

Mormonism as a Narcissistic Institution

Carrie A. Miles

Why is it that we human beings will stay in emotional relationships that are clearly not life giving? - Jill Bolte Taylor

Who told you that? Why do you believe it? – Andrew Iannaccone

If heaven is where human beings reach their full potential, can a narcissistic institution such as Mormonism get them there? This paper explores narcissism not as a personality disorder, but as the normal “default” mode of all human infants – and cultures. While healthy individuals and institutions outgrow narcissism, some get stuck in this stage an immature urge to dominate and control. This forces those in thrall to narcissists, whether individual or corporate, are forced to conform to authority and black-and-white understandings of God rather than “progress” emotionally and spiritually.

I present a new understanding of the roots of narcissism in individuals and show how this applies to cultures as well; investigate the narcissism of Joseph Smith and his successor cultures; and talk about the impact of narcissistic culture on its individual participants. Finally, I offer some tools to free participants to reclaim the path to their full potential.

What is Mormon Culture?

Both historically and in the present, Mormon institutions have displayed many qualities that meet my definition of cultural narcissism. I acknowledge that the Church under the leadership of Russell Nelson officially objects to being called “Mormon” or even LDS. When referring to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints itself, I will abide by its request and use the shortcut of “Church.” However, there is a constellation of cultural assumptions, practices and personalities surrounding the formal Church that can only be described as “Mormon.”¹ For instance, I am told that Utah is second only to

¹ Here is the statement regarding the name on their website: “The official name of the Church is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The full name was given by revelation from God to Joseph Smith in 1838.”?

“In the first reference, the full name of the Church is preferred: ‘The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.’ When a shortened reference is needed, the terms ‘the Church’ or the ‘Church of Jesus Christ’ are encouraged. The ‘restored Church of Jesus Christ’ is also accurate and encouraged.

Los Angeles in number of plastic surgeries performed there. I can hardly refer to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' beauty culture, but perhaps it makes sense to talk about a Mormon culture of beauty. In any case, the official Church is part – and arguably the source – of the constellation of Mormonism, but it is not the whole.

I quote leaders of the Church to illustrate my points in my discussion, but stress that I am not labeling or diagnosing these individuals themselves of being narcissists. Rather, I accept their claims that their statements represent the sentiments of the organization itself. Indeed, these leaders' speeches, publications, and pronouncements are all vetted by a committee that ensures that they are all conform to official Church doctrine.

Chapter 1: What is Narcissism?

Like “Mormon,” the label “narcissist” similarly refers to an imprecise but unmistakable collection of characteristics. The label of narcissist is usually applied to individuals who are vain, self-centeredness, grandiose, and who have a strong sense of entitlement. In popular thought, narcissists are full-of-themselves; braggarts demanding constant attention and affirmation; egomaniacs who love themselves too much, or, perhaps, as those whose wildly self-confident veneers disguise the fact that they love themselves too little.

The formal, clinical symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, as listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association* (DSM),¹ are similar to the popular stereotype, including traits of: grandiosity; a sense of entitlement; the belief that one should associate only with other superior beings; lack of empathy; preoccupation with fantasies of power, success, beauty, or finding perfect love; envy of other people and belief that others envy them; requiring a constant flow of admiration; and the expectation that one should be obeyed.²

“While the term “Mormon Church” has long been publicly applied to the Church as a nickname, it is not an authorized title, and the Church discourages its use. Thus, please avoid using the abbreviation “LDS” or the nickname “Mormon” as substitutes for the name of the Church, as in “Mormon Church,” “LDS Church,” or “Church of the Latter-day Saints.”

<https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/style-guide#:~:text=The%20official%20name%20of%20the,of%20Latter%2Dday%20Saints.%E2%80%9D.>
Accessed 2/23/2022.

² Bear in mind that personality or other mental disorders are social constructs. The disorders named in the DSM are created by committee for the purpose of providing diagnostic codes that enable therapists to bill insurance companies for the treatment they provide. I do not deny that human mental suffering and

Both popular and clinical definitions of narcissism consider it to be a deviation – too much or too little of these traits – from normal or healthy personality. However, claiming that groups have a “personality,” let alone a personality disorder, stretches the usual understanding of human personality and its origins in the individual’s biological and social development. Does saying that an organization behaves narcissistically mean that it is composed of narcissists? Or, as Lasch² or Twinge and Campbell³ write in their influential works on narcissism and culture, that it promotes values the culture promotes values that encourage narcissism in its members?

In talking about Mormonism as a narcissistic institution, I take a different approach. I do not suggest that people who adhere to one of the Mormon traditions are narcissists themselves. For one thing, an entire culture or organization made up of narcissists is unlikely to exist for long. Narcissists do tend to be attracted to other narcissists, but due to each one’s desire to be top-dog, relationships among them tend to be unstable, if not explosive. Such associations are functional only when the drive to dominate is contained through strictly enforced power hierarchies.

Suggesting that Mormonism is composed of narcissists also defies the popular – and I believe accurate – perceptions of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For example, my daughter once asked me why everyone thinks Evangelicals Christians are mean, while everyone thinks of Mormons as nice?³ Ironically, as I will show later, rather than create narcissists, the tendency for Mormons to be cooperative and conscientious provides more evidence for the narcissism of the institutions themselves.

Beyond a trait theory of narcissism

To answer the question of what it means for an institution to have something usually thought of as a disorder of the individual, I propose that we look at narcissism in a different way. Rather than define this pathology as too much or too little of any particular trait or cluster of traits (too vain or too entitled, for example), or as a variant

disorders are very real, but with the current state of knowledge, no mental diagnosis can claim to point to a definable disease that “exists” in the way that the virus that causes chicken pox exists.

³ Remember the episode in the sitcom *Frasier* when Frasier tires of the dirty tricks played by Bebe, his extremely aggressive agent, and hires a Mormon instead? Bebe’s sardonic observation, “Well, when there’s a dirty job to be done, you can’t go wrong with a Mormon,” says it all.

on normal personality, I suggest that narcissistic behaviors are not personality traits, or even disorders, but rather the default behaviors or drives with which people are born.

The default objective of any organism, whether adult woman or infant, and not just human, is to do what it takes to continue to live. Life requires food, freedom from pain and discomfort, protection from the elements, and the devoted attention of a mother or other caregiver. Infants must have these things, and if they do not get them, they behave in very narcissistic – or entitled, at least - way, screaming, crying, and wailing.

While infants are narcissistic, in normal development, they become more social and less survival oriented and gradually outgrow the behaviors that allow them to survive as infants. For reasons we do not understand, however, some people's emotional development gets stuck in the self-absorption and self-protectiveness of early childhood and are likely to be labeled "narcissists."

As Margalis Fjelstad, author of *Stop Caretaking the Borderline/Narcissist*, summarizes:

"People with [narcissistic personality disorder] seem to get 'stuck' or impaired at fairly early levels of emotional development, usually around 18 to 24 months of age. As adults, they have the mental content, vocabulary, and experiences of adults; however, their ability to process complex, personal, intimate relationships has not developed beyond those early childhood levels."⁴

Babies are adorable, but you must admit that they are, well, striking immature. They cannot consider the interests and wellbeing of other people, even that of people they adore. In fact, initially infants are not even aware of where they end, and other people begin. "Hardwired" with basic emotions of joy-sadness, anger-fear, trust-distrust, and surprise-anticipation, babies have much neurological development ahead of them. Fortunately, the qualities with which they are born are ones that promote their survival. "Being hardwired, basic emotions (or 'affect programs') are innate and universal, automatic, and fast, and trigger behaviour with a high survival value."⁵ The basic human drive, even for newborns, is to keep living.

In addition to being without boundaries, an infant's other built-in behavior can be considered symptoms of narcissism. Consider qualities like entitlement, self-absorption, and the need for excessive attention (!) An infant does not care if her caregiver has not showered – or slept – in days. If she is hungry or wet, she will scream in a most entitled fashion until her needs are met. And think of the grandiose play of a child, especially one who has been given a superhero's cape or a princess's tiara. The ability to

experience abstract thought, including complex emotions like compassion for one's caregiver and the ability to take the perspective of others, takes years to develop.

Included in the narcissistic behaviors of infancy is the ability to invoke the overwhelming bonds of love experienced between babies and caregiver. This love, called attachment (on the infant's part) or bonding (on the caregiver's) is something that is hardwired into both infant and parent to ensure the helpless infant's survival. This ability to love and to generate love in another is not included in the diagnostic criteria for narcissism because it is not considered a pathology. Yet anyone who has been in a romantic relationship with a narcissist can testify (in hindsight) that their partner's ability to draw them into a compelling passion is a red flag. For a narcissist may love deeply but fail to develop *beyond* the primal traits of infancy, never love compassionately.⁴ But while the failure to progress is abnormal, the presence of the traits themselves require no explanation. They are neither unique nor remarkable but the default behaviors with which we all start.

Why do most people grow up emotionally and others do not?

Bessel van der Kolk, quoting Charles Darwin, writes that "If an organism is stuck in survival mode, its energies are focused on fighting off unseen enemies, which leaves no room for nurture, care, and love."⁶ Van der Kolk does not reference narcissism, but it is easy to recognize narcissists as people who have "no room for nurture, care, and love." Although narcissists are not the only people who fit this description, I propose that *being chronically stuck in survival or self-protective mode is a defining characteristic of narcissism*. Children get stuck in survival mode because they never learn how to feel safe in interactions with other people.

The work of neuropsychologist Stephen Porges provides profound insights into the importance of feeling safe with other people. Called "The Polyvagal Theory" (PVT), it offers great insight into how human beings sense and respond to danger – and in the case of narcissists, especially danger that may not really be there. Applying PVT to narcissistic behavior explains a lot about the narcissist's behavior and cognitive limitations, perhaps even the nature of narcissism itself.

⁴ Irish social worker and domestic violence expert Don Hennessey writes of the deep and abiding love and profound grief proclaimed by men for the wives they have just beaten to death. Don Hennessey, *The Mind of the Intimate Male Abuser: How He Gets Into Her Head*, Atrium, 2012.

Porges coined the term “neuroception” to describe our bodies’ ability to pick up cues about whether we are safe or not. Neuroception differs from perception in that neuroception takes place below the level of consciousness. Porges writes,

“The nervous system, through the processing of sensory information from the environment (and viscera), continuously evaluates risk. Since the neural evaluation of risk does not require conscious awareness...the term neuroception was introduced to emphasize a neural process, distinct from perception, that is capable of distinguishing environmental (and visceral) features that are safe, dangerous, or life threatening.”⁷

When the body detects threat, the autonomic nervous system signals the body to fight the danger, flee it, or freeze. The autonomic nervous system, as distinct from the voluntary nervous system that controls our muscles, works automatically, without our conscious control. A part of it called the *sympathetic nervous system* (SNS) controls the fight/flight response. When activated, the SNS signals for the release of adrenaline, which quickens heartbeat and breathing, shuts down digestion, and sends blood to the arms and legs. The sympathetic system also floods the pre-frontal cortex, the logical, reasoning part of the brain, with the hormone cortisol, turning off logical thought. In effect, the triggered sympathetic system jettisons important-but-not-urgent functions like digestion and reasoning, and strengthens the rest of the body to fight or run away. Another brain function jettisoned when the sympathetic nervous system is aroused is the laying down of new memory.

People can display extra-ordinary strength and energy with the sympathetic nervous system triggered, but no one can stay in this state of heightened arousal for long. When danger has past or the organism is exhausted, another system, the parasympathetic, jumps in to release hormones that slow the heart rate and return blood flow to the brain and viscera.

Much of the autonomic nervous system is contained in a large bundle of nerves called the *vagus* or the *vagal nervous system*. “Vagus” means “wanderer,” and the system is called that because it meanders from the lower part of the brain down to the heart, lungs, diaphragm, and bowels, and then up again to the neck, throat, eyes, and ears. There are two parts to the vagus nerve; the ventral (which runs up and down the front of the body) and the dorsal (that runs down the back). PVT offers a major contribution to understanding mammalian response to threat by emphasizing the distinct functions of the ventral and dorsal vagal nerves. This proves especially important in understanding the problems of the narcissist.

The dorsal vagal system is the most primitive and oldest part of the body's danger-response system. The dorsal vagal system's day job is to run the body's autonomic functions below the waist, such as digestion and sexual functioning. When the body perceives extreme danger, however, and the sympathetic nervous system options are exhausted, this primitive responses to danger by causing the organism to shut down, freeze, dissociate, or play dead. With the dorsal vagal pathway in shutdown, a person might faint, the technical term for which is "vagaling" or "vasovagal syncope." Blood pressure and heart rate drop, and the person might faint or disassociate.

The dorsal vagal freeze response and losing consciousness protects the body by minimizing the pain someone experiences during an inescapable trauma. The freeze response includes dissociation, or feeling disconnected from thoughts, feelings, memories, and surroundings. In less acute situations, the dorsal vagal response may not be so extreme, but will tell the body to lie low in more subtle ways, such as making a person feel immobilized, feeling emotionally numb, or fearful of taking risks that might lead to failure.⁸ In other words, depression.

The last part of the autonomic nervous system, the ventral vagal system, enhances survival on a different level than fight/flight/freeze. Porges writes, "[S]ocial connectedness evolved as the primary biological imperative for mammals in their quest for survival."⁵ In other words, there is safety in numbers. The ventral vagus system connects the heart with the face and ears. In humans, this system allows us to signal by our voices and facial expressions that we are not a danger to others. In turn, our ventral vagal system enables us to read the signals of safety or danger given off by others.

The ability to give and receive cues of safety through facial expression, hearing, quality of voice, and social gazing is called the *social engagement system* (SES).⁹ Van der Kolk writes, "Human beings are astoundingly attuned to subtle emotional shifts in the people (and animals) around them. Slight changes in the tension of the brow, wrinkles around the eyes, curvature of the lips, and angle of the neck quickly signal to us how comfortable, suspicious, relaxed, or frightened someone is.... When the message we receive from another person is 'You're safe with me,' we relax. If we're lucky in our relationships, we also feel nourished, supported, and restored as we look into the face and eyes of the other."¹⁰

⁵ The ventral vagal system is also found in other mammals, although obviously the capacities it enables are different.

Our bodies in physiological balance – with a steady heart rate, full breaths, the ability to recognize familiar faces and our middle ear responding in such a way that we can understand what is being said to us – is called “regulation.” In addition, the social engagement system allows people to calm each other, a process that Porges calls “co-regulation.” Think, for example, of how a mother calms her infant, who is not able to calm himself. When humans are with people they trust, their heartbeat steadies, blood pressure goes down, they sleep well, and are better able to think and deal with adversity. Co-regulation is necessary for optimal human functioning and performance. Indeed, prolonged isolation has been shown repeatedly to be dangerous, even deadly.

Attachment

According to PVT, the social engagement system begins very simply with the newborn’s ventral vagal-controlled ability to nurse. I have not seen this anywhere, but I believe that attachment theory describes the nucleus of how the SES develops. The early work in attachment was done by psychologist John Bowlby and focused mostly on how the parent/child relationship affected the child’s development and later relationships with other people. Bowlby, like Porges and Van der Kolk, looked at relationships and bonds between people in terms of their survival advantage. Part of this advantage is the protection the group provides from wild animals, the elements, and enemies, but both theories also stress the primal importance of “co-regulation.”

When they are hungry or uncomfortable, babies quickly become physiologically dysregulated. When the child signals a need for food, warmth, or sleep by crying, and a caregiver responds appropriately through touch, movement, voice, singing, and gaze, the child calms, and his autonomic systems - heartbeat, breathing, and digestion - becomes regulated. As this pattern of need and attuned response repeats successfully through the infant’s first year of life, the child learns to trust other people. Caregivers who are “attuned” and responsive to the child’s needs provide a secure base from which the child explores the world. Infants in response develop an ability to use and read facial expression, to hear and be comforted by the human voice, and to vocalize in response to those voices.

Attachment has importance beyond the bond between caregiver and child. Attachment expert Linda Ikeda writes, “The attachment relationship is the foundation of ALL brain development, impacting every aspect of it, including its physical size! Attachment forms a “template” or pattern in the brain, impacting how future relationships will be experienced.... Attachment is the foundation of a healthy personality, logical (cause and effect) thinking, and conscience development, becoming self-reliant and how we handle

our worry and fear. When attachment does not occur well, it is called 'disordered attachment' and the child may not develop an accurate sense of self [or] where he belongs."¹¹

If there is no caregiver or one who is not able to meet the child's needs, the child will not learn how or whom to trust. Instead, she will become distrustful, hypervigilant, and controlling, and will feel safe only when she is in control.

Rupture and repair

As children grow from helpless infants to toddlers, the needs of the attachment relationship grow as well. To keep them safe, caregivers must put limits on the child's actions and often tell them, "no." Very young children, who have yet to learn that their caregivers can be angry with them but still love them, experience such restrictions as dysregulating or as a "rupture" in the relationship.

Disruptions in the relationship between mother and infant is not in itself a problem. Attachment theorist Edward Tronick estimates that parents are attuned to their children perhaps only thirty percent of the time, thus guaranteeing that there will be daily disruptions.¹² But, as Ikeda writes, "In healthy relationships, ruptures need to be repaired."

A repair takes place when you pick up your child, rub his back and say something like, "I know it scared you when I yelled at you, but I can't have you running into the street. You could get badly hurt. So no running into the street, ok?"

As the child accepts the repair by allowing himself to be comforted and saying "ok," he feels that he is re-united in his feelings of connection to you and a reunion or repair has taken place.

It is through these experiences of having limits imposed, experiencing a separation/rupture, and then offering and accepting a repair that a child learns to tell right from wrong. This ... is the beginning of conscience development.... (21)

A repaired disruption seems to strengthen the parental bond:

We understand from attachment theory that when parents respond to their infants' cries in a more or less consistent, predictable and nurturing way, the infant will begin to build a sense of trust and safety in their world ("I know I will be taken care of"). The repetition of these types of experiences of being

responded to builds and reinforces “healthy” neural pathways in the infant’s brain. In much the same way, through the repeated process of disruption and repair, the infant adds to his knowledge or blueprint of the nature of relationships, increases his tolerance for stress, and begins to realize a sense of agency in the world.¹³

What happens if the parent fails to repair a disruption?

If the infant’s bids for their parent’s attention fail, the infant will attempt to self-regulate by looking away, sucking their thumb and even losing postural control. If the infant experiences repeated failures over the attempts to re-engage his parent, this can lead to an insecure attachment.

The insecurely or ambivalently attached infant still needs the parent, but he no longer trusts and has difficulty repairing (the early form of forgiveness). Attachment theorists point out that as children experience numerous ruptures and repairs with a trustworthy caregiver, they acquire emotional resilience. Because narcissists cannot accept a repair, however, they never learn resilience. They cannot bounce back from disappointments but remain emotionally fragile and suspicious.

Narcissism in Light of Polyvagal and Attachment Theories

Safety and narcissism

According to polyvagal theory, the neuroception of safety is a biological imperative for human beings. “If we are not safe, we are chronically in a state of evaluation and defensiveness.”¹⁴ Yet narcissists do not appear to be timid or phobic people in general, so the problem is not hypersensitivity to all kinds of threats. Rather, it appears that people with this disorder have difficulty processing *social* signals of safety.⁶ In other words, for the child fated to remain at the social-emotional level of a toddler, something goes wrong with social engagement system that impedes their ability to recover from relationship ruptures. This is in keeping with Fjelstad’s observation that narcissists “tend to have a highly sensitive emotional system that reacts instantaneously and intensely to their experiences. They do not adjust to change very well or very quickly”

⁶ One might argue that narcissists must have good social engagement systems, as they are known for their social skills, i.e., for being charming. Such “charm,” however, while compelling at first, is of a very limited nature. In general, narcissists do not have much social skill.

and as children, “do not respond to soothing and nurturing as easily as other children.”¹⁵

For such non-resilient children, feeling safe requires excessive amounts of attention, approval, and admiration. Alternatively, negative reactions from others, such as fear, anger, and compliance, also make them feel powerful and therefore safe. For such emotionally distressed and socially-hypersensitive people, any hint of social humiliation or embarrassment, disagreement, blame, or being subordinated or not being in control, mobilizes their autonomic defenses. They respond to threat with a fight response, although the degree to which their aggression is overt or covert depends on their overall personality, levels of intelligence, and what is acceptable behavior in their reference community. No matter how overtly or covertly aggressive they become, however, or how much damage they do to their caregivers, the narcissist still considers himself to be a victim who is fighting only protecting himself.

Caretakers

As adults who has outgrown their original caregivers, narcissists look for a replacement *caretaker* to do the things that calm them and make them feel safe. The caretaker will be expected to do the things that allow the narcissist to shine, to listen to their complaints and boasting, to ensure them that they are always right, to fight the narcissist’s enemies, and to never challenge the narcissist for control.⁷ In addition, the hormones released when the fight system is activated shuts down the thinking part of the brain and impairs the brain’s ability to lay down new memory. Perhaps as a result of this turning off of parts of the brain, narcissists appear to have difficulty with “executive function” – the ability to make decisions, plan, tell a coherent story, etc. These difficulties raise the importance of a partner who can help the narcissist on this level as well.

But while narcissists attach deeply to their caretakers and originally idealizes them, their inability to accept repairs makes them more and more ambivalent and mistrustful of their caretaker.⁸ When the black marks the narcissist is collecting against their

⁷ Plus, manage the mundane tasks in life, are narcissists also do not have much executive function. “Executive function” refers to the ability to organize, to make decisions, to tell a coherent story, adaptive thinking, time management, self-monitoring, etc.

⁸ The narcissist’s ambivalence results in what is called the “narcissistic abuse cycle.” In this cycle, the narcissist “love bombs” his target, devalues or discards her as differences emerge, then “hoovers” (called this after the vacuum cleaner) her back with another round of love bombing, only to discard her again. For the target, the intermittent reinforcement of the come-hither-now-go-away behavior makes it difficult to leave the relationship. Although many in the therapeutic and survivor community believe that the

partner build to a breaking point, or when a rupture occurs that makes the narcissist believe that they have been betrayed or abandoned, the relationship becomes untenable. The narcissist's desperate attempts at control will become frantic, illogical, and more and more aggressive.

narcissist employs this cycle purposefully, I suggest that this is classic approach/avoidance behavior on the part of the ambivalently-attached narcissist.

Chapter Two: Default Behavior and Narcissism in Organizations and Cultures

So how do we apply a problem with social-neurological regulation in individuals to an institution or a culture? Societies are formed of individuals, and cannot have emotional abilities that the individuals comprising it do not. Just as individuals, even infants, act in ways that ensure their survival, survival motives shape the norms and practices of entire social systems. Most of human history was (and in many places, still is) a long struggle simply to survive. Cultural narcissism – also known as despotism or slavery in all their varied forms, including patriarchy – tends to be by far the most common form of social organization historically. These strongly hierarchical, competitive societies are essentially the default survival patterns of infancy cast onto a larger societal stage. Transcending such power struggles to achieve peace, democracy, and equality must be undertaken deliberately.

Patriarchy, a virtually-universal practice in the traditional world, is usually thought of as the rule of men over women. The burdens patriarchy imposes on women have long been recognized. More accurately, however, patriarchy is not simply the rule of men over women but the rule of a few men – the patricians – over everyone else, male and female. The Roman Empire provides an ancient example. An extremely hierarchical society, Roman had a very small citizen class and a lot – a lot -- of slaves. In this competitive, honor/shame culture, men were expected to seek public acclaim and the approbation of others (honor), which was often achieved by humiliating or dominating some other man (shame). Being shamed brought disgrace on the entire family and was to be avoided, literally, at all costs. The truth was easily sacrificed in such cultures. For instance, for Roman orators – the ancient world's equivalent of rock stars – winning a debate was more important than being factually correct. The men on top (always men) felt safe only when they were lauded, and reacted aggressively to anything that looks like a threat. Indeed, in these kinds of societies, not reacting to threat or insult was dangerous, as it signaled a weakness that could be exploited by other men.

In many developing countries these patriarchal patterns persist. Men as a whole are encouraged to have an exaggerated sense of self-importance and superiority (grandiosity); a strong sense of entitlement (for instance, a man's desire to spend money on indulgences such as beer or extra-marital sex will override his children's need for shoes); require constant affirmation (narcissistic supply); are envious of others; are overly sensitive to criticism; lack boundaries – i.e., will not allow subordinates

(wives, children, and dependent males) to have a separate self; and, will not share power, not uncommonly using physical violence to keep their wives, children, servants, or other men in line. Part of the reason for the strong son preference in many of such cultures is because if a man is insulted down at the bar, he wants to have a few strong sons to send to avenge his honor.

If these expectations for masculinity were rolled up into a human individual, that person would easily fit the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder.⁹ Further, while the individual members of the society mature emotionally, often the behavioral norms for men especially remain narcissistic. Consider how closely male gender norms and patriarchy, with their emphasis on dominance, winning, grandiosity, and entitlement to the services of subordinates, equate to the symptoms of narcissism.

As with the narcissistic individual, narcissistic culture discourages repairs to ruptured relationships. Instead, an instance of harm or insult to another family or tribe, even accidental, may set off an endless feud. This drive for retribution extends even within the household: “We do not forgive, even in marriage,” a Ugandan woman once told me. “We revenge.” Attempting a repair may require the person seeking it to accept complete subjugation, which is not a real repair but a conquest. Constantly monitoring the environment for threat, at the extreme people in narcissistic cultures may trust only members of their own family, even marrying their children only to other family members (even first cousins), a practice that is common in Afghanistan, for example.

Only by consciously practicing higher-level notions of forgiveness, justice, mercy, equality, and *agape* (self-sacrificing) love are cultures able to develop beyond narcissistic concerns about dominance and subjection. Promoting such higher-level values should be the province of churches. Unfortunately, many religious organizations and theologies have syncretized patriarchy, and therefore narcissism, into their belief systems.¹⁶ Like any kind of narcissist, what matters most to them are not “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly,”¹⁰ but to maintain their authority and

⁹ There are limits to men’s striving for dominance, however, as the hierarchical nature of these cultures require everyone to be sensitive to issues of status and to show honor to their social superiors. Most men cannot even dream of having self-determination, let alone dominance, vis-a-vis other men. However, in these cultures, even the lowest man knows that when he comes home at night, there will be a woman he can lord it over.

¹⁰ Micah 6:8, *Holy Bible*, NRSV.

control at all costs. That is the bottom line when dealing with narcissists. Virtually all their behavior can be understood in terms of their fear-based, compelling drive to win.

Syncretism

Many fundamentalist religious systems, not just Mormonism, have become syncretized with patriarchy, i.e., they have incorporated the traditional gender division of labor and teachings on male dominance over women into their religious teachings. Syncretism refers to the amalgamation of two (or more) different religions. Voodoo, for example, developed among Africans brought as slaves to the Caribbean and forcibly converted to Catholicism. Blending African animism with Catholic practices, voodoo conflates traditional African gods with Christian saints and sacraments, including the animal sacrifices, charms, and curses associated with folk religion. Gnosticism, which blends the teachings of Jesus and early Jesus followers with a variety of second century religious and philosophical traditions, is another example of syncretism.

Not limited to blending of religious systems, however, religion can also be amalgamated with cultural practices or economic forces. For example, Taiwanese folk religion, sorted its gods and goddesses into a version of the extreme bureaucracy of the Chinese government.¹⁷ Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the traditional gender division of labor/patriarchy was so ubiquitous and economically-necessary that virtually all religious institutions have become syncretized with it. The rule of fathers and the submission of wife and children to that rule have become regarded not as an accident of economics but as God's will.

Unfortunately, culturally-syncretized religions have fared poorly as family structure, marriage, sexual morality, and gender identity have undergone drastic change followed the Industrial Revolution. Fundamentalist religions cloak their inability to adapt under a veneer of righteousness and patriarchy. Mormonism, with its belief in a plurality of gods whose flesh-and-bone bodies are literally male or female, takes syncretism to another level.

Narcissistic organizations

Unfortunately, too many organizations, including big businesses, governments, families, and churches, fall into a narcissistic mold. Consider blogger Sackwinkie's list of how to recognize a narcissistic organization.¹¹ The items in italics are my additions.

Although Sackwinkie is not writing about the Mormon traditions, or even about religious organizations, his list provides a chilling fit.

Top leadership (or a parent) is revered and accorded almost god-like status.

Organizationally-approved ways of thinking or acting are treated as holy.

No one ever admits to any mistakes. Problems are always blamed on someone else, *usually Satan, Democrats, apostates, organizational participants or people outside the organization.*

People treat the bombastic, dictatorial behavior of certain leaders as justified by their exceptional status.

Questioning any aspect of the organization or its leadership is strongly discouraged. "Objections to policy or procedures from outsiders are met by an amused and superior smile."

Obtaining employment (*or membership*) within the organization is seen as a life-changing achievement and a gift of immeasurable value, which must be repaid with unquestioning loyalty.

All power and authority resides with top leadership, not with the participants.

The needs of the organization come before the needs of its participants.

Appeals from below about abusive or incompetent leaders are not allowed.

Higher-ups have the right to receive direction for individuals below them.

Subordinates are expected to be perfect.

The organization does not recognize personal boundaries.

Acting like a narcissist without being one

I suggested above that narcissistic cultures have behavioral standards for men that require them to act in narcissistic ways. There are other situations that create narcissistic behavior as well. For example, in defending or protecting their clients, attorneys may act narcissistically. Basically, being a narcissist is their job. Because the Church operates primarily in a self-protective mode, that many of the men called to high leadership positions in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are lawyers. Just because a Church leader's public pronouncements are very narcissistic, however, his words and actions can be narcissistic without it meaning that the leader himself is.

In *People of the Lie*, psychiatrist M. Scott developed the concept of *malignant narcissism*, which he defined as an “evil” putting of one’s own wants before the welfare of other people. In the course of treating his patients, troubled young men living in a mental health facility, Peck met occasionally with their parents. He often found himself appalled by the behavior and attitudes of some of them, who were insensitive at best and the cause of their sons’ problems at worst. He recognized many of these couples as narcissistic, but as he worked with them, he realized that only one of the couple was really a narcissist. The other partner was perhaps not, but was in “thrall” to the narcissist. However, Peck writes, he *could not tell which was which*.¹⁸

Popular survivor literature calls people who assist narcissists in their attempts to control others “flying monkeys,” after the minions of the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. These are the caretakers identified by Margalis Fjelstad earlier.¹² Whatever you call them, in assisting narcissists in their battles against the world, partners often end up behaving like narcissists themselves. In addition, those close to narcissists pick up easily on the narcissists’ self-protective anger/fear/fight/flight emotions and find themselves feeling that way, too, a psychological phenomenon called “emotional contagion.” As a result, they may find themselves holding and acting on paranoid beliefs that are not their own.

As caretakers of a corporate narcissist, not only leaders but members find themselves adopting the narcissist’s entitlement, grandiosity, lack of boundaries, and self-righteousness, even though they might have none of these traits personally. Such behavior might be typical of normal people who are constantly under scrutiny and judgment, and who are invited to conduct such inquisitions of their fellows. Thus the true narcissist becomes indistinguishable from those in thrall to him.

What is Behind the Defensiveness?

Considering this history, Mormonism is entitled to its persecution complex.

Mormonism has from its beginning struggled to survive. The early Saints established settlements in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, only to being driven out of each place by angry neighbors. Its founding prophet Joseph Smith was tarred and feathered, arrested several times, and finally died at the hands of an angry mob. Even when the community moved to relatively isolated Utah, it continued to be engaged in battles with the United

¹² Psychotherapist Elaine Montag calls them “boobs,” and says she is going to write a book called, “I’m Not Your Boob.”

States government. At one point, in a battle to force the Church to give up the practice of polygamy, all Church property was confiscated, and Church leaders imprisoned or went into hiding to avoid imprisonment. In the twentieth and twenty-first century, the Church has been the subject of much negative press due to discrimination against people of African ancestry, women, and LGBTQ+ people. Government raids and persecutions of fundamentalist polygamist groups have continued into the twenty-first century. Even today, the leadership of the Church believe that they are still being “mischaracterized,” discriminated against, and misunderstood, and that, “perverse things are being spoken, written, and portrayed.”¹⁹ In fact, generating “enough spiritual light to push back the darkness” of negativity against the Church requires members to be “fully engaged in living the gospel—living it with all of your ‘heart, might, mind and strength’.”²⁰

As challenging as the threats to the Mormon institutions were in the past, however, recent developments are no less threatening. Many of Mormonism’s claims to eternal and exclusive truths – and hence to the devotion of its members -- are being pummeled by scientific and historical evidence. Some of the damaging information comes from new technology. For instance, a central tenet of Mormonism is the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. However, that truthfulness is currently being challenged on just about every level. One of the most damning addresses its claims to be the historic record of a group of Hebrews who traveled to the Americas in 600 BCE. This history explains Native Americans as the descendent of that group of Hebrews. his claim has been severely damaged by DNA evidence that shows Native Americans to be of Asian, not Middle-Eastern, origins. Other troublesome information, such as Mormonism’s founder Joseph Smith’s secret marriages to between 30 and 40 women, including young teenagers and women who were already married to other men, has been known for decades. For most of those decades, however, this information was found only in relatively hard-to-hide books, and their authors’ excommunications warned members not to read them. Today Internet blogs, podcasts, and YouTube videos make damaging facts discretely available to anyone with a laptop or a smart phone. Excommunication of these Internet dissidents may make them even more popular.¹³

With waning support for its claims to religious truth, the Church loses its claim to the commitment and obedience of its members. Mormonism is “party-line theology.” That

¹³ “‘Mormon Stories’ podcaster John Dehlin makes \$236K a year from his nonprofit. Is that too much?” *Head Topics*, <https://headtopics.com/us/mormon-stories-podcaster-john-dehlin-makes-236k-a-year-from-his-nonprofit-is-that-too-much-24355042>. This article reported, “Yearly revenues jumped by 67% in the aftermath of ‘Mormon Stories’ podcaster John Dehlin’s 2015 excommunication from the LDS Church.”

is, rather than being a systematic, orderly, coherent, and rational, Mormon theology and doctrine is held together mostly by belief in its central authority or claim to exclusive truth – i.e., “the party line.” If faith in that central authority is lost, there is little reason to continue to believe in any of the rest of the Church’s teachings. As would be expected from a self-protective organization, the more its truth claims are discredited, the more adamantly the Church fights to defend its truthfulness.

The sharp decline in the membership activity, mostly among young Saints, offers another element of the Church’s increasing defensiveness. In 2008, Church research found that only 30 percent of young single adults members were active participating in the Church.¹⁴ While this decline is in keeping with the general U.S. trend of young adults claiming no religious affiliation, it is especially alarming to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which believes that membership growth proves its claim to be the only true church.

Narcissism in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Here are some examples of how Mormon institutions fit the narcissistic model:

Grandiosity: Whichever Mormon institution under consideration, they all claim to be the only true church, the only church with authority to act in God’s name, the only church with the Holy Spirit (Holy Ghost in Mormon parlance), and the only church with a living prophet (who would never lead the Church astray).¹⁵

Requires constant admiration: Considerable attention and time in church meetings and proselytizing are spent on urging members to “get a testimony” of Joseph Smith’s status as a prophet; of the current church leaders as “living prophets” who cannot lead the church astray; and of their particular institution as the “only true church.”

Triangulation to divide and conquer: Narcissists often endeavor to pressure those they are trying to control by targeting their loved ones. One example is found in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ 2015 policy denying children of same-sex marriages membership in the church until they are 18 years-old and renounced their parents’ behavior. (Due to public pressure, this policy was reversed in 2019.)

¹⁴ “In Which They Fret Over the Young Single Adults,” YouTube video 50:03. Leaked video of a meeting of LDS leaders posted on MormonLeaks, October 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBH0450oaY0>.

Dominance: Pronouncements that the leader of the Church must be obeyed, as “God will never allow the prophet to lead the Church astray.” Leaders are ritually “sustained” (i.e., their call and authority acknowledged) at bi-annual conferences of members. Those who speak up to protest any particular leader might be condemned with the statement, “Do not speak ill of the Lord’s anointed,” or with Church leader Dallin H. Oaks’ saying: “It is wrong to criticize leaders of the Church, even if the criticism is true.”

No boundaries/need for control: These categories are particularly revealing, as narcissists or narcissistic institutions find any assertion of boundaries, difference from them, or even ordinary difference of opinion profoundly threatening. Mormonism is a lay church (no professional clergy) that does not even pay a janitorial staff but requires its members to clean the church buildings. Virtually all active members are given a “calling” to provide voluntary service in virtually any capacity the leaders deem fit. Turning down such a calling is considered unacceptable behavior.

Beyond Mormonism’s claim to their time and labor for free, members are required to meet regularly with leaders for “worthiness” interviews in which intrusive personal questions are asked. For instance, even young children and married adults are asked if they masturbate and are disciplined if they confess to doing so. Mormon life is expected to conform to very narrow but highly intrusive standards, including abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea; undertaking a highly regimented, two year proselytizing “mission” for the Church; heterosexual marriage and childbearing at a young age; substantial financial donations to the church, including a “tithe” of ten percent of their income, contributing to the maintenance of the local church building, and donating to a fund to feed the poor; attending several hours of church meetings weekly; participating in ceremonies at temples regularly; daily individual and family scripture study and prayer; and many other church “programs,” such as researching one’s ancestry and holding weekly “Family Home Evenings.”

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also places restrictions on where members can attend church services. Members are assigned to a congregation (called a “ward” or sometimes a “branch”) based on where they live, and while they are allowed to visit other LDS congregations occasionally, they remain under the religious authority of the geographically-assigned ward. If a member does not like the ward’s leadership, or if the leadership does not like them – too bad. If the ward’s geographical boundaries are redrawn, the congregants will be expected to leave their friends and transition to the

new ward. In consequence, with very few exception, members either attend the congregation to which they are assigned, or they do not go to church at all.

Although the behavioral expectations on Mormons are substantial, judging from the admonitions of church leaders, members are also expected to conform not only their behavior but also their thoughts, emotions, and spiritual life to the very black-and-white, narrow confines of what is considered acceptable to Church leaders. Members are constantly exhorted to consult the “Holy Ghost” - never their own judgment and desires – for all important decisions.

The most chilling example of the perfectionism and external control encouraged by the Church was given by Church leader David A. Bednar in 2016:¹⁶

The Church of Jesus Christ is not a social organization, and it is not just about what we do for 3 hours on Sunday. It can and it should be the doctrine, the authority, the ordinance, and covenants that becomes the central focus of our lives. If they are not, I urge you to consider yours ways.

Being a member of the Church effects everything:

Where you go, where you don't go. What you think, what you don't think. What you speak, what you don't speak. What you eat, what you drink, what you wear.

There is no aspect of your life 24/7 that isn't influenced by your discipleship and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

If it is less than that, you are living far below your privileges in the gospel. It is not a burden. It is not a chore. It is the only source of enduring joy, purpose, and direction.

To the extent that the Church achieves the kind of devotion for which it strives, it becomes what is considered in organizational literature to be a “total institution” - a place where a group of people is cut off from the outside and under bureaucratic control. That is, for compliant members, being part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormonism more closely resembles a prison orphanage, or the military than a church. Some of the fundamentalist Mormon groups, especially the FLDS, are even worse.

¹⁶ Bednar, David A. Woodland California Stake Conference, 24 April 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVv0FQkPHN0> . Accessed 6/20/2022.

Chapter 3: Beyond the DSM

From the section above, it appears that if Mormonism were an individual, it would meet the criteria for diagnosing Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Because the DSM is just an undifferentiated list that fails to distinguish between causes, effects, and second-order effects, it is only marginally useful in understanding narcissism, however. In this next section, I explore a few aspects of narcissism that are not found in the DSM but which provide insight into puzzling aspects of institutional narcissism.

Ability to Accept a Repair

As discussed earlier, attachment theory stresses the importance of repairs in the relationship between child and caregiver. While these ruptures are unpleasant for all involved, the rupture/repair cycle helps the child to learn that their caregiver can be angry with them but still love them. If repairs are never made or cannot be processed, the child never learns to tolerate the ambiguity of other people's difference. Differences will be processed as threats. Unable to process repairs to a relationship, such people will swing back-and-forth between adoration for the parent, partner, or friend, and anger/fear at their perceived rejection and abandonment.

For cultures, the inability to tolerate and repair ruptures is seen in revenge cycles. Institutions defective in this way will reject any member that disagrees with the leadership, not being able to accept that one can hold an opposing view and still be a loyal member.

In 2015, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints leader Dallin Oaks, speaking on behalf of the Church, made puzzling statements that illustrate such inability to accept a repair on any institutional level. In an interview regarding Church statements on homosexuality, Oaks said, "I know that the history of the church is not to seek apologies or to give them. We sometimes look back on issues and say, 'Maybe that was counterproductive for what we wish to achieve,' but we look forward and not backward." The church doesn't "seek apologies," he said, "and we don't give them."²¹ These statements seemed like a bizarre stance to be taken by a church, and they caused an uproar. Nonetheless, in a video interview given the next day, Oaks reinforced his position, saying that the word "apology" does not appear anywhere in either the Bible or the Book of Mormon.²²

Continuing this theme, a year later Oaks said,

Some who use personal reasoning or wisdom to resist prophetic direction give themselves a label borrowed from elected bodies — “the loyal opposition.”

However appropriate for a democracy, there is no warrant for this concept in the government of God’s kingdom, where questions are honored but opposition is not.²³

In a much earlier incident, Brent Metcalf recounts how he was called to meet with Church leader Thomas Monson. Metcalf had been required to resign his job working in security for the Church because of articles he had published critical of Church truth claims. Metcalf said that Monson told him that Church apostles, not his work supervisor, had been behind the firing. Metcalf said that Monson obviously felt bad about this, but told him that the Church had rules that prohibited him from apologizing, as that would make the Church look bad.²⁴

Narcissists always want to avoid looking bad, of course. Looking bad detracts from their power and image of perfection, and apologizing - admitting that they did something wrong -- makes them vulnerable to more damage. Car insurance company lawyers teach this when they urge people to refrain from saying, “I am sorry” at the scene of an accident, as the other party might use the apology as an admission of guilt. Without the willingness and ability to apologize, however, relationship repair is not possible. Self-protectiveness is exactly the opposite of repair.

Yet inability to accept a repair has devastating impact on human functioning. If an individual or institution cannot accept a repair, they cannot adapt to changing circumstances. They cannot grow. People who cannot accept a repair cannot compromise, empathize, or trust. They can only cling to power and slowly strangle everyone around them. Being narcissists, they are great at gathering groups of exciting, superior people, so in the short-term, it may look as if they have created something. But they cannot accept a repair, so the moment a difference occurs, their self-protective “fight” system springs into action.

Both Oaks’ and Monson’s behavior in these accounts illustrates the earlier point that individuals who may not be narcissistic themselves, behave like one when they are in thrall to a narcissistic system

Performing for the Audience

Refusing to make or accept a repair as part of not looking bad leads into the concept of narcissistic performing for the Audience. When I started attending Protestant churches many years ago, one of the first things to strike me was how little interest most of them

had in talking about the “truthfulness” of their organizations. When I once asked some Presbyterians about holding a testimony meeting, I was nonplused to discover that nobody knew what I was talking about. Immersed in Mormonism until my early twenties, I had never appreciated how unusual it is that the Church spends so much time and energy insisting that everyone kowtow to its truthfulness. Even during the schisms in the Episcopalian Church in the USA or the Presbyterian Church in the United States (both of which I witnessed firsthand), people were deeply concerned about the moral and ethical issues at the heart of the splits, but never talked about the “truthfulness” or exclusive authority of the denominations themselves, let alone that of their top leaders.

In contrast, Latter-day Saints and other Mormons are constantly bombarded with admonishments to get a “testimony” of the truthfulness of the Church, the Gospel, the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, the present Church leaders, its policies, etc. Missionaries work to convert people to the Church based on it being “the only true church upon the face of the earth” and are encouraged to say that they *know* the Church is true. Testimony meetings, held monthly, provide forums in which everyone is urged to get up in front of the congregation and proclaim this knowledge. Should anyone, especially missionaries, dare to admit that they do not really have a testimony that the Church is true, let alone *know* that it is, they are encouraged to say they do anyway. “A testimony is to be found in the bearing of it,” urged Church leader Boyd K. Packer in response to a missionary who confessed that he was not sure that he really believed.

Critics point out that this approach to proselytizing means that missionaries are encouraged to lie in order to convince people of a truth they themselves do not believe. Victims of narcissists will also register the blame inherent in Packer’s statement. You do not believe, he seems to be saying, because you have not repeated the mantra often enough. You are not doing what you are supposed to do, i.e., believe. But this statement also reflects what I suspect is another aspect of institutional narcissism: The Church does not care whether members believe the Church is true or not, so long as they say they do.

It may seem odd to demand people “perform belief” even when they explicitly do not believe, but the apparent contradiction need not be explained to a narcissist. Always on stage, everything the narcissist does is a performance before an imaginary Audience. The performance is given in hope of the affirmation that they are superior and therefore safe – but also provides the opportunity to monitor the Audience for negative judgment.

Who or what is meant by the narcissist's Audience? Although they often seek out audiences of real people for whom to perform – think of all those full-of-themselves actors or professors - the narcissists' true Audience is not made up of real people but of disembodied ideals against which they are judged. Think of it as a kind of warped, overly-defensive superego. The Audience is satisfied when the person behaves in a way that makes him appear to be a good, worthy, perfect, or superior person, a Sex-god or goddess, all powerful, etc. Perhaps the Audience is an idealized form of the narcissist's original caregiver, who would never have rejected the narcissist (for that is the way narcs will perceive any rupture) had the narcissist just performed well enough for it. The actual identity, values, and standards making up the Audience matter less than that narcissists are frantically driven to please it. If they can only meet those ideals, the Audience will applaud, all difference will disappear, and they will be safe.

The paranoia and constant self-reflection involved in performing for an Audience can result in a peculiar logic. One man badgered his parents for years to disinherit his brother, who he feared was trying to steal his share of their estate. When he succeeded, he promptly gave it, including his own share, to another relative. Why? Because keeping the money would make the narcissist look bad to the Audience. Keeping the money would mean that he had alienated his parents from their own son for his own selfish greed. The narcissist would receive a bad review, and that he could not bear. Instead, in his mind, he not only saved his parents from his brother's evil, by giving up his own share, he had proved himself a superior person.

Similarly, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' emphasis on performance of belief, perfection, and godliness, betrays the existence of a narcissistic Audience. This "mask" or "false self" of perfection is composed of the performances, behaviors, values, and attitudes that please the Audience.

How do we define such the Audience for Mormonism? One might expect that the Audience of a church would be God. But there is always something artificial and deceptive about a performance, especially a narcissist's. Narcissists care very much what others think of them, but what good does it do to perform for God, who knows their hearts and who presumably cannot be manipulated or deceived? God is not the Audience, but rather a kind of sponsor, a concept that the Church employs in its attempts to placate its Audience.

And oddly enough, although members are the actual, literal audience addressed by the leaders, they are not the Church's Audience either. Church leaders are indifferent to

what the members think¹⁷ while being extremely concerned about how they behave. This seems wrong. If the members lose faith in the goodness of the Church, what will be left? And if the Church cannot maintain its public appearance as a worthy institution, how can attract new members, without whom the Church cannot sustain its claims to truthfulness? Granted, the Church as a corporation can survive forever on its huge investment accounts, but a bureaucracy living off assets and without followers can no longer be considered the “only true church upon the face of the earth” anymore. Nonetheless, the badgering and belittling way that the Church treats its members strongly suggests that members are not the Audience but its caretaker/enabler/boob. Members are as an essential but untrusted part of Mormonism’s boundaryless self. Rather than consider members to be their Audience, the Church often treats them as untrustworthy actors who must be goaded into giving convincing performances.

No, neither God nor the members are the Church’s Audience. Rather, the Audience is the Church leaders’ the abstract perception of behaviors that allow the Church to protect its “good name” or public perceptions of its “integrity.” As long as Church actions are such that its “good name” continues, the leaders know that they have fulfilled their mission and will be safe.

Note I said “protect” the good name, not enhance it. Made up of self-protective values, for a narcissist the Audience is a conservative critic who can only pass judgment. The Audience does not perform, nor does it write new plays. Just as engagement of a person’s sympathetic nervous system releases hormones that shut down logical thought, an organism or organization focused only on self-protection becomes lost in aggression, anxiety, or paralysis. As noted above about refusing to accept a repair, the organization performing for an Audience cannot flourish. With an Audience that demands that the Church protect its reputation, the Church may perhaps despite itself add numbers, but it dares not grow in meaningful ways. The self-protective can only poison and divide.

¹⁷ Although the Church conducts surveys to keep tabs on members’ opinions, and acts on at least some of what they learn, accommodations to membership concerns are always manipulative. For example, when women began entering the U.S. workforce in large numbers in the 1970s, the Church’s initial response was strongly condemnatory. Surveys they conducted in the 1980s, however, found that, given economic circumstances, these women usually had little choice but to seek employment. In response, the Church found a way to continue to hold up mother-at-home as the eternal ideal, while allowing deviations in practice than allowed families to do what they needed to do to survive.¹⁷

To Whom Does God Give Authority?

If the Audience is pleased, it provides narcissists with the power they believe they need to survive. Power and authority are extremely important to the narcissist. Sociologist James Coleman's theory of rights provides insight into what goes on in the head of a narcissist.

Coleman understands government and religious polity (or structure of government) into three main categories.²⁵ In the traditional world pre-secularism, all rights and authority to rule were considered to belong to God. The question of how God delegates that power to human beings underlies the different governmental systems of both church and society.

At one extreme of the continuum is monarchy and the "divine right" of kings. In monarchical government, the king, emperor, or chieftain is regarded as the one to whom all rights were given. The monarch extended rights to those below him at his pleasure.

At the other extreme is democracy, or the rule of the people. In a democracy, rights belong to the people, who chose leaders, not rulers. The leaders exercise power only at the pleasure of the people.

In between are parliamentary systems consisting of hereditary aristocracy or elected republicans representatives (note the small "r"). The right to power is still confined to a select group of people, but there are a lot of them who must work together collaboratively. If there is a king at the top, his right to rule is tempered by accountability to that class below him.

Religious polity can also be thought of in these three categories. In Roman Catholicism, the ultimate earthly authority is invested in the pope. At the other end is congregationalism, in which the individual congregants hold the power and issue the call to religious leadership of their choice.

In the middle category of religious polity, authority is vested in the bishops (episcopalianism, from the Greek *episcopos*, or bishop) or the elders (presbyterianism, from the Greek *presbyteros*, senior or elder). Thus in an Episcopal denomination, authority is held by the bishops. The bishops elect an archbishop, but it is the body of bishops that control the denomination. In a Presbyterian denomination, a board of elders is selected by the congregation, and it is they who rule the church.

Theory of Power and Mormonism

Coleman phrases the different theories of power in terms of human beliefs in “to whom God gave power.” In Mormon traditions, however, God does not seem to give power to anyone at all. Rather, they claim that the rightful form of government was rule by God directly through the Mormon priesthood, most especially through the current “prophet.” As Latter-day Saint nineteenth century apostle Orson Pratt wrote:

The form of government given to man immediately after the creation was theocratical; that is, the Creator became the great Lawgiver. He appointed the officers of that government, established his own authority, and arranged all things after his own order, which is eternal.... Hence such a government might in reality be termed a theocracy, because God was the author of the laws, forms, and institution of the same.

After a period of time, men departed from God, apostatized from the form of government instituted from heaven; and, still thinking that it was needful and necessary to have some kind of government, in order to control the people and keep them within due bounds of subjection, they concluded to form and establish governments of their own, according to the best judgment and wisdom they had. Hence the various nations...instituted governments according to human wisdom.... some giving the whole authority into the hands of a ruler, called a king, an emperor, or monarch; others reserving a portion of the power in the hands of various individuals, termed nobles or princes; others leaving the form of government more or less in the hands of the people at large, something resembling a republic. But all these various forms instituted by man were entirely different in one particular from that instituted of God.

The Lord claims it as a right, in consequence of his wisdom and superior power, and in consequence of his having created men, to govern them... But mankind would not permit him to exercise the right which so justly belongs to him. They usurped the authority and denied the right of the Almighty to govern them, and thus originated all the forms of human governments which have existed upon this globe for the last six thousand years.²⁶

Note that, in the view of nineteenth century Mormonism, democracy is considered an apostate and undesirable form of government.

But surely, once they lost their Utah empire, the Church has put off its belief in autocracy until the Millennium, when Jesus will return to earth to reign for a thousand

years? Perhaps in terms of secular government, Mormons agree to abide by the rules of democracy. But in the churches themselves, authority is obviously still in the hands of “God.” Although members are regularly asked whether they “sustain” their leaders, members have no power at all. Should they vote “no,” they will be called in for “counsel” and in effect, punished. Members of the Church have no choice as to where they will attend church services, i.e., which leaders command them, and are subject to significant demands on their time and behavior and intrusions into their personal lives, thoughts, and beliefs. Although all conforming Mormon men (but no women) are ordained to the Mormon “priesthood” at age eleven¹⁸, even they have no role in selecting their leaders, and no escape from difficult ones. Even the offices of elder and bishop in the Mormon churches have limited and circumscribed discretionary power. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is ruled by a *Handbook of Instruction* that spells out appropriate actions for all conceivable situations. Like Pratt in the quote about, the Church seems to still believe that the purpose of government is “to control the people and keep them within due bounds of subjection.” Keeping the people close to them under control and subjection is very much the goal of narcissists.

Consider the explicit equation of belief and power in the following statement by Church leader James E. Faust:

There are four absolutes about which it is always appropriate to testify:

The first is that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior, the Mediator and Redeemer of the world.

The second is that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God.

The third is that all of the Presidents of the Church since Joseph Smith have been successors in that power and authority.

The fourth is that [the current] President... is the only prophet of God upon the earth, holding all of the keys, powers, and authorities of the Church in the earth today.²⁷

Here is where the paradox arises: While the top leaders of the Church, especially the president/prophet, have an enormous amount of power, they rely heavily on those formally-powerless members to do the actual work. Dun and Bradstreet estimates the Church has 16,000 paid employees. This number is spread over nearly 17,000,000 reported members and more than 31,000 congregations, none of whom have any paid

¹⁸ It used to be twelve, but Church president Russell Nelson recently lowered the age to eleven.

employees at all. Obviously, nothing gets done without the willing compliance of the membership. Equally as obvious, if those members cease to believe that the Church is “good” or true, their willingness to remain under control and subjection – falls into considerable doubt.

The membership is not the Audience any more than an individual narcissist’s spouse is his Audience. Neither kind of narcissist cares about pleasing the caretaker. Nonetheless, neither can exist without a caretaker either. All powerful while ultimately completely powerless, narcissists have no qualms about manipulating, threatening, or shaming their caretakers to maintain control over them. This insight allows us to understand everything that Mormon institutions do. Everything is motivated by the need to retain authority. Such an approach lets us quickly see that, even people who may be completely temple-worthy, like Kate Kelly, Natasha Helfer, Bill Reel, and John Dehlin, will be quickly culled from the Church’s ranks simply for questioning some aspect of the Church’s behavior or teachings. The more overt and public the challenge to authority – in fact, the more accurate the challenger’s claim - the faster the excommunication.

The “I Win” Theory of Truth

Well, really the “I Win” theory of everything

Identification of Mormonism’s Audience makes it easier to explain this next concept, the “I Win” theory of truth. “Theory of truth” is a notion from the field of epistemology, the study of knowledge. A theory of truth is the framework that each of us uses to assess whether something is true or not. People use different ways of determining if something is true or not depending on the circumstances and the information available. The more concrete and observable the fact in question, the less a theory of truth comes into question. In more abstract situations, or ones in which the “truth” may be a matter of opinion, the more alternative ways of knowing come into play. The three most commonly-used theories of truth are:

(1) CORRESPONDENCE: We believe that a claim is true if it corresponds to something that exists or that actually happened.

(2) COHERENCE: We believe that a claim is true if it is consistent with other things we believe or know are true. This theory underlies the notion of an alibi in law: If a person accused of a crime has proof that they were on at the other side of the state when the

victim was stabbed, the coherence theory of truth argues that they could not have been the one who committed the crime.

(3) PRAGMATIC: We believe that something is true if it is useful to believe it true. The claim is true if it works. When I was a management consultant, I always tried to frame the problem that people were experiencing in such a way that it could be resolved. That is, “the boss is a micro-managing jerk” might be a true statement, but if the boss was there to stay (or was the one employing me), this “true” statement offers no practical solution to the problem, and we need to find another truth that we can act on.

A Mormon example of employing a pragmatic theory of truth is found in my experience when I took geology at BYU. The class memorized the dates of the geological eras and periods (“Jurassic period: 201.3 to 145.0 million years ago”) and took a bus one Saturday driving around Utah looking at geological formations and hunting for fossils. The classroom had cabinets full of smaller fossils, including one that some erudite vandal had labeled, “Terry Trilobite.” Trilobites had their heyday during the 250 million year between 250 and 500 million B.C.E.¹⁹ Pragmatically, no mention was made in class of the belief held by most Mormons that the earth was only 6,000 years old and that nothing died before Adam.

Narcissists, whose cognitive capacity is easily overwhelmed by a self-defensive need to dominate, have their own theory of truth. As George Simon writes, “[A]ggressive personalities are overly prone to fight in any potential conflict. Their main objective in life is “winning” and they pursue this objective with considerable passion.”²⁸ For them, concern about truth is perhaps, like Leona Helmsley’s quip about taxes, only for little people. Like you and me. And truth can be easily discarded if it gets in the way. If a fact or situation does not support a pathological’s superiority, it is not worth bothering with.²⁰ I call this the “I Win” theory of truth.

Calling this way of processing reality “I Win” captures the narcissist’s compelling drive to be dominant and in control. For an institution, reality must always be defined in such a way that the institution’s authority, pre-eminence, good name, and control is maintained. Without this authority, pre-eminence, good name, and control, narcissists,

¹⁹ It is silly to say “B.C.E.” when talking of a period of time that vast, but I couldn’t think of another way to end that sentence.

²⁰ One might argue that the “I Win” theory of truth is just a sub-set of pragmatic theory, but I find it more useful to consider it separately.

whether individual or corporate, fears they will perish. What actually happened is of little importance to them. Narcissists will lie almost reflexively to maintain dominance.

An example of this is found in one narcissistic husband's complaint, whenever he and his wife disagreed, that his wife's superior memory of events was "unfair." After all, it is hard to win an argument when the other person has facts on their side. Or perhaps I should say, it is harder to gaslight the other person if they remember reality differently. (I discuss gaslighting later but briefly here, to "gaslight" someone is to behave in such a way as to cause the target to question their reality.) This perspective makes no sense if one understands truth to be what actually happened (correspondence theory). If an accurate recall of the facts takes the win away from the narcissist, however, then the other person is obviously cheating. What is astonishing is that how narcissists will be so blatant in their complaints when they are prevented from forcing their version of reality onto other people. The disregard for reality inherent in the "I Win" theory is often so bewildering to the other person that they may accept the blame, get sidetracked into an argument about their memory, or simply withdraw from the discussion in confusion.

The Audience versus the Truth

In 20XX, podcaster Bill Reel was summoned to a Church courts excommunication court, Reel presented irrefutable evidence for the truthfulness of the historical evidence disproving the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. XXXX what else? The authorities at his court agreed that he was correct. But they excommunicated him anyway

In virtually all cases, the LDS Church's treatment of historical and other information damaging to its truth claims betrays not an interest in what actually happened but rather their defensive drive to "preserve the good name of the Church" and so maintain dominance and authority. As Church Historian, future LDS President Joseph Fielding Smith is reputed to have cut Joseph Smith's 1832 account of his First Vision (which was inconsistently with later versions and with LDS doctrine) out of the notebook in which it was written and hidden it from public view. Geneticist Simon Southerton and anthropologist Thomas Murphy, both of whom published academic works on DNA evidence disproving Book of Mormon claims that Native Americans are descendants of ancient Hebrews, were excommunicated or threatened with excommunication for making these facts known. Sex therapist Natasha Helfer was excommunicated for upholding professional standards that contradicted Church teachings condemning masturbation. Other scholars have been subject to Church discipline for their honest presentation of Mormon history.

As historian Allen Roberts sums up regarding the excommunication of historian D. Michael Quinn, he “was not excommunicated because his history writing was inaccurate. He was cut off because his findings did not reinforce pictures the church has painted of its past.”

. Apparently, the Audience does not care about the truth if the truth tarnished the good name of the Church.

The Church’s War on Truth

In an address to Church educators, late Church leader Boyd K. Packer’s captured the essence of the “I Win” theory with his statement, “Some things that are true are not very useful.” He went on to forbid his audience to teach controversial aspects of Mormon history. The title of his talk -- “The Mantle is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect” – conveys leadership’s perspective on the issue, as well as the conundrum it poses for academics. “The mantle” refers to authority passed down to the current prophet of the Church from Joseph Smith, and “the intellect” refers, apparently, to the professional training of Packer’s audience. “There is a temptation for the writer or the teacher of Church history to want to tell everything,” Packer said, “whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not.” However, a “member of the church ought always, particularly if he is pursuing extensive academic studies, to judge the professions of man against the revealed word of the Lord.”²⁹ For Packer, an educator in the Church system does not teach what actually happened, but rather becomes a one-sided advocate for the Church. Anything less than this is to be a destroyer of faith, in league with “the enemy.” Such traitors should not expect to be paid. Further, Packer warned, “such conduct does not go unnoticed in the eternal scheme of things.”³⁰

A few years later, Church leader Dallin Oaks, a former Utah Supreme Court Justice and as of this writing, next in line for the presidency of the Church, also said regarding the teaching of Church history, “Not everything that is true is useful.” When questioned about it on a PBS special, *The Mormons*, Oaks explained what he meant by un-useful truth: “I am a lawyer, and I hear something from a client. It’s true, but I’ll be disciplined professionally if I share it because it’s part of the attorney-client privilege.”²¹

Unfortunately for Oaks, his use of attorney-client privilege as an example of an un-useful truth does not work. The information to be suppressed is only deemed “un-

useful” to the defense because it will prove his client guilty. It would presumably be very useful to the prosecutor.

Attorney-client privilege is not about either truth or usefulness. Attorney-client privilege is about guaranteeing the accused’s Constitutional right to representation. Oak’s example could be viewed as a piece of misdirection designed to get his listeners thinking that he had explained his statement about “usefulness” when he really had not. But ironically, his example does illustrate the “I Win” theory of truth. Invoking attorney-client privilege to avoid disclosing information is a defensive move - and being defensive is the heart and soul of narcissism. Oak’s position as a lawyer charged with defending the Church explains why so many of the things he says sound narcissistic.

Bear in mind that concepts such as “truth” or “compassion” are abstract and as such, beyond the capacity of most narcissists. Even if they do learn to avoid getting caught in outright lies, they do not have any allegiance to these sometimes-inconvenient notions. They are bewildered or antagonized by versions of the facts that do not ensure their triumph and are surprisingly oblivious to the fact that insisting on their version of reality does not make it so. Like the wife’s superior memory, any proof of a reality that challenges the narcissist’s coming out on top is unfair.

Gaslighting

In the film “Gaslight,” a villainous man marries an innocent young woman and attempts to convince her that she is crazy. The word has now come to mean attempts to redefine a person’s reality and view of themselves. For example, a narcissist might cry on his partner’s shoulder about how much he loves her but is so hurt that she seems to dislike him. Not understanding just what she is doing that makes him think she dislikes him, the confused partner becomes convinced that she is an unaffectionate and unloving spouse. One narcissistic father convinced both his wife and son that they had no compassion. When the son mentioned this to a friend, the friend expressed astonishment, telling him that he was the person everyone went to when they needed sympathy. Narcissists tell spouses, partners, children, co-workers regularly that they are: not good enough, not affectionate enough, that no one is interested in their art, that they are too flirtatious or loud, that they have no sense of humor or style, that they are unkind, that they are frigid, that they are spendthrifts or lazy. Eventually, when someone who claims to love you says (or worse, implied) these things, the targets come to believe them.

Narcissists will say anything to maintain their superiority over other people, to cajole them into remaining under their control. Even after their victims manage to escape, rebuilding themselves takes time. As Sandra Brown advises women who have escaped pathological love relationships, their first job after getting out of the relationship is to reclaim the person they were before they met their abuser.

Most people would agree that no one has the right to redefine someone else's reality and sense of self. To do so is to violate their integrity as a human being. But can you already see the problem when the concept of gaslighting is applied to a religious institutions? A big part of why religious institutions exist is to define reality for its adherents. How do individuals draw a line in allowing religion's version of reality to define them? Disallowing the personal boundaries of their adherents, narcissistic institutions' gaslighting is particularly insidious. Always, the things narcissists tell their victims are negative, always intended to keep them down and subordinate to the narcissist. How do members get back to being the people they really are when they are constantly being told that even God thinks they are not good enough and always demands more?

Impact on the members of a narcissistic organization:

FOG and Complex Post-Traumatic Stress

Confused by gaslighting, misdirection, and manipulation, victims spiral into a fog in which even simple activities become problematic. The acronym, FOG, which stands for "fear, obligation, and guilt," describes the impact of narcissists, individual or corporate, on their targets.

Under the leadership of Warren Jeffs, members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, were taught that if they did everything – *everything* -- they were told, they would someday become gods and goddesses. But if they did anything – *anything* – wrong, including wearing red clothing or using the word "fun," their souls would be taken apart and recycled to make other souls. Jeffs took this variation on traditional Mormon doctrine to an extreme in his determination to keep his community under his control. Yet, except for the part about having one's soul recycled and Jeffs' peculiar aversions to red, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints uses the same basic kiss-kick theology to demand obedience and conformity from its members.

In one of his last public pronouncements, Joseph Smith taught that God was once a man, and that human destiny was also to become gods.²² As this theology was later developed and integrated with Smith's previous teachings, Mormon theology taught that, in order to achieve such glory, called exaltation in the celestial kingdom, people had to (1) be baptized into the Mormon church, (2) participate in Mormon temple ceremonies, (3) be married in the temple for time and eternity, and (4) "endure to the end."²³ "Enduring to the end," or as recently phrased, remaining on the "covenant path" requires that those to be exalted continue to obey all the Church rules, including remaining chaste and faithful within heterosexual marriage, observing the dietary restrictions known as the "Word of Wisdom," paying the Church ten percent of their income, and more. Couples who meet these requirements are promised that their children will be "sealed" to them. Not only will their family continue to live together forever, such exalted couples, as gods, will continue to have spirit offspring and will create and populate their own worlds. Although LDS Church leaders, apparently in embarrassment by having such theology made public in *The Book of Mormon, the Musical*, have backpedaled on doctrines about humans "getting their own planets," beliefs on eternal marriage, eternal offspring – and eternal sex – continue. Such blessings, however, are only for the faithful, who remain on the "covenant path," i.e., continue in strict obedience to Church directives. Not only will those who do not do all these things not become gods, but they will also not be with their loved ones in eternity. Kick.²⁴

FOG: Fear – where will you go? There is no life outside Verona. Ultimate triangulation: You will not be with your family if you leave. Catastrophizing, cognitive distortions. Narcissistic institutions are incapable of compassion, compromise. Must win. Will never back down, never apologize. If you are waiting for vindication, you will never get it.

Obligation – Gratuitous costs (Word of Wisdom, polygamy, marriage, childbearing. Why would God care if you have a cup of tea? Why does God care if you

²² Reading the talk in which these ideas were given, the "King Follet Discourse," will make your head spin.

²³ Originally, and still in groups like the FLDS, these requirements included being part of a plural or polygamous marriage as well.

²⁴ Note that although Mormonism talks a great deal about Jesus and the atonement, this emphasis on Christ screens the fact that its unique doctrine places Joseph Smith above Jesus. Jesus offers salvation from sin, but Mormonism promises of a higher salvation, exaltation, that can only be realized through the Mormon rituals introduced by Smith and controlled by his ecclesiastical heirs.

are married? In the Bible, marriage and children are blessings, not commandments.)

Endless meetings

Guilt – demands of perfection. “Choose to believe.”

Blame – Anything you do right challenges the narcissist, so he must quibble. Narcissists have to win and to be right at all costs. Therefore they reflexively blame other people for everything. If you don’t believe, it is your fault. If you don’t feel the Spirit, work harder. Read the scriptures.

This grandiose vision of the individual’s potential for eternal happiness, combined with threats of isolation and sexlessness if they fail to obey perfectly, creates a culture that demands perfection. If promises and threats for the next life are not enough to make members obsessed with their behavior, the society in which active Mormons live subjects them to social monitoring and judgment. Fear-based theology blends into obligation to behave perfectly, engendering guilt when members cannot meet the standards of perfection set for them.

Interacting with narcissists creates in their partners (especially children) a strong sense of never being good enough. Because preserving their public image matters so much to a narcissist, narcissists themselves tend to perfectionism. Since the behavior and accomplishments of family members reflect on them, narcissists also demand that their spouses and children always be perfect (although it does not go over well with the narcissist when a family member surpasses them in some area; narcissist’s representatives must be beyond reproach while allowing the narcissist to remain superior). This pressure results in members’ feeling that they will never be good enough. At the extreme, that can lead to suicidal ideation. I strongly recommend “Mormonism and the Pursuit of Perfection,” by Donna Bevan-Lee (2017)³¹ in which she provides a background for Mormon perfectionism, for a fully understanding of the theological factors underlying this perfectionism. She wrote:

the link between perfectionism and suicide is well-established. In fact, a 2014 review of research³² found a that suicidal thoughts were even more strongly linked to perfectionism than they were to feelings of hopelessness, especially perfectionism resulting from “chronic exposure to external pressures to be perfect (i.e. socially prescribed perfectionism).” In response to the spike in suicides, the Mormon Church has begun to address the danger caused by perfectionism, producing a video titled “Perfectionism: Will I Ever Be Good

Enough?"²⁵ and disseminating Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's speech to the 2017 general conference, titled "Be Ye Therefore Perfect — Eventually."²⁶

Beyond these institutional expectations of perfection, however, I think that those in thrall to a narcissist become perfectionistic because of the narcissist's pattern of blaming the people close to them. Themselves driven by fear of being less than perfect, and terrified of being found at fault when something goes wrong, narcissists reflexively blame others. Since accusing another person directly might start an argument, which narcissists cannot risk, such blame is often subtle or even misdirected. This subtlety creates confusion in the people close to the narcissist, who may feel guilty in response to the covert blame but do not understand why they feel blamed or what they have done. The blamed live in a cloud of FOG, spending the next hours or days trying to figure out what just happened. Or narcissists attempt to get their way by claiming that they did whatever it was to which their partner objected because that is what the partner wanted. For example, in a Mormon Stories podcast, a man summoned to a "membership counsel" (the new term, apparently, for excommunication hearings) inquired repeatedly about the grounds for the proceedings. The bishop conducting the hearing actively avoided answering the question, instead repeatedly claiming that they were withdrawing his membership because that was what the man wanted.³³

In turn, people who interact frequently with narcissists experience a disproportionate panic when they do make a mistake. After all, they are punished when the narcissist makes a mistake, and punished when the narcissist wants to feel superior. Narcissists use fabricated blame so effectively that the partner panics at the thought of the damage they will do with evidence of an actual failing. And maybe, they fear, they are guilty of all the other things of which they have been accused.

The emphasis on perfection and the individual's consequence believe that they will "never be good enough" appears to lead to depression. Residents of heavily- Mormon dominated Utah are prescribed antidepressant drugs more than those of any other state and at twice the national average *

²⁵www.reddit.com/r/Mormonism/comments/chp08z/perfectionism_will_i_ever_be_good_enough_by_the/. Ironically, the young woman talking about perfectionism in this video was concerned about her performance as a swimmer. She finds a solution to her anxieties by going to church.

²⁶ <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2017/10/be-ye-therefore-perfect-eventually?lang=eng&clang=swe>. .. which also dismisses the problem of perfectionism by encouraging members to follow Church practices.

Trying to reconcile the narcissist's later hostility with the survivor's emotional perception of being loved puts a huge burden on her. Sandra Brown says that overcoming that confusion is key to recovering from the pathological relationship. But when the experts tell us that he never loved us, that he worked hard to deceive us and take us captive, and that we should just accept this as part of his pathology and get over it, we feel not just confused but also invalidated. As Kendall says, "If [my perceptions of being loved] weren't real, it makes me feel like I am as crazy as Ted was."

As I look at narcissism from the perspective of polyvagal and attachment theory, I think that the narcissist does/did love us. Our feelings of being adored was true. But while this love is profound and compelling, the "love" of which a narcissist is capable is the very basic attachment found in infants. *The narcissist loved us, but it is the love of an infant for its mother.*

The love that an infant has for its mother is nothing to be sneezed at. I deeply cherish my children's love for me. But this attachment is not a mature love. In the same way, narcissists love dearly, but it is not a morally or spiritually mature love. Neither a child's love nor a narcissist's is entirely safe love for its object. A child can love its mother, but still hit her, pull her hair, push her away, or scream "I hate you." Mature love, which might be labeled empathy, compassion, concern for the other, self-sacrificing love, or *agape*, is an abstraction, and abstract thought is an ability that small children do not have.

Complex -Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD)

Chronic exposure to fear, obligation, and guilt can be one of the precipitating causes of complex or chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD).

C-PTSD differs from PTSD. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is the term used to describe the brain's response following a major traumatic experience. Trauma is a terrifying, life-threatening event, whether we experience it ourselves or witnessing another person suffer it. Examples of major trauma include being in a major car accident, experiencing a violent assault, surviving a natural disaster, or witnessing someone else's violent death. In PTSD, the person experiencing the trauma suffers from intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, troubled sleep, feelings of worthlessness, avoidance of situations that remind them of the trauma, problems with memory or concentration, feelings of guilt, and more. Untreated, these symptoms may persist for months or years.

Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) is another form of trauma-induced stress. As it is not yet formally recognized and codified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, definitions of C-PTSD vary. An important component of the definition, however, is that it results from on-going traumas that the victims are unable to escape or to which they cannot see an end. For example, children who are repeatedly abused by caregivers, victims of domestic violence, people living in war zones, trafficked or enslaved people, may all suffer from C-PTSD. The symptoms of C-PTSD include those of PTSD but may include difficulty seeing themselves, other people, and indeed the world itself as good and safe. Treatment of C-PTSD is complicated by the fact that the sufferer carries memories of many traumatic incidents, not just one.

Likely, most participants in narcissist organizations do not experience major trauma at their hands. The concept of Complex-PTSD, however, can be taken to include the subtle traumas inflicted by narcissists. Not all trauma is detectible. Trauma theorists distinguish between major traumas, called “big T,” and less-dramatic “little t” traumas.³⁴ A “little t” trauma may be something like the loss of a relationship, being bullied, living in a relocation camp, having one’s experiences invalidated, the death of a pet, a minor traffic accident, or having a job in which one must listen to stories of other people’s traumas. The person suffering little t traumas may not recognize them as traumatic events, nor do the people around him, but such small traumas may still result in traumatic stress. With little trauma, both sufferer and observer may downplay the damage being done and fail to take the situation seriously.

People who live, work, or are otherwise in frequent contact with narcissists, or who are part of narcissistic institutions, live in a steady rain of a little t traumas. Some of these will be overt and recognizable as such – the narcissist’s criticisms and put-downs, silent-treatments, and rages. Others take the form of unconscious neuroceptions of the hidden stresses inflicted by a narcissist – the narcissists’ signals of danger (fear), demands for compliance (obligation), and blame (guilt). Add a double dose of “guilt” to the mix, as narcissists not only blame other people for everything, they blame the partner for the effect they have on them as well. For example, a narcissist who has driven a partner to tear might complain about having to put up with such an emotionally immature partner. The partners may not consciously process the small insults and pregnant silences that undermine their self-confidence, frighten them, make them feel invalidated, or leave them endlessly apologizing, explaining, repenting, or praying for forgiveness. Nonetheless, the nervous system registers these small traumas as threats. Partners of narcissists are not safe, and the narcissist manages to convince

them (even when they are not convinced) that they are the problem, which adds another level of anxiety, guilt, or shame to the partners' emotional quagmire.

Shahida Arabi writes:

Survivors carry a sense of toxic shame, helplessness and a feeling of “separateness” from others, of being different and defective due to the trauma. They also bear the burden of guilt and negative self-talk that does not belong to them. Pete Walker (2013) calls this the “inner critic,” an ongoing inner dialogue of self-blame, self-hatred and a need for perfectionism that evolved from being punished and conditioned to believe that their needs did not matter. As he writes, “In extremely rejecting families, the child eventually comes to believe that even her normal needs, preferences, feelings and boundaries are dangerous imperfections – justifiable reasons for punishment and/or abandonment.” Children who experience abuse in early childhood have a difficult time distinguishing between the abuser’s actions and words and reality. A child who is told that the abuse is their fault repeatedly will come to believe in and internalize their lack of worth without question.³⁵

This description of victims of narcissistic control certainly describes the feelings of many members of Mormon churches. Because the FOG experienced by partners of narcissists comes from below the level of consciousness, they may not know why they suffer as they do. But eventually, subjected to but unable to escape innumerable small insults to their mental wellbeing, partners to narcissists lose hope, shut down, and sink into depression – C-PTSD. And while polyvagal therapists have found deep breathing exercises helpful in calming an anxious state, as Porges says, it is not at all clear how to re-start someone who has lapsed into a state of immobilization.

Neuroceptive trauma INTEGRATE THIS

In addition, what the narcissist does to control their victims is often ill-defined and vague, little “t” trauma, or maybe feelings so disperse that it cannot be singled-out, named, or even acknowledged, let alone treated. A close relationship with a narcissist, especially living with one, generates this kind of chronic fear/dread/anxiety. The narcissistic abuse community call this “ambient abuse.”

I like the “ambient” part of the label, but I do not think that the narcissist is creating these feelings on purpose. That is, while a narcissist will attempt to punish anyone they believe challenges or defies them, this horrible, shapeless emotional miasma is not what the narcissist is *doing* but is a projection of what the narcissist *feels*. In terms of polyvagal

theory, narcissists are people whose social engagement system does not function well enough to tamp down neuroception of threat. I suggest that this ambient emotional state that the narcissistic projects, and that those close to them feel, is a low-level triggering of the sympathetic “fight” response. The emotion is a primitive, undifferentiated mix of fear and anger, and both the narcissist and those around him find it distressing.

Narcissists are perhaps able to control these emotions for some time, but as they age, they seem to deteriorate. Donna Andersen surveyed 2,100 romantic partners, children, family members, work colleagues, and acquaintances of people with sociopathic traits and behaviors. She asked if those individuals became less manipulative, deceitful, or antisocial after age 50. Ninety one percent of the respondents reported that the individual was just as bad – and 52% said they were significantly worse – after age 50.

In the meantime, after long term exposure to a narcissist, a survivor becomes extremely attuned to the narcissist’s feelings and increasingly feels what they feel. I call the ineffable but very real psychological response to chronic exposure to simmering fear/anger characteristic of narcissism *neuroceptive trauma*.

Impotent entitlement

My ideas of “impotent entitlement” arose from my work in developing countries, where the plight of men in the face of economic development that leaves many of them behind is most pronounced. The 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, however, make it plain that men in developed countries suffer from the same problem. By “entitlement” I refer to widespread cultural beliefs that a successful man should have certain things in life. In developing countries, that is more apparent in the belief that men should had a wife – and not uncommonly in the past, wives - children, and enough money to support and protect them. Such a man was also entitled to the services and obedience of his wife and children. Once he has all these things, he will also enjoy the respect of his community, to which he is also entitled, and will be considered a man. In contrast, until he marries and has a son, even if he is 40-years-old, in many places he will still be deemed a boy, not a man.

Yet in the developing world, many of the things that men did traditionally to support a family – hunt, clear land for farming, small-hold farming – are no longer being done. There is no more land to clear or game animals to hunt; and while small-hold farming may feed a family, it no longer generates enough income to pay for school fees, shoes,

medical care, or mobile phones. When men lose that ability to support a family, they lose a great deal of what defines them as men. Still, narcissistic cultural norms continue to insist louder than ever that “real men” are entitled to the services of a wife and children and the respect of other men.

This is impotent entitlement. Too many men respond to this situation with despair, alcohol and other substance abuse, abandonment of families, “extended adolescence,” machismo, domestic violence, and self-indulgent, predatory sexual behavior. Their rage and despair is easily harnessed by narcissistic leaders. I suspect that much of the unrest in the Middle-East and Africa, as well as religious extremism and American groups focused on conspiracy theories (including far-right groups in Utah), can be traced to the impotent entitlement of large portions of the male population.

In contrast, Burundian architect and pastor, Laurent Niyonsaba speaks of how Jesus’ teachings, “frees men from the prison of believing that they are little kings.” Mormon traditions do not offer that freedom. While early Christianity challenged culturally-imposed grandiosity and patriarchy, most other religions (and later-Christianity) syncretized the gender division of labor and male narcissism, viewing it as “God’s will.”

Mormonism, with its early (and extremely grandiose) teachings that God is literally a glorified human male, goes even farther, insisting that “worthy” priesthood holders (i.e., conforming men) take on a damped-down version of men’s culturally-imposed burdens of pride, shame, privilege, entitlement, and superiority. In Mormon traditions, men are subject to grandiose expectations that they will:

- achieve perfection
- hold the priesthood, the “power of God on earth.”
- have eternal marriage, eternal families, eternal sex – and may lots of wives.
- be forever entitled to the services of their wives and children (Note: This entitlement for men is discussed only indirectly as an obligation of women to “honor the priesthood” and make care of their family their highest priority.)
- eventually become a god.

As a writer on exmormon reddit writes:

“The themes of being special, chosen and powerful are mainstay in the Book of Mormon. The grandest temple blessings are proclaiming one a king and judge

with power and dominion over eternity. Is it any wonder the church breeds narcissism? It's part of becoming a Mormon God." ²⁷

BUT – (and here is the impotent part) despite their endowment in the temple as kings and priests to God forever, here on earth, the very best Mormon men just go to a lot of meetings. The Church requires bland conformity, endless obedience, the devotion of much time to work for the Church, and that people submit to being grilled about personal behaviors that are no one else's business. This fits poorly with the grandiose prospects of an eternity as a powerful, divinity. As YellowFeatheredNurse wrote on exmormon reddit,

It's weird that the culture breeds a lot of self-esteem crushing things (making people feel inadequate), at the same time as giving people a way to shamelessly say/believe that they're better than everyone else. Gah, it's a mind f***. ³⁶

Indeed, the requirement that members take turns cleaning the chapel toilets would be enough to turn away any self-respecting narcissist. But it appears that the requirements of becoming exalted produces not narcissists but people with a strong sense of guilt, shame, and powerlessness. As I noted in the beginning, Mormons have a reputation for being very nice people, not narcissists. In fact, Judd (2012) surveyed a sample of students at Brigham Young University and found they scored markedly lower on narcissism than their non-Mormon peers.³⁷ Further, another study found that young adult members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were less-likely than their non-member peers to report having positive attitudes about themselves, were less satisfied with themselves, did not feel that they had as much worth as others, and were more likely to say they were "no good at all."³⁸

Comparing business students from around the United States with students in Utah, Stevens (2013) found that students who were members of the Church were significantly more likely than students from other parts of the country to use avoidance as a means of dealing with conflict.³⁹ Breaking his data down further, Stevens found that LDS students who were raised in Utah were more avoidant still. Avoidance is considered a defense tactic, one aspect of passive-aggression. Stevens writes,

²⁷www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/comments/1k3dns/anyone_else_think_that_mormonism_breeds/. Accessed Oct 4, 2017.)

Passive-aggression is the least common response option to conflict among the U.S. population at large and is typically viewed as an inadequate and unconstructive strategy....

A passive-aggressive person will generally deploy such behavioral tactics as: keeping one's distance and remaining silent or aloof; hiding one's true thoughts, feelings, or emotions; suppressing, setting aside, or ignoring issues that otherwise should be addressed; postponing or ignoring decisions; resisting change and otherwise championing the status quo; citing rules, policies, procedures, or higher authority as both a defensive and offensive tactic; and providing little meaningful or worthwhile feedback.

Stevens offers several suggestions for why Church members consistently employ an ineffective strategy for dealing with conflict. I find this one most persuasive involves the concept of "high power distance:"

This term originates in cross-cultural psychology and refers to the size of the gap between people who have high status, power, and authority within the culture, and those who have low status. High power distance cultures require high levels of deference to people in positions of power, often translating into restricted rights for the average person to question or challenge the status quo or the decisions made by high-status persons.

In short, avoidance is a tactic used by people who have no power, i.e., are impotent. Avoidance may be the only viable strategy for dealing with a narcissist, who must win at all costs. Even worse for the narcissist's partner, any resistance to the narcissist's dominance will be punished. Stevens continues:

To observe Mormonism's high power distance tendencies, one need only attend any LDS church meeting where a sustaining vote is called. Rather than serving as a referendum by members on the actions and decisions of church leaders, such votes function as little more than member loyalty tests. In all cases, uniform deference is clearly expected, and when such deference is not given—such as through the act of casting a dissenting vote—the non-acquiescing members are invariably brought before the very church leaders who held the vote. It is not the leader and his actions that must be justified to the member; rather, it is the non-deferential church member who must provide explanation for his or her decision to cast an opposing vote.

In interactions with Church leaders, which could be anyone above them in a vast hierarchy, ordinary members can never win – so why even try?

Narcissism and “supertraits”

Earlier, I wrote about how my daughter once asked me why everyone thinks Evangelicals Christians are mean, while everyone thinks of Mormons as nice. I suggested that this niceness of its members is more evidence for the narcissism of the institutions themselves.

This insight comes from Sandra Brown, a psychotherapist who works extensively with women who have been in love relationships with men suffering from narcissistic, borderline, or psychopathic/sociopathic/antisocial ²⁸ personality disorders.²⁹ Early in her career, Brown ran a personality disorder clinic. As she treated her mostly-male patients, she interacted with their wives and girlfriends, and noticed that they all seem to share certain personality traits. She contracted with Perdue University to conduct a survey for her using standard personality inventories and found that, indeed, women who were in relationships with men suffering from these kind of disorders scored significantly higher than average on those traits. Brown identified them as “supertraits,” which fell into two main clusters, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

“Agreeable” traits include being straightforward, trusting, cooperative, humble, loyal, having a high degree of tolerance and empathy, and a giving nature. Flexible and forgiving, people high on agreeableness may feel sorry for the “wounded” partner, even though they are abusive.

“Conscientious” traits include being dependable, reliable, efficient, organized, deliberate, self-disciplined, and achievement-oriented. Very loyal, people high in these traits will go the “extra mile” to try to save the relationship.

Often, women have been accused of seeking out difficult or abusive partners and labeled “co-dependent.” In fact, the early sociological studies on domestic violence focused on the qualities of the victims rather than those of the abusers. Sandra Brown’s work has shifted that focus to considering the reverse: It is the disordered men who are

²⁸ Each of the recent editions of the DSM has changed the label for this disorder.

²⁹ Note that, while not all narcissists are psychopaths/sociopaths/antisocial personality disordered, arguably those with the more extremely psychopathologies are narcissistic as well.

seeking out loyal and agreeable women who willingly undertake the caretaking the pathological desperately needs.

I want to add to the mix the observation that narcissists are attracted to other narcissists, but such relationships tend not to be volatile and not last very long. It may be that the narcissist/supertraited pairings occur not only because the pathological is looking for a caretaker, but because only the “supertraited” will remain in that roles

Mormonism's False Self

(from participants at Sunstone)

What does the Church want its public image to be?

Perfect

Its image is more important than the people

Protecting finances

Church= salvation

The only way

Happy healthy people

Family first

Trying to mainstream, not so peculiar

Church of Jesus Christ

Humanitarian

Inerrant leaders

Growing, all members active

Inclusive of everyone

What does the Church want the public image of its members to be?

Family focused

Void of negative emotions

Happy people

Prosperity ;gospel

Christians

Perfectionism and False Self or Mask

Most of the time you are blamed, you have done nothing wrong, but you still panic anyway. And if you do happen to be guilty of something, you really panic, because as bad as the groundless accusations are, ones that have some basis in fact are terrifying.

It is hard to live with being told that you are doing something bad all the time. So you must be perfect.

Mormon doctrines about perfection. "Be ye therefor perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect." Belief that members are supposed to strive for perfection. Do everything right, do not sin, "covenant path," do all the works.

"If this is not the only true church, why am I doing all of this?"

Identity: My own perception that there was only one acceptable way to be, that when we are perfect, we will all be the same – and that was not the way I wanted to be. That idealized sameness did not fit with my individuality and ambitions. A truer meaning of perfection is completeness, maturing spiritually. But Mormonism is designed to keep its adherents forever in a state of conformity. Must obey all the rules perfectly. Not concerned with simply not doing things wrong/sinning. Have all of this arbitrary nonsense that you also have to keep. Read the scriptures, attend all meetings, go to temple, FHE, family prayer morning and night, scripture study, journal keeping, search out the names of ancestors, go to the temple. There is always something you should be doing that you are not, because there are not enough hours in the day. So you are always guilty, and therefore have no standing.

Mormonism does not want you to mature. It wants to keep you small.

Underlying the exhortation to be perfect is the myth of perfection. It is a myth that conformity-perfection is attainable. Grace – there is no condemnation for those in Christ.

Myth of perfect families – damaging. Promised that if you do everything right, you will get married in the temple, your marriage will be perfect, your children will be happy and healthy and do everything right. So when any part of that goes wrong -whose fault is it?

Oaks – Always exhorted to decide everything with the HG but must be “worthy” in order to be sure that what you are hearing from the Holy Ghost is from the HG and not just from your own desires.

Black-and-white thinking

As narcissists view everything in terms of a self-protectiveness threat/not threat, their suffer from black-and-white thinking. This inability, called “splitting” in the psychological literature, means that they see things as either all good or all bad. There is no nuance, no understanding of other people, their beliefs, or politics as anything but black or white. The characters in the Book of Mormon provide a good example of this, being either without flaw or without virtue, except for a few characters who are all bad until miraculously, through no effort of their own, experience a dramatic revelation that renders them all good. Mormons then apply this way of looking at scriptures to biblical characters. If someone in the Bible is considered a prophet or favored of God, for example, black-and-white thinking can only see them as good. This misses what the Bible tells us about their very-human struggles (and poses huge problems when thinking about someone like Samson.)

In a *Mormon Stories* interview, Rod Meldrum (founder of the Book of Mormon Heartland Model, i.e., a Book of Mormon apologist) points out that in the Book of Mormon account of Jesus’ visit to the New World, he does not teach in parables as the New Testament recounts him doing. Instead, Book of Mormon Jesus just lectures. Meldrum says this is because the Book of Mormon people were ready to be told straight out.⁴⁰ Meldrum’s observation reinforces the contrast between the Bible, with its rich wells of poetry and metaphor, with the straight-forward narratives, sermons, and directives of the Book of Mormon. In the Book of Mormon, Jesus gives directives that could easily be put into a handbook of instruction. Jesus’ biblical use of metaphor, however, invites his listeners beyond black-and-white obedience. Instead, they must think about what Jesus says, must come to grips with the nuance and how it applies to their own spiritual lives and interactions with each other. I suggest that Book of Mormon Jesus just lectures because Joseph Smith is too rigid in his thinking to do metaphors well. Jacob 5, for example, is an attempt at a metaphor, but it is pretty pointless, being just a list of things that happen.³⁰

³⁰ I use Jacob 5 as an example because when I was at BYU, I took a course in logic at the same time I was taking Book of Mormon. I eagerly examined Jacob 5 for its logical structure, i.e., “premise, inference, and

Biblical Jesus said that simply hearing is not enough to understand. But that is okay, because Jesus does not expect black-and-white obedience. Flat-out directives and expectations of obedience to all the rules are the province of scribes and Pharisees. Instead, Jesus' enterprise is to raise his followers up to a new relationship with God, and that cannot be achieved simply following rules.

Why do I have this point under "Impact on Participants?" According to moral development theories, most people do not develop past what they call the "conventional" stage. People in this stage conform to authority, believe what everyone else believes, and follow the rules. Perhaps that in itself is not a problem. One of the effects of being in a narcissistic institution, however, is that not only do participants have only models of black-and-white thinking, but the institution also refuses to let them develop beyond it. The increasing numbers of excommunications of those members who want to nudge the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints beyond black-and-white thinking make this painfully clear, as does the fear and frustration of those who have somehow managed to see through to the other side despite the Church's effort to constrain them.

Reclaiming your power

Recovery from narcissistic abuse has become a big subject in the therapeutic and survivor/blogger communities. Getting out from under the control of a narcissist is not easy, and I do not pretend to have all the answers. I offer a few suggestions here but do not attempt to cover everything systematically. A good starting point is narcissistic recovery therapist Andrea Schneider's statement that to reclaim oneself from a narcissist, survivors "need to understand what happened to them."

Coming to an understanding of "what happened to you," however, is hampered by the narcissists' desperate drive to preserve their power and prevent anyone from suspecting they are not perfect, or in Mormon terminology, "true." Mormonism is a party-line theology. That is, its belief system is not a particularly coherent, let alone a systematic theory, but consists rather of doctrines, programs, and requirements held together by belief in its central authority of being "the only true church." For most people, once they lose belief in something that the Church insists is eternally true, belief

conclusion" or "if, then, therefore." It turns out that nothing that happens in Jacob 5 follows logically. I came away from that experience reconciled to the scriptures just not being logical.

in the Church's exclusive claim to religious authority can quickly be lost as well. Members are discouraged from seeking out information that discredits the Church.

Fortunately for members seeking to reclaim their power (and unfortunately for the institutions) the massive amounts of information about Mormonism is now available discreetly on the Internet. Therefore, do not be afraid to explore the wealth of books, podcasts, YouTube videos, and social media sites on the that are now available. You do not have to believe everything you hear – in fact, do not believe everything you hear – but the broader your exposure to the range of material out there, the greater your ability to discern truth.

But whether an individual accepts the Mormonism's truth claims or not is not the only factor in keeping them actively participating. In her 2018 survey of current and former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jana Reiss found that the greater the doubts members have about these truth claims, the less likely they were to continue to participate in the Church. Those who doubt the truth claims but remain active (seventeen percent of her respondents) were those with strong ties to the Mormon community, with family and friends who are active members.⁴¹ Those without such strong social ties were more likely to leave.

Personal decision-making

Mormon traditions make a big deal about free agency – after all, the Mormon “war in heaven” pitted Jesus against Satan as the champion of free agency -- but as the Orson Pratt talk about earthly authority quoted above suggests, what they mean is that members mostly have only the freedom to do what they are told. As the “kingdom of heaven,” ruled by the Mormon priesthood, he Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ goal is to keep everyone under “control” and in “subjection.”⁴²

It is for each individual to decide whether or not they wish to escape that control and subjection, but those members who want to reclaim their power must at least learn to include their own desires in their decision-making. This, of course, is exactly what the Church desperately wants to prevent members from doing. Consider Dallin Oak's warning:

In terms of priorities for each major decision (such as education, occupation, place of residence, marriage, or childbearing), we should ask ourselves, what will be the eternal impact of this decision? Some decisions that seem desirable for mortality have unacceptable risks for eternity. In all such choices we need to

have inspired priorities and apply them in ways that will bring eternal blessings to us and to our family members.⁴³

Members are urged to get spiritual inspiration in every decision, but they are only entitled to the spirit if they are compliant and obedient members who are already doing everything right, including daily scripture reading.³¹

Such “warnings” are just FOG. Making your own decision about where to live, or how to dress, or how many children to have will not affect your “eternal blessing.” And as a very wise man used to ask me whenever I fell into a narcissistically-induced FOG, “Who told you that? Why do you believe it?” When making a decision, it is okay to consider your own desires at least on par with what the institution is telling you to do.

No Contact

When dealing with individual narcissists, most abuse specialists advise victims to go “No Contact” if possible. No Contact is exactly what it sounds like: Have no contact with the narcissist. Often this is not possible, however, especially with narcissistic family members or someone with which the victim shares custody of minor children.

Grey Rock

The next option if No Contact is not possible is called “Grey Rock.” With Grey Rock, the survivor strives to be as interesting to the narcissist as a dull, grey rock. Keep interactions to the least possible; do not respond to the narcissist’s attempt to punish or engender guilt; do not make eye contact or get emotional. Maintain firm boundaries. Do not feel sorry for them. Much as you may be tempted to, do not do anything to flaunt their loss of control or otherwise embarrass them. Remember that with the narcissist, it is never a conversation, it is a competition. They are not capable of compromise and certainly will not let you win. Anything you tell them will be used against you. So tell them as little as possible.

Randi Kreger, author of *Stop Walking on Eggshells*, recommends a technique for dealing with emotionally-dysregulated/manipulative people that she calls “JADE.” JADE stands

³¹ For a truly blood-curdling example of this kind of FOG (fear, obligation, and guilt), watch the video, “The Lord's Side of the Line,” with LDS Church leader David Bednar, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftp4-kT9VSg>).

for “Don’t justify, argue, defend, or explain.” As Jesus said, when dealing with toxic people, “Let your yes be yes, and your no be no” (Matthew 5:27).

A friend of mine provided me with a good example of the usefulness of JADE in dealing with manipulative people. She has an adult niece who was sending her long texts, demanding to be invited over to my friend’s house to just “hang out.” My friend did not want her to come, having learned from experience that the niece would bring with her sister and their several ill-behaved children. The children would run wild in my friend’s house, pull things out of the cupboards and drawers, torture her dogs, etc. The nieces would drink too much and, oh, yes, before they left (and the true purpose of the visit), ask for \$1,000 for rent because their boyfriends were both in jail.

My friend was replying to the requests with long, thoughtful, detailed -- and dishonest -- texts explaining why circumstances prevented her from having them at her house. The niece would reply immediately, repeating the same request, but incrementally throwing in additional little zingers, like how much she loved my friend and how abandoned she felt by her refusal. So my friend would write back saying that she was not abandoning her, that she loved her niece, she just... you get the picture.

My friend showed me a couple of the exchanges.

I suggested, “Just say, ‘No,’” and explained about JADE. If that seemed too harsh, I suggested, say, “Sorry, no.” She took my advice, and after another long, “I feel abandoned” salvo from the niece, the text exchange ended.

I remember one of my teachers at BYU talking about trying to turn down yet another calling (Mormon-speak for a Church assignment). He already had several callings that kept him going to meetings literally every night of the week except Monday, which was supposed to be reserved Church-wide for a program with their individual family. The leader extending the call kept proposing a different day or a different time; my professor kept providing the details of how he already had something at that day or time. None of the Church leaders demanding my professor’s time would ever think to allow him to choose which if his many callings he was interested in doing, and it is against the rules to ask for the calling of one’s choice.

This kind of badgering is a typical of narcissists. Look at Joseph Smith’s pattern of badgering, threatening, and bribing the very young women and girls who he wanted as plural wives. By not allowing members to have boundaries, to say, “no,” or to even consider their own preferences when making decisions, narcissists steadily erode the individual’s sense of self and personal power. Saying no without explanation or

justification, even to people who bully you in the name of your eternal salvation, is essential to reclaiming your power. While I do not know if JADE will work in a worthiness interview, if you continue to be in situations in which you will be judged, respond briefly and without elaboration. Do not volunteer any details. Remember, Jesus told you that you could do this.

Cognitive dissonance

The narcissistic recovery community uses the term “cognitive dissonance” to describe the emotional pain of holding two conflicting ideas about a loved one. Sandra Brown captures it well as the war between feelings of “I love him/I loathe him”; “He is good/he is evil”; “I cannot live without him/I cannot endure another day with him.”

I understand what the therapy/survivor community is saying about the pain engendered by both loving and fearing a person or institution. As a social psychologist, for whom “cognitive dissonance” means something a bit different, however, I want to point out that the pain is caused not by conflicting *cognitions* but by conflict on a deeper, non-cognitive level.³² Resolving the pain, therefore, requires therapeutic techniques that reach deeper than logical thought. Using polyvagal theory (PVT), with its concept of neuroception, my idea of neuroceptive trauma, and neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor’s work on the “whole brain,” I explore a solution to that pain.

Recovery from trauma

Earlier I discussed big T and little t trauma. The good news is that trauma is treatable. The bad news is that ongoing trauma,³³ PTSD, or complex-PTSD required a different kind of treatment than is providing by talking therapy or prayer (which, when you think about it, is talking therapy with God.) It appears that the brain damage that trauma causes is not confined to the part of the brain that talks – i.e., the right cortex of the brain.

A trauma-treatment technique called EMDR (“Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing”) proves to be very helpful in resolving major trauma, often in as little as three or four sessions. Nobody really knows why EMDR works, but one theory is that trauma triggers the amygdala and hippocampus, part of the sympathetic nervous

³² I do not think that holding conflicting thoughts or beliefs is necessarily painful. In fact, human development theorists call being able to entertain two conflicting opinions “tolerance of ambiguity,” and consider it a sign of moral maturity.

³³ Although there is a tendency to refer to all responses to trauma as PTSD, for people who are still exposed to a narcissist, the stress reaction is not “post” but a response to active, ongoing trauma.

system. This turns off the rational, thinking part of the brain. Traumatic memories get “stuck” in the SNS, where they cannot be processed. In EMDR, the therapist stimulates first one side of the body, then the other (often by having the patient move their eyes from side to side), while the patient focuses on the trauma. Clinical psychologist Desne Doman writes,

EMDR temporarily slows your over-stimulated amygdala down and synchronises your brain waves helping you process the traumatic memory.

This suggests that during EMDR therapy the traumatic memories are continuously “reactivated, replayed and encoded into existing memory networks”. In other words, EMDR helps traumatic memories become “unstuck” and processed like normal, less traumatic memories.⁴⁴

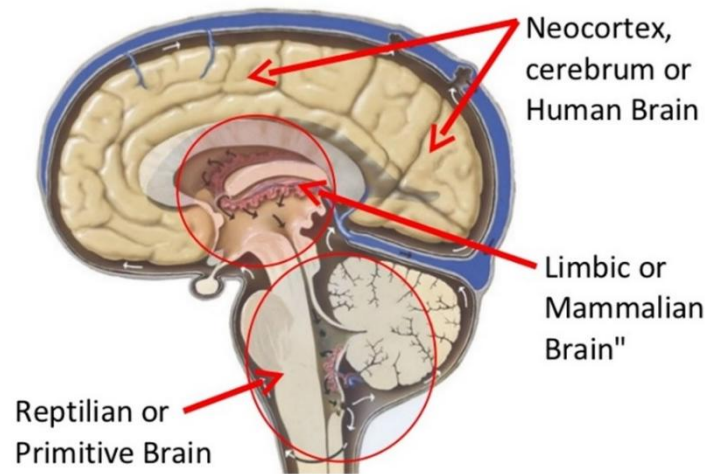
Sometimes victims of narcissists have experienced a one-off, major trauma with the narcissist for which EMDR works. Rarely, though, is the trauma imposed by a narcissist a one-time event. And the downside of EMDR is that while it works well for major trauma, it is less helpful with complex or chronic trauma responses (C-PTSD). Survivors of many trauma may resolve one, only to find twenty more just like it still there.

Jill Bolte Taylor, the whole brain, and managing neuroceptive trauma

Jill Bolte Taylor is a neuroanatomist who was on the faculty at Harvard when she suffered a massive stroke that shut down the left side of her brain. This catastrophic experience, from which it took her eight years to recover, gave her a unique understanding of exactly how the various parts of the brain operate.⁴⁵

Science has long regarded the brain as having three parts. The brain stem or reptilian brain, the most primitive part of the brain, connects the brain with the spinal cord. It controls basic bodily functions like breathing and heart rate. This hosts most of the autonomic nervous system, which I discussed with polyvagal theory, so (I am guessing here) collects neuroceptions and sends them along to the next system for processing. Sitting on top of the brain stem is the limbic system, known as the mammalian or emotional brain. The amygdalae, which responds to neuroceptions of danger by releasing fight or flight hormones, are contained in the limbic system. The third part, the cerebral neocortex, is the thinking part of the brain.

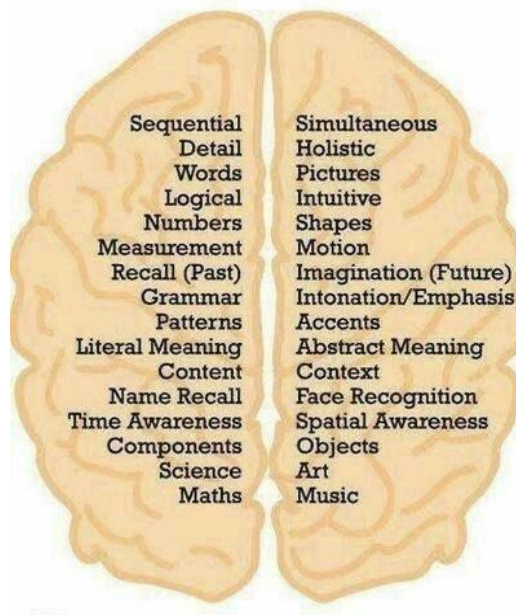
Your Three Brains



46

Another way to parse the brain is to look at it in terms of its right and left sides, or hemispheres. The different sides of the brain generally have different functions, with logic, mathematics, and language abilities located on the left side of the brain, and spatial perception, abstract meaning, and artistic abilities located on the right. In short, the left hemisphere has the words, and the right hemisphere has the music.

LEFT BRAIN RIGHT BRAIN



Quora.com

Taylor's experience of being a trained neuroscientist living without the left hemisphere allowed her significant insights into brain function. Most notably, she points out that there is limbic tissue on both sides of the brain, each with a different function. She divides the brain into four segments, which she calls "characters."

Character 1: Left cortex (thinking). This part pretty much follows the common understanding of the "left brain." The left thinking part of the brain has language, reason, and a sense of time, and allows the individual to function in the world. It contains the sense of right or wrong/good or bad.

Character 2: Left limbic (emotional). Taylor characterizes both halves of the limbic system as monitoring the environment for threats and calls them the "alarm, alarm, danger, danger" center. The left limbic system has a sense of time, however, which the right does not. As character 2 monitors the environment, it is watching for danger, constantly comparing what happens in the present with similar occurrences in the past. The left limbic system is therefore the locus of traumatic memories. With the left side of her brain not functioning, Taylor experienced no anger or fear.

Character 3: Right limbic (emotional). Here is where Taylor's experience provides new insights. Like the left, the right limbic system monitors for danger, but because it has no sense of time, it is not constantly comparing the present with the past. Because the right limbic system functions in the present, it is, in Taylor's terms, an "adrenaline junkie."

Character 4: Right cortex (thinking). Taylor writes that character 4 is:

the portal through which the energy of the universe enters into and fuels every cell of our body. This energy and its consciousness fill up our entire being. We are swimming in it, and it is swimming in us. There is no separation. Our Character 4 is the all-knowing intelligence from which we came, and it is how we incarnate the consciousness of the universe. (125).

Taylor talks about how individuals are often dominated by one character or another. A person who operates primarily out of character one, for example, will be logic, punctual, organized, and black-and-white in their thinking. A character 3 dominated person will be fun-loving, playful, and risk taking.

Here is Taylor's description of a character 2 personality:

When a Character 2 exists in a steady state of adrenal drain that can leave them feeling emotionally dull, their default emotions become distrust and fear. Both of our left-brain Characters 1 and 2 run an emotional storyline that is a zero-sum

game, meaning that only one player can win when causing someone else to lose. Characters 1 and 2 keep an ongoing scorecard and always know who's one up (196).

Character 2s under stress become "controlling, hostile, and hyper-judgmental." (197) Clearly, in Taylor's system, having a character 2 personality equates with narcissism.

While the narcissist/character 2 is clearly driven by fear and self-protectiveness, trying to interact with one costs the partner to deny their true self and behave in character 2 dominant mode as well. A lot of emotional pain and anxiety results. As Taylor writes, anxiety

is generally triggered by an experience or trauma that has already happened in the past (left brain) or we are anticipating that it will happen at some unknown time in the future. Anxiety feels like an overall body agitation that is accompanied by a feeling of despair or self-doubt. It is often triggered by a worry, fret, or concern that something unpredictable, unpleasant, or dangerous is lurking around, and thus we feel physically or emotionally vulnerable (82).

BRAIN

The consciousness of this microcosmic flow [of the universe] remains omnipotent and omnipresent. We never left it, we are never without it, and it is the river of peace that flows through our veins. We embody this peace when we tune in to the consciousness of our Character 4. However, in order to do this, we must quiet the thoughts of our Character 1, which is obsessed with the details of life in the external world. We must settle the emotional volatility and reactivity of our Character 2 and distract our focus away from the experiential sensations being processed by our Character 3. These three characters make a lot of noise inside our head, and we need to quiet it all down if we are going to expand in the consciousness of our Character 4.

Bolte Taylor, Jill. Whole Brain Living (pp. 125-126). Hay House. Kindle Edition.

Parked

Deviation Correcting versus Deviation Amplifying Cycles

The ventral vagal system acts as a mechanism to correction deviations from the norm. A deviation correcting cycle brings a person back to center. Think of a thermostat as a deviation correcting cycle. On a cold day, one sets the thermostat to the desired degree of heat. When the temperature falls below that point, the furnace turns on and the house warms up. The deviation from the desired temperature is corrected. Eventually, the temperature in the house gets too hot. The thermostat responds to this deviation from the desired temperature by turning off the furnace. This pattern of turning the furnace on and off is called a “deviation correcting cycle.” In a deviation correction cycle, the system is returned to normal or stasis. In PVT, the soothing presence of a trusted person stimulates ventral vagal nerve responses and allows the distressed person to calm down.

A “deviation amplifying cycle” on the other hand, is more like a vicious cycle. In a deviation amplifying cycle, the system’s response to input or feedback is to become more extreme. For example, suppose a distressed individual encounters anger rather than sympathy from the person to whom they turn to help. Instead of returning to calm, the distressed person becomes angry themselves. If the other person also responds with anger, the system spirals out of control.

For most people under stress, the sympathetic response of other people returns them to calm. But disordered people cannot process sympathy under normal circumstances. Instead of quietening down, they just become more stressed.

Early in a relationship (or infancy) narcissists may be calmed by normal effort of the caregivers. As the number of relationship ruptures build, however, the narcissist has more difficulty calming down.

“Truth” is not an easy concept for a narcissist, who has limited capacity to understand abstract emotions. To the extent that they are concerned about the truth, their conception of it is black-and-white and instrumental. With their only real motive in life to maintain their dominance, higher concepts like abstract truth seem immaterial. Being safe requires being in control in all situations. The narcissist can never be wrong, and that anyone who disagrees or challenges them must be subordinated. As someone once said about interacting with narcissists, it is never a conversation, it is a competition. In a competition, facts can be manipulated or disregarded all together, if that is what it takes

to win. This attitude toward the truth is not unusual in narcissistic, honor/shame cultures. In ancient Rome, for orators, who engaged in public debates with each other as a form of entertainment, winning was much more important than being correct.

From exmormon reddit, re: why people are leaving

Dude! So sorry this happened to you. And so proud of you for choosing to come home in spite of what you knew was waiting for you. I wish I'd had the balls to say what I really felt. I remember my companion and I being asked to present our religion to a university World Religions class. It was awful to stand at the bottom of a lecture hall and defend a religion I never really believed in. But at the time I didn't really know I didn't believe. I wanted to believe. I wanted to stay even though I hated how I felt. I thought there must be something wrong with me so I prayed more, read my scriptures more, worked harder, and learned more eloquent ways to explain why believing was the only acceptable way to live. All because I couldn't even think of the awful reaction of my immediate and extended family if I quit. I wonder every day what would be different if I had had the courage to stand up for myself back then. No matter. I'm out now and have more peace and joy than ever before. It may be hard to leave whenever one decides to finally go but the good stuff on the other side is SO worth

it. https://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/comments/wm7y0n/what_do_yall_think_will_happen_if_i_used/ijzkgc5/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf&context=3

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- ⁸ Ibid, p. 9.
- ⁹ Deb Dana, *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018. p. 7.
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