment to keep students "on task," I should never interrupt a student who is daydreaming—really important work was going on behind those glazed-over eyes.

Real experience, as John Dewey endlessly argued, is not just ceaseless action, but the constant interplay between action and reflection.[15] It was Narcissus' lack of internal reflection that left him unable to recognize and resist the image he projected onto the pool. Our inability, or reluctance, to conserve the time and space for our children to be left truly alone, denies them the opportunity to strengthen their inner sense of self, condemning far too many to share Narcissus' fate.

We have not been good stewards of childhood. Reclaiming that stewardship will certainly not be easy. We will have to create opportunities for activities—and inactivity—that help youth change the way they see themselves and their role in the community.

There are no formulas for this. Social ecology is an intensely local task. The good news is that young people seem to be increasingly aware of the hollowness of a mediated life and are receptive, even eager, to enlist in something that offers them a more meaningful sense of belonging. Many seem ready to be good stewards if only we are willing to teach them how. To figure that out we may first have to reteach ourselves to daydream.

ENDNOTES

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