

# The Ego Experiment

## Part 2: Individual Resolve

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The pest of society is egotists. There are dull and bright, sacred and profane, coarse and fine egotists. 'Tis a disease that, like influenza, falls on all constitutions. ... One of its annoying forms, is a craving for sympathy. The sufferers parade their miseries, tear the lint from their bruises, reveal their indictable crimes, that you may pity them.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Culture" (1860)

Everyone has an ego — and you must believe in yourself to accomplish anything. As usual, it's all a matter of degree. True narcissists are considered untreatable because they cannot admit imperfection and are expert at projecting their issues onto others. If directly confronted, a narcissist will immediately accuse the accuser — which can lead to useful self-examination. Just remember that unless you actively scheme to cause harm — and derive real pleasure from the misery of others — your ego is probably manageable.

I've learned that the only way to deal with a narcissist is not to deal — to absent yourself. I have five minutes and best wishes for everyone. If you want more of me, don't blather on, noddingly, with false sincerity, about who I must hate and why. Don't spin bullshit narratives about being ever hard-used, your own ruthlessness notwithstanding. I'm sorry for your pain but will not descend with you into the abyss.

However, it's also important to question the trope that narcissists are lost souls. I've come to believe that at least some are treatable, but only if they themselves are the therapists. Holding out that hope for others means holding it out for ourselves, as we're all afflicted to some degree. It's actually heroic for a deeply self-absorbed person to face up to the scope of his or her selfishness. Once that's accomplished, the nano world of the vast ego can be steadily enlarged from the inside out. Others may be helpful, but expansion must come from within. It doesn't take much to see that the great pastime of narcissists — hating others — is singularly profitless. It's the ultimate expression of ego because it depends on the arrogant assumption that you know everything about a person. There's something to admire in everyone, but an inflamed ego won't look for it. And hatred blots every ledger. You might determinedly bankrupt someone, but at the cost of your own soul.

Sadly, narcissists are adroit at propagating their bullying. If you grew up under the thumb of a toxic ego, you are a veteran of bully bootcamp. You know how it's done and have resorted to it, at least occasionally, as a means of survival. Everyone tries out various ways of being and it's natural to gravitate toward what you have been assiduously taught. But you might well move on to more enlightened behavior. It's just a matter of emulating the right people. If, like Trump, your egotism has festered to the point at which you get a thrill out of wounding others, you have a litany of loathsome habits to work on. The only hope is to condition yourself, hard-wiring your pleasure to the pleasure we can each generate so easily for others. A breathtaking transformation is always

possible — at least, in theory. Fortunately, many bullies are more civilized than Trump and some, of every age, are still just mimics.

Living in a more humane, less bullying society begins and ends with the individual. Self-examination is always necessary. If you find yourself ever eager to express disdain, if scorn is your go-to reaction, you have a problem. If you habitually make threats and stage drama, you have a problem. If you're easily slighted and relive every slight, you have a problem. If you are hyper-competitive, you have a problem. You crush others as a matter of course and will find yourself, sooner or later, wondering why you can no longer find a hiking partner. At least you're getting valuable feedback. If, like Trump, you are cursed with enormous wealth and power, an army of enablers will carry out your executions and service every delusion. Self-awareness is hardly possible.

The only way to recognize bully-enabling behavior within yourself is to continually, honestly consider whether you're acting out of kindness. Directly confronting a narcissist is a waste of time, but you can always find a way to avoid doing his or her bidding. If your boss is a narcissist, start looking for another job. He or she is not likely to change, as you keep hoping.

How might we find our way back from shallow, egotistic bluster to the greater good? How do we heal ourselves from the inside out? Our national conscience, Ralph Waldo Emerson, had some ideas about that. One of the fascinating things about Emerson is how often he anticipated Darwin. In "Culture" he uses evolutionary theory to deduce the function of self-love.

This goitre of egotism is so frequent among notable persons, that we must infer some strong necessity in nature which it subserves; such as we see in the sexual attraction. The preservation of the species was a point of such necessity, that Nature has secured it at all hazards by immensely overloading the passion, at the risk of perpetual crime and disorder. So egotism has its root in the cardinal necessity by which each individual persists to be what he is.

He goes on to establish its galling ubiquity.

... if a man seeks a companion who can look at objects for their own sake, and without affection or self-reference, he will find the fewest who will give him that satisfaction; whilst most men are afflicted with a coldness, an incuriosity, as soon as any object does not connect with their self-love. Though they talk of the object before them, they are thinking of themselves, and their vanity is laying little traps for your admiration.

What's the antidote? Culture.

Culture is the suggestion from certain best thoughts, that a man has a range of affinities, through which he can modulate the violence of any master-tones that have a droning preponderance in his scale, and succor him against himself. Culture redresses his balance, puts him among his equals and superiors, revives the delicious sense of sympathy, and warns him of the dangers of solitude and repulsion.

Before delving into culture, Ralph Waldo returns to the over-arching context of natural selection.

Nature is reckless of the individual. When she has points to carry, she carries them. To wade in marshes and sea-margins is the destiny of certain birds, and they are so accurately made for this, that they are imprisoned in those places. Each animal out of its habitat would starve. To the physician, each man, each woman, is an amplification of one organ. A soldier, a locksmith, a bank-clerk, and a dancer could not exchange functions. And thus we are victims of adaptation.

The antidotes against this organic egotism, are, the range and variety of attractions, as gained by acquaintance with the world, with men of merit, with classes of society, with travel, with eminent persons, and with the high resources of philosophy, art, and religion: books, travel, society, solitude.

Emerson's answer is clear: become cultured. Climb outside yourself. Be humbled by things not created or even touched by you. Feel awed by human genius and the atomic intelligence of nature. Seek out and praise everything deserving — and lose yourself in the process.

Each of us is absorbed in our own ego experiment. We're saddled with it at birth. Ego is the concentrating force that enables us to succeed. But it's also a distortion that can prevent us from recognizing the great potentialities beyond ourselves and the great souls that make life worth living — including our own. The best we can do is learn from each other. If we work tirelessly at turning outward — checking in with the cosmos, the muses, our fellow travelers — we might occasionally escape the shadow of the all-encompassing "I." Our glimpses beyond ourselves might become loving looks. We might stretch those looks into meaningful lifetimes. There's even the possibility of finding one true friend along the way.