

Rose Pedals on Tail Feathers **The Pitfalls of Over Inflating our Problems**

By
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When I watch the pundits on TV anymore, and it seems there are only pundits on TV anymore, I cannot help but think I'm really watching eternal teenagers stuck in adult bodies. The things they say, their criticisms, questions, and sometimes the very issues they cover, seem so juvenile and unimportant, at least compared to the major problems going on in the world, that I feel I'm really watching an elite group of celebrities who are so into their own narcissistic images that they can't see beyond their own reflections to address the real problems facing our world. Gone are the days of professional journalists like Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite, who worked to keep their biases out of the stories they covered, and in their place are a "clinking, clanking, clattering collection of caliginous" pundits in a personality driven news media who seem to delight in making their own personal opinions the focus of the stories they cover.

This is not to suggest in the least that all teenagers are shallow and narcissistic. I know many, especially running in Unitarian Universalist circles, who have more depth and awareness than do many adults I know. I use the term "juvenile," rather, in a literal sense to refer to some of the immature behaviors that can be demonstrated by people of any age. This is an important distinction if we agree with John Bradshaw's assertion that the "neglected, wounded inner child of the past is the major source of human misery."¹ He suggests that when we feel unloved as children we develop narcissistic wounds that may continually influence how we behave as adults—that is, making us behave like children in adult bodies. "The narcissistically deprived inner child," he writes, "contaminates the adult with an insatiable craving for love, attention, and affection."² In other words, when we don't feel adequately loved as children, we often grow up seeking the spotlight in order to get the attention we missed out on early in life. It is no wonder, then, that so many who actually seek the spotlight on TV can be so childish in their thinking.

Bradshaw isn't alone in thinking this. We all know the first thing that happens in psychoanalysis is the exploration of one's childhood. At the beginning of her book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller writes, "Experience has taught us that we have only one enduring weapon in our struggle against mental illness; the emotional discovery and emotional acceptance of the truth in the individual and unique history of our childhood."³ And Carl Jung once wrote, "The small world of the

¹ Bradshaw, John, *Homecoming*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1990, p. 47.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³ Miller, Alice, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 1990, p. 3.

child, the family milieu, becomes the model for the big world.”⁴ So the truth is, all of us, at times, will look at the world through a lens of woundedness and childishness. The mark of maturity is only that we learn to set these thoughts and feelings aside in favor of the present reality, that we don’t allow our false paradigms, those unhealthy patterns instilled in us since childhood, to cause us to misinterpret reality and rob us of the present moment.

Fortunately, training to grow out of our childish habits begins early in life, often with those simple fairytales and bedtime stories that have been told to children throughout the ages. One such story that I know you will recall is the tale of Chicken Little:

Once upon a time there was a tiny little chicken whom everyone called Chicken Little. One day, while she was out in the garden (where she had no right to be), a rose leaf fell on her tail. Away she ran in great fright, for she thought the sky was falling.

As she ran along she met Henny Penny.

“Oh, Henny Penny,” cried Chicken Little, “the sky is falling!”

“How do you know that?” asked Henny Penny.

“Oh, I saw it with my eyes; I heard it with my ears; and part of it fell on my tail,” said Chicken Little.

“Let us run and tell the King,” said Henny Penny.

So they ran along together until they met Ducky Lucky.

“Oh, Ducky Lucky,” cried Chicken Little, “the sky is falling!”

“How do you know that?” asked Ducky Lucky.

“Oh, I saw it with my eyes; I heard it with my ears; and part of it fell on my tail,” said Chicken Little, “and we are on our way to tell the King.”

“May I go, too?” asked Ducky Lucky.

“Oh, yes,” said Chicken Little, and they all ran along together.

Presently they met Goosy Loosey.

“Oh, Goosy Loosey,” cried Chicken Little, “the sky is falling!”

“How do you know that?” asked Goosy Loosey.

“Oh, I saw it with my eyes; I heard it with my ears; and part of it fell on my tail,” said Chicken Little, “and we are going to tell the King.”

“May I go, too?” asked Goosy Loosey.

“Oh, yes,” said Chicken Little, and they all ran along together.

Presently they met Turkey Lurkey.

“Oh, Turkey Lurkey,” cried Chicken Little, “the sky is falling!”

“How do you know that?” asked Turkey Lurkey.

“Oh, I saw it with my eyes; I heard it with my ears; and part of it fell on my tail,” said Chicken Little, “and we are going to tell the King.”

“May I go, too?” asked Turkey Lurkey.

“Oh, yes,” said Chicken Little, and they all ran along together.

Presently they met Foxy Loxy.

“Oh, Foxy Loxy,” cried Chicken Little, “the sky is falling!”

⁴ Jung, C.G., *Freud & Psychoanalysis*, CW, vol. 4, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1989, pg. 137.

“How do you know that?” asked Foxy Loxy.

“Oh, I saw it with my eyes; I heard it with my ears; and part of it fell on my tail,” said Chicken Little, “and we are going to tell the King.”

“Come with me,” said Foxy Loxy, and I will show you where the King lives.” So Chicken Little, Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky, Goosey Loosey and Turkey Lurkey all followed Foxy Loxy; but oh! he led them into his den, and they never, never, came out again!

This is a simple story, but it touches on a lot of important themes, not the least of which is our fascist tendency toward group-think and going along with the crowd to our own detriment. But the real point here is that Chicken Little, who is very childish in her thinking, takes a small event—a rose pedal lighting upon her tail feathers—and blows it way out of proportion. More importantly, her neurotic behavior ends up disrupting the entire community. This is precisely what’s happening today with our national news media. Instead of focusing on real problems, like climate change, the rising sea levels, and water depletion, they invent the news by talking about rose pedals on tail feathers—such as Anna Nicole Smith, or Britney Spears, or post-election squabbling between John McCain and Sarah Palin, or weather or not it’s appropriate to display pictures of our President in a bathing suit, or right for the First Lady to publically embrace the Queen of England. Yet how many of us watched Headline News on CNN to learn that a piece of the Arctic Ice Shelf the size of Road Island broke off this month, one of ten major shelves to shrink or crack in the past few years? How many of us read or watched stories in the mainstream news media about the fact that India, one of the largest countries in the world, is rapidly running out of water, and very soon, if something is done, the people there will begin to die of thirst long before they ever starve to death? How many of us were made aware this week of the increasing desertification of our own country? Shouldn’t the apocalypse come before Ana Nicole Smith and the President’s bathing suit?

Just a couple of weeks ago the national media spent days obsessing about the millions of dollars in bonuses paid out to banking professionals with Federal bailout money. Practically every pundit I heard speak about it said, “the public is outraged over it,” yet I never even heard anyone talking about it, let alone witnessed anyone I would describe as outraged. While I agree, it does seem outrageous that taxpayers should foot the bill to pay corporate bonuses, a few million spent to fulfill legal contracts is nothing compared to the hundreds of billions we’re being asked to pay in general. To me this was just a case of Chicken Little coming to us and exaggerating the issue.

But what we see happening in the news is only symptomatic of what’s happening in our entire society, and often with us as individuals. How many of us obsess about small matters only to avoid what’s really going on in our lives? And how often do we seek the attention we crave, and to make ourselves feel important, by trying to get others to obsess with us? And, furthermore, how often do we fall

into the trap of accepting the petty, unfounded problems others present to us as our very own?

These are the questions we have to ask ourselves in order to get the most out of our short lives here on Earth, if not to preserve the Earth itself for future generations. Certainly our pasts will always remain a huge influence on how we see the world, for, we are, after all, an accumulation of our experiences. But when we refuse to differentiate between the past and the present we condemn ourselves to repeat our mistakes and miss the reality of this moment in the process. And we do this, not because we are merely deluded, but because there's a real payoff for us in avoiding reality. Reality can be painful right? *The truth hurts*, as the saying goes. Why concern ourselves with mammoth, seemingly insurmountable, problems like global warming, when we can occupy our minds with questions about the paternity of Ana Nicole's baby? But an even bigger reward is pursuing the impossible dream of recapturing our childhood and finally having all our wants and needs fulfilled. This is impossible because, as Bradshaw puts it, "The narcissistically deprived adult child cannot get his needs filled because they are actually a child's needs."⁵ In short, we can't go back in time. We cannot change the past. Again, as Bradshaw says, "Only grieving the loss will provide healing."⁶

Only in facing up to the reality that there are certain voids in our lives that can never be filled, be they emotional, psychological, or even physical, can we begin to move on. If not, we condemn ourselves to spending our lives and vast amounts of energy pursuing a reality that can never be. "For if he allows his libido to get stuck in a childish milieu," Carl Jung said, "and does not free it for higher purposes, he falls under the spell of unconscious compulsion."⁷ In Buddhism this is called *samsara*, the repetitive wheel of birth and death we're caught in until we wake up to reality. Jung goes on to say, "Wherever he may be, the unconscious will then recreate the infantile milieu by projecting his complexes, thus reproducing all over again, and in defiance of his vital interests, the same dependence and lack of freedom which formally characterized his relations with his parents."⁸

So we have to ask ourselves, every time we seek attention by blowing our problems out of proportion, declaring that "the sky is falling," if this is really how we want to live out the remainder of our lives; obsessed with getting something we can never have, while missing out on what we really do have right before us in this very moment. To follow such a path makes us hungry ghosts, creatures with enormous bellies that can never be satisfied because they have pin prick mouths. "The narcissistically deprived inner child..." Bradshaw says, "will sabotage his adult

⁵ Bradshaw, *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11f.

⁷ Jung, C.G., *Symbols of Transformation*, CW, vol. 5, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1989, pg. 414.

⁸ *Ibid.*

relationships because no matter how much love is forthcoming, it's never enough."⁹ Reality is the only bread that can fill us up, for our delusions are empty. And reality only and always takes place right here, right now, never in the past, and never in Never Never Land.

And for those of us striving to put our pasts behind us so we can live more fully in the present moment, we must be wary of all the Chicken Littles who approach us, lest, like Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky, Goosey Loosey, and Turkey Lurkey, we end up in the devouring maws of Foxy Loxy. The best way to accomplish this is simply not to give our energy to the tempests in the teapots they ask us to drink from, or help them make mountains out of molehills in the name of compassion and understanding. For it is more loving and more compassionate to help people become free of their delusions by empowering them to face reality—the rarest and most beautiful gem in the entire Universe. That's the ultimate point of the Chicken Little story, that when we allow ourselves to obsess about small unimportant matters, we miss the important matters, and end up as accomplices in our own demise.

Yet reality, too, is so much more than something we must force ourselves to face; it can be awesome, and fulfilling, and beautiful, and profoundly meaningful. Certainly it also has much pain and sorrow and loss, which is why we wish to avoid it by escaping into the small worlds of our own making. Reality is the power to see people for who they are, not clouded by our projections. It is the ability to see through the false paradigms that are taken for granted by our larger culture. It liberates us from so many of our problems by helping us put them in their proper perspective, shrinking them down to size. Reality is rich, and heavy, and physical, not ethereal and lofty or dreamy. Reality is experienced as much through passion as by logic, though it remains evasive, like a veiled temptress in the night who ever so slightly flashes us a lover's smile. Reality, like the Sun, like God, if not God, is at once alluring and impossible for us to behold in its fullness, yet we are drawn to seek it out, wherever it might dwell, within or without.

And so I share this childhood story of Chicken Little with the wounded child in each of us, as a reminder that growing up means grieving our losses, and finally accepting them, so we can stop focusing on what we don't have, and can never have, in order to more fully enjoy what we really do have. For when it comes to reality the sky's the limit, not the problem, not a rose pedal on tail feathers.

⁹ Bradshaw, *ibid.*, p. 11.