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Some Aspects of Narcissism Among French-Canadians

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That breaking of the unity of bodily feelings through sexual denial and the persistent desire to reestablish contact with the self and the world is the subjective basis of all religions which suppress sex.

Wilhelm Reich. *The Function of the Orgasm*.

When I accepted the invitation to give a lecture on the theme "Narcissism, Sexuality and Culture," I had no idea what impact my investigation was going to have on my practice as a bioenergetic therapist. First of all, I was to discover all the uneasiness that follows from the business of publicly denouncing certain abuses of a religious observance that we have identified ourselves with during our youth. For doesn't respect for the sacred demand that we take the greatest pains not to shock the believers' faith needlessly? Remaining silent also allows us to avoid stimulating the uncomfortable undercurrents of a secret shame: that of having believed in a vision of the world which would eventually crumble.

When this paper was first presented before the Ninth International Conference of Bioenergetic Analysis, it was preceded by a workshop intended to allow the participants to experience certain situations discussed in this lecture. Therefore I have found it necessary to modify the text. [Translated from the French by Margaret Langford, Ph.D., Professor of French, Keene State College, Keene, N.H.]

A large part of my clientele has been composed of former priests, nuns and monks. Moreover, a goodly number of my male and female clients had entered the Seminary, a religious, classical pre-school or a convent, only to leave before taking vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

Among my male clientele we must count all those whose immediate circle of friends and relatives (mother, aunt, grandmother and pastor) had destined them at a very early age or when they were adolescents for the religious life, that life of men consecrated to God. Even if they didn't yield to all those pressures when it came time to decide about their futures when they had finished school, these men were greatly influenced nevertheless by the Québec Catholic Church. Before the '60s the clergy had a powerful hold on Quebec society and the power it wielded helped orchestrate a vast sexual repression.

How do we then explain the relative silence surrounding the religious past of these people throughout their therapy? Why did these former religious say so little about that whole part of their lives consecrated to the service of God? Having come up at the very beginning of my investigation of this subject, these questions became the veritable sources of inspiration for the present paper. Then came the inevitable troubling question: hadn't I aided and abetted this silence?

Having pursued classical studies myself (a *Petite Séminaire**) within the walls of a secondary school staffed solely by priests, I can't plead ignorance. Educated in the Catholic faith, I've passed through periods of great religious fervor. I have also been the target of various pressures and manipulations regarding the religious calling. How could I have been so blind to a reality which seems so evident to me today?

*Classical studies represent eight years that end with a Bachelor of Arts degree and open the door directly to the university. One can start his classical studies after having completed the seventh grade. The "small seminary" (*Petite Séminaire*) covers this period of eight years of classical studies in the same institution. The reader should get a clear picture of that to understand the context and orchestration of both the repression and calling from God.—D.R.

Many Québécois of my generation have moved away from the religious practice which marked the first twenty or so years of their lives. This distancing coincided with the profound social upheavals which affected Québec society during the '60s. Although that period has been labeled "the quiet revolution," we must admit that the clergy's fall from power was exceptionally dizzying. Without a doubt, all these changes have contributed to developing what seems now to be a phenomenon of *mass occultation*. All those years lived under the rule of the Catholic clergy which master-minded sexual repression have been swept under the carpet. In my work, the questions I asked these people about their religious past often met with answers that were either evasive or minimized its influence. They answered that they had put all that behind them twenty years before when they quit going to mass. As if to stop practicing one's religion sufficed to remove the impact of the forces that helped shape the individual throughout his whole growth period. Such thoughts came to light at the same time as my awareness of my own counter-transference. It was becoming increasingly evident that the walls of my office had heard very little about the religious calling, the religious life, just as they had heard very little about sexual repression. These people didn't speak any more easily about their religious past than they did about their sexual difficulties: those two realities being seen as closely associated in Québec as they were before 1960!

As I was searching for the cause of this *silence*, I found my attention attracted by another factor: the influence exercised by the genetic point of view in the theoretical model of the personality. I am referring here to the presently favored therapeutic model which focuses on early childhood. This model invites the therapist to find the sources of problems in early childhood. And since my clientele includes psychologists, social workers, and teachers, this explanatory model already plays a part in their method of dealing with problems affecting them. However, influences and decisions concerning the religious and priestly vocation belong only slightly to the latency period and

much more so to adolescence. Rereading Edith Jacobson (1964), I found support for my idea about the influence of the theoretical model which focuses on early childhood. She voices the opinion that if adults relive so infrequently the emotional reactions of their adolescence, it's because we (therapists) might well be more preoccupied with reconstructing their early childhood than with fully exploring their development as adolescents.

Clinical work with my clientele confirms that the experience of having received the call from God affects self-image and self-esteem. And since the question of religious calling becomes most important during adolescence, my thoughts on this subject lead me to question the small amount of space that this very period occupies in psychotherapy.

Nevertheless, to illustrate the connection between sexual repression, problems of self-esteem and the narcissistic solutions that the religious vocation offers, we must first describe briefly the cultural context of the childhood and adolescence of the clientele already mentioned. We will pay particular attention to the influence of religion.

A Few Historic Facts

The power of the hold of the Catholic church has its roots in the beginning of the history of the French colony. Let's remember that during that period (1608–1760) *only Catholics* earned the right to come settle in New France. As the sociologist Marcel Rioux writes (1974): "This results in a homogeneity which, during a period when religious beliefs served to profoundly differentiate one group from another, permanently marked the evolution of this colony." "French-Canadian" and "Catholic" thus become interchangeable terms. Religion is an essential part of life and is found everywhere.

After the conquest by the English in 1760, the wealthiest and best educated class of francophone society went back to France. The clergy and the religious took charge of education. Such a

situation created an ideal climate for exerting religious influence over the next generation. For example, let's remember the influence exerted by the Little Catechism in the elementary curriculum in Quebec. This little manual sets forth the principal dogma of the Catholic religion. It is carried to and from school every day, and it occupies the most important place in the first six years of school. Children must learn this catechism by heart.

Conquered and dominated by the English, abandoned by the former ruling class, the French-Canadians who remained in the country sought refuge on their farmlands. Survival became their major preoccupation. Survival as a people, preserving *their* language, *their* religion and managing to live through the winter: there is the backdrop against which the melodrama of the "revenge of the cradle" played itself out. For that was what the Québec phenomenon of the proliferation of large families was called. Several of my male and female clients belong to families with twelve, fourteen, sixteen and even eighteen children!

The influence of the Catholic clergy made itself felt both in the socio-political and economic spheres. During the childhood and adolescence of individuals in my clientele, this same clergy had the power to orchestrate massive sexual repression.

Sexual Repression and Catholic Religion

The Québec child comes of age when he is seven years old. At that time he becomes responsible for his thoughts, his emotions and his actions before God. His status as a child of God doesn't have much weight with him because he is henceforth considered a *sinner*. He is initiated into the rite of *confession*. And since a saint sins no less than seven times a day, the child must learn to examine his conscience in order to recognize his faults, confess his sins, repent, promise not to do it again, ask forgiveness and expiate his sin through a penitence. All this is played out, of course, on bended knee, with bowed head, and hushed voice.

The word *sexuality* is taboo in and of itself. They speak of *temptations of the flesh, touching someone with lustful inten-*

tions, looking at someone with lustful intentions, and thinking about someone with lustful intentions. Repression has a vast arsenal of weapons—guilt being the most deadly. Committing a sin is the same as making the Virgin Mary cry and she has suffered so much already. It's the same as offending God in his infinite love. It's the same as joining Christ's torturers as they hit the crown of thorns with clubs the better to drive the thorns into his head. Some preachers and confessors aren't very light-handed. And since they don't manage to impress all children with guilt and shame, they try *fear*. To impress the thick-skinned and those who are reluctant to come to the confessional, they brandish the specter of divine punishment par excellence: *hell*. If you die in a state of mortal sin (and you have only to lingeringly touch someone with lustful intentions once to blacken your soul with mortal sin), you are cast into hell where you will burn forever. (When you finally imagine how long eternity is, tell yourself that this is only the beginning!) You can understand that in such a context sensitive children gifted with imagination don't have to wait for nightfall to have nightmares!

Self-Esteem and Controlling One's Impulses

Although it's true that the Québécois have always loved to dance, they didn't develop that taste dancing a two-step between masturbation and the confessional. In such an atmosphere filled with repression and sexual obsession, self-esteem depends largely on how difficult it is to control your impulses. Even with the help of bioenergetic therapy, it won't be easy to reconcile sex and the heart. For during all those years while that sexuality was taking form, masturbation provided the outlet to discharge left-over tension that hadn't been sublimated in a spiritual movement. And self-esteem fled by the same door each time that safety-valve opened! On that perilous road towards purity, we must repeat in unison the formula which will save us: "Let us raise our hearts to the Lord."

Jules: A Prospective Priest

To help you understand the attraction narcissistic solutions can offer in such a universe, here are a few examples from the life of Jules, a typical case. Seventh son in a family of fifteen, he lives with them on the family farm. Since the village isn't too far away, he attends the school where his ability is noticed. Docile, well-behaved, obliging and intelligent, he attracts the attention of the priest. He becomes an altar boy. His mother and his maternal grandmother foresee that he will become a priest when he is five years old. They talk about educating him to be a man of God. But the secondary parochial school is very far away from the village. He would need to live at the school. His family doesn't have the means. His father is reluctant to lose manual labor for the farm work; but, it is true that Jules doesn't have much of a gift for that work, as the priest points out.

Jules Enters the Parochial Secondary School

Entering the Petite Séminaire proves to be a great shock for Jules' system. He leaves his village, his friends, his family; in short, everything he knows, to go live as a boarder for eight years with priests as his only adult contact. Except for vacations, the only women's faces he will see inside these sheltered walls are the faces of the nuns who take care of the meals and housekeeping arrangements. Besides, this sudden uprooting takes place just as he enters puberty. Aware of the situation, his teachers give him a spiritual director and structure his time "religiously." His day starts with the morning prayer. Then mass. Still fasting, he goes to take communion—unless he is in a state of mortal sin! Then he decides to go to confession. Nothing easier: many confessionals are spread throughout the chapel! Once he admits his failings with the firm resolution not to repeat them, he becomes a child worthy of God and can rejoin the others at the Holy Table. There are prayers before and after the meals. Classes begin with a prayer and a few invocations. After recess, everyone lines up to say ten or so rosaries. Before leaving

the classroom to go to the refectory, they will also recite some prayers together.

The father superior often graces the study period with a spiritual reading. And let's not forget the Angelus. High Mass and Vespers are added to the list on Sunday. One or two retreats lasting for several days find their place on the school calendar. There have to be propitious times for the preacher to prepare his "brews" with sermons on purity and hell.

Women: a Threat

Let's remember the only Great Lady really present inside these walls is the inaccessible Virgin Mary, our spiritual mother who plays such an important role. They greet her fifty times while they say their rosary: a daily ritual. Anyway women don't exist in this universe. There are only virgins, mothers, and whores (low-life women!). Besides his own mother, the Holy Virgin Mary is the only feminine creature who wouldn't pose a threat to his future vocation. The other women have the bad reputation of stealing vocations. Jules will be put on guard because these women are temptation of the flesh incarnate. God knows that the flesh is weak! So, it's better to be abstinent. Jules will find out that, although talking about sexuality is forbidden, the priests are authorized to talk about impurity. Some relish doing so! The subject is so fascinating that we don't know whether we should talk about sexual repression or sexual obsession. Whoever doesn't remain pure and chaste shows himself unworthy of the love of the Virgin Mary, the model woman; therefore this is the same as showing himself unworthy of his mother or the girl he says he truly loves. But we are speaking here of human love and Jules is destined to a nobler, higher reality. Hasn't he been *pre-consecrated* and *pre-destined* to become a man of God?

Loss and Recovery of Self-Esteem

Perhaps this is why the demons of impurity beset our poor Jules. The trials of the flesh eat away at his self-esteem. He feels

guilty, ashamed, despicable and disgusting. And when his self-esteem is at its lowest level, at its very lowest, of course the infinite mercy of God is there to lift our Jules up. Once that self-esteem has been shaken by the difficulties of rising up, difficulties exploited to make him feel guilty and humiliating him, they will throw him a lifeline to help him get out of the muck. They will teach him to rise above these base instincts unworthy of a true son of God. *They entrust him with the key to the miracle of recovering self-esteem.* The humble repentant sinner shrivels up in a contracting movement of self-denial. There's the way to end all inner torments and turn towards the Way to Eternal Salvation. They promise him a future rise to the glory of a luminous transformation which will eclipse all megalomaniac fantasies which Jules has managed to imagine up to now. Because Jules has been baptized. He belongs to the large family of the children of God. He isn't like the poor pagan in the bush or the Protestant who has gone astray. There are even signs that God is calling him into His service. It is an honor that must be accepted warmly and with humility. He is at the right age to dedicate his life to an ideal worthy of him. Isn't the fact that he is the only one of his family to go on with his schooling a sign of his vocation?

Religious Vocation and Narcissism at Stake

Jules must devote himself to cultivating the virtues of faith, hope and charity. Since he has received so much from God, he must in turn be a generous person. And since he will be a member of tomorrow's elite, he must show himself worthy of those who believed in him. They encourage his intellectual development, but within clearly defined limits. Many books are on the Index and, therefore, forbidden. Any student found in possession of a book not approved by the authorities will be automatically expelled from the school. Jules understands immediately. Faith is a gift from God and you have to know how to take care of it. Therefore it is better to avoid reading the Bible and discussing religion with Protestants or Jehovah's Witnesses. Sex-

ual repression is associated with repression of intellectual curiosity. Here we have excellent conditions for confining someone within the limits of a dogmatic attitude.

Besides, dogmatism and narcissism make good bedfellows. Nothing like the unshakable certainty of possessing the truth to banish feelings of insecurity. As if we were using a jack we lift our self-esteem up several notches. In no time at all we find ourselves above ordinary humanity. Therefore belief systems play undreamed-of survival roles. We hang on as drowning men hang on to their lifebuoys.

Then imagine what will happen to our Jules when they advise him to leave the Seminary after a year-and-a-half stay! He didn't manage to be sufficiently chaste, he confided to me.

Ah yes! Jules chose to enter the Seminary after he finished his classical studies. Thus he undertook four preparatory years before entering the priesthood. Was it his wish or someone else's? He still finds it difficult to sort all that out. Still, his decision pleased his mother and his grandmother very much. There is an anecdote on this subject which really should be told. When he had been living in the Seminary for about a year, his family called him back to his dying grandfather's bedside.

I was quite shocked when I came into the kitchen where my whole family was waiting for me. They all got up when they saw me. I understood all too well that they took me for someone I wasn't. Clearly they expected me to perform a miracle.

You have a clear enough picture of the context to understand the narcissistic games that can creep into the religious vocation. To be one of the chosen by God, to feel called by God, there are so many experiences that can *consecrate* you, that is to say to confer a privileged status on you by raising you above the humble human condition. Isn't that promise of healing, that image of self as poor sinner incarnated in an abject mortal body, tantalizing?

The priestly sacrament marks the soul indelibly for all eternity, they told Jules. Must we add that assurances of eternal sal-

vation prove to be greater in a life consecrated to the service of God than in a life "in the world" as in marriage? Enough! Perhaps these thoughts worry only those with accountants' souls.

Religious Vocation and Love of Power

Should we see something other than the manifestation of supreme generosity when someone chooses the religious life? Isn't it a question of the pursuit of a worthy ideal? Jules heard many discussions about transcending the self and the pursuit of superior and non-material values. We must guide our lives by betting on what we have learned to recognize as the best in ourselves. The power games seem to be all the more non-existent since we are talking about a life ruled by vows of obedience, poverty and chastity.

A Québécois philosopher taught me a little formula which remains fixed in my memory: power is always where they say it isn't. In choosing the priesthood, Jules had in mind *giving* his life to God and placing himself in the hands of his bishop. But, with this gesture, did he not also become part of the most powerful masculine institution in existence at that time? We haven't forgotten that the Québécois clergy exercises enormous power over Québec society on all levels: economic, political, religious and social. The priest stands out in the crowd because of his singular dress.

His black habit commands respect. We always greet him politely on the street. He always says mass before his parishioners in his most resplendent sacramental vestments. They kneel before him on several occasions: to receive his blessing, communion or, once again, pardon in the confessional. The father even kneels before his son to kiss his hand on the day he is ordained. From high up in the pulpit on Sundays and holidays he speaks in the name of God and *proclaims the Truth*.

In his observations about narcissistic personalities, Lowen (1983) points out two principal characteristics: the importance of self-image and the search for power.

The Disillusionment When Everything Starts to Crumble

Jules experienced a crushing disillusionment when he was sent away after a year-and-a-half spent studying in the Seminary. His mother didn't accept this and his grandmother even less so. His grandmother wouldn't speak to him any longer and he didn't dare present himself anymore before this person who had once loved him so fondly. He who had always been held up as a model of how to behave for his brothers and sisters! His fall from grace is complete and therefore he cannot come back to the place where he was born.

Imagine what a great number of priests, monks and nuns must have felt when, during the '60s, the Catholic Church suddenly began to collapse. Wouldn't you feel dizzy if you saw a whole belief system, a whole organizing principle of your life, disintegrating? I'm thinking here particularly about Thomas, Albert, John, and Monica who left the religious life at thirty-nine, forty-three, thirty-four and thirty years of age. We must understand that the fall of the religious and clerical empire happened so quickly in Québec that we might venture to compare the phenomenon to the change in political power after an election. The social climate changed so rapidly that former priests and clergymen quickly understood that it was to their advantage to see that their past was forgotten.

Nevertheless, when you have been so near the sacred for many years you still keep something of the *consecrated* in your attitude, even when you try to plant both feet firmly on the ground. Disillusionment is accompanied by the feeling of having been deceived and of deceiving yourself. And when, regretfully, you see your youth go up in smoke, you experience moments of unrelenting solitude and deep despair.

After having put so much energy into satisfying your need for contact, love, tenderness and sexual needs through a spiritual movement towards the upper part of the body, you find yourself suddenly above a void. It seems that these vows of chastity, obedience and poverty leave their indelible mark on the body.

In more than one division between the upper and lower parts of the body, I have often been in the position of observing serious problems at the scapular and chest level. The ability to open your heart and let yourself feel a desire, a need, an expectation, a wish to receive . . . that capacity remains strongly if not irreparably handicapped. In such a clientele the sexual problems are enormous. I remember a former priest who was afraid that therapy would take away from him the one thing that made him feel alive: the times when he felt an uncontrollable urge to go out wandering, to search for homosexual contacts.

A Consecrated Body

I came upon this concept of the consecrated body when I was working with Jules on his sexual difficulties. To root yourself in your body and identify fully with your sexuality are difficult therapeutic objectives to achieve when you have been taught to dissociate yourself completely from this reality. This difficulty takes on a distinct quality when this body is seen as being consecrated to God. The word *sacrilege* springs rapidly to the lips. How can someone repossess his body and shake the hold of such a narcissistic position without feeling he/she is playing havoc with all spiritual values? How can he respect his own yearnings for that spiritual universe and still avoid denying a whole dimension of himself? Let's think about this for a minute!

Any attempt to grapple with these repressions and regain the unconscious calls forth similar games. The fear of sacrilege poses a double threat here: the individual can no longer sort out all the tangles woven around the spiritual universe as he has known it.

Shame and Wounds

I understand better now my clientele's silence and reticence about discussing their religious past. This silence hides very deep narcissistic wounds. It also hides *immense shame*. The fear

of committing a sacrilege encroaching on the domain of the sacred certainly contributed to locking this past up in secret vaults. To remove a repression about such an aspect of one's sexual life becomes a more dangerous task when one must liberate oneself from the status of a being whose body has been consecrated.

To unmask this past is to stir the ashes when everything has ended in disillusionment. Placing one's faith, one's enthusiasm, one's hope in a vision of existence and in a movement of self-transformation: that's a driving force which has motivated many adolescents. A better future glimmers on the horizon holding out the promise of a better self-image. That this expansive movement isn't always grounded will not surprise anyone and even less so, if you are familiar with the monolithic and dogmatic context. Nevertheless adolescence allows us to know moments of great fervor, to live these experiences of great opening out to the possibilities that the best in human nature allows us to see. The adolescent also experiences moments of intense resonance with the universe. It's the age of discovery and love.

Everything goes wrong when that capacity to experience such states of consciousness is used to enlist someone in a belief system such as the one I've talked to you about. In the aftermath of such conditioning, when the whole belief system crumbles, the most complete disillusionment follows. Self-esteem and self-respect are so deeply wounded that an almost final closing follows. At the beginning of his therapy, Jules showed himself completely incapable of letting his body experience any involuntary movement. My clients are handicapped in differentiating between the experience of "surrendering the soul" and the experience of giving themselves up freely to their feelings and emotions.

Minimizing the Importance of Adolescence in Therapy

I began this paper by confiding to you that I was hardly aware of all I was going to discover about myself and my clientele as I

thought about this question. I would like to present you with a final question which has not stopped haunting me: "Why didn't I take an interest in the adolescent years in my work as bioenergetic therapist?" It seems illogical in our understanding of the personality not to apply this energetic vision of the body to that period of such profound psychic, physiological, and endocrinological transformations. This stage of existence offers a unique chance to study the bioenergetic postulate which states that the amount of energy is a determining factor in the personality. The instinctual pressure of adolescence necessitates the development of new ways of managing our erotic and aggressive movements. Isn't it possible that the functions of charging and discharging have their balance affected in a context of sexual repression?

Adolescence should have fascinated me for a long time as a practitioner of bioenergetic analysis. Body changes are most important. In his book entitled: *Psychology of Adolescence*, Jersild (1963) wrote as follows:

The most important single event in adolescent development occurs in the changes that take place in the young person's body. Before these changes occur the adolescent is a child; after they have occurred the young person can have a child.

When adolescents grow four inches in height in a single year, they face a whole process of relearning how to coordinate themselves so they can integrate these changes. Why haven't we stopped to look at that period which cumulates major body changes—especially those of us who are interested in the relationships between the psyche and the soma! The more I ask myself the question the more puzzled I am.

The present study suggests the existence of an overlapping between the silence about adolescence in adult therapy and the silence that prevailed in my office about sexual troubles and a whole religious past. But the fate allotted to adolescence in adult therapy isn't an isolated phenomenon. Minimizing it seems to be commonly accepted.

If we feel so much discomfort at thinking about our adolescence, at rediscovering those states of great sensitivity and intellectual opening to the world, perhaps it is because *reality testing* which our insertion into the culture represents, forces us to close ourselves, to protect ourselves. Certain deep narcissistic wounds belong to this period of life more than to the early childhood years. To consider them as new versions of old wounds seems to me simplistic and reductive. For a long time psychological literature has associated narcissism and adolescence.* No doubt you have noticed that once settled into the comfortable *system of adult beliefs*, it takes events like the birth of a child, the sudden loss of a loved one, a grave illness or a disaster like Chernobyl (for those closely associated with it) to pierce that shell. We therefore have the feeling we are rediscovering a simplicity of soul and sensitivity which momentarily allows us to see life (*à travers une vision*) which seems so much more real, substantial and deep. Could disillusionment be an experience so like death as to cause this closing up? Following Becker, several authors think that the building of a belief system is of vital necessity, given the human inability to face death directly.

If we find ourselves so reluctant to relive the emotional experiences of our adolescence, it is surely for fear of finding ourselves so vulnerable again. Shame reappears rapidly and we are afraid of reopening very deep wounds because in this way we become permeable and very subject to the influence exerted by other people. To open ourselves in that fashion is perhaps also to risk once again feeling the fibers of our being threatened by that *desire* to believe, to propel ourselves forward and to awaken at the same time the profound disillusion and despair that had been stowed silently with our baggage as we embarked on our voyage.

*Following the presentation of this paper at the Montebello Congress, Welmoet Ponne kindly called my attention to a significant detail in the myth of Narcissus. In his text the Latin poet Ovid notes that the hero is *sixteen years* old when he goes through the key experience in the myth.

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