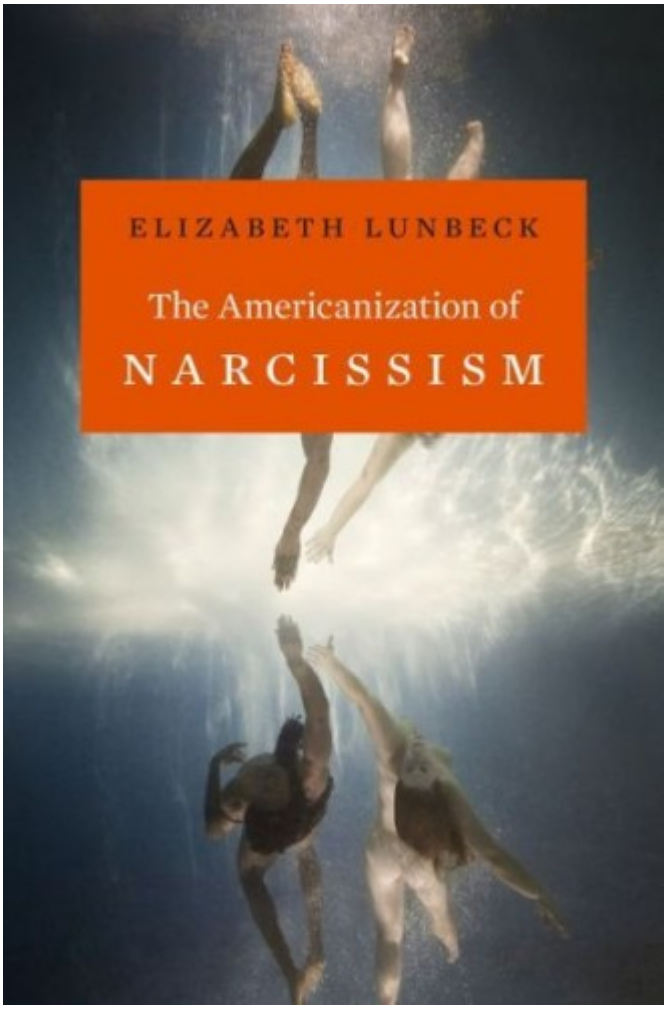
Narcissism is normal

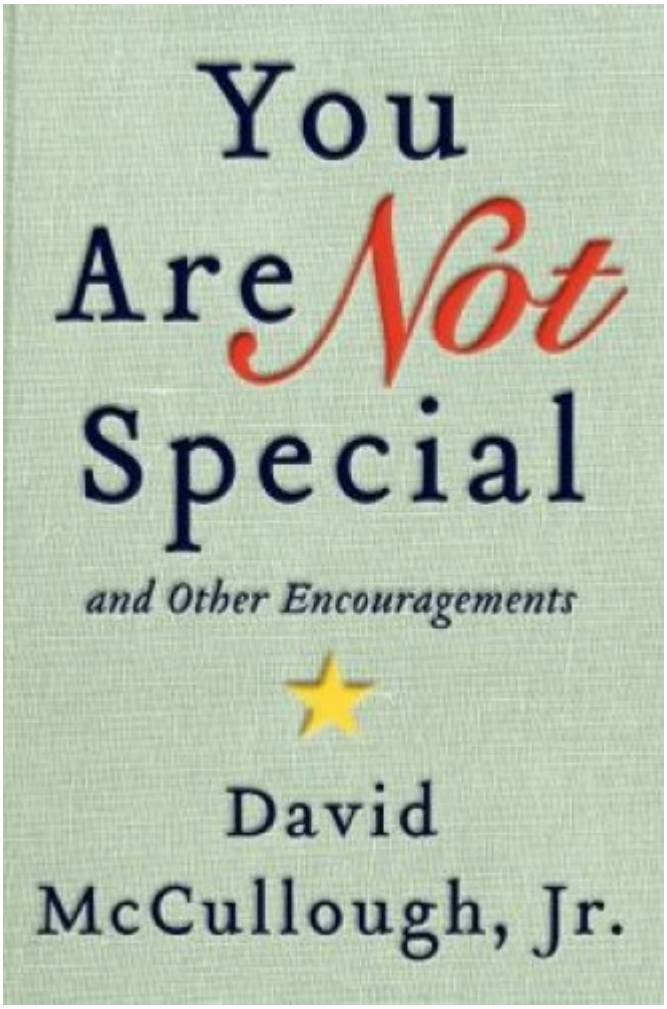
by Eric Miller in the November 26, 2014 issue

In Review



The Americanization of Narcissism

By Elizabeth Lunbeck
Harvard University Press



You Are Not Special . . . and Other Encouragements

By David McCullough Jr.
Ecco

"The question of whether we once again find ourselves in an age of narcissism," Elizabeth Lunbeck observes, "has recently captured public attention." As if on cue, David McCullough Jr. warns of the "swelling narcissism" besetting kids these days. His book is the expanded edition of a commencement address he gave in 2012 at Wellesley High School in Massachusetts, where he teaches English. "You are not special," he managed to say, in varying wry ways, nine times in a 12-minute address. The video went viral; McCullough inked a book deal; and Lunbeck no doubt looks on with bemusement.

So does McCullough, one senses. Drolly teasing, gently beseeching—a dead ringer in style and voice for NBC's Brian Williams—McCullough exudes affection for his

students and enthusiasm for his calling. If he's crotchety, he's crotchety-cool. Having taught for 26 years and fathered four children, he's lived some history (and as the son of the historian David McCullough, has presumably read some, too).

Circled up daily with his students, he finds that many "are suffering from (or rather enjoying) inflated notions of themselves and regard every opportunity as theirs for the asking, every accolade their due." These young people "feel neither indulged nor directed nor dependent. Nor, for that matter, fretful, naive, self-absorbed, or soft. What they feel is *perfectly normal*." He directs the brunt of his charge not at the students but at their parents, whose way of life and manner of child-rearing have taught kids that "me, me, me is the refrain" they should sing.

McCullough's understanding of narcissism is one that has over the past 50 years worked its way into the argot of America's professional classes: narcissism as a self-endangering and community-denying preoccupation with self. To raise a narcissist is in our day no parent's idea of success. So behold the irony: those who universally declare narcissism a deadly sin are the perpetrators of its universal triumph. We disdain narcissism and yield narcissists.

It's an angle on our age that Lunbeck, a historian at Vanderbilt University, finds blinding. She seeks to restore vision by telling the story behind a widely held—and culturally disabling—conceptual error: a faulty clinical definition of narcissism, which influential intellectuals propounded to a listening public. By correcting their mistaken understanding, Lunbeck hopes we might finally grasp not narcissism's danger but its promise.

For Lunbeck, Freud's seminal writings, born in the scientistic milieu of the turn of the 20th century, laid out an intolerably fatalistic vision of psychic turmoil, conflict, and repression. However brilliant his signature constructs, they had little chance, in Lunbeck's view, of revealing more hopeful dimensions of human experience: innate promise, for instance, and harmonic possibility. The theorists and practitioners who followed faithfully in Freud's train—the so-called orthodox lineage—tended if anything, she charges, to render Freud's dark analysis with yet more severity.

From beginning to end Lunbeck tenaciously goes after the most influential of the orthodox intellectuals, Christopher Lasch, aiming for a splashy takedown. Lasch's 1979 bestseller *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* won him an audience with President Carter and an interview in that

bastion of social criticism, People magazine. Steeped in Freud and speaking a distinctive variant of neo-Marxism, Lasch rendered his judgment on the American circumstance with a melding of scholarly style and prophetic verve rarely found in American social criticism. Many felt enough curiosity, concern, or confusion to check it out.

Narcissism for Lasch (at this time) was most fundamentally the psychic malformation that capitalism, with expansive force, was inescapably afflicting on the (erstwhile) citizenry. Through its disruption of parental authority, the political economy of corporate capitalism decimated the intensive family dynamics that alone could defeat the domination of narcissistic impulses within any person.

Lasch's use of psychoanalytic theory was, crucially, a buttress for his larger analysis of "the culture of competitive individualism, which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of narcissistic preoccupation with the self." For Lasch this narcissistic devolution revealed itself in sector after sector of contemporary life, from the relations between the sexes to views of death. The book was sharp, impassioned, and bracingly prophetic.

Lunbeck will have none of it. *The Americanization of Narcissism* is in part an exposé that seeks to undo the harm that she thinks Lasch (and others in this lineage, primarily Daniel Bell and Philip Rieff) have caused. Lunbeck punches back with scorning ridicule, a scholarly harrumph aimed at what she contends are Lasch's mistaken appropriations of psychoanalytic theory, from Freud through his later interpreters, Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut. Lasch, she grants, was a "gifted polemicist." But he was fundamentally wrong in his understanding of narcissism and in his vision of America.

Following the work of Kohut, Lunbeck contends that there is a "normal narcissism," fostered by steady parental affirmation and that it is "the wellspring of human ambition and creativity." Kohut and others argued (contra the orthodox Freudians) that "healthy societies were premised on the capacities of parents to nurture children's grandiosity and feed their self-esteem." While narcissists may in fact take destructive turns, they can also direct their outsized "ambition and creativity" toward great personal and public good. Lunbeck nods toward Steve Jobs as an example.

Thanks in part to the superior insights and influence of Kohut and friends, Americans in the last third of the 20th century began more fully to embrace this spirit of ego affirmation, of self-love, summed up in the single touchstone phrase *self-esteem*. To Lunbeck, the social gain has been significant—the psychoanalytic turn in Western culture eventually "would fuel various forms of identity politics, from black to women's to homosexual liberation." Despite what Lasch and other "Cassandras" were saying, things were getting better, not worse.

Lunbeck's book makes for a familiar variety of feel-good story: the seemingly wise are exposed as fools, and our way of life turns out to be better than we feared. But the exposé is not convincing.

Many of Lunbeck's readings of Lasch are implausible or just off—such as the claim that Lasch idealized "the imperial self of yesteryear," or that he sought to fortify patriarchy, or that by narcissism he meant something like "selfishness." Lasch was himself intensely communal, both personally and politically, and he advocated egalitarian social arrangements of the sort that would enable both mother and father to center their lives on the home. While not denying the ubiquity of selfishness, he considered the value of the psychoanalytic tradition to lie in its ability to move beyond universalist conceptions of human behavior toward a more historically precise mode of insight.

The parts of Lunbeck's critique that ring truer center on the charge that Lasch in *Narcissism* was unable to sense genuine promise in what he and others denounced as the therapeutic turn in American culture. Lasch himself later came, with qualifications, to grant as much.

What is most disturbing, and in the end telling, is Lunbeck's bald depiction of Lasch as an amateur bumbler in his handling of psychoanalytic literature and theory. One would never know, reading Lunbeck, that many psychoanalysts praised his book, that in 1981 he gave the Sigmund Freud Lectures at the University of London, that he wrote the introduction for the English edition of the eminent psychoanalytic theorist Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel's *The Ego Ideal*, and that, in fact, he responded to many of the criticisms Lunbeck makes in his 1984 follow-up volume *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. Perhaps strangest of all, Lunbeck neglects to let the reader in on the curious fact that Lasch in *The Minimal Self* writes with deep sympathy for what he calls, in an inventive typology of current ideological alignments, "the party of Narcissus" (existing alongside the parties of the ego and

superego).

Lasch, it turns out, kept reading in the face of his critics, who were indeed many. Through the writings of theorists like Chasseguet-Smirgel he refined his understanding of narcissism, placing increased emphasis on the promise, not simply the peril, of “primary narcissism,” what in 1985 he described as “the infantile illusion of omnipotence and of the blissful feelings bound up with it.” His thinking, in short, continued to evolve and deepen. A few years later he described narcissism as “not chiefly a sociological issue but as an existential, moral, and religious issue.”

As such, it continued to help him understand what he persisted in declaring a historical reality: that in foundational ways American civilization was not advancing but disintegrating, that real gains in some spheres were being more than offset by seismic shifts that registered their damage at the level of character. Although in *The Minimal Self* he contended that “the best hope for the future” lay in an array of radical movements he configured as the “party of Narcissus”—“the growing opposition to the nuclear arms race, the growing awareness of ecology, the growing criticism of consumerism and high technology, criticism of the ‘masculine’ psychology of conquest and competitive enterprise”—this party had emerged against the backdrop of palpable cultural devastation and bore its marks.

Among “the characteristic features” of the nation’s condition he included such tendencies as “our protective irony and emotional disengagement, our reluctance to make long-term emotional commitments, our sense of powerlessness and victimization, our fascination with extreme situations . . . our perception of large-scale organizations as systems of control.” The ever more extreme forms of individualistic liberation were symptoms not of freedom so much as of disorder—of a failure, or inability, to realize our own highest ideals.

Lunbeck and Lasch are at loggerheads—but not in their conceptions of narcissism. Rather, they are on different sides of a divide far more consequential, which lies beneath Lunbeck’s relentless hammering of Lasch: a difference over the defining of human ends and of the human prospect itself. Lunbeck’s enthusiasm for what Lasch 40 years ago began to call the “cultural left,” or “cultural radicalism,” is evident throughout; her book in fact might be read as a backstory of the liberationist trajectory of the past half century, crystallizing in the regnant psychological affirmation of “internal plenitude and abundance.” “Talk of self-esteem is not cause for alarm,” she reassures. The kids are, really, OK. And so are we.

But what of the observations of teachers like McCullough? Or what about the findings of sociologists like Christian Smith, who in his 2009 study of “emerging adults,” *Souls in Transition*, echoes many of McCullough’s judgments—that, in Smith’s words, the rising generation has difficulty seeing “an objective reality beyond the self” and seems to be “progressing yet further toward the nearly total submersion of self into fluidly constructed, private networks of technologically managed intimates and associates”? A civic life and identity, concludes Smith, eludes most of them. For many it’s something they simply cannot imagine.

Lasch took such signs, many of which he noted well before his Freudian turn in the 1970s, to be symptoms of a culture—and people—in trouble. For a time psychoanalytic theory helped him to define and probe what he then called “the collapse of a common culture.” But by the 1980s he had begun to see the psychoanalytic tradition as inadequate and, if isolated as a self-contained line of inquiry, part of the problem. In a 1993 interview shortly before his death, he submitted that if psychoanalysis was “approached as a science or would-be science,” there was “nothing there.” Its value, rather, was in the way it “restates certain ancient religious insights in new form.” When it was “assimilated to a very old tradition of moral discourse, its real meaning begins to emerge.” He concluded in his last book that “at its best psychoanalytic theory exposes the moral and existential dimension of mental conflict, but even then it cannot compete with religion.” And psychoanalysis itself? “The more it infringes on the territory once occupied by religion, the more it invites unflattering comparisons with its rival.”

Among other things, religion provides access to a long tradition of inquiry into one of those ancient insights, which is also one of Lunbeck’s concerns: the centrality of love. Even the scientific, stoical Freud thought love necessary for aiding a suffering soul. “Our cures are cures of love,” he remarked (though he was referring to the love of the client for the analyst, not the opposite).

If a misunderstanding of narcissism can have the untoward consequences Lunbeck supposes, how much more a misapprehension of love? Love ill-defined cannot but diminish our prospects for the freedom for which we yearn, the freedom these authors in their varying ways sense we need.

What if love is not fundamentally an act of interpersonal affirmation, or a celebration of “internal plenitude and abundance,” as Lunbeck, reflecting the new common sense, has it? What if instead love is the final cause of the universe, expressed in

creational structures that articulate an overarching telos and that inform our very essence? And what if it is to this creating love that we must turn if we are to realize finally our freedom?

This is what religion—Christian religion, anyway—teaches. It proffers a cosmology that transcends, without eclipsing, biology, offering insight into our condition and succor for our circumstance. If love so fathomed does indeed “move the sun and all the stars,” as one scholar of the soul concluded, it surely has the power, even in our restlessly secular age, to heal our afflictions and redirect our way.