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SOCIAL IRRATIONALITY –
CROSSING THE BORDERLINE:
A DEVELOPMENTAL/CHARACTEROLOGICAL CONSTRUCT
OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL PHENOMENA

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“Even as we grow old, grow big, and grow powerful, we have yet to grow up... Appealing lies take the place of uncomfortable truths...” Cornel West¹

INTRODUCTION

Developing a logical, *rational*, groundwork upon which to structure one's philosophy, social and political viewpoints, and consequent actions and reactions, is an elusive and challenging endeavor. With any depth of understanding, positions that may at first appear comfortable and reasonable often devolve into apparent contradictions,

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paradoxes, and competing demands and expectations. Seemingly irresolvable contradictions and impenetrable negative forces can lead to acute or gradually-escalating psychological disequilibrium; in turn accelerating a fall into irrationality, despair and nihilism. The socio-political-economic milieu of the 21st Century has been marked by ominous indications that phenomena which promote chaos and disaster are overwhelming forces of rationality, wisdom and stability. Despite efforts to the contrary, there are overt and covert social forces that are actively pressuring towards exclusion as opposed to full Democracy, pressing for the solidification of an almost feudal social order. These forces are in direct competition with movements that encourage full participation and inclusion of all members of society. Superficially observing the reaction of the popular society to different demarcations of classically defined sectors of the population, e.g., sectors defined by race, gender, religion, etc., it may be held that the socially dysfunctional processes of discrimination, repression, racism and bigotry may be undergoing a slow but steady positive transformation. However, from a more comprehensive point of view, the ostensible progress toward the development of an effectively inclusive and equalitarian democratic social order remains under serious threat, and the progress which has occurred may be problematically fragile and transient.

Recently in the United States, the effects of “Social Irrationality” had had an increasing impact upon the outcome of the electoral process. This is due to the inherent nature of “Social Irrationality” acting in concert with an almost evenly divided electorate.

On a national level, each Party has a “base” that has a fixed allegiance to the Party. With little fluctuation, these people will vote predictably, regardless of the circumstances, specific politicians or nuances of the current political debate. This portion of the electorate only needs to be “informed” to follow their selected leadership – by and large, they are not actively considering, evaluating or rationally debating the merits of issues and positions. They are subject to the ability of a party to “get out the vote” but they do not “need to be convinced” for whom to vote.

In addition, there is a second large segment of the population that takes a more sophisticated stance towards considering issues and will follow political debate with a more-or-less open mind, but quite reasonably, make a decision regarding whom they will vote for rather early in the campaign process. Their “committed” decision may or may not be well-reasoned or logically-reasoned, but while they must be courted during the early part of a campaign, once they have made a decision, barring unexpected events, they will have committed to a course of action long before the actual election (i.e., rather early during the ever-lengthening course of electoral campaigns).

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Without going into specific polling data, the “base” group represents approximately 50% of the population, and their allegiances are currently split approximately equally between parties. The “committed” group represents approximately 40%-45% of the electorate – and in the current political environment, they also split approximately equally between parties.

This leaves between 5%-10% of the voters who are truly “swing voters” who, within the weeks (or at most the last month or two) of the election will still be “making a decision” and will continue to be reactive to events, arguments and political advertising. Considering the durations of campaigns and the constant discussion of the political issues, the question arises *why* this segment of the population remains uncommitted and able to “swing” their vote so late in the campaign process. The premise of this paper is that these are persons who vote based upon their emotional state at the moment, and thus are extremely vulnerable to “plays” to their emotional state – and the phenomenon of making decisions based upon emotions rather than logical thought processes is the central issue of “Social Irrationality.”

Thus, in practical effect, the outcome of elections – and specifically, the most recent Presidential elections for the last several decades – has actually been determined by a segment of the population that is characterologically immature and “socially irrational.” Politicians and political consultants are aware of this dynamic (practically, even if not appreciating the underlying psychological issues) and political campaigns, campaigning styles, advertising content, “spin” and even the selection of candidates has moved further towards gaining the support of this all-important 5%-10% of the population who actually determines the outcomes of the election – but who, through their political power as the “swing voters” move the entire political system away from logical discourse and into the realm of “Social Irrationality.”

This work focuses upon developing an understanding of the impact of *irrationality* as it is commonly displayed by essentially “normal” persons, an understanding informed by an exploration of personality development and systems theory. This study proposes a sophisticated model of the psychological functioning of individuals, as it affects social phenomena on all levels – individual behavior and interactions, family dynamics, interactions within the workplace and business environments, the functioning of domestic social, economic and political processes, and the perceptions and responses which impact international relations. By understanding the pathology and dysfunction which leads to *social irrationality*, interventions can be devised to aid the development of a better informed, inclusive and socio-politically active populace – particularly among the younger generation; a generation which will see the American experiment in democracy flourish, or fall into ruin.

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Most current theories regarding psychological functioning and psychodynamics are based on modifications of classical psychoanalytic-psychodynamic theory, revised to reflect psycho-social and social-cultural changes that have occurred since the original hypotheses were formulated early in the 20th Century, and modified by the significantly increased bio-neurological understanding of brain and neurological functioning. In evaluating, understanding, and treating the patients with whom I have been interacting for well over two decades, I found that while useful, the accepted and classical theories: 1) tend to lack a practical description of personality structure as it relates to personal and interpersonal dynamics without resorting to esoteric jargon or meta-psychological theory; and, 2) do not fully acknowledge, take into account, or explain the pernicious nature of the subtle irrationality which fuel the negative aspects of human nature which abhor and undermine democratic ideals.

With a background in chemical and bio-medical engineering as well as psychiatry, I propose a schemata of personality development which focuses upon: 1) the development of a person's ability to relate maturely and effectively to others; 2) the ability of a person to respond to external events and "stresses" in a rational and ethical manner; 3) the nature of the psychological defenses used by certain people which interfere with mature functioning as full participants in a democratic society, and 4) both clinical and socio-cultural interventions which can support healthy development of mature and rational adult functioning. At the same time, I strive to present this model without resorting to technical jargon or esoteric theory. Through a basic understanding of personality development and characterological structure, while balancing input from psychological, developmental, psychodynamic, behavioral, sociological and neuro-biochemical paradigms, I believe that a deeper understanding can be gained regarding both the forces that support social progress, inclusion and equality, and the forces which foster regression to an effectively medieval mindset.

Primary to the understanding of personality development and characterological structure is an appreciation of the use of psychological defenses. Beyond the realm of investigating underlying biochemical/neurological brain functioning, and prior to exploring social functioning, it must be recognized that universally, as an aspect of normal emotional development and maturation, it is a necessary aspect of the human condition to employ psychological defenses. "Psychological defenses" are nothing more than conscious and unconscious mechanisms that employ distortions of reality or avoidance of acknowledgement of reality (which may be overt or very subtle) in the service of maintaining an essentially *irrational illusion* of security, comfort and emotional stability in the face of perceived (realistic or imagined) pain, fear and/or danger. "To the degree to which an individual must constantly guard against the development of potentially threatening inner states, to that extent is he/she is forced to exclude perception of outer stimuli in order to prevent them from triggering recognition of his/her inner tendencies."¹² "In addition to directly defensive activity aimed at the reduction of anxiety, the ego will

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attempt to counterbalance the anxiety, so to speak, by heightening the safety level by whatever technique it has at its disposal.”¹³

Notwithstanding the most sophisticated scientific theory and know-how, the *reality* is that the more sophisticated the understanding of any real-world system or design, the less frequently it can be accepted that “things work according to plan”, and the more frequently that we are forced to address issues of incompletely understood complexity, paradox and inherent chaos, unpredictability and insecurity. That is, unless one holds a Pollyanna-like unrealistic expectation of a perfect world, in which one may omnipotently “live happily ever after”, all human beings are inevitably confronted with situations of pain, fear and danger. As described by Leo Rangel, “Central to the willingness to commit oneself to a decision is the capacity to anticipate its consequences... however, included in this capacity is the knowledge of its limitations, of the fact that not all consequences, and consequences of consequences, can be foreseen. This is part of the developmental task which goes along with relinquishing of infantile omnipotence. The extent to which this is achieved determines the ability to accept the limitations imposed by reality and the willingness to proceed always to some extent into the unknown.”¹⁴

Obviously, the more uncaring, hostile or traumatizing the environment one lives in, the more frequent and direct are the experiences of pain, fear and danger; and the more important is the construction of effective psychological defenses to prevent descent into depression, despair, paralysis, madness, or acquiescence to malicious and malignant philosophies of life. This fact remains true whether negative conditions arise from nature, by chance, due to unavoidable tragedy, or via the intentional actions of malicious institutions or individuals (i.e., war, violence, abuse, repression, bigotry, racism). At the same time, turning from the individual level to macro-phenomena, sociological, economic and political processes are strongly impacted by the nature of the psychological defenses employed by the persons in power, as well as the nature of the psychological defenses of those who have been excluded, abused or marginalized.

In discussing personality dynamics and psychological defenses, this is not an attempt to determine to what exactly what extent personality traits are a matter of “nature or nurture”; nor is this an attempt to differentiate between the ultimate effects of inborn temperament versus the results of life experiences. In fact, the understanding of how personality dynamics affect sociological processes does not require any specific conclusion regarding the extent to which neurological structure and biochemical processes impact personality development. The focus herein is upon the describing the observable aspects of the process of maturation of personality traits and the ability to maintain interpersonal relatedness, to the extent that the process is impacted by life experiences; and understanding how the development of interpersonal and characterological maturity, and a commitment to *rationality*, impact both the position of an individual within the society, and the functioning of the society as a whole.

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Regardless of how one views the biological vs. psychological *substrates* of personality development, there is no doubt that human beings begin life as dependent, helpless infants, with little or no sense of individual identity or understanding of the world; and “if all goes well” there is progress through different (and overlapping) developmental stages, leading to: 1) a person being able to experience life as an independent, rational, autonomous individual; 2) the development of an individual with a unique personal identity; and, 3) the developmental of an individual who has gained a mature respect for the unique personal identities of other persons. There is also no doubt that regardless of the biological substrate of personality structure, specific events which occur during the maturation process impact, influence and either support or discourage the successful movement towards characterological maturity and rationality.

The schemata of personality development proposed has been broken into five Stages of normal psychological/characterological development (i.e., every person passes through these Stages). These are not discrete and separate stages of development. Rather, these phases form a continuum of development from the infantile state towards mature adulthood – with a flow that naturally tends to moves forward, but is capable of periods of regression (i.e., “backwards flow”). Each general phase, of Stage involves particular developmental tasks to be mastered; each phase involves the risk of becoming fixated or “stuck” at that level of maturity/immaturity, with consequent practical, personal, interpersonal, socio-political and socio-economic implications.

The ability of a person to effectively progress through each phase is dependent upon factors of innate temperament, intellect, motivation as well as, at least as importantly, the support and guidance – or sabotage and disruption – caused by the external environment. Of course, most immediately, the “external environment” of a developing child consists of parents, or parenting caretakers. However, the larger socio-economic-political environment also may play an important role. Thus, before introducing the specific Stages of Development, it is necessary to discuss the function and impact of the external environment of parents, caretakers, and relevant sociological factors; followed by a discussion of the general internal processes – the use of Psychological Defenses – which allow a person to progress emotionally from the state of a helpless and vulnerable infant, to a functioning, autonomous, maturely rational adult.

Chapter I:

Characterological Development and “Good-Enough” Parenting/Caretaking

It is useful to start with basic ideas regarding the interaction between a parenting person and the needs of a child. Of course, the primary “parenting person” is *usually* the child’s mother, but the person may not be the child’s biological mother; may not be a woman; may not be a single individual; and at times may be multiple persons within a group or

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institutional setting. Historically, different cultures have approached the issue of child-rearing from very different perspectives. In fact, it is only within perhaps the last century, if that, (and certainly even now, it is far from universal), wherein there has been an enlightened respect for the needs of a child in moving toward the development of a rational adult fully participating in society, and the protection of a child from abusive trauma which disrupts and skews that development. For various reasons – often out of practical necessity, as well based upon functioning within the established sociological structure – through the ages, for the vast majority of the population, childrearing has focused more specifically on aiding a child to simply *survive* into adulthood (at times, even limited to “survival of the fittest”), rather than nurturing the development of the capability to process complex information in an optimally rational and socially responsible manner. Obviously, for the socially disadvantaged, the emphasis has been on aiding a child to functionally maintain and survive through adulthood – without there being, in essence, the “luxury” of encouraging the child’s developing into a comprehensively mature and rational adult who is able to contribute to the full range of social processes. Even for the overtly socially “advantaged”, who would not have to expend as much energy on basic physical survival, more often than not, childrearing was geared towards the formation of an adult who through intellectual and practical prowess, and at times through professions of magnanimity, philanthropy, faith or religious conviction, could *exploit* their social position in order to maintain or improve their social status and the social status of their family. Only in rather rare instances, would there be an effort for a person to develop a combination of optimal intellectual, philosophical, spiritual and ethical wisdom for non-exploitive purposes – and while at times revered, more often than not, those persons would be perceived by those in power as threatening to the *status quo*, and would face being pressured into a marginalized position in society, being excluded from having a significant impact upon the overall socio-political/socio-economic functioning.

Classical psychoanalytic theory has focused mostly upon parent-child interactions, which of course, are usually of primary importance. However, that exploration tends to minimize the impact of non-parent societal and psychosocial factors. In fact, “A developmental arrest can come about through an unfavorable match between the environment and the developing child, either because of the child’s unfolding potentialities have not been met by an average, expectable environment, or because the child’s needs require a particular empathic responsiveness which the environment fails to provide.”¹⁵ For the sake of convenience, in discussing the basic needs of a developing child or youth, I will use the term “good enough parenting,” which is a term from the psychoanalytical theory of Margaret Mahler, which, by itself, implies that no parenting or caretaking is ever perfect – but hopefully, parenting/caretaking will be “good enough”. For these purposes, I’ve broken down the idea of “good enough parenting” into five general areas, which are not all-inclusive, but which provide a “good enough/caretaking” understanding of the issues involved:

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The first requirement of “good enough parenting/caretaking” is the satisfaction of basic objective needs – providing physical protection, food, clothing, and shelter; avoiding injury, hunger, extreme heat or cold, etc. The second area is that of subjective comfort – beyond taking care of basic needs, there must be the conveyance of a sense of emotional comforting; a sense of calmness and security; provision of relief from pain (both physical and emotional) – and a sense that there is a caring and loving interpersonal connection that is intricately related to achieving comfort. The third area is the acceptance of the child, initially by the parenting person (and later, by the society in general). The parenting person needs to accept that the dependent person (infant, child or adolescent) is going to be a burden, both practically and emotionally, for quite some time, even under the best of circumstances. That is, the process of childrearing is an extended, comprehensive and difficult task; and the needs of the parenting person and the child are going to conflict at times; the parenting person has to reasonably accept (practically and emotionally) a loss of aspects of their own personal freedom, without reacting to the realistic burdens of parenting with immature or inappropriate sadness, anger or punitive/abusive actions. It must be understood that it is not the child's “fault” if the parent cannot meet all of the child's needs; that the child inevitably will *not* do exactly what the parent wants him or her to do; and that even when parenting is appropriate and very adequate, there will be disagreements, frustrations and various problems as an *inherent aspect* of the parent-child relationship. It must be understood that a parenting person lovingly accepts the responsibility of this burden, and must have his or her own support system for coping with inherent deprivations and frustrations. Of course, these issues apply to the attitude of *the society as a whole* towards youth, as well as to the particular parenting persons. Youth must be expected by society to assume age-appropriate responsibilities; youth cannot be expected to act or behave as wizened adults. Society must make appropriate provisions for sufficient benevolent and caring support, containment, encouragement, and opportunity to allow youth to progress successfully into adulthood; while at the same time, society must make appropriate provisions for addressing behaviors of youth that are not appropriate or acceptable. However, the existence of those dysfunctional youth who fail to socialize cannot be used as an excuse to neglect or demean the needs of healthy youth who are in the process of maturing.

Consistent with the need to support appropriate mature socialization, along with the need for the parenting person to accept responsibility and to make a commitment to reasonable personal sacrifice in the service of the child's needs, simultaneously, there is a need for the parenting person to have realistic expectations, and to set appropriate limits on behaviors of the child/youth – setting those limits in a caring and compassionate, age-appropriate manner. The child must be guided to learn that he or she can never be “perfectly” taken care of, and can never have “everything” he or she wants – and that the child can then learn to tolerate realistic frustrations, and be able to discriminate between unavoidable and normal disappointments and frustrations versus being mistreated, neglected or abused. While a lack of appropriate expectations and limits impairs

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development of mature socialization, on a somewhat more subtle basis, but just as importantly, difficulties can arise by the imposition of inappropriate limits such as when the parent tries to meet the child's needs, or provide for a child's safety, "too perfectly". Such an environment tends to instill in a child an unrealistic sense of entitlement, encourage dysfunctional dependency, and implicitly lead to expectations that everything should "work", should "be fair", and should be free of risk of danger. At an age-appropriate time, limits must be established so that childrearing does not unduly support an unrealistic impression that a parenting person will be unfailingly (omnipotently) protective. For example, while infants realistically demand almost constant parental vigilance; an adolescent must learn to take increasing responsibility for his/her own safety; to develop appropriate judgment regarding risk-taking behaviors; and to accept responsibility for the consequences of risks which were voluntarily accepted. Expectations of a child must be tempered by reality, so as to avoid encouraging a child to attempt to achieve success in certain areas which may realistically be beyond their level of innate aptitude, in effect setting up inevitable failure; while supporting self-esteem and healthy identity formation for a child to be consistently reaching for and achieving his or her own "personal best", and consistently striving for improvement, though not perfection. A lack of appropriate limits in these areas may engender a reaction in the child of becoming enraged or feeling "abused" in response to ordinary or unavoidable frustrations; developing hypertrophied fear and anxiety, with avoidance of taking any risk (even those risks inherent to progress and achievement); refusal to take responsibility for disappointments and failures that inevitably occur along the way; inability to objectively evaluate situations of disappointment or frustration, so as to be able to problem-solve and develop a more effective plan for addressing the situation in the future; or in the extreme, perceiving oneself as having no responsibility whatsoever for the consequences of one's own decisions and actions. A lack of appropriate limits can lead to dangerous behaviors, while a lack of appropriate expectations can lead to depression and despair.

Additionally, there can be limits and expectations which are set too rigidly, such as when the parent acts almost as if the child is machine-like, and that needs can be calculated and attended to according to a set plan. When that occurs, practical needs may be met, but the interaction tends to be emotionally distant and lacking in empathy, with inadequate teaching and modeling of effective and necessary flexibility, and a loss of a sense of humanity. In an age appropriate manner, youth must learn to cope with ambivalence and uncertainty, and must appreciate that neither they nor their care-givers can prevent exposure to the more random and chaotic aspects of life, "We are all, to some degree or another, afraid of uncertainty. Because our conception of 'rationality' is grounded in the Mechanistic paradigm, which has no place for uncertainty, we find it difficult to be rational about uncertainty. Instead, when faced with uncertainty, we become anxious – most of all when our lives are on the line... We are tempted to retreat into a false sense of certainty, which affects our ability to make decisions... But we cannot make wise decisions when we deny ourselves the benefits of conscious awareness of uncertainty."¹⁶ "As we expand necessity, and so relieve ourselves of conflict

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and responsibility, we are relieved also, in the same measure, of authority and significance. When there arises then a crisis which does not fall within our limited routine, we are frightened, without resources, insignificant.”¹⁷

Finally, limits must be set calmly, non-punitively, and without conveying to the child a sense of anxiety. At times, a parenting person can “do everything right”, but if while doing so, a sense of *anxiety* is conveyed, and there is a disruption of the child’s need to experience and internalize a sense of confidence, calmness, and security; instead, the child may react in a fearful, anxious, avoidant, or disruptive manner in response to their perception of parenting person’s fear and/or anxiety, despite the fact that practically, they may be “well taken care of”. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton described this concisely in her book, “It Takes a Village”, “*What disturbed me more deeply was the realization I’d had... that all the people around me – even the adult who was in charge of me – were also scared. It was a profoundly disconcerting experience...*”¹¹

The last of these general areas is that of providing the child with logical explanations – helping the child to build a cognitive structure by which to understand the world, and by which to understand what occurs within interpersonal relationships. Again, it is essential for the healthy development of a mature adult to gain an understanding of the difference between being frustrated within a relationship, as opposed to being abused. An understanding must develop that you can appreciate and love a person, and simultaneously, experience feelings of resentment or anger – without acting out that ambivalence destructively. The child/youth must learn how various competing emotions can be safely, logically and appropriately identified, tolerated and expressed. Disruptive of optimal development, there can be a situation in which there is no attempt to provide age-appropriate explanations regarding the nature of human experiences and relationships, or there can be a situation in which illogical, inaccurate or irrational explanations are provided. This may occur due to intentional or unintentional parental neglect of the issue, at times due to intellectual problems or a lack of sophistication on the parent's part, or even due to parental psychosis. This may also occur due to destructive social stereotypes of race, gender, nationality, etc. Severe damage can occur to the developing individual if they are introduced to a cognitive “world view” which is based upon illogical, irrational, prejudiced, bigoted, or immoral views.

In summary, “good enough parenting” must provide the child with appropriate instruction and modeling at each stage of development, so that the youth can learn how to accept an increasing (but age-appropriate) level of responsibility for his or her own comfort and success, while at the same time, be willing to seek comforting from others in appropriate ways – without resorting to disruptive, self-defeating, or irrational behaviors to reach those goals.

However, even in the most benign and enlightened situation, problems can *and will* occur in the provision of “good enough parenting/caretaking” in almost *all* of the areas

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discussed above (i.e., hopefully situations of overt abuse can be avoided, but in essentially all other aspects, imperfections are inevitable). That is, it must be recognized that the very essence of the term “good enough parenting” implies that at every stage, in essentially every area, it is unavoidable that *some things will go wrong*. Problems in parenting and caretaking can range from mundane and benign inescapable frustrations, to the avoidable but unintentional lapses, to malignant abuse borne of malicious intent. Problems can occur due to parental inattention or lack of acceptance – which at times is inevitable and minor, but frustrating; but which can extend to outright rejection or abandonment; or may be serious and damaging but still *not* being due to malicious intent, such as when the parent or caretaker may be physically or emotionally ill; when for practical reasons, the parent or caretaker may not be able to be physically present; or due to the impact of social disorder beyond the control of the parent or caretaker (poverty, violent environments, social discrimination, etc).

Additionally, there can be issues of misinterpretation, wherein the parent may not realize what it is that the child truly needs. Obviously with an infant, discerning the needs of the child is very difficult, as there is no direct verbal communication. As a child gets older, hopefully the communication becomes more verbal and more accurate, but obviously, misinterpretation can still be a problem, to varying degrees, at any age. As noted above, there can be problems due to parental provision of misinformation – ranging from benign but unsophisticated world views; to pernicious and malignant views based upon bias and prejudice.

Finally, there is the situation wherein *regardless* of the attempts and good intentions of the parenting person(s), for reasons of innate neurobiological, neurochemical or neurostructural defects, a child cannot adequately comprehend or make use of even the most enlightened interpersonal interactions. This refers to constitutional neuropsychiatric dysfunction within the child, including disorders such as mental retardation, schizophrenia, endogenous affective dysregulation (an innate inability to control emotions effectively), autistic-spectrum disorders, etc. However, even when no specific definable or diagnosable disorder is present, a child may display more subtle “sub-clinical pathology” which interferes with the child responding effectively to appropriate parental interactions. There are now ways of evaluating neurological/brain status through testing performance, and medically evaluating brain functioning (X-rays, MRI’s, EEG’s, SPECT scans, etc.) – processes which can objectively describe *certain types* of neurologically-based dysfunction. However, especially when the pathology is mild or subtle, there may be a constitutionally-driven disruption of a child’s ability to respond to “good enough” parenting, which is not fully appreciated and or compensated for.

To digress briefly, on the most severe end of the spectrum of those persons with severe endogenous disorders, through history, these people have been most commonly referred to as “mad”, but are now referred to as severely developmentally disabled and/or psychotic. It is rather easy to identify persons who are “grossly delusional” or severely

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intellectually challenged – i.e., professing ideas or exhibiting behaviors that are so bizarre, so illogical, and/or so inconsistent with accepted reality and social functioning, that it can be concluded that they are very “different”. Different societies have perceived those individuals and responded those individuals in very different ways (with different types of disorders being perceived differently). In some societies, persons with certain severe disorders have been viewed as “lunatics” and “madmen”, unworthy of attention and to be ignored, shunned, punished, or “locked away”. Other societies recognize some of those individuals as suffering from illness, and attempt to provide them with safe containment or “treatment”. In some societies, certain types of disorders have been viewed as moral failings, deserving of punishment; while in some societies, certain types of disorders have been viewed as endowing the individual with mystical powers, and perceiving them as prophets or oracles, who are to be honored and protected for their connection to a different understanding of the world, with their pronouncements “interpreted” by intermediary “seers”. Exploring the historical aspects of these phenomena falls outside of the focus of discussion. Since the advent of psychiatry as a science, there has been an attempt to categorize and understand these disorders (and provide treatment as may be possible). However, since there is always interplay between biological, psychological and social processes, even what might *appear* to be a rather straightforward task of identifying, categorizing and treating physiologically-based pathology, making use of modern scientific knowledge, is an endeavor which is still fraught with ambiguity. While there is a reasonably clear demarcation between those who might be considered “overtly psychotic”, i.e., describing obvious hallucinations, or bizarre delusions, and those who are not overtly psychotic, and one might hope that our society has progressed to the point where those suffering from such objectively-defined disorders are treated and cared for appropriately and comprehensively, with respect and dignity – even without delving into the conditions which occur in hospitals and institutions for the developmentally disabled, chronically psychotic, or criminally insane – even a superficial foray into the “parts of town” inhabited by the homeless; or even more so, visiting a “correctional institution”, will provide ample evidence that we have *not* come that far at all in humanely dealing with this portion of the population; and the issue of how society deals with those suffering from more subtle forms of those disorders is extremely controversial, and not at all resolved. This situation is all the more tragic when the affected individual is a child or youth, whose illness is not detected, treated or benignly attended to, thus allowing the youth to slip into a chronic state of despair, dysfunction, anti-social behavior, and exclusion from even a rudimentary ability to function within and contribute to society.

In understanding the developmental model which follows, it may be helpful to keep in mind how, at each stage of characterological development, “good enough” parenting/caretaking – as well as a “good enough” environment – can help the child and emerging adult to meet and master the challenges of that stage; while a lack of “good enough parenting” and/or a toxic environment can lead to dysfunctional fixation at an immature stage of psychological development. Such fixation, in turn, results in an

incomplete or pathological sense of self, a distorted view of interpersonal interactions and a disturbed conceptualization of the world and society in general. In a vicious cycle, these immature aspects of character development reinforce the use of pathological psychological defenses to protect against painful emotions – ultimately resulting in forms of *irrationality* that only rarely reach the realm of being “overtly psychotic”, but nonetheless, introduce into society what may objectively be seen as illogical, irrational, asocial and/or anti-social modes of functioning.

Chapter II:

A Hierarchy of Defenses

It is impossible to understand psychological functioning, at any level, without an appreciation for the use of psychological defenses. While it would take a very in-depth and detailed clinical discussion to cover all of the different defenses which can be employed, applicable to this discussion, it suffices to provide a brief outline of a general hierarchy of defenses, describing how psychological defenses may be used by an individual, how those psychological defenses impact a person’s view of the world and relationships to others; and in particular, how psychological defenses can contribute overt or subtle *irrationality*. This is not an attempt to discuss the specific etiology of specific defenses (psychological, biochemical, neurological etc), but a phenomenological description of the nature and significance of these important psychological processes.

Within the psychiatric literature, following the classical writings identifying the presence of psychological defenses by Freud, a detailed discussion of defense mechanisms was published by Freud’s daughter, Anna Freud¹⁸. A more contemporary discussion of psychological defenses is contained in the classic paper of George Eman Vaillant from 1992, “*Ego Mechanisms of Defense: A Guide for Clinicians and Researchers*”¹⁹. However, the below conceptualization differs somewhat from those conceptualizations regarding how to establish a “hierarchy” of defenses, i.e., how to differentiate “immature” from “mature” defenses. Traditionally, each defense is categorized as “immature” or “mature”; for example, “projection” (displacing a perception of one’s own emotional experiences onto others) is seen as “immature” and essentially consistent with paranoia; while humor and sublimation (expressing uncomfortable emotions and impulses through modification into socially appropriate behaviors) are seen as “mature”. While that classification is certainly useful, in my opinion, it leads to the misconception that as a person matures, the person will “give up”, or “grow out of” immature defenses. That is simply not true. Even the most psychologically mature and sophisticated individual is likely, at times, to lapse into the use of projection; even the most immature or psychotic individual may be capable of making use of some forms of

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humor and sublimation. Therefore, what I propose is a “Hierarchy of Defenses” which is not based exclusively on the *nature* of the defense (i.e., *which* particular defense is employed), but rather, which is based on *how* that defense is employed, i.e., the frequency of use, and even more importantly, the degree of rigidity and tenacity with which the defense is employed.

As already noted, on the most basic level, all psychological defenses (mature or immature) can be defined an internal mental process which distorts or “censors” one’s perception of reality; in the service of guarding against overwhelming psycho-sensory stimuli, or the emergence of uncomfortable, painful, feared or potentially overwhelming emotions and/or behavior impulses. In everyday life, from the moment of birth, we are bombarded with information in the form of psycho-sensory stimuli. There are constant internal stimuli (bodily sensations, mental images, thoughts, impulses, fantasies, dreams, etc.) as well as external perceptions (via basic “senses” – sight, sound, touch, taste, hearing, and proprioception). The brain cannot process and integrate all of this information on an equal basis. There must be a “filtering” of psycho-sensory experience – an immediate, unconscious, differentiation between “important” information versus “noise”. While that filtering mechanism can later be revised (i.e., information initially thought to be useful can later understood as irrelevant; information initially marginalized or ignored can later be brought back into consideration), if there is an absence of an initial filtering of information, the neuropsychological brain processes become overwhelmed. Many believe that this is, in fact, a significant aspect of schizophrenic psychosis – an inability to filter, differentiate and integrate internal and external information, which leads to a loss of effective reality testing. There are differences of opinion regarding the degree to which the inability to effectively process information is due to: 1) innate, constitutional biochemical/neurological defects; 2) a loss of biochemical/neurological functioning which may be acquired through disease processes such as autoimmune disease or infection; and/or 2) responses to psychological factors such as emotional pain, fear and trauma. Whatever might *cause* an inability to effectively filter information, the result is an inability to construct a logical, *rational* perception of reality. Thus, if we – every single human being – do *not* develop adequate and appropriate filtering mechanisms and “defenses”, the resulting confusion is essentially incompatible with autonomous survival in society. Yet what begins as a necessary neurobiological mechanism for filtering out “noise” and effectively processing information, through the process of psychological development, also evolves into complex “defense mechanisms”, which serve *not only* to adaptively filter out “unnecessary” information, but also to “protect” the individual from *emotionally painful or disruptive experiences*. The first function is necessary and adaptive, while the second function may hypertrophy to the point of being dysfunctional and pathological. The issue most pertinent to this particular discussion is the extent to which perceptions of reality are distorted by non-psychotic, essentially “functional” psychological defenses, that are common and considered essentially “normal” within the populace at large; and the tenacity with which a person will maintain that distortion of reality as the basis of their world view and decision making

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processes – which leads to an essentially *irrational* mode of functioning, albeit, a mode of functioning which at times may be adaptive within society, while at other times, highly ineffective or anti-social.

In very general terms, the *manner* in which psychological defenses are employed (whether discussing those defenses “classically” considered “mature” or “immature”) can be described as falling into one of four categories (which actually represent a spectrum, as opposed to discrete groupings): “Neurotic” defenses; “Narcissistic” defenses; “Paranoid” defenses; and “Schizophreniform” defenses.

Neurotic Defenses

When a person employs defenses within the “neurotic” realm, he or she will essentially accept a distorted view of reality as “real”, in order to repress emotionally painful or disruptive experiences, but if it becomes obvious – either through confrontation by others, or by objective observation of events – that the position taken seems improbable to be consistent with objective reality, the person will feel uncomfortable with the contradiction between their belief and the observed reality (i.e., will have a sense that “something is wrong”). At that point, generally the defense will tend to give way to an acceptance and objective confrontation of reality – although at times, one defense may be replaced by a different defense which seems more “reasonable”, in order to continue to repress the feared experience. However, by and large, if the distortion is directly confronted by objective data, there will usually be a relinquishing of the defense, a release of repression, and a reasonably mature “working through” of the underlying emotional discomfort or conflict.

That is, realizing that he or she is supporting an improbable view of reality, a person making use of “neurotic”-spectrum defenses will begin to examine his or her beliefs and viewpoints more carefully, understanding that there is a good likelihood that he or she may have been in error; and with appropriate motivation and support, the person will begin to view the situation more objectively (even if accompanied by uncomfortable emotions), and the person will find a more “rational” and mature way to cope effectively with the realistic situation, and their own emotional responses to that situation.

Narcissistic Defenses

Persons defending against feared emotions on a narcissistic level generally will not relinquish their defense in the face of *improbability*. These persons sincerely perceive themselves as eminently (if not infallibly) logical and reasonable, and they will maintain their distorted view of reality as long as there is any slim chance of *plausibility* to their belief. That is, unless they can be definitively and absolutely “proven” to be wrong, the

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fact that a belief is *improbable* does not cause any distress; as long as the belief is theoretically *possible*, and “*sounds*” reasonable, the belief is maintained, despite information which shows the premise to be unlikely. In fact, the knowledge of their view being “improbable” may even engender a sense of “enlightened specialness” – a conviction that one is so smart, or so sensitive, or simply so “special”, that he or she perceives what others fail to appreciate, and what others “stupidly” or “naively” see as “improbable”. If there is an attempt to reason with someone maintaining a defense at this level, any insinuation or confrontation of the objective improbability of their belief will be met with a response such as, “So what?”, “Perhaps unlikely, but true,” or from the more severely narcissistic individual, some version of, “Well! That just proves how *special* and *unique* I am, and that my keen powers of observation and insight are so superior to yours!” To use the vernacular term coined by Stephen Colbert, “truthiness” trumps truthfulness. Of course, at times *unlikely* premises *may* turn out to be objectively true – and it is this “ray of hope” to which the narcissist will cling, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

This description of “Narcissistic Defenses” does not imply that reality is always accurately determined by “consensus”, or that there may not be times that one has sufficient reason to logically, rationally and appropriately maintain a belief that others view may not as being likely accurate. However, on a psychological basis, when a person is relying on a using an improbable belief/rationalization, which has little or no realistic substantiation in fact, for the purpose of defending against uncomfortable/feared emotional experiences – that process constitutes a “Narcissistic Defense”.

Employing Narcissistic Defenses leaves one extremely vulnerable to the influence of pathological liars. That is, if another person – particularly an authority figure – intentionally presents a false argument/position, which provides a sense of emotional comfort, reassurance, or security, and that position cannot be “proven” wrong, and “sounds logical” – the vulnerable person may, in plain language, “buy the argument hook, line and sinker”, and tenaciously support and defend the argument (and the purveyor of the argument), even in the face of logical arguments which strongly suggest the position to be inaccurate. This is the type of “logic” employed by cults, be they social, political or religious; and in my opinion, this is also the most frequent type of argument employed in common political “media debates”, advertisements, “spin” and “sound bites”.

Paranoid Defense

The Paranoid Defense represents a more severe loosening of a person’s commitment to reality. Defenses in this realm are based upon a blatantly *false premise* (“premise” being the equivalent of a mathematical “postulate”), totally resistant to logic or fact. The belief or perception is *delusionally* maintained (in technical psychiatric language, it becomes “a fixed, false belief”). No argument, no logic, no pointing out of the improbability of the

belief, and not even actual demonstration of “proof” of contradictions between beliefs and reality, will change the opinion of a person who is delusional. Persons using this form of defense still maintain a *quasi-commitment* to being logical, in that if you accept their false premise, their reasoning from that point on may be quite logical and reasonable – but however logical, reasonable, or even erudite and sophisticated their argument may be, it is *based* upon a false belief that is not amenable to any confrontation, and thus the ultimate result of this type of thought process is the production of grossly irrational beliefs and typically, maladaptive behaviors.

Schizophreniform Defenses

The deepest level of defense disregards all logic. Currently, most experts believe that schizophreniform thought patterns are most frequently the result of a neuro-biochemical inability of the brain to maintain logical processing of information. However, at times, such as in response to severe trauma, there may be a psychological “defensive” disruption of reality testing that reaches the level eschewing any semblance of logic or reason. Not only is there usually an underlying delusional system (i.e., the maintenance of fixed, false beliefs), but there is not even a logical system of beliefs built upon that delusional belief. This level of functioning is overtly psychotic. Such severe psychosis is usually, although not always, rather easy to identify; and the individual harboring that level of dysfunction is typically perceived as suffering from a severe mental illness.

With an appreciation of the function of psychological defenses, and the impact upon the developing individual of the external environment of personal relationships and sociological conditions, I present a phenomenologically based model schemata of Developmental Stages of Maturity, which is explicative of the tasks inherent to a person progressing from infantile immaturity to an involved, rational, contributing member of society

A SCHEMATIC DESCRIPTION OF DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF MATURITY, and RELATED PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Chapter III

Stage 1: Developmental Stage of “Merger” or “Symbiosis”

This Stage describes a person who is functioning on an infantile level – either because they are chronologically infantile (at which point this is a normal, non-pathological

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phenomena); or because they have never psychologically matured beyond an infantile level. At this Stage, a person perceiving oneself as a vulnerable individual lacking in any autonomy, who must rely on the external environment for care, sustenance, and nurturing. There is no cognitively-organized internalized sense of “self” or identity, nor is there the capacity to perceive others as having a unique identity. With normal physiological/neurological development, “good enough parenting/caretaking”, and a supportive, non-toxic environment, a person progresses beyond this level, moving to develop an individualized and autonomous sense of identity.

During this Stage, there is a global severe immaturity of psychological and cognitive functioning, and lack of ability to participate in effective verbal communication regarding emotional or practical issues beyond the elaboration of very general verbal or physical expressions of discomfort. The internal psychological stance at this level of functioning is a non-verbal sense, that, “If I am uncomfortable, I need to be reasonably satisfied,” with no understanding of the interactions or processes by which satisfaction is achieved. When there is a failure of the environment to satisfy those needs, there arises an intense, primal experience of fear, terror, abandonment and grief, at times leading to a deep clinical depression, or severely regressive behaviors. The resulting emotional pain is so intense, that Schizophreniform and Paranoid defenses are rather routinely employed, often (but not always) to the degree of overt psychosis.

Implications of fixation to social functioning:

These are persons who, simply put, will not think for themselves beyond seeking comfort and sustenance on a most basic level. Regardless of their innate intellectual abilities, they are psychologically incapable of autonomous functioning or decision making. Further, they are lacking in the ability to discriminate between benign and malignant sources of gratification. That is, they will simply seek comfort, and will follow whatever source of comfort is available. They do not have a cognitively-organized investment in, or loyalty to, the person, persons, or institution providing nurturance and sustenance. While the loss of a source of sustenance will likely lead to immediate anxiety and fear, if a new source becomes available, the despair may be reasonably rapidly diffused and resolved (at least partially – there may remain some residual fear/insecurity, especially if such losses and replacements occur repetitively, inducing a chronic state of anticipatory fear). At the most basic level, sources of sustenance are essentially interchangeable (although not necessarily without some permanent emotional “cost” in terms of reactions of fear and trauma during transitions).

Within the social milieu, those persons who remain at this regressed level but who have reasonably effective intellectual abilities may be able to accept and develop quasi-logical explanations and rationalizations for their behaviors, usually parroting what they are “taught” without really grasping the concepts involved. If they have not been traumatized, and have at least rudimentary cognitive abilities, they may blindly follow a sustaining institution. If they have been traumatized, or are severely cognitively impaired, they may

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be continuously suspicious, paranoid and difficult to manage within any but the most structured and contained environment. When there is cognitive reasoning or aspects of “rational thought” displayed, it is hollow, and will dissipate or be easily jettisoned if a disruption or threat of change occurs regarding the source of sustenance. Cognitively, internally inconsistent, illogical, and contradictory views may be held, with no discomfort or anxiety regarding the dissonance – as long as maintaining those views does not disrupt being able to be taken care of, and being provided with a basic level of security and comfort.

If needs are not met, there is not a focused sense of disappointment or rage, but rather, a generalized sense that the environment has failed the individual, leading to primitive experiences of fear, anxiety, terror, despair and depression – which may be ameliorated by obtaining sufficient sustenance from a different source, or, if not chemically suppressed, may lead to severely regressive and/or dangerous behaviors inconsistent with functioning safely within society.

To the extent that these persons may at all take part in socio-political processes, they will tend to follow any leader who offers sustenance. They will not necessarily even identify the leader, or identify with or understand the leader’s position or belief system – they are simply focused upon their own sense of comfort and security in a simplistic manner. These people are not inherently malicious, but are unable to logically evaluate political arguments, and will inherently accept illogical or even malicious arguments, if presented in a “supportive” manner.

This portion of the population is not available for involvement in true socio-political debate or analysis of issues, nor constructive contribution to a mature and effective socio-political process. Rather, they will simply respond on a reflexive/instinctual level to promises of comfort and security.

Chapter IV

Stage 2: Developmental Stage of “Malignant Narcissism” or “Paranoid Stance”

This refers to persons who are psychologically functioning essentially on the level of a toddler. Normally at this stage of development, the child starts developing a sense of being a unique person in the world, and having a sense of identity (as opposed to merely experiencing oneself in an amorphous manner, as an entity sensing comfort and discomfort). There is a movement from the more regressive position of expecting that, "If I am uncomfortable; I need to become comfortable...", to the recognition that there are other external entities, be it a person, persons or institution, who have their own

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identities, and that are responsible for providing security and comfort. However, that entity is not perceived realistically. Providers of sustenance are not perceived as being other struggling, imperfect human beings.

Rather, the child perceives the source of sustenance as a separate entity, but an entity that is expected to be magical and all-powerful (for good and/or evil). The child has gone beyond merely sensing and communicating discomfort, to being able to understand and communicate that there are specific needs to be met – with the implication that the provider of sustenance will meet those needs. The basic interpersonal position of the child is that of, "If I am uncomfortable, and there is something that I want/need, my care-taker must provide me with what I need, so that I can become comfortable." It is learned that the child, rather than being totally passive, actually has a responsibility to begin communicate his or her needs. If the need is not met, the emotional response goes beyond a generic sense of abandonment and/or despair, and there is now a specific sense of frustration that a specific need has not been met, and that a specific person/provider has not performed the necessary duty. In classical psychoanalytical terms, Rollo May described, "The sense of responsibility begins in the relationship of the infant to the mother: as he [sic] grows older, the infant learns that mother has her own needs. She does not come very time he cries, and he cannot bite his mother's nipple without eliciting a look of pain on her face."²⁰

Recognizing that there is an external entity, assumed to be omnipotent, who "should" have provided for basic needs, the person develops a sense of "good" and "bad", which may be attributed to either the external entity, and/or the self, and is directly related to the state of satisfaction of needs. That is, when frustration occurs, in order to defend against a regression back to a state of abandonment and despair, there is an assumption that either the child him or herself has been "bad" – and has caused the omnipotent provider of sustenance to actively punish the child; or it is the provider of sustenance who is "bad" for unreasonably causing the frustration. In a very complex manner, depending upon the response of the provider of sustenance to the child's frustration (i.e., whether there is at that point "good enough parenting", in the manner discussed previously – as opposed to neglect or abuse), and depending upon the ability of the child to accurately perceive that parental reaction, a sense of moral order is developed. If the reaction to the child's dismay is to providing sufficient comforting, along with reassurance (and when age-appropriate, a logical explanation) that there has been no malevolence by any party, this tends to result in a healthy development of frustration tolerance. However, if the child's reaction is ignored, or responded to punitively or angrily, what becomes reinforced is a pathological developmental path toward a very distorted and irrational sense of what constitutes "good and evil". Also impacting this important development of morality is the social environment, beyond the specific actions of the parent/caretaker. An environment which is generally benign, peaceful, calm and reassuring will aid the development of an appropriate sense of morality; an environment which is abusive, dangerous, violent, or threatening will tend to undermine even "good enough" parenting/caretaking, and foster

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the development of a malignant view of the moral standing of both the world at large, and of one's own self.

In the healthy situation, the child begins to learn to problem-solve, without immediately regarding frustration as an indication that someone has been "bad" or "evil"; the child learns how to resolve interpersonal disappointments rationally, without fear of punishment, abuse or retaliation; and the child learns to form caring and loving relationships, within a safe and benign environment; relationships that can tolerate and withstand experiences of reasonable frustration and emotional ambivalence.

In the pathological situation, (e.g., if the child is ignored, abandoned, or abused because of their expressions of frustration when needs are not met as expected; or if the environment is consistently dangerous or threatening), the child may fixate upon the perception of him or herself as a "bad" person, not deserving of love or caretaking, needing to survive only through his or her own wiles. There follows dangerous acceptance and acting out that "evil" identity as a matter of simple fact. That is, persons fixated at this level can accept being "bad" or "evil" with little ambivalence or guilt, essentially believing that "being evil" is just who they are innately, without any sense of responsibility for their malicious actions. This is not to imply that this is the only path to severe sociopathy, but it can be a psychological process which strongly contributes to the development of an unremorseful, unempathic, pernicious form of sociopathy. There may well be other constitutional, neuropsychiatric, or even psycho-social causes for anti-social/psychopathic behaviors. That is, I am proposing that persons with this type of developmental fixation tend towards sociopathy; but I am not proposing that all sociopathy arises from this type of developmental fixation.

Alternatively, or simultaneously, the person may be fixated on the perception that those who provide sustenance, although omnipotent, themselves are not benign, and are untrustworthy, uncaring, enigmatically unpredictable, or terrifyingly malignant – and therefore, to at least some degree, they are to be feared as much as loved. This creates a deep confusion between love and fear which is may not be consciously recognized. Rather than learning to problem-solve, the individual learns that to have needs met, one must: 1) completely identify with the loved and feared "omnipotent provider"; 2) conquer and replace that entity with a less hostile "omnipotent provider"; or, 3) constantly appease that entity, at the cost of any sacrifice demanded. Understandings of "good" and "evil" become distorted so that "being good" is very concretely identified with appeasing the omnipotent power, and "being evil" is equally as concretely identified with opposing the omnipotent power. Since the omnipotent power is, by definition, perceived as all powerful, the wishes and commands of that power are accepted unquestionably and uncritically. Being "good" or "evil" only depends upon whether or not the commands of the omnipotent power are being followed, and there is no *rational* examination of the morality, justice, fairness, logic or rationality of those demands. By identifying with the feared omnipotent power, and mimicking abusive behaviors, the victim of such

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mistreatment strives to avoid feelings of helpless despair, “using his ability to produce failure and to provoke punishment as proofs of magical control of the environment... [to avoid becoming] the helpless slave of the environment.”²¹

At times, the child may learn (and if fixated at this point, the adult believes) that it is within his or her best interest to develop a manner of acting and reacting that disguises the above belief system, and he or she devises a rationalized, “pseudo-mature” persona. In essence, the person may have learned to “do the right thing” or “say the right thing” – and may act in “correct” manners with a significant degree of manifest sincerity – but the behaviors are driven essentially “for the wrong reasons.” That is, while the person may adopt a demeanor of wanting to “appear” to be “good”, “kind”, or “empathic”, there is actually no compunction about surreptitiously breaking any rules or relinquishing the pseudo-mature position, as may serve his or her purpose – i.e., the driving motivation remains to maintain the appeasement of the perceived omnipotent provider, whether that be accomplished by behaving pseudo-responsibly, or behaving in a sociopathic manner. There need not be any consistency of behaviors in that regard, and different modes of functioning may be adopted in different milieu, as is perceived to be expected by the omnipotent power, without any sense of conflict, ambivalence or guilt regarding any of the behaviors or the inconsistencies involved. Consequently, if “doing the right thing” turns out to be frustrating, or impractical, there may be either a subtle switching, or even a radical, almost instantaneous and guiltless transformation, from a quasi-ethical position to an overtly sociopathic position – and then back again, if conditions are suitable. The protagonist in Clint Eastwood’s 1992 movie “The Unforgiven” is an excellent example of this type of functioning vis-à-vis asocial perceptions of masculine “strength”, just as this dynamic is also referred to by Cornel West “As with the bully on the block, one’s own interests and aims define what is moral and one’s own anxieties and insecurities dictate what is masculine.”⁷ Progressing beyond such pseudo-maturity requires developing the ability to feel secure without identifying oneself with an all-powerful, fearful, source of sustenance – which is very difficult to achieve if a person is fixated at this level beyond early adolescence.

The focus of the person fixated at the Narcissistic Stage is upon a sense of personal entitlement; “I need, I want...” with frustration of entitlement or disappointment of needs leading to a severe sense of emptiness, abandonment, worthlessness and hopelessness, accompanied by feelings of rage and guilt. Those intense emotions often leading to sado-masochistic-type acting out, in attempt to regain an alliance with, identify with, or even take over and assimilate the identity of, a perceived magically-powerful – but possibly uncaring, capricious, or evil – source of sustenance. There is a total disregard for the morality of the actions necessary to accomplish those goals, and a total disregard for others who threaten the re-acquisition of a relationship with an omnipotent other. These emotional reactions may be focused upon a realistic source of sustenance, or projected upon a symbolic source of omnipotent power. A very telling example of this type of pathological identification and perceived usurping of omnipotence is described in the AP

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article regarding the murderer of John Lennon, "...according to a transcript of Chapman's most recent parole hearing... Chapman, 49, told the panel October 5 he'd accomplished his goal of transferring Lennon's fame to himself in one sense... 'It was just a tremendous compulsion of just feeling this big hole, of being what I thought was a big nobody, a big nothing, and I couldn't let it go,' he said. 'And it just kept going very strongly, and I couldn't stop it'..."²² From a sociological point of view, Cornel West directly addresses the same issue, using an example that is non-violent and more impersonal, but no less pathological, "business leaders (their wealth and power) are to be worshipped... and the most powerful corporations are delegated magical powers of salvation rather than relegated to democratic scrutiny..."⁵ Persons fixated at this level rely very heavily if not almost exclusively on psychological defenses in the Paranoid and Narcissistic spectrum.

Implications of fixation to social functioning:

Since persons fixated at this level strive to align themselves with more powerful external sources of gratification, they will gravitate into institutions that are based upon a hierarchal power structure, with a real or imagined "ultimate" source of power. Depending upon the socio-political-religious-economic situation and environment in which these persons finds themselves, they may have no interest whatsoever in being a functioning member of society, adopting an inherently sociopathic lifestyle (organized crime, street gangs, etc.); they may take an intermediate path into cult-like organizations that are not overtly sociopathic, but neither are they fully socially accepted; or they may enthusiastically enter any of a number of ostensibly socially-approved institutions (military, religious, business, politics, etc.) and learn to "play the game", but while doing so, effectively disrupting and perverting the institution through overt or subtle sociopathic actions. That is, even if these persons are functioning within a legitimate and benign institution, persons at this level of maturity are essentially *personally approaching* the institution as a "cult" – regardless of the objective reality of the situation, or the objective reality of the *intent* of the institution. Even if the institution itself is benign or beneficial, the "bottom-line" motivation of the *person* involved is completely self-serving, unquestioning, and amoral; with the person secretly (consciously or unconsciously) viewing the power structure as both omnipotent and fearful. The perceived omnipotent power structure may be the actual supporting person/environment, or there may be a "split" in which the person maintains a pseudo-appropriate relationship with their actual source of sustenance, while internally projecting the source of omnipotence upon a severely (even psychotically) distorted perception of a real person/institution with which they have no actual relationship; or a delusional, fantasized person/institution. Of course, these persons are naturally drawn to malignant cults (of organized or street crime, personality, religion, politics or philosophy) – groups and institutions which implicitly or explicitly offer the promise of being protection by an omnipotent power to any follower. In the words of Plato, "Everything that deceives can be said to enchant."

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Depending upon the degree of pathology present, and if the person has the intelligence, wherewithal, and luck “to do well at playing the game”, he or she can rise to very high levels within institutions and societies (or the good graces of a designated “leader”), whether that leader or institution be licit or illicit, benign or malignant. While the person’s self-interest and self-absorption remains their primary motivation, depending upon the circumstances, the person may act benignly, may be effective in his or her endeavors, and he or she may be seen (superficially) as an exemplary citizen – as long as the internal illusion/delusion of omnipotence is maintained. At the same time, these persons tend to be very manipulative – at times transparently and naïvely, at times quite ingeniously or disingenuously. Unfortunately, on a very practical level, it takes only a small number of such individuals to distort and pervert the behaviors of a group or institution, however benign the initial intent of that group or institution. An illustration of the type of completely self-centered commitment to “playing the game”, overtly within the accepted “system”, yet without indication of a real appreciation for ethical concerns (or consequences to others) beyond personal self-interest would appear to be apparent in the quotation from Jim Cramer of CNBC “Mad Money”, in the [2006 interview](#) he gave to TheStreet.com's Aaron Task, “What's important when you are in that hedge fund mode is to not be doing anything that is remotely truthful, because the truth is so against your view - it is important to create a new truth to develop a fiction... You can't take any chances.”²³ A similar verbalization of grandiosity, ostensibly in the service of a “good cause”, but offered by a person who was objectively rather amoral, could be the line sung by Jim Morrison in The Doors “*When the Music's Over*”, “We want the world, and we want it – now!”²⁴ In a more overtly malignant mode, essentially the same grandiosity was voiced by Al Pacino as the character drug-dealer Tony Montana in Brian De Palma’s “*Scarface*”, “I want what’s coming to me... the world... and everything in it...”²⁵

Persons fixated at this Stage of characterological development who are functioning within the hierarchy of the sociopolitical structure (i.e., politicians themselves, and their attendant advisers, “handlers”, and confidantes) will tend to align very rigidly with a particular political position, which they will invest with complete righteousness, to be defended at all costs, notwithstanding logic or facts to the contrary, (even to the extent of whole-heartedly adopting terrorism). This includes the demonization and dehumanization of any persons who are not among the “in” group of “believers.” Those who are fixated at this level who are outside of the formal political system (e.g., the general populace, voters) will similarly adopt a position, and stand by the position and the leaders who support that position unquestioningly, accepting uncritically the most transparently illogical and essentially *irrational* justifications for their positions. These persons will only change positions if, on a very basic level, they perceive it to be in their own best interest to do so, vis-à-vis aligning with a *different* source of omnipotence.

Before discussing these dynamics further, it is important to distinguish between the pathological following of a cult versus legitimate religion and faith which may transcend traditional rationalistic logic. Maintaining sincere religious faith can be a healthy,

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appropriate way of coming to terms with and coping with some of the issues that are pertinent to this stage of development (i.e., the loss of a sense of *personal* omnipotence and the availability of protection from the vicissitudes of life). However, persons who are immaturely fixated at this stage will use religious beliefs in a *particular manner* which is actually antithetical to a sincere faith: At the most basic level, persons fixated at this level do not perceive themselves as an individual and autonomous entity who has faith in the spirituality or “Higher Power” of their belief system, striving to live an ethical, spiritual/holy life – but rather, they see their “faith” as *conferring upon themselves* God-like omnipotence and infallibility *in their own right*. Therefore, they will also believe that any opinion they form based upon their interpretation of their belief (or based upon the interpretation of the belief system provided to them by the designated quasi-omnipotent “leader” of their cult/religion), is also beyond questioning, re-consideration or critical analysis. This is a differentiation between the *rational* perception that there are aspects of life which defy “logical explanation”, and for which metaphysical/mystical/religious understanding can be adopted, in concert and *integration* with rational and objective information (e.g., scientific discovery); as opposed to a *rejection* of aspects of rational thought, objective information, scientific discoveries and basic responsibilities related to functioning, in whole or in part, in order to maintain an allegiance with an omnipotent protective entity, or out of a sense of a personal omnipotent entitlement derived from faith. In fact, this delineation was even addressed in certain early religious writings. For example, quoting Mark 12:13-17, regarding the words of Jesus on Paying Taxes to Caesar, “13 *And they send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians, to catch him in his words. 14 And when they were come, they say unto him, Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth: Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not? 12:15 Shall we give, or shall we not give? But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, Why tempt ye me? Bring me a penny, that I may see it. 16 And they brought it. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Caesar's. 17 And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.*” On one (of many) levels of interpretation, this verse can be seen as addressing the issue that even deepest faith, does not practically insulate one from dealing with demands of practical social living, albeit, in an ethical manner consistent with faith. Similarly, in David S. Ariel’s “*Mystic Quest*” a Talmudic legend is recounted in which in the midst of a dispute with “other sages on a matter of law”, Rabbi Eliezer proclaims, “If the law is according to me, let the heavens provide it”, and he brings forth miraculous events, such as a stream of water reversing course and flowing upstream, in attempt to convince others that due to his personal relationship with God, his interpretation of the law should be respected as correct. Yet the others do not accept miraculous occurrences as relevant to practical discussions, and as explained by David Ariel, “*The astounding conclusion reached in this passage is that... these jurists have established procedures for the resolution of differences in legal matters. No individual has the right to circumvent the process of jurisprudence by claiming special prerogatives or authority...*”²⁶

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Conversely, the opposite position was described by Maureen Dowd, “*What does it tell you about a President that his grounds for war are so weak that the only way he can justify it is by believing God wants it?... Miracles make the incurious even more incurious. People who live by religious certainties don't have to waste time with recalcitrant facts or moral doubts.*”²⁷ More recently, the range of types of religious devotion (from immature to mature) can be observed in the different individuals interviewed in Bill Maher’s movie “*Religious*” (without necessarily accepting Mr. Maher’s rather extremely negative view of all religious conviction).

This phenomenon does not pertain only to matters of spirituality, but also to matters of practical day-to-day activities and choices in life, be those choices mundane, personal or political. Persons fixated at this Stage come to believe that through their allegiance to an omnipotent authority figure, they *themselves* have become essentially infallible and beyond reproach. They will not be capable of experiencing a sincere sense of guilt or responsibility for their actions, nor do they feel a need to make reparation for their actions to other persons. They may also justify and rationalize all types of malignant or destructive behaviors as trivial or inconsequential, as long as they maintain their basic relationship with the omnipotent. This latter type of “splitting” can be seen in the many religious, business and political leaders who have been found to have been involved in various unsavory behaviors, yet perceived themselves to be immune to responsibility for their actions by nature of their relationship with a “higher calling” (religious or secular), which conferred upon them a “special” status. Lynda Obst, in “*Hello, He Lied*” succinctly describes such a person, “I know a studio executive who routinely lies, then returns home for weekend religious services. He lets you know too. He may have to excuse himself early from lying to you so he can go home and pray.”²⁸

In summary, persons fixated at this Stage are essentially irrational – unresponsive to logical argument, debate, or factual analysis, other than offering platitudes and “explanations” that defy logic; or responding to confrontation with reflexive and digressive attacks. However, rather than being simply bystanders to sociopolitical process, they often tend to be ardent supporters of a particular point of view, yet incapable of reasoned discourse, compromise, or understandings issues which involve complexity or ambiguities. These persons imbue their political positions with a sense of self-righteousness and infallibility borne of their overt or covert belief in their own omnipotence, infallibility and immunity. Additionally, the more threatened these persons feel in their sense of omnipotence, the more fiercely they will defend their position, even at the cost of regressing into grossly illogical, unreasonable, manipulative, paranoid or violent positions. Consciously or unconsciously, they perceive their only other option (in the face of confrontation of their non-omnipotent humanity) to be a terrifyingly unacceptable collapse into utter and intolerable despair.

Chapter V

Stage 3: Developmental Stage of “Shared Omnipotence”

This brings us to what I believe is the central developmental Stage of our culture, the Stage of "Shared Omnipotence." Developmentally, in general terms, a child starts dealing with this Stage during the later toddler years, and then again works through these issues, on a different level that is deeper and more intense, all through “adolescence” (which for these purposes, in our U.S. society/culture, can be seen to range from the pre-teens into at least the mid-20’s). During this Stage, there is a movement beyond just expressing the sense that “I am uncomfortable”, or a need to be provided for by an omnipotent protector. There is a growing ability to appreciate that in dealing with the challenges of life, there are various interpersonal interactions with other imperfect human beings, with whom one must establish relationships. In addressing their needs, the focus of persons at this Stage becomes, simply stated, "I want you to give me that!" There is awareness that "in order to have my needs met, I need to rely not just upon the universe as a whole, or a God-like omnipotent power that will magically relieve me of any problems, guilt or distress; but I must also rely upon other fallible human beings to work with me, and I must develop a way to maintain a relationship with them."

Most significantly, while the above reality is cognitively recognized, the wish for a sense of all-encompassing security and omnipotence has not yet been accepted as unrealistic, and there is an expectation that with a “perfectly” loving/caring relationship, albeit involving imperfect individuals, from that relationship, a mutually omnipotent protective power will arise. The other individual is not expected to be unilaterally omnipotent and protective, and the person himself or herself does not expect to become omnipotent, nor to be beyond experiencing pain or guilt – but there is the constant wish and expectation that the relationship formed will confer upon *both* parties a mutual and shared omnipotence, and as fairy tales had promised, “We will live happily ever after.”

Yet inherent to the basic position of this Stage of development, the conscious or unconscious mind-set of the individual forms, **“I want you to give me what I need and want, and if you don't, it's not just that I am uncomfortable or that I'm frustrated, but I'm enraged and devastated, because you, as a person, have disappointed me, and not only have you hurt me, but you have destroyed my sense of there being any security in the world; without our Shared Omnipotence, the world is a treacherous, overwhelming place – both for me and for you!”** Thus, when relationships do not provide a sense of inner completeness, comfort and satisfaction, a sense of personal devastation, anger and rage inevitably arises, accompanied by feelings of guilt, fear and dread. The person fears that either they have somehow “caused” the other party to be rejecting, which may lead to devastating guilt and self-recrimination; and/or they fear having been tricked and abused into having believed in a false promise of Shared Omnipotence – and in either case, all is lost; i.e., “If you will not care for me

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as I see fit, whether or not it was my fault, not only have you hurt me, but I have to realize that I am pretty much a helpless, hopeless half-of-a-person, who is likely doomed, and who will be ruthlessly punished for my rage.” However, when functioning within this developmental Stage, there is an expectation that, “As long as I maintain a commitment to a relationship of Shared Omnipotence, the relationship will survive any disruptive or dysfunctional behaviors I may commit, and any transgressions of my own should be absorbed, neutralized and forgiven.” For example, these persons expect that if they get frustrated or angry, or act immaturely or inappropriately, the other party will accept their behavior, and still provide love, sustenance and nurturance, and a sense of shared omnipotence, i.e., “unconditional love”. One need only refer to literature or music, from the modern day; to the pop-rock of the 1950’s and 1960’s – when The Seekers sang in “*I’ll Never Find Another You*”, “There’s a new world somewhere, they call the Promised Land; and I’ll be there someday, if you will hold my hand...”²⁹, or when the Righteous Brothers declared in “*Soul and Inspiration*”, “You’re all I’ve got, to get me by... without you baby, what good am I?”³⁰; back to Romeo and Juliet, and extending further back into antiquity, to find that from childhood through adolescence, (and if unresolved, extending through adulthood), there is a recurrent theme that, “With my perfect match, we can do anything together, and we will live happily ever after – but without you, life is so hopeless, that suicide becomes an option.” Again referring to the same dynamic in within relationship of a person to the socio-political structure, rather than within personal or intimate relationships, Cornel West wrote, “The dissonance of being both a person who ardently believes in democratic ideals... and a wide-eyed realist about the dispiriting truths of everyday life in America can be alternately enraging, numbing and crushing.”⁹

In a healthy resolution of this Stage, (which typically, if all goes well, occurs in later adolescence), a person is able to recognize that his or her life is imperfect, that “living happily ever after” only occurs in fairy tales, and that within a caring, loving relationship, imperfections of self and others, and frustrations and disappointments, can be tolerated and resolved – without either party actually having been “abusive”, without either party resorting to *becoming* abusive in retaliation, without either person abandoning the other party, without either person acting out dysfunctionally, and without either person “falling apart” emotionally. It can also be accepted that not all relationships succeed – which may engender non-pathological feelings of sadness, resentment, loss and grief, but which does not have to “doom” either (or both) parties to rage, hopelessness, despair and depression.

However, if the person perceives (accurately or inaccurately) that an acknowledgment of imperfection or disappointment, which is perceived as frightening and angering, is also causing a similar fear and anger in the other party, no healthy resolution can occur, and you may have a situation of a vicious cycle of mutually exacerbated rage, guilt and despair. For example, this can occur with a child (or adolescent), if the parenting person themselves are fixated at this stage (i.e., again, the parenting person cannot provide “good enough parenting”, as the parenting person unconsciously desires the child to be

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their source of Shared Omnipotence in order to maintain their own sense of wholeness and security). The dysfunctional expectations of a parent, that if the parent/child relationship is not perfect, the only alternative is despair, is vividly and concretely summarized by Jodi Picoult, author of many books with a central theme of children in peril, [emphasis added]: “*Maybe the average reader is not facing the daily challenges of a mom whose child is dying of cancer, for example, but she probably had an argument with her teenager that morning about something inconsequential that left her feeling frustrated and certain there’s no middle ground between them.*”² This dynamic, if not resolved, will be repetitively recapitulated within adult relationships (intimate relationships, friendships, occupational relationships, etc).

The disruption of a normal age-appropriate movement into the Stage of Shared Omnipotence, which can then be successfully resolved, can be severely disturbed on a less directly personal level by various forms of social injustice. If a child prevented from being able to sufficiently experience a sense of competence, security, and well-being, the age-appropriate fantasy of Shared Omnipotence is prematurely and traumatically shattered, preventing effective working through of that experience in order to achieve a healthy and realistic sense of Self as an adult. For example, the pernicious effects of racism is described in this regard by Leonard Pitts, Jr., “Black, white and otherwise, we are all socialized by the same forces and carry, by and large, the same unconscious assumptions. One of which is that a certain level of achievement [i.e., competence and well-being] is black and another is white. This is what you are hearing when a black kid speaks standard English and another black kid chides him for ‘talking white.’ This is what George W. Bush was alluding to when he decried ‘the soft bigotry of low expectations.’”³ A socially-engendered prevention of developing age-appropriate relationships by which to work through the illusion of Shared Omnipotence essentially dooms a person to remain fixated at a lower level of emotional development.

Assuming that a youth appropriately moves into this Stage, while real or imagined relationships imbued with a sense of Shared Omnipotence may last for a significant duration of time, since no relationship is either perfect or omnipotent, inevitably there arises a sense of disruption. When there is no healthy resolution of disruption of a relationship of Shared Omnipotence, the first response is to rely upon a variety of defenses (i.e., as discussed, *irrational* distortions of the reality) to try to rescue and restore the illusory “Shared Omnipotence”. Some of those defenses can be relatively benign, even if not optimally mature or rational (i.e., the elaboration of “neurotic” defenses); but at the more pathological end of the spectrum, the defenses can be highly disruptive or dangerous, falling towards the paranoid or narcissistic realm of psychosocial defenses. These particular defenses, used in this particularly manner, are clinically considered evidence of “Borderline” pathology. Defenses may include turning to denial – simply refusing to accept that a disruption has occurred, or that negative emotions are present; “splitting” – attempting to “blame” the disruption on a person outside of the relationship of Shared Omnipotence, in order to protect that all-important relationship;

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dissociation of affect – a disconnection between affect and cognition, such that while the person may experience the sense of disruption, they do not attribute the feelings to the events that have occurred within the relationship; quasi-paranoid projection – beyond displacement of blame, development of an almost delusional rationalization as to why person or institution other than the focus of Shared Omnipotence was the cause of the disruption; or the seeking of comfort through dulling of negative emotions via substance abuse, illicit sex, or other inappropriate ways of relieving frustration or artificially achieving a temporary sense of well being. Also dangerous can be the acting out of rage and vengeance regarding the disruption, where in the physical expression of anger directed away from the Omnipotent relationship serves to attempt to protect that relationship from the emotions arising from disruption. While it is clear that some of these defenses (substance abuse, illicit activities, violence) are dangerous and anti-social, despite being immature and ultimately ineffective and self-defeating, our society has not only embraced various of the less overtly toxic of these defenses as “socially acceptable”, and certain aspects of society have thrived on exploiting these defenses to their own gain. As described by Cornel West, “...one of the most effective strategies of corporate marketing has been to target the youth market with distractive amusement and saturate them with pleasurable sedatives that steer them away from engagement with issues of peace and justice [i.e., preventing the rational identification and confrontation of issues of injustice and threats to peace and security]. The incessant media bombardment of images (of salacious bodies and mindless violence) on TV and in movies and music convinces many young people that the culture of gratification – a quest for insatiable pleasure, endless titillation, and sexual stimulation [i.e., Shared Omnipotence] is the only way of being human. Hedonistic values and narcissistic identities produce emotionally stunted young people unable to grow up and unwilling to be responsible democratic citizens.”¹⁰ Whether or not those defenses temporarily enable and restore a sense of “Shared Omnipotence”, ultimately, the distortions of the reality of the situation fostered by the defenses usually do fail; the risks and dangers of impulsive pleasure seeking eventually take a physical, emotional and at times legal toll – and the person employing those defenses remains prone to periods of serious depression (which may take the form of classical clinical depression, a somaticized loss of physical health and integrity, and/or withdrawal from and marginalization within the functioning of society).

This Stage of emotional development is so central to our current culture, that it is worthwhile to digress and explore some of the historical roots of these dynamics. While romantic and idealistic, the wish for Shared Omnipotence – a state of endless contentment – obviously is not a mature or realistic view of life. As described by Liah Greenfield in “*The Cradle of Madness*”, the concept of being able to actually live in a romantic world is a relatively recent development in the history of society, and in fact, has transformed society, “The 16th century in England was the first century of the world as we know it. It gave us so much that we are, so much of what we now consider the inner capacities and needs of the human nature: love, ambition, happiness, the dignity of Man. It also gave us madness.”³¹ As discussed above, the grandiose, omnipotent, “romantic”

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perception of reality is essentially a normal part of child development, stemming from the toddler years. However, in a society in which the reality of every-day life directly (and rather coldly if not cruelly) confronts the illogic of the “Romantic” position, persons are effectively forced to find a way to cope with the loss of the idealized position of Shared Omnipotence early on in life, most often by remaining at a more regressed Stage of development. However, as society changed from maintaining a basic acceptance of feudal misery as inherent to life (if not even divinely ordained) for the majority of the populace; towards providing all with a chance for “upward mobility”, the fantasy of achieving the unrealistic state Shared Omnipotence continued into adolescence. If not confronted and worked through during those years, the hope to achieve that fantasized state of being persisted beyond youth into adulthood. The changes in society at the same time allowed many persons to reach a high level of emotional development than previously possible, yet since again, inevitably relationships based upon the illusion of Shared Omnipotence fail, those changes also condemned those same persons to even deeper levels of pain and despair. Again referring to the above-cite historical perspective, “The first treatise by an English physician on mental disease was called A Treatise of Melancholie. This 1586 work by Timothy Bright, also an Anglican priest and the inventor of modern shorthand... The Treatise of Melancholie was ‘the most representative thesis upon melancholy and insanity of the Elizabethan period.’ [Robert R. Reed, Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage (HUP, 1952)] It was precisely at the time of the book’s composition, 1580s, that melancholy became ‘epidemic.’ It ‘continued for several decades. For some time melancholy men were so numerous in London that they constituted a social type, often called malcontent.’ [Lawrence Babb, 1959, p. 3; Vieda Skultans, English Madness: Ideas on Insanity, 1580-1890] The “epidemic” seems to have been confined to the upper classes and affected, in particular, the intellectuals, whose numbers at that time expanded rapidly, learning being the necessary component of upward mobility. ‘Under Elizabeth,’ writes Lindsey Knights, ‘there had been a considerable increase of educational activity, with a consequent heightening of men’s expectations. Even before the close of the sixteenth century there were more than a few who could find no definite place in the existing organization of the state... Contemporaries were well aware of the danger of over-education and thwarted ambition.’ [Lindsey Knights, Drama and Society in the Age of Johnson, p. 324] Naturally, mental trouble formed a central subject in the literature of the period – ‘as every student of the Elizabethan period knows... Among poets, Breton, Daniel, and Campion were perhaps particularly mindful of the pathology of melancholy; among pamphleteers, Nashe in The Terrors of the Night drew an acute picture of the terrifying apparitions of ‘fuming melancholy.’ But all late Elizabethans – Camden, Chapman, Green, Harvey, Sidney, Spencer – wrote about it. This was the time of the very first bloom of what was to become one of the world’s greatest literary traditions, and so, however many these writers were, it was a very small group: we know all its members by name. But this small group was, clearly, stricken by the new and incurable malaise: melancholy was “the prevailing mood with intelligent writers.’ [Harrison, in the introduction to Breton’s Melancholike Humours, 1929]. From the first years of the 17th century, however, the preoccupation with the

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subject spread to the stage, so that ‘the great majority of the [period’s] allusions to melancholy, in addition to the comparatively more important pathological studies of insanity, are quite significantly found among the dramatists, particularly in the works of Marston, Shakespeare, Tourneur, Webster, and Ford... It was the “democratic circumstance of his profession,” thinks Robert Reed, which made him sensitive to the interests of the audiences that prompted the playwright to focus so on mental disease, which suggests that by the early 17th century the audiences have developed such interests. That they did so, apparently, some twenty years later than those who wrote for them, in turn justifies the inference that the disease was rather rapidly percolating down through the urban population.”

The codification of a hope for a better life can also be seen within the Declaration of Independence, referring to the “inalienable right” to a pursuit of “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness”; yet sociologist Gregory Bateson gave a lecture in April of 1966 at the Sacramento State College called "From Versailles to Cybernetics", in which he maintained that regarding Western culture as a whole, specific elaboration of those goals came about 150 years later, when the Treaty of Versailles set forth an anti-Feudal philosophy as an entitlement via Part XIII, which organized the establishment of the [International Labor Organization](#), to promote “the regulation of the hours of work, including the establishment of a maximum working day and week, the regulation of the labour supply, the prevention of unemployment, the provision of an adequate living wage, the protection of the worker against sickness, disease and injury arising out of his employment, the protection of children, young persons and women, provision for old age and injury, protection of the interests of workers when employed in countries other than their own recognition of the principle of freedom of association, the organization of vocational and technical education and other measures...” However, Bateson also theorized that what turned out to be the “false promise” of that document fomented severe unrest, “Most of you probably hardly know how the Treaty of Versailles came into being. The story is very simple. World War I dragged on and on; the Germans were rather obviously losing. At this point, George Creel, a public relations man – and I want you not to forget that this man was a granddaddy of modern public relations – had an idea: the idea was that maybe the Germans would surrender if we offered them soft armistice terms. He therefore drew up a set of soft terms, according to which there would be no punitive measures. These terms were drawn up in fourteen points. These Fourteen Points he passed on to President Wilson. If you are going to deceive somebody, you had better get an honest man to carry the message. President Wilson was an almost pathologically honest man and a humanitarian. He elaborated the points in a number of speeches: there were to be "no annexations, no contributions, no punitive damages..." and so on. And the Germans surrendered... We all live in the same crazy universe whose hate, distrust, and hypocrisy relates back (especially at the international level) to the Fourteen Points and the Treaty of Versailles... If you promise your boy something, and renege on him, framing the whole thing on a high ethical plane, you will probably find that not only is he very angry with you, but that his moral attitudes deteriorate as long as

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he feels the unfair whiplash of what you are doing to him.”³² Recently on the Helium website, Liam Kloef commented, “No doubt President Wilson, Mr. Creel, and the Allied Powers leaders justified the Treaty as contributing to the general good. A popular and long-standing notion: it is one preached by our current presidential candidates and, indeed, by almost anyone with a social standing and a public platform. But Bateson said that “it is the big integrated structures of life that seem to have carried the lunacy.” He cited William Blake: “He who would do good must do it in Minute Particulars. The General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer.” The lesson of the Treaty of Versailles was, contrary to the title of a recently popular book, to sweat the small stuff.” Not dissimilarly, but more specific to America, Cornel West even borrowed psychological terminology [*emphasis added*] to describe the malignant impact of the overall structure of society, notwithstanding evidence of superficial progress, “the ways in which the vicious legacy of white supremacy contributes to the *arrested development* of American democracy”, and the resulting pernicious mediocrity which has most often ostensibly held power, “I’ve always been impressed by the intelligence, imagination, creativity and humor of the American people, then found myself wondering how we end up with such mediocre and milquetoast leaders in public office.”⁴ Thus, these discussions of sociopolitical events are totally consistent with the assumption that society is functioning at a level of “shared omnipotence” – consciously or unconsciously feeling entitled to a “romantic” arc of life, but practically, constantly struggling against rage, fear, and resulting psychological disintegration of the self and dysfunctional self-defeating behaviors.

In essence, the acceptance of the entitlement to “live happily ever after”; the false hope that society has “turned the corner” toward enlightenment; has transformed the “inalienable right” to the *pursuit* of happiness, into a perception of entitlement to the *achievement* of happiness. Clearly, if one accepts the *achievement* of happiness as an entitlement, as an inalienable right – then life is found to be fraught with frustrations that not only lead to disappointment, but that foment a sense that *one’s entire world view, one’s place and identity in the world, and one’s inalienable rights* have been disordered, destroyed, and possibly irretrievably broken. That is, **normal frustrations of everyday life lead to a disruption of the expectation of maintaining a state of Shared Omnipotence.**

It is also interesting to consider how modern technology has served to reinforce this type of dysfunction. Technology has led to a degree of personal choice and freedom that would have been inconceivable even 25 years ago – and assumed preposterous generations ago. While increased choice and freedom are without doubt indications of great progress, and provide amazing benefits – the degree of choice and freedom available in contemporary society also requires an individual to take responsibility for ordering and prioritizing their choices, and makes it increasingly evident that it is impossible to have everything wished for, or even to make use of everything available. This, again, leads to a sense of frustration and loss when all available choices and freedoms cannot be realized; and this again leads to an inability to maintain a state of

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Shared Omnipotence. For example, on a very mundane level, it was only a few decades ago that if a person wished to listen to music, it would be of necessity accepted that the choices available included listening to any of a limited number of radio stations; or listening to some form of recording (record or tape) from a reasonably limited personal collection. Yet today, beyond the proliferation of different television and radio stations which can provide any genre of music available, beyond even the vast array of stations and musical genres available upon demand from Satellite radio – a person may carry with them, at almost all times, an ‘I-Pod’-type device, into which can be electronically stored almost the entirety of the history of recorded music. Thus, what was previously an inherently limited freedom and choice, now becomes a matter of choosing between (i.e., ordering, selecting and *rejecting*) vast numbers music productions. While at times, the “choice” may seem easy, at other times, it is only natural that the choice will be conflicted – there may be internal reasons for desiring to hear various different performances; all of those performances are immediately available, yet a choice must be made. If not approached in a realistic mature manner, this can lead to anxiety-provoking ambivalence and internal conflict, and an immediate conscious or unconscious sense that “*I can’t have everything I want*”. That is, even though “everything” is *technically available*, there remain practical restraints (restraints of time, the restraint of the ability to only listen to one musical piece at a time; and perhaps most significantly, if the choice is being made in the context of an interpersonal relationships – i.e., “What should we listen to?”); and there is introduced the much more complex necessity to come to a decision/mutual agreement, with the options available making the probability of easy agreement exponentially less likely. Clearly, this can engender a sense of disappointment and frustration – and again, a disruption of a state of Shared Omnipotence. The freedoms and choices made possible by technology remove restrictions that were previous obvious, inherent, accepted “facts of life”; choices which were logically beyond the practical means of achievement *even within a state of Shared Omnipotence*; but that same freedom, while obviously a positive practical and moral improvement for society as a whole, *at the same time* creates a greater potential for internal and external conflict, disappointment, feelings of loss, and interpersonal disagreement – with ensuing disruption of the sense of maintaining a state of Shared Omnipotence, *which is particularly disturbing for those person who are functioning within that Stage of psychological development, whether due to normal (age-appropriate) developmental processes, or due to dysfunctional fixation*. That is, rather than being confronted with limitations and restrictions which are inherent aspects of the nature of life, in which personal choice and interpersonal agreement played a limited role (if any), youth now have to cope with limitations and restrictions which are no longer technically bounded by inherent reality, and in which personal choice and interpersonal agreement are primary factors. Perhaps it is this phenomenon which contributes to the fact that resolution of the state of Shared Omnipotence has become more difficult and time consuming, and rather than occurring in childhood, or during adolescence, in our current society, resolution of this stage often still represents a struggle well into the early adult years.

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While functioning within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence, some persons become so adept at using less-dangerous, reasonably “socially-appropriate” defenses, that they can maintain themselves within a “cycle” of ostensibly “good functioning” and “minor” acting out, without ever actually resolving the developmental issues at hand, but also without decompensating into overt depression or severely regressive/dangerous behaviors. These persons are often referred to as “narcissistic”, since they (at times rather transparently) maintain an air of grandiosity and self-importance, but there is a significant difference between this type of more benign (but still at times disruptive and essentially irrational) narcissism, and the more malignant and dangerous/paranoid narcissism of the earlier stage, as discussed above.

Since persons functioning within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence do perceive partners in a relationship as independent others, they generally have at least a rudimentary ability to develop a true compassion for others, and there can be a willingness to compromise or sacrifice to maintain a relationship of “Shared Omnipotence” (sometimes to the extreme of tolerating abuse – although usually not to the extreme level of sacrifice of morality that occurs in Stage 2). Persons fixated within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence also have at least a rudimentary ability to distinguish right from wrong beyond simply defining right and wrong in terms of “what is good for me” or “what appeases the omnipotent power”. These persons also have an ability to truly experience guilt and remorse. Yet in the face of anything more than a minor disruption, there is an inability to maintain a stable, healthy, realistic sense of identity; and there is an inability to maintain a stable, empathic, respectful and realistic understanding of the autonomous identity of others within a relationship. (I again note that this pertains to *all* relationships, not just intimate relationships, e.g., family relationships, friendships, acquaintances, academic relationships, occupational relationships with peers, supervisors and supervisees, other business or professional relationships, etc.)

Specifically, from the point of view of the person functioning within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence, if the other part in relationship (person, group, institution, etc.) is perceived as reacting in an overly stern, seemingly uncaring, unforgiving, or even hostile or abusive manner – then it is perceived that the Shared Omnipotence has dissolved, and what remains is the self-concept of a helpless, hopeless, incomplete person. Of course, as already implied, this situation becomes all the more serious and dangerous if both (or all) persons involved are functioning on the same immature level, so that any perceived disruption of the “perfection” of the relationship, by any party, can lead to a cascading disintegration of the functioning of all parties involved, with mutual recriminations including poorly controlled expressions of rage/guilt, rejection/withdrawal, abandonment/flight; etc. In any group or institution, it often takes only a few persons functioning at this level to lead the group dynamics into mutual allegations and recriminations, inefficiency, dysfunction, and chaos.

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Several options are available to a person who functioning within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence to try to ameliorate the painful and terrifying position of perceiving him or herself as a “hopeless, helpless, incomplete person”, as will inevitably occur in any relationship which cannot maintain an illusion of Shared Omnipotence; and each of these options lead to *irrational* – but generally not psychotic – behaviors: 1) unrealistically deny or rationalize away that a disruptive event has even occurred (i.e., “I didn’t really need that anyway, I’m OK, you’re OK... – the most extreme form of which would be analogous to the position of an anorexic “I can’t possibly be frustrated, or deprived, or hungry – I already have more than I need”); 2) attributing the negative situation to a different source (technically, “projection” or “splitting”), so that the illusion of an ongoing relationship of Shared Omnipotence can be maintained, while another, less important relationship is sacrificed; 3) the use of chemical means (licit or illicit) to restore an illusion of comfort; or, 4) regress to a more immature level of functioning, i.e., regress back to functioning at the level of Stage 1 (ineffectively infantile), or at the level of Stage 2 (with all of the risks attendant to Stage 2 narcissistic/paranoid pathology, as described above).

In light of the availability of psychoactive drugs to the populace, it should also be noted that persons functioning within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence are particularly vulnerable to becoming very dependent upon prescribed medications and/or illicit drugs. Various psychoactive agents can dull emotional pain and artificially instill a sense of well-being. (Activating agents, such as amphetamines, cocaine, etc., tend to lead directly to an illusion of omnipotence; sedating agents such as tranquilizers, pain killers or marijuana can suppress emotional pain and fear.) Thus, use of those agents are very tempting to persons who sense an emerging loss of shared omnipotence, and desperately want to maintain the illusion – and of course, contribute to distortions of logical processes, poor judgment, and increased irrationality. Of course, the “crash” of withdrawing from amphetamines or other addictive drugs can be especially devastating in exacerbating the regression that was temporarily contained. Since no pharmacological intervention (even therapeutic use of psychotropic medications) can consistently or “perfectly” maintain the illusion state of Shared Omnipotence, and even with the use of psychoactive agents, the emotional pain of having lost Shared Omnipotence may “break through” or there may be side-effects which also defy the expectations of a return to omnipotent safety through the use of psychotropic medications and/or a therapeutic relationship, the use of illegal drugs or even prescribed psychotropic medications can at times paradoxically exacerbate a decompensation, with regression into a severe depression, or back to Stage 2. That is, the pharmacological agent *itself*, whether licit or illicit, as well as the prescribing physician, can be unconsciously perceived as a potential sources of Shared Omnipotence (in essence, a “relationship” develops with the chemical agent and/or the provider of the agent); and when the desired emotional relief is not provided, or toxic reactions or side-effects develop – the use of the chemical agent itself can be perceived as yet another failed attempt to achieve a “relationship” affording Shared Omnipotence.

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As described, the focus of persons functioning within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence is on relationships (with persons, groups, and/or institutions), rather than purely upon meeting specific needs. In fact, frustration of needs can be tolerated – and significant amounts of pain and guilt can be tolerated – if the *illusion* of a continuing relationship affording Shared Omnipotence is maintained. The overt or implicit stance is that, “I need YOU to love me and care for me, and then together, we cannot fail. But if I see any lapse in your loving and caring for me, and I cannot immediately relieve the pain and fear that emerges, I will inevitably disintegrate into a helpless, hopeless, and desperate complete person – and I assume that you will also be similarly destroyed.” Thus, these people will tend to be extremely sensitive to emotion, since it is emotion rather than logic which can provide a sense of Shared Omnipotence. While persons at this Stage generally attempt to be logical, and generally avoid falling into overt paranoia or psychotic-like thinking – internally, they value emotion at a much higher level than they value cognitive logic, and the resultant behaviors and beliefs may be objectively *irrational*, but not psychotic. In fact, there is actually a valid internal logic to this mode of thinking, which reflects the typical history of persons fixated at this level. As stated above, fixation at this level is often engendered by developmental situation in which the parenting persons or the environment did not provide safety, security, and/or “good enough parenting”, but rather, the developmental needs of the child were responded to by an inattentive, uncaring, or often hostile and abusive environment. If one imagines the position of the child growing up in such an environment, implicitly and explicitly, they learn early on that the determination of whether they are nurtured/rewarded or rejected/punished is not as much dependent upon the actual objective reality of the situation, nor the actual objective reality of their needs as a child or a youth – but is largely if not totally dependent upon the affective state of the person with whom they are interacting. This can occur due to their being parenting persons who are themselves struggling with borderline and narcissistic issues, and thus largely focused upon their own inner emotional state, rather than practical reality; or a hostile or violent external environment in which safety is dependent upon the emotional whims of an outside malicious entity. Thus, the child/youth learns that the best way they can protect themselves is to discern the *affective state* of the other persons in their environment. For example, no matter how strong the need is, unless it is life-threatening, one dare not approach an already distant, angry, hostile, or intoxicated parent, friend, acquaintance or stranger, other than from a position of appeasement. The child learns to disregard their own needs in the service of assuaging the affective state of the other person. That is, regardless of the objective reality of the situation, the child learns that it is his or her duty to reinforce the other person’s needs, which may include the other person’s desire for a relationship conferring Shared Omnipotence; and that is best accomplished by attending to the *affective* needs of that person, rather than realistic practical issues. Thus, the lesson learned is that *reality, at least vis-à-vis safety, is defined by affect, rather than by objective fact*. It can be seen how this dynamic reinforces psychological defenses in the Narcissistic spectrum (i.e., maintaining “useful” but false beliefs and rationalizations at almost all cost), and discourages the development of more reality-based Neurotic

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spectrum defenses (i.e., being relatively willing to explore and confront belief and rationalizations). Decision making based upon affect may be effective in certain milieu, but is detrimental to effective practical functioning. The person functioning at this level will consciously or unconsciously strive more strenuously to keep their landlord, or employer, or friend, or spouse “comfortable” – than to actually pay the rent, effectively perform their job, be an honestly supportive friend, or maintain a sincere and open form of intimacy. Dysfunctional relationships based on mutual desires for Shared Omnipotence can “work” – but only up to a certain point at which objective reality tends to require a more mature approach to avoid practical problems.

Thus, persons functioning within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence can easily become dependent upon a “system” (be it a personal relationship, a social, political, or religious institution, etc.) which affords a consistent illusion of “Shared Omnipotence”; and as long as the system maintains that illusion, they may sacrifice almost anything and everything to remain within the system – and they will have no motivation to change their lifestyle or manner of functioning, or seek any mental health treatment, as long as the illusion of Shared Omnipotence is maintained. Generally, these persons will not relinquish their sense of identity and autonomy as easily as those fixated in Stage 2, because they generally do not perceive the other person / persons / institutions as *of themselves* all powerful and omnipotent, but they perceive the omnipotence as arising *out of* the relationship. Thus, if “asked to much”, or if they “feel abused”, they may not hesitate to question the authority, (unlike the person fixated at State 2, who remains devoted to *appeasing* authority at all costs). However, with enough malicious “support” and encouragement, with enough peer pressure, or with a dulling of cognitive abilities and/or inhibitions through use of psychoactive agents, these persons can regress to a Stage 2 position, with all of the attendant risks and dangers. Since all of these developmental stages actually represent a fluid spectrum, there are many persons who may fluctuate between State 2 and Stage 3 dynamics, depending upon the circumstances and stresses they are under. That is, at times they may be defiantly and self-righteously angry and manipulative; at other times they may be passively acquiescent and amoral. This phenomenon has been depicted widely in the media, as the election of President Barak Obama has severely disrupted the sense of “Shared Omnipotence” among the portion of the population which supported the previous administration. In fact, this dynamic has actually been growing over the last few years, as the Bush administration has come under increasing criticism, and has more overtly been dysfunctional and ineffective. There may be disagreements as to “where the line may be drawn”, but the media is replete with comments from the opposition which range from sincere, educated, thoughtful disagreement; to those who have regressed into largely irrational and desperate attacks which contain significant doses of paranoid distortion. That is, ideas which previously were considered by most to be “fringe”, and were generally considered *irrational*, are now being accepted rather unquestioningly and without any logical analysis, by a larger percentage of a population, which is regressing and psychologically deteriorating under due to their loss of a sense of Shared Omnipotence offered by the

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previous administration. John Dean implicitly describes this phenomenon in his preface to Conservatives without Conscience, “Contemporary conservatives have become extremely contentious, confrontational and aggressive in nearly every area of politics and governing... an arrogant and antagonistic style, along with a narrow outlook intolerant of those who challenge their extreme thinking. Incivility is now the norm...”³⁴ Similarly, on the other side, there has recently been an increasingly presence in the media and blogosphere of those who are looking for the new administration to confer upon them a state of Shared Omnipotence, now from a position of power as opposed to from a position of opposition – and are already experiencing a disruptive sense of disappointment, and retreat from irrational evaluation, in feeling disappointed that the Obama administration has not immediately “delivered” that which was expected (unconsciously, Shared Omnipotence). In fact, perhaps only partially in jest or with a sense of irony, On June 12, 2009 Bill Maher expressed a longing for the very sense of *irrational* confidence/omnipotence which he previous devastatingly attacked, “What he [President Obama] needs in his personality is a little George Bush ... What we need to do is to marry the good ideas that Barack Obama has with a little bit of that Bush attitude and certitude.”³⁵

Implications of fixation to social functioning:

As already noted, it is my opinion that the majority of the population of our society actually are essentially functioning within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence. This is not to imply that the majority of the population suffers from a diagnosable “Borderline Personality Disorder”, which represents the lower, severely pathological end of the spectrum within this Stage; but rather, while avoiding most of the dangerous and severely disruptive pitfalls of what is clinically considered “borderline pathology”, the majority of the population has not fully and successfully worked through the desire for Shared Omnipotence, and tend to act out the longings for that state of being in at least some areas of their life and/or relationships, especially when under stress.

Within the political system, encouragement of these dynamics is rampant. This is not the political stance of tyranny or fascism, which imbues a selected person or “system” with omnipotent powers (as would be the case in Stage 2) – but this is the political stance that offers the hope and illusion that if the “right” decisions are made, if the “right” policies are instituted, if the “correct” political viewpoints are adopted – in essence, “We will all live happily ever after”.

The realistic sociopolitical dilemma is that to enlist the support of persons functioning at this level, the illusion of Shared Omnipotence must be, to at least some extent, offered to the electorate. Yet, just as on a personal level, just as in personal relationships, political relationships, platforms and policies based upon the illusion of Shared Omnipotence also

inevitably fail. Thus, party politics which play into this dynamic lead to an internally fractious process that cycles between periods of unrealistic hope and expectation, and periods of frustration, anger, rage and defensive denial, self-recrimination, guilt, and self-sabotage – or when those defenses fail, a depressive regression into passive ineffectiveness and despair. Thus, it was perhaps with a deep innate level of insight, (albeit many would argue unactualized thus far during his tenure in office) President Obama wrote in his introduction to “Dreams of My Father”, “I work as a lawyer active in the social and political life of Chicago, a town that’s accustomed to its racial wounds and prides itself on a certain lack of sentiment. If I’ve been able to fight off cynicism, I nevertheless like to think of myself as wise to the world, careful not to expect too much...”,³⁶ And similarly, President Obama wrote in the prologue to The Audacity of Hope, with an earnestness that might explain some of the current predicament of the administration, emphasis added, “...the topic of this book: how we might begin the process of changing our politics and our civil life. This isn’t to say that I know exactly how to do it. I don’t... I offer no unifying theory of American government, nor do these ages provide a manifesto for action, complete with charts and graphs, timetables and ten point plans...”⁴⁵ When expectations are “too much”, when the fantasy of Shared Omnipotence is triggered, intra-party feuding, personal attacks, and an acceptance of self-defeating strategies become common. The ironic and paradoxical implication is that political systems that rely on a more malignant narcissistic/paranoid dynamic will be inherently more stable than a “healthier” system that is functioning at the level of seeking Shared Omnipotence. In the more regressed situation, as long as the “authority figure” can maintain power (whether through cult-status, dictatorship, fascism, manipulation, etc.) – the system may internally “work” for those who are “members” of the ruling class; unless and until they are deposed by external forces. However, political systems that are actually “healthier” and eschew malignant fascist/narcissistic/paranoid dynamics, are less stable, and more prone to internal self-defeating processes – which may destroy the functionality of the group or institution from within.

Chapter VI

Stage 4: Developmental state of “Acceptance”

This Stage involves developing a realistic sense that "I am a whole, but imperfect person. I am not a helpless, hopeless, incomplete person. I have imperfections. There are things that are wrong with me, but I am still basically a whole person. In the world, there are other whole-but-imperfect people. Working with these other persons, at different levels of relationship – colleagues, business associates, friends, family, intimate relationships – we are all trying to take care of practical matters and meet our needs and each other’s needs to the best of our abilities. It does not always work out, but there is a difference between being disappointed and being abused." To get to this point, what has to happen is that a

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person must come to the Acceptance of a very real loss of the expectation that "There is an omnipotent power that is going to protect me, keep me immortal, and take care of everything I need." There is no omnipotent power, benign or malignant, which will afford complete protection in the real world; there is no relationship which can be formed – with another person, group, or institution –which will produce Shared Omnipotence. There has to be a true mourning process regarding the loss of the possibility of omnipotence in practical life. It must be recognized that grief, or suffering, can be endless – but that through a process of mourning, a state of Acceptance and reasonable comfort can be achieved. In essence, this is the exact opposite of the narcissistic position of, "Don't get mad, get even"; this represents the resolution of the belief that one cannot survive acknowledging and grieving a loss. If mourning does not occur, non-pathological disappointment, sadness and grief cannot be transcended – and instead, they decay into constant self-righteous indignation, and/or misery and depression – which fuel the desire to re-capture the fantasy of Shared Omnipotence. Again referring to the realm of music (even mundane popular music) and literature, the destructiveness of an inability to tolerate sadness, the seeking of Shared Omnipotence through attachment to an aggrandized group or cult, and the helpless suicidal despair that emerges when the illusion is confronted, were all indirectly referenced in the iconic 1960's "*Leader of the Pack*", "They told me he was bad, but I knew he was sad; That's why I fell for (the leader of the pack)... One day my Dad said, 'Find someone new', I had to tell my Jimmy we're through... As he drove away on that rainy night, I begged him to go slow; But whether he heard, I'll never know... Look out! Look out! Look out! Look out!"³⁷ Later during that era, there were expressions of a distinct turning away from seeking omnipotence (e.g., as opposed to the aforementioned scream of Jim Morrison, "We want the world and we want it – now!"), towards a more realistic and humble problem-solving mode, the declamation of The Moody Blues in "*I'm Just a Singer (in a Rock and Roll Band)*", "If you want the winds of change to blow about you, and you're the only other person to know, don't tell me! – I'm just a singer in a rock and roll band..."³⁸ Yet more importantly, as suggested by Cornel West, the importance of being able to grieve, mourn and transcend both personal loss and social injustice is metaphorically expressed and has a transformative impact through the power of music, "That is the essence of the blues: to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or pessimism... The blues is the most profound interpretation of tragicomic hope in America. The blues encourages us to confront the harsh realities of our personal and political lives [i.e., to effectively grieve and to mourn] without innocent sentimentalism or coldhearted cynicism."⁸

Persons functioning within the Stage of Acceptance have developed a relatively mature ability to acknowledge the reality as it is, and to accept responsibility for one's own behaviors, actions and reactions. There has developed a tolerance for experiences of disappointment and grief. However, while specific losses and disappointments may be mourned and accepted, there may still remain an incomplete ability to fully resolve the mourning process necessary to acknowledged accept the inherent "unfairness" of life. There may remain a tendency to repetitively and self-righteously rail against whatever

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targets may appear to be causing “injustice”, in an attempt to “make things right” – at times acting this out in an unconscious, but reasonably socially-acceptable and practically constructive manner; but at times with a greater emphasis on releasing the uncomfortable and feared emotions, as opposed to truly problem-solving the situation, or accepting what cannot be changed, or what can only be changed through an evolutionary process, and in the meantime, tolerating the world as it is. Again, the focus is on the process of mourning, and the fact that *suffering* from loss is a universal, natural, endogenous (unlearned) emotion; and left unattended, can be interminable; but mourning is a means of healing, which involves going through different stages of a grieving process. The process is not the same for every person. Not every one exactly follows the “stages of grief” made famous by the writings of Kubler-Ross³⁹ – as she made clear in her later writings, “The stages have evolved since their introduction and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives.”⁴⁰ However, in order to transcend suffering, one must in essence learn how to mourn, which often requires a supportive environment, and some degree of ritualistic “cleansing”, which allows a natural healing process to occur. In this regard, I can only assume that it is no accident, but rather an implicit indication of his level of understanding (that again, has not necessarily translated into practical effectiveness), that within The Audacity of Hope as early as on page four of the prologue that President Obama introduces the issue of the necessity of mourning the loss of idealistic dreams (even indirectly referencing Kubler-Ross), and arriving at a state of acceptance in referring to his developing a mature and realistic attitude towards politics, “I began feeling the way I imagine an actor or athlete must feel when, after years of commitment to a particular dream... he realizes that he’s gone just about as far as talent and fortune will take him. The dream will not happen, and he now faces the choice of accepting this fact like a grownup and moving on to more sensible pursuits, or refusing the truth and ending up bitter, quarrelsome and slightly pathetic. Denial, anger, bargaining, despair – I’m not sure I went through all the stages prescribed by the experts. At some point, though, I arrived at acceptance – of my limits, and, in a way, my mortality...”⁴⁶ Certainly this suggests that Obama’s “audacity of hope” does refer to embracing an irrational state of Shared Omnipotence, but rather, this is audacity to maintain hope which is borne of the effective resolution through mourning of painful grief and loss, and transcendence of disillusionment and despair.

Conversely, the interminable suffering of unmourned grief, as described even by Shakespeare, is summarized in the writing of Liah Greenfield³³, [emphasis added]: *“Hamlet’s madness differs from Lear’s: rather than express itself in acute mania, it takes the form of depression. He shows signs of it from the start, with his first appearance in the play. The Queen, his mother, remarks on the unusual duration and power of his grief: “Thou know’st ‘tis common, -- all that live must die / Passing through nature to eternity...Why seems it so particular with thee?”... Shakespeare believed that love-*

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madness was real and common and a disastrous disease is proven by his decision to make Ophelia, blameless but blaming herself for driving Hamlet mad, succumb to and die from it.”

The process of mourning is analogous to the healing of a physical wound. Without proper attention, a wound may become infected and fester, and even a minor wound can prove fatal. However, attention to the wound, whether simply through appropriate “first aid” or through professional medical attention, can protect against infection, can reposition or reattached damaged tissues, and can provide specifically needed nurturance (medication, physical therapy, etc.). All of those interventions can aid and foster healing – but the healing process itself is a natural process, which is not “performed” by any doctor or medicine. Similarly, a person going through this developmental phase often requires support to aid the mourning/healing process, and to avoid becoming emotionally “infected” or fixated in a state of suffering/depression or self-righteous indignation. Through appropriate mourning, an emotional healing and transcendence of acute grief and futile rage occurs.

Implications of fixation to social functioning:

Although persons functioning within the Stage of Acceptance may adopt rigid stances, if provided with reasonable support and guidance, they can act autonomously and logically. The defenses used by persons at this stage are more amenable to confrontation and resolution (i.e., “neurotic”) – but it must be expected that when defenses are confronted, resolution will inevitably entail the person needing to tolerate and work through a deep sense of grief (i.e., the person must heal through a process of mourning). Although not optimally mature, these are persons who are very amenable to logical argument and debate, as long as it is respected that they are dealing with emotionally difficult and painful issues, for which they will require appropriate support and guidance. Persons functioning within this stage can be very responsible and productive within socio-political processes, albeit at times requiring some gentle guidance and support in order to stay focused upon realistic practical tasks, and avoid being distracted by emotional factors.

Chapter VII

Stage 5: Developmental state of “Mutuality”

With effective mourning, a stage of “Mutuality” can be reached. This is a position in which one fully understands, *rationality*, and both emotionally and intellectually, that the world and its inhabitants are imperfect and at times dangerous; that relationships are imperfect and at times problematic; and that success in life does not constitute ‘living happily ever after’, but tolerating inevitable frustrations, disappointments, losses and grief, and yet as much

as possible avoiding abuse and trauma, and striving to live a reasonably satisfying and contented life.

At this point, there has been developed a mature ability to logically evaluate situations, to accept what cannot be controlled, to attempt to change what can be changed, take personal responsibility for one's behavior and actions, and to complete a grief process by which to reach a realistic position that, "We are all in this together. It will never be perfect. But we can strive to improve, we can problem-solve, we can accept what cannot be changed – and we can be content with making the best of it..." There is then a movement towards an honest, empathic, humanitarian drive to improve conditions for self and others, that is self-less (i.e., not primarily selfish), without being self-defeating or masochistic (i.e., not performed out of fearful subservience or appeasement). There is the capability for rational and logical thought processing and problem solving. A movement within the culture towards this stage of development was recent implicitly referenced by A.O. Scott in an article on recent trends in cinema, "*Slumdog Millionaire*" concerns itself with poverty and disenfranchisement, but it also celebrates, both in its story and in its exuberant, sentimental spirit, the magical power of popular culture to conquer misery, to make dreams come true. And the major function of Oscar night is to affirm that gauzy, enchanting notion... For most of the past decade, magical thinking has been elevated from a diversion to an ideological principle. The benign faith that dreams will come true can be hard to distinguish from the more sinister seduction of believing in lies. To counter the tyranny of fantasy entrenched on Wall Street and in Washington as well as in Hollywood, it seems possible that engagement with the world as it is might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy. Perhaps it would be worth considering that what we need from movies, in the face of a dismaying and confusing real world, is realism."⁴¹

It is unrealistic to expect any but a rather small percentage of the population to consistently function on this level of maturity (and it is equally unrealistic to expect any institution to function with this degree of insight and understanding). These are the people who can develop and institute innovation and progress in a truly altruistic manner, but who are neither dysfunctionally self-absorbed, nor disruptively self-defeating. **These are the people who, regardless of their particular political persuasion, are desperately needed to lead society to a higher level of functioning.**

SOCIOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

Chapter VIII

The Political System of the United States

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It is the basic premise of this discussion that a significant majority of the population do not consistently function at the levels of *Acceptance* or *Mutuality*, and that persons (both individually and in groups) may demonstrate different personality traits at different times and under different conditions. However, most of the population, most of the time, functions at a level which will fall somewhere between the higher end of the Stage 2 Narcissistic/Paranoid state, and the mid-point of developing Stage 4 Acceptance. The functioning of a society or institution in general not only reflects the level of functioning and maturity of the majority of the individuals, but the behaviors of those individuals both marginalize and exclude participation of those functioning at a lower level, and at the same time, can subvert and sabotage the efforts of more emotionally developed individuals to encourage the society or institution to exhibit more mature attitudes and behaviors.

A confounding issue that occurs in domestic politics within the United States is that the voting population, in general, is split almost equally between the Republican and the Democratic Parties. At different periods of time, and under different socio-political and socio-economic influences, one party or the other may appear to gain the advantage, but for the most part, neither party can claim to be consistently predominant. Especially looking at the Presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, it can be seen that (ignoring the electoral vote), the population itself was quite evenly divided. Even regarding the election of 2008, which was relatively “decisive”, in fact, the results were determined by a relatively small percentage of voters who “swung” to the Democratic side.

Due to the situation of a split electorate, and the fact that the United States government certainly is, for all practical purposes, a two-party system, the ultimately deciding factor in recent elections has been the voting pattern of the relatively small percentage of “undecideds” – not only those whose party allegiances are not fixed, but those who make their voting decision relatively late in the campaign process. In that regard, the population can be broken down into various constituencies which are mirror-images on both sides of the political spectrum:

The “base” of each party commits quite early on – for the most part, even prior to the beginning of the campaigns. Campaigns realize the necessity to “solidify the base”, and to “get out the vote” – but those are essentially issues of mobilizing people to cast their vote, rather than needing to convince those persons as to which candidate to vote for.

Those who are not part of the “base”, but who are involved in a more analytical, logical consideration of the issues, may or may not be definitively aligned with either party, but those persons are likely to make a decision relatively early in the campaign process, as the issues and the stances of the candidates become clear. Again, campaigns recognize the necessity to keep those persons involved through the day of actually casting their votes – but the consideration of issues and philosophies, the debating process, the presentation of different points of view – has largely become irrelevant to those persons

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at a relatively early stage. Their level of excitement and enthusiasm for a particular candidate or party may wax or wane, (and thus, their ability to affect other “swing voters” may vary), but since they have already thought through the basic political and philosophical issues reasonably early in the political campaign process, they are unlikely to change their decision during the course of the campaign.

This leaves those who remain undecided until the late stages as constituting the “deciding factor” in determining the outcome of close political races. Yet by definition, and through reference to the considerations of personality characteristics discussed – by and large, these are persons who will be voting largely based upon emotional factors, based upon seeking a sense of Shared Omnipotence with their political idols, rather voting based upon an objective analytical consideration of the facts. That is, the majority of the late-deciding swing voters – who are thrown in the position of literally being the “king makers” – are those who rely most heavily on *irrational* emotional factors in their decision-making, factors which emerge out of the dysfunctional aspects of personality structures functioning at the level of Stage 3.

Thus, in close elections, not only is the ultimate result often very heavily weighted to the last-minute *irrational* emotional reactions of a relatively small percentage of the population, but of course, informed and sophisticated campaigns understand this (on a practical level, even if not on a deeper psychological level), and thus, the campaigns are largely “managed” to solidify the base and “logical” voters early on, and then in the closing months or weeks, to attract the “emotional” “undecided” voters. This phenomenon significantly impacts the entire positioning and strategy of the campaign, and even the selection of candidates, as well as the “attitudes” “spin” and “persona” that the candidates and campaigns adopt. Campaigning to attract voters who maintain a desire for Shared Omnipotence thereby dysfunctionally informs and pressures the actual policy positions and actions of the Parties and the Candidates, of the “necessity” to attract the swing voters. At the same time, on a more subtle level, these dynamics tend to stimulate and reinforce the residual desire for a state of Shared Omnipotence that resides even in the most “mature” individuals. As a consequence, politicians and parties turn to “managers” and “handlers” who implicitly or explicitly understand “what it takes to get elected”; the “managers” and “handlers” develop and “spin” a persona for the Party and the specific politician which fits into this dynamic; and unless under extremely strong and enlightened leadership, the Party will select candidates who “fit” the persona being constructed for them (i.e., not necessarily the most maturely functioning individuals, even if they are intellectually superior). Those candidates then may consciously and/or unconsciously relish forming a relationship of Shared Omnipotence with the electorate.

This process is a “positive feedback” system, i.e., a self-reinforcing situation. That is, a society or institution tends to adopt socio-political positions consistent with the level of maturity and developmental stage of the “average” member/individual – and particularly within the United States system, the level of maturity and the developmental stage of the

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all important “swing voters”. In order to maintain power and control, the leaders of the society/Party/institution will reflect conflicts inherent to the stage of maturity of that segment of the population; and the leadership and structure (rules and regulations, standards of conduct, expressed philosophical stances) of the society/Party/institution will tend to reinforce the behaviors and attitudes inherent to that stage of maturity, even to the extent of encouraging regression in those who have the capability to be more mature. Those in society who are less mature will tend to be marginalized, discounted, and/or stigmatized (the grossly inadequate person may be severely stigmatized); and those who are more mature will be attacked and reviled almost as severely, with the accusation that they constitute the “intellectual elite”, that they are not “one of us”. While the gross irrationality of the severely disturbed may constitute a threat to the stability of the Stage 2-3 individual, to an even greater degree, the insightful maturity of individuals functioning at Stages 4-5 (i.e., accepting that in fact, a state of Shared Omnipotence does not exist and cannot exist) is an even more dangerous threat to those who depend upon the activation of the illusion of Shared Omnipotence to maintain their political power.

This entire dysfunctional schema has generally been reinforced by persons “managing” the political system/campaigns. From the point of view of gaining and holding power, (from either the right or the left), maintaining a divided and angry electorate which is disparaging of “the other side”, psychodynamically reinforces the Stage 3 defenses and encourages the illusion of needing to enter a relationship which will confer a sense of Shared Omnipotence; and thereby may attract the attention of the most practically important “swing” voters. This, in turn, reinforces the strength of a hostile power structure in each competing side, at the cost of rejecting non-partisan compromise and problem solving. The ineffectiveness of governing from either extreme then creates a vicious cycle which foments disillusionment and disappointment, raises fear, and thus in itself, extenuates, exacerbates and exaggerates the disturbing affective states and dysfunctional defenses which tend to undermine mature analysis and problem solving.

The processes needed to move the society/institution forward developmentally will be actively discouraged by what becomes an inherently ineffective institution; an institution that is self-perpetuating in its own dysfunction. The disruptive defenses of this stage of immaturity will tend to be reinforced, codified and institutionalized, as described by Stanley A. Renshon, a psychoanalyst and political scientist at the City University in New York, “Contempt has become legitimized and institutionalized in American politics... The volume of it and frequency is all very new.”

Only through an intense internal struggle within the society/institution, can development towards maturity be encouraged, or even be tolerated. Development in that regard is a slow, painful, evolutionary “healing” process, marked by periods of progress and periods of regression – with a constant risk of moving forward slightly, only to again become again fixated at a less than mature stage. Unless there can be a leadership that relies on wisdom and rationality (despite a political process that tends to discourage the

adoption of such a leadership) the prognosis for more mature development in the immediate future, while not hopeless, is not good. Yet at the same time, even the most enlightened leadership, in order to gain and maintain power within the government, must adopt compromises which including enticing the following of those seeking Shared Omnipotence. However, paradoxically, those compromises must be made not out of the illusion that Shared Omnipotence can ever actually be effected, and not out of malicious intent to control or repress the populace, but rather, as a realistic and *rational* strategy to foster the most benign, most “good enough” form of governance that is practically possible.

Chapter IX

A Wider Perspective

Viewing the world situation in light of this model, it would appear that the functional basis of most social and political entities incorporate philosophies and traits which fall within the spectrum between the stages of Narcissism, Shared Omnipotence and the beginnings of Acceptance.

At the Narcissistic/Paranoid extreme, societies are totalitarian. The populace is expected to thoughtlessly depend upon an all-powerful, all controlling, omnipotent leadership – who can be easily exploit segments of the populace without care or remorse, based upon whatever illogical or malignant rationale can be most effective (i.e., racism, religious discrimination, classism, etc). The system “works” as long as the power is respected, the rules are followed, and there is no threat to the fantasized omnipotence (good or evil) of the leadership (that is, it matters not if the omnipotent leaders are loved and/or hated, as long as they are revered and followed mindlessly). As long as the populace is convinced and/or coerced into maintaining the power structure status quo, superficially, “all is well” for those in power. But should the populace “awaken” or “arise”, there emerges extremes of fear, rage and chaos – often untempered by the capability for mature responsibility, guilt or remorse (which had been systematically sabotaged, beaten down, disrespected and reviled by the existing power structure). Tragically, dissembling the pathological power structure all too often (at least temporarily) turns into an exercise in vengeance and revenge, rather than (or at least before there can be) growth and development.

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At the Shared Omnipotence end of the spectrum, there is a more realistic understanding that no power structure/institution/leadership can be expected to be omnipotently protective of itself. What occurs is a cycle, in which a relationship/power structure/institution/leader comes into prominence with great promise; and then disappointment begins to set in. There is an inevitable rupture of the hoped for relationship of Shared Omnipotence (when “reparative defenses” fail), at which point there emerges within the population is a sense of helplessness, despair, anger, rage, guilt, and depression. The power structure, in attempting to survive and defend itself, may then regress into a more narcissistic/paranoid totalitarian structure; or alternatively, the disillusionment of the populace eventually leads to the downfall of the discredited relationship/power structure/institution/leader, which may in essence have the “decency” not to regress towards a totalitarian stance, but unable to accept its own fallibility, recoils and essentially self-destructs in shame. The populace can then gain relief from the ensuing chaos only when there arises the opportunity to attach to a new (or rehabilitated) power structure/institution/leadership. The re-established leadership is then seen as “new and improved”, and again imbued with the fantasy that finally, the relationship with this power structure will *truly* allow for Shared Omnipotence. However, more ominously, (and through history, more frequently), the disruption breeds a regression to a Stage 2 totalitarian/fascist political system.

Only if the society begins to effectively deal with the emotional tasks of reaching a level Acceptance, and moving towards relationships of Mutuality, can there be an objectively mature approach to problem solving (be it interpersonal, social, or political) – and that will occur only if the ruling power structures are wise enough and mature enough to truly try to be “therapeutic” towards the populace, rather than being primarily invested in self-interest, exploitation, and increasing power.

Chapter X

Implications Regarding the Recent History of Politics in the United States

The current political and economic situation places us at a point in history where we are confronted daily with concrete indications that both as individuals and as a society we have suffered a loss of even a reasonably rationalized expectation of omnipotence or shared omnipotence. As individual, groups (e.g., political parties) we must take positions on a variety of issues and problems that have no clear, good or easy solutions. In a sense, this episode of confrontation by reality began on September 11, 2001. We had to acknowledge that we were facing an enemy who “plays by no rules”, who is not represented by an organized State or institution, and who cannot be defeated by a classical political or military struggle. While the images and meaning of 9/11 certainly continue to consciously and unconsciously haunt us, overtly, the sense of acute trauma has most recently been supplanted by the economic crisis. In fact, while 9/11 emotionally

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affected the entire nation, if not much of the world, the events of that day did not *practically* impact the lives of most individuals; but the current financial crisis, while not physically threatening in the same sense, has a much more immediate and practical impact on a huge percentage of the population, whether through falling value of homes and retirement plans, job insecurity, concern for the practical success of the upcoming-generation, and a general sense of distrust and malaise regarding the ineffectiveness and corruption of the systems of government and finance which had been relied upon for security. That is, the persons and institutions who were invested by many with properties of Shared Omnipotence have given way to a sense of “shared impotence”. The combined effects of the political reality of 9/11 and the socioeconomic reality of the broken financial system have devastated the typical “adaptive” defenses which in the past maintained a sense of stability for the majority of the population. Additionally, in the interim between 9/11 and financial collapse, other events such as the governmental response to Hurricane Katrina, the multiple evidence of both individual and organized corruption which have been uncovered, and the intensity of “negative campaigning” throughout the last electoral cycles, have all reinforced the destruction of illusions of omnipotence or Shared Omnipotence.

In response, consistent with the dynamics of the model which has been described, the disruption of previously functioning defenses has resulted in the emergence of poorly-tolerated and at times poorly moderated emotions of fear, anger, hopelessness, helplessness, anger, rage and despair. Typically, the more immature have resorted to trying to reinstate a connection with a sense of omnipotence in a changed political milieu. This phenomenon knows no political boundaries. For example, on the left side of the spectrum, there are those who have imbued President Obama with an almost mystical power to effect needed “change”. On one hand Obama has overtly denied, modestly refuted, and didactically has insisted that he does not perceive himself or his powers in that manner, but arguably, a sub-theme of his campaign and Presidency has surreptitiously encouraged aspects of just that type of grandiosity. On the right side of the spectrum, devoid of even the overt modesty of Obama, certain demagogues (some politicians and certainly some in the media, such as Limbaugh and Beck) have overtly attempted to channel social malaise into rejuvenated omnipotent cult-like followings. At the same time, those who have not succumbed to the degree of immaturity which has led them to quickly re-attach to a new symbol of (fantasized) omnipotence, have been conflicted if not distraught regarding the obvious lack of optimal knowledge and control held by politicians on either side of the spectrum. This in turn has increased a general sense of depression within the population, as well as internal disputes and fractures within both parties. While the specific nature of those disputes and fractures within the Democratic and Republican parties differ somewhat, the overall dynamics of the process are essentially the same, and mirror images of each other. More mature persons (on both sides of the spectrum), are working on integrating the situation constructively – grieving and mourning the very real losses vis-à-vis political stability and economic security, and attempting to rationally problem-solve how to face the future. However,

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among the population as a whole, *and* among those in power in general, those with the most mature attitudes certainly constitute a small minority, and the powerful forces of emotional chaos and immature attitudes within the populace, expressed and exacerbated by many in the media, and among the politico themselves, are proving a very powerful force with which to contend; so powerful, that attempts to affect rational plans to address the current crises must often compromise with, if not become largely subordinate to, the immature immediate emotional needs of the majority.

Of course there have been sharp divisions within the country for as long as the United States has been a democracy, and the political process has never been genteel, or even particularly rational. At different times, those who have garnered most power have represented positions which ranged from the “Narcissistic/Paranoid” end of the spectrum, to more often engendering of a promise of “Shared Omnipotence”, to at times (often futilely) aspiring towards reaching levels of Acceptance and Mutuality. In fact, essentially every administration has included a combination of individuals and positions emerging from each of those psychological positions, even if the “overall” demeanor of each administration could be characterized by political positions and policies determined by a “consensus” philosophy and level of maturity which has fallen in differing places upon that spectrum. However, while these same processes have been ubiquitous through history, it appears that we are currently at an unusually intense, problematic, and acute confluence of the factors which will either “force” a positive developmental movement, or engender a dangerous period of depressive decompensation, chaos, and irrationality. The experience and trauma of the Vietnam War and its aftermath revealed aspects of the self-sabotaging, depressive deterioration that can occur with the loss of Shared Omnipotence in vulnerable person/persons and institutions, but during that period of history, various defenses and rationalizations converged to restore a precarious balance, a new illusion of “Shared Omnipotence”. Positions of Shared Omnipotence in response to the confrontation of reality that occurred through the fall of Vietnam and the political fall of Nixon were initially engendered partially within society by the drug-infested culture of the 1960’s; followed by the openly proclaimed “faith” of Jimmy Carter; and then powerfully reinforced by Ronald Reagan’s “New Morning in America”, and the near-worshipping of the “new technology”. Thereafter, the “high tech” and “economic bubble” allowed there to be some political shifts, but essentially a continuation of belief in an irrational fantasy of Shared Omnipotence through the Clinton administrations, and into the Bush-43 years. It can be seen that throughout that period of history, there were forces which acted to undermine Shared Omnipotence, but at each juncture, “effective enough” defenses allowed for a re-establishment of essentially the status-quo, without any true progress towards a more mature position. The amelioration of emotional distress through drug use took (and continues to take) a severe toll, and a reliance on chemical means of suppressing affect has also continued through a heavy reliance on licit, prescribed psychotropic medications. In fact, while use of the most damaging illicit drugs generally became seen as socially irresponsible, the use of pharmaceutical means to control emotions expanded not only through the scientifically valid development of

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useful medications, but through the change in laws which allowed for advertising of psychoactive medications through the mass media. In response, the use of many potentially beneficial agents (for the appropriate patients) became contaminated by disingenuous promotion of the use of psychotropic medications to address reasonable emotional pain and malaise, as opposed to treating psychopathology. However, even the use and over use of these agents cannot change characterological traits, and unless drugged into a quasi-intoxicated state, the use of licit pharmaceuticals cannot quash the effects of the real-life stresses and traumas confronting the populace as a whole. Thus, a pharmacological “stabilization” of the system has proven impossible. Jimmy Carter’s “down-home” faith that problems could be overcome through entreaty to the “better side” of humanity was undermined overtly and covertly by the reality of the Iranian Hostage Crisis and other economic problems (in certain aspects, intentionally exacerbated by political opponents). There followed a relatively brief period of disruption, but the basic characterological structure of the society held fast, remained essentially unchanged, and allegiance of the majority was transferred to the philosophy of the Reagan administration. Economic factors led to some deterioration of trust in that philosophy, but the sense of “Shared Omnipotence” was almost seamlessly transferred into the Clinton years, buoyed by economic “revival” via the high-tech boom and real estate bubble. Immature personal behavior, both appropriately condemned and also exploited by political opponents, led to the disruption of Bill Clinton being able to represent a grandiose representation of “Shared Omnipotence”, but then, again employing the use of immature but practically “adaptive” defenses, there was another almost seamless transition towards attaching a sense of “Shared Omnipotence” onto the “compassionate conservatism” of George W. Bush. There had been bitter political partisanship during the Clinton administration which interfered with effective cooperative governing, accompanied by immature and hostile behaviors by various persons. However, as intense as the disputes were regarding policies and personalities, the partisan fighting was essentially among politicians, and did not directly affect the emotional life of the population as a whole. In fact, many persons cynically viewed the political disputes, investigations, impeachment proceedings, etc., as nothing more than a political game. That is, no matter how passionate the populace felt about the political decisions or personal behaviors of the President, those issues did not in any manner approach the emotional shock and intensity of the events of 9/11, or the recent economic collapse, both of which have constituted a direct and personal devastating threat to safety and security.

September 11th plunged the country into the need to face loss and grief immediately and suddenly, on an immense scale. In an instant, at home, watching television, we needed to face suffering, grief, terror and rage that could not be distanced or made impersonal. The sense of grief, anger, victimization and vulnerability experienced by the vast majority of the population far exceeded that elicited by any previous disaster or even any previous terrorist action. For a while, the country seemed to rise to the occasion, and sincere expressions of grief and a process of mourning appeared, appropriately supported by a President who performed far better as a benign and comforting “good-enough parent”

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than many thought him capable. But the ability to tolerate the grief, fear and rage and to effectively mourn *without resorting to dysfunctional defenses* was short-lived. A mature and effective social response of unity and internal cohesiveness deteriorated. The political landscape turned into a severe and bitter partisan struggle, reinforced by subsequent natural disasters and political-economic events. “Adaptive” defenses were overwhelmed, as the enormity of the confluence of events confronting reality destroyed any sense of “Shared Omnipotence”, fostering regression to a more narcissistic/paranoid state in those so prone (on both the left and the right). During the 2004 election cycle, playing directly into the dynamics of seeking omnipotence, the Republican “spin” overtly labeled any acknowledgment of complexity as an indication of “weakness”. In reality, understanding the risks and limitations in dealing with highly complex and dangerous situations represents intellectual and practical strength – and can only be seen as “weak” in comparison to an *illusory* position of omnipotence. At the same time, the Democratic “spin” dared not risk threatening the desire for omnipotence/shared omnipotence within the Party’s own political base or the “undecideds”, and therefore responded by trying to “prove” the “strength” of Senator Kerry (e.g. vis-à-vis his Vietnam experience). In essence, the process regressed into an implicit conspiracy to force the electorate to choose between competing illusory solutions – to adopt a position consistent with Stage 2 or Stage 3 immaturity, on one side or the other, rather than encouraging the developmental tasks of Stages 4 and 5. Consistent with this phenomenon, Darrell M. West, a political science professor, was cited in the *New York Times* edition of October 17, 2004, *“I’m not sure we’ve really seen a campaign with so many explicit plays to emotion. What we’re seeing this year are direct plays to fear and anxiety.”*⁴³ Thus, while the “political chaos” of the Clinton impeachment was essentially able to be dealt with by “adaptive defenses” which largely maintained the status quo, the current social-economic chaos essentially fosters a “full-blown Borderline crisis” – to which both parties initially responded by reinforcing regressive tendencies.

This led to the re-election of President George W. Bush. During the second term of the administration, as crises multiplied, at least within the mainstream media (whether or not those reports reflect a fully accurate assessment of the internal functioning of the administration), there was revelation that the philosophy of the administration rested upon premises of perceived omnipotence and Shared Omnipotence. With reference to the previous discussion of perceived “infallibility” and omnipotence that occurs in Stage 2, this phenomenon was very specifically as occurring within the administration in the *New York Times Magazine* article “*Without a Doubt*”, by Ron Suskind, October 17, 2004 [emphasis added]:

Bruce Bartlett, a domestic policy adviser to Ronald Reagan and a treasury official for the first President Bush, said, ‘... for people who’ve spent time up close to Bush: that this instinct he’s always talking about is this sort of weird, Messianic idea of what he thinks God has told him to do... This is why he dispenses with people who confront him with inconvenient facts... He truly believes he’s on a mission from God. Absolute faith like

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*that overwhelms a need for analysis... [What] Bush's top deputies -- from cabinet members like Paul O'Neill, Christine Todd Whitman and Colin Powell to generals fighting in Iraq -- have been told for years when they requested explanations for many of the president's decisions, policies that often seemed to collide with accepted facts. The president would say that he relied on his "gut" or his "instinct" to guide the ship of state, and then he "prayed over it."... This evangelical group -- the core of the energetic "base" that may well usher Bush to victory -- believes that their leader is a messenger from God... The president has demanded unquestioning faith from his followers, his staff, his senior aides and his kindred in the Republican Party. Once he makes a decision -- often swiftly, based on a creed or moral position -- he expects complete faith in its rightness. A writ of infallibility... open dialogue, based on facts, is not seen as something of inherent value. It may, in fact, create doubt, which undercuts faith.... In the summer of 2002... I had a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend -- but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency. The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality... Lincoln Chafee, the moderate Republican senator from Rhode Island, has broken with the president precisely over concerns about the nature of Bush's certainty. "This issue," he says, of Bush's "announcing that 'I carry the word of God' is the key to the election... After a day of speeches by Hardy Billington and others, it goes without saying. "To me, I just believe God controls everything, and God uses the president to keep evil down, to see the darkness and protect this nation," Billington told me, voicing an idea shared by millions of Bush supporters. "Other people will not protect us. God gives people choices to make. God gave us this president to be the man to protect the nation at this time... I believe he's an instrument of God, but I have to be careful about what I say, you know, in public.'..."*⁴⁴

In the aftermath of 9/11 came the War in Iraq, Katrina, and the economic collapse, the philosophy of the Bush Administration became untenable to a much larger percentage of the population. Through the 2008 primary campaign, and then extending into the general election, in retrospect, it can be interpreted that to a large extent, there was a powerful battle between forces and positions that encouraged and promised a return to the previous level of security by essentially again using "reasonably adaptive" but functionally immature defenses, re-enforcing and mildly re-working the status quo to regain stability (e.g., at least on an *emotional* basis, relying upon a return to "conservative values"; or a return to "the Clinton years"), versus those who acknowledged that the status quo was no longer tolerable and acceptable, as in fact, the crisis was far more severe than the "usual adaptive defenses" could contain. Through the primaries, John

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McCain gathered support as the “maverick” who was going to challenge the system; and Barak Obama focused his entire campaign upon the need for “change”. Seemingly curiously, but from a psychological point of view, not really surprisingly, *after* the primaries were effectively over, and the McCain versus Obama election became inevitable, Obama reinforced (arguably exploited) his stance of a need for a systemic “change”, while the McCain campaign, for all practical purposes, while attempting to maintain the “maverick” image, rather transparently retreated towards supporting a re-working of the status quo. Consequently, as the Presidential campaign progressed, in large measure, it became more partisan and more bitter. On that level, at times, attempts by candidates or persons on either political side to present honest assessments of the situation often met with derision and name-calling. As discussed above, the outcome of national elections is based largely upon the responses of rather small percentage of the population which actually respond most directly to emotional factors which promise a sense of “Shared Omnipotence”, rather than rationally evaluating positions and policies. Thus, in the environment of increasing economic chaos, which was exponentially increasing even during the electoral campaign, certainly in retrospect, it is not surprising that those “swing voters” spurned a return to even a “re-worked” status quo, and supported the call for systemic change. (I must reinforce that this is *not* a comment or critique of the actual political positions or policies of either candidate; these comments are related to the dynamics of the political process which *transcend and overwhelm* rational evaluation of political positions and policies.)

Turning to the present time, as discussed, President Obama’s writings, as well as Obama’s actual statements since being elected, an argument can be made that at least superficially, the President seemed to have been seeking to instill in the populace a realistic and *rational* sense of the severity of the current crisis, and a realistic and *rational* sense of his lack of omnipotence. Quoting again from the prologue of The Audacity of Hope, “...I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views. As such, I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them. Which perhaps indicates a second, more intimate theme to this book – namely, how I, or anybody in public office, can avoid the pitfalls of fame, the hunger to please, the fear of loss... [i.e., the seduction of the fantasy of Shared Omnipotence]”⁴⁷ Yet it is equally as obvious that there are forces at work (quite possibly intentionally and disingenuously encouraged by certain actions of the administration) which attempt to at least superficially *irrationally* place Obama in the position of leading the way *to* a renewed sense of Shared Omnipotence; and at the same time, there are forces at work (quite obviously intentionally and disingenuously encouraged by opponents of the administration) which not only seek to immediately undermine any illogical presumption that Obama is omnipotent, but also to maliciously undermine any respect for attempts by this administration to *rationally* problem-solve through the crisis as effectively and possible. Those negative forces *irrationally* suggest that the populace has not only severely erred in electing this President, but that the secretly pined for relief from chaos and grief, and re-establishment of a sense of omnipotence, would become available if only the Obama

administration fails, and is replaced by those fostering opposing philosophies and positions – and even more importantly, beyond any actual policy dispute, that the Obama administration be replaced by those fostering a return to functioning within Stages 2-3 of emotional development.

Chapter XI

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

If the society becomes regressed and fixated in Stage 2, there is a distinct possibility of the introduction of subtle or overt neo-fascist policies. If the society becomes regressed and fixated in Stage 3, there is a high risk of self-sabotage due to internal partisan hostility and divisiveness, policies compromised by corruption, impulsivity and economic irresponsibility, and an inability to constructively and cooperatively address problems. Those risks portend a possible internal disintegration of the integrity of the society that may equal or surpass the dangers posed by external threats to the Nation.

The political leadership cannot pretend that there exists an easy, safe, risk-free, cost-free path to follow. The political leadership must recognize that there is no definitive “correct” path. There must be an honest and open recognition of the present dangers that is not perceived as an admission of weakness. The political leadership must be able to readjust positions, as may be demanded by changing conditions and unexpected events. Problem solving and resolution of internal differences must occur through compromises based upon knowledge and logic, not illusory psychological defenses.

This is not an easy task – and may not be an endeavor that is actually possible to accomplish. Encouraging the society to move towards maturity cannot be accomplished by one Party, or one President. The maturing process must simultaneously involve the participation of politicians, the media, industry/business and the population as a whole. As discussed, extreme political partisanship from any corner encourages regression. Sensationalistic, overly-dramatized, overly-simplistic and/or biased presentation of events in the media, regardless of the “bias,” breeds fear and anger, and incites regressive tendencies in the population. Corrupt, manipulative and excessively greed-driven business practices encourages regressive responses of the victimized public. It appears that there may well be more powerful forces aligned in the direction of regression and chaos than those favoring development of maturity; and that there is a stronger drive within the populace to regain a sense of omnipotence, than there is motivation to progress in realistically mourning the loss of believing in omnipotence.

A transformation of the political paradigm in the direction of maturity is essential – but not necessarily likely. The close to “50-50” political division of the populace forces each

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party to scratch and claw for every possible vote. While the practical “majority” may swing to one side or the other over any relatively short span of time, the underlying almost even divide remains present. This guarantees that neither party can afford to offend, alienate, or frighten any of the sizable percentage of the population who cannot see beyond their yearning for a return of a sense of omnipotence or Shared Omnipotence. While it may be politically unlikely, impractical or naïve to expect the political process to foster an implicit form of national psychotherapy, from a psychodynamic/developmental point of view, there is a dismal prognosis unless there can be some form of enlightened post-partisan leadership, which attracts the support of a percentage of the population significantly larger 50%, which would thus diminish the over-embellished power of the inherently immature, emotionally-based “swing voters”. The alternative is a very high risk of a vicious cycle of regression, encompassing an increasingly large percentage of the population, until there is a Stage 2 stabilization through the massive support of an unenlightened leadership functioning on an extremely dangerous Narcissistic/Paranoid basis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David M. Reiss, M.D. has been a practicing psychiatrist for 25 years. After graduating from the Bronx High School of Science, Dr. Reiss' undergraduate training was at Northwestern University, majoring in Chemical and Biomedical Engineering, with a minor in Philosophy. Dr. Reiss attended Northwestern University Medical School, did a psychiatric Internship at Ohio State University, and completed his psychiatric residency at the University of California, San Diego. Dr. Reiss has had training and personal experience in classical psychoanalysis, Jungian analysis, bio-energetic therapy, and psychopharmacological intervention.

The first half of Dr. Reiss' career was devoted to "front-line" Adult and Adolescent Psychiatry, providing psychotherapeutic and psychopharmacological intervention, inpatient and outpatient treatment, with an area of sub-specialty in dealing with patients who were identified as suffering from personality disorders in the Borderline/Narcissistic spectrum. However, as he saw the restrictions of "managed care" interfering with the ability to provide optimal mental health treatment, while continuing a private therapy practice, Dr. Reiss became involved in forensic psychiatry, providing psychiatric evaluations and treatment through the California Workers Compensation System, as an Agreed Medical Evaluator, Qualified Medical Examiner, and "Defense" Independent Medical Examiner. Dr. Reiss has published articles and given workshops regarding various aspects of the interactions between the managed care and Workers Compensation systems. Dr. Reiss has lectured for many groups on issues related to the treatment of Borderline Characterological pathology, providing medical-legal evaluations, and the significance of understanding characterological/personality traits in evaluating and treating patients within the Workers Compensation system. Dr. Reiss has lectured extensively providing non-psychiatric physicians with a basic understanding psychological development, (what in plain language can be seen as determining the level of "maturity" of a patient); to guide the physician in providing the most effective medical care, while minimizing resistance and psychologically-based complications. Additionally, Dr. Reiss is currently working on applying these theories and models of personality dynamics to an understanding of sociopolitical systems.

Dr. Reiss currently maintains an individual practice, providing both treatment and medical-legal evaluations, with offices in San Diego, Palm Springs, San Clemente, Huntington Beach, Oxnard, Bakersfield and Fresno, California. During 2010 and 2011, Dr. Reiss has also been practicing inpatient psychiatry in Massachusetts, currently in the position of Interim Medical Director of the 122-bed Providence Behavioral Health Hospital in Holyoke, MA.

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