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The daughter of an eminent psychoanalyst uses her experience to help us understand the pursuit of celebrity – its psychological roots, its social meaning, its human cost

by Sue Erikson Bloland

It seems inevitable to me now that I should have become preoccupied with fame. My father became famous when I was an adolescent, and his celebrity has loomed over me ever since, affecting me in confusing and conflicting ways. It has sometimes been a source of great pride to be Erik Erikson's daughter, but more often it has overwhelmed my sense of myself -- been demoralizing, diminishing, even paralyzing. Regardless of how it affects me at any given moment, my father's fame is always there to be reckoned with, a powerful force in my life. So I have struggled to try to understand the emotional intensity that is associated with fame as a way of diminishing its power over me.

Of course, I have always longed to feel better understood by the many admirers of my father who assume that they know what it would be like to be in my shoes, who have envied my good fortune at being the daughter of the eminent psychoanalyst. I have indeed been fortunate -- but not in the ways that my father's image would lead one to believe.

And now a book has been written about my father and about our family -- *Identity's Architect: A Biography of Erik H. Erikson*, by Lawrence J. Friedman. This is a thorough account of my father's life and work, written thoughtfully and with great respect. But despite Friedman's extraordinary accomplishment in piecing together information gained from archival research and close to a hundred interviews with family members and with people who have known my parents, his description of intimate family

relationships and family affairs cannot possibly reflect my own experience -- any more than *my* description could capture the experience of anyone else, within or outside the family. That the story of my father's fame has appeared in Friedman's words makes it more urgent for me to write of it now in my own words.

Not long after my father's first book, *Childhood and Society* (1950), was published, I witnessed a dramatic transformation in how people related to him and an equally dramatic transformation in how he related to them. He became the luminous center of attention at most social and professional gatherings, where people milled around him, obviously excited, doing their best to make conversation with one another while awaiting their turn to engage with *him*. In his presence they became mysteriously childlike: animated, eager, deferential, anxious to gain his interest and approval.

Friends and admirers all seemed intent on idealizing my father, seeing in him someone much more important and powerful than themselves. People would ask me, "What is he *really* like?" and I knew they wanted their fantasies confirmed, not an honest answer about a real human being. Or, upon first learning that he was my father, someone might say, "Really? Can I touch you?" -- conveying even more directly what magical power they ascribed to his very being. (At such moments I became little more than a conduit for my father's magic; this was one of the many ways in which his fame diminished me and my sense of my own place in the world.)

My father was a tall man with an impressive shock of white hair, which gave him a distinctive and dignified look. He had kindly eyes and a gentle face. He appeared to be the quintessential father figure: concerned, compassionate, and knowing. With the advent of his fame he acquired a larger-than-life social aura, a special air

of confidence, which nourished people's fantasies about him and suggested that he felt as wise and as comfortable with himself as they perceived him to be. His words, even his most casual remarks, were heard as profoundly meaningful, because of the reverence accorded their source. And people often felt deeply understood by him even in the course of a brief conversation -- the profundity of his empathic responses was magnified by his aura.

Once, when I gave a party for some college friends, I saw the excitement in their faces the moment my father walked into the room, and I saw the transformation in him the moment he became the center of their attention. There was electricity in the air -- a sense that something out of the ordinary was about to happen. And because of the anticipation on both sides, something did happen. It was a charged dance between people with an intense need to idealize and a person who needed just as intensely to be idealized. Once this dance had begun, I found myself wondering why I had ever thought the occasion would be enjoyable for me. I felt deflated by my father's fame -- not enhanced, as I had always hoped to feel, but momentarily invisible.

The idealization that accompanied my father's fame seemed the more mysterious to me because he did not seem *personally* different after he became famous. To those close to him my father was -- and continued to be -- a life-size human being, suffering from all the same difficulties in living that had plagued him in the years before his celebrity. Despite his brilliance as an analyst and a writer, and his great charisma, he was an insecure man, described as "exceedingly vulnerable" by his friend the analyst Margaret Brenman-Gibson in a reminiscence about him after his death. He evoked in those closest to him a wish to comfort and reassure him; to make him feel that he was worthy and lovable; to help him wrestle with his lifelong feelings of personal inadequacy, his punishing self-doubt.

Once, during my adolescence, when Dad and I were alone together, I burst into tears -- brokenhearted over the abrupt ending of a teenage romance. I remember the look of terror and grief on his face -- terror because in the context of the family he did not feel like an adult with the ability to soothe and comfort. For these vital functions he looked always to my mother, who was in his eyes the ultimate source of strength and wisdom within the family (if not the universe), the *real* healer, the solver of all problems both practical and personal. On this occasion he could not call to her, as he normally would in anything remotely like a crisis, "*Joan!*" Grief was in his face precisely because he felt so powerless to comfort someone he loved who clearly needed and longed to be comforted by him.

I have recently read a letter that Dad wrote to my brother Jon in the early 1960s, acknowledging how little he had been involved with us when we were children. He wrote,
I left (and always have left) too much to Mom. This ... had to do with my being an immigrant. She knew everything about this country, from the worth of a dollar to the needs of American children. And I honestly believed that I could not be of much use to you.

This is a touching statement about his real feelings as a father, but I don't believe that his being an immigrant was the heart of the matter. I think he felt personally ineffectual long before he came to the United States, and had invested my mother with such authority from their first meeting, in Vienna. (My mother, a Canadian by birth, had lived for a number of years in the United States.)

Indeed, my father's self-explanations often struck me as shallow for a man of such deep insight into the emotional lives of others, and I could not help feeling that his brief analysis with Anna Freud had been inadequate for someone who was to make psychoanalysis his life. It was brought to a premature end when my parents emigrated from Vienna to the United States. He never again sought emotional relief, or clarification of his feelings, from

psychoanalysis or any other form of psychotherapy. This reflects, I think, his fear of knowing himself, and it perpetuated his limited understanding of his closest relationships and of the sources of his own deepest pain.

That moment in which I sought his comfort illustrates the dilemma of my relationship with my famous father. On that occasion I had been seduced momentarily by the public image, and had asked for something that I knew (and had always known) he could not give - - as much as he longed to. The pain this caused him seemed to me much greater than my adolescent suffering, and I felt terrible for having reminded him of his feelings of inadequacy.

I also experienced once again bewilderment that the psychoanalyst who had become famous for understanding and helping people (particularly children and adolescents), and for writing about them with such insight and compassion, was so frightened by *my* adolescent needs. If *he* was overwhelmed by my needs, what did that say about *me*? I redoubled my efforts to protect him from any feelings of mine that might bring that pained expression to his face, and continued to do so for the rest of his life.

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OW was I to reconcile my experience of that emotionally fragile man (who understood so little about his feelings or mine and was terrified by both) with the public image of the intellectual pioneer who had challenged the authority of the great Sigmund Freud, daring to revise some of Freud's basic assumptions about human nature? How was I to reconcile the picture of the father I knew at home with the image of him as he appeared in public, where he radiated a humble but confident sense of his own ability to understand human behavior and to help others -- and where he demonstrated (both in his writing and in his personal style) an exceptional level of comfort in exploring the most intimate human

emotions? In the public sphere he was the authority on feelings, and his audience received emotional nourishment and reassurance from him. In my lifelong effort to reconcile the two seemingly disparate facets of my father's personality, I feel I have come to understand something general about the nature of fame. In the relationship between the public image of a famous person and the private human being there is *inherently* something profoundly paradoxical. The public image is the reverse of the private person as experienced by him or her self and by intimate others. It might be accurate to say that the public image reflects what the private person most longs to be. It represents an ideal self.

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For example, how often have you heard a master entertainer reveal that he or she is shy almost to the point of being socially crippled? David Letterman has talked about what a nerd he felt like in high school, how he couldn't get a date, and how he still feels socially inept, though his television persona is that of a quintessentially cool, relaxed, and witty guy.

Laurence Olivier -- a commanding figure on the stage -- was awkward as a young boy and remembers being looked on with

contempt by his peers in school, who considered him effeminate and, he later wrote, referred to him as "that sidey little shit Olivier." In his remarkably candid autobiography, *Confessions of an Actor* (1982), Olivier acknowledged that he continued to feel like that unpopular little schoolboy in adulthood, even after he was knighted by the Queen. He was painfully shy and thought his face "weak." He was most at ease on the stage, where he could wear a costume and a facial disguise -- a fake nose or a moustache or a beard. That afforded him "the shelter of an alien character," he wrote, and enabled him "to avoid anything so embarrassing as *self-representation*" (italics mine). At parties, where he had to appear as himself, he occasionally fainted from anxiety and had to be carried out of the room.

We all know about the deep connection between comedy and tragedy, but I have never heard it spelled out so clearly as in W. C. Fields's pronouncement about his good friend Bert Williams -- that he was "the funniest man I ever saw, and the saddest man I ever knew." Charlie Chaplin, a symbol of childlike playfulness on the screen, sometimes did dozens of takes for one of the hilarious and seemingly spontaneous little scenes he created. He drove his fellow actors and the rest of the crew mad with his obsessive perfectionism. Those delightful scenes were born of compulsive misery. And, of course, there is Judy Garland, whose brilliant smile lit up the screen and made her one of the most popular entertainers of our time. We now know that she was desperately unhappy behind that smile, and tried many times to commit suicide. Radiant movie stars who have died essentially of unhappiness are not rarities.

Everyone old enough to remember John Fitzgerald Kennedy can call up the vital image that was such an essential element of his charisma. But Kennedy was in truth a sickly man, whose health problems began at birth; Seymour M. Hersh writes in *The Dark Side of Camelot*(1997) that Kennedy had difficulty feeding as an

infant and was often sick. At age two he was hospitalized with scarlet fever, and during the rest of his life there were few days when he wasn't in pain or seriously ill in some way.

How could our image of JFK have been so different from the reality? In some cases his infirmities actually gave him a heightened appearance of health: the cortisone he took to relieve his health problems is said to have swollen his thin, boyish face, making him look strong and robust; the tan that contributed to his appearance of well-being was actually owing to Addison's disease, in which the skin can bronze very deeply when exposed to sunlight. But there were also characterological reasons for Kennedy's powerful aura. Hersh writes,

Kennedy was not merely reluctant to complain about pain and his health but was psychologically unable to do so. "He was heartily ashamed" of his illnesses [an old friend of JFK's told a biographer]. "They were a mark of effeminacy, of weakness, which he wouldn't acknowledge. I think all that macho stuff was compensation -- all that chasing after women -- compensation for something that he hadn't got."

This strikes me as a real insight into the public image of a charismatic figure. Kennedy's public persona was constructed around the denial of shame: he considered his ill health a weakness and put on a show of exemplary good health. Laurence Olivier thought his face was weak, so he wore disguises that helped him to play some of the most compelling figures in the history of the theater. Shame, I have come to think, lies behind an exaggerated public image of strength, confidence, well-being, or benevolence. Great talent is often the vehicle for projecting such a larger-than-life image on the public screen.

Many writers about narcissism ([Heinz Kohut](#), Andrew P. Morrison, and Helen Block Lewis, among others) have suggested that narcissism (or grandiosity) is, essentially, a defense against shame -- with shame defined as a sense that the self is deeply flawed or deficient. To feel shame is to experience the self as

small, weak, insignificant, powerless, defective. It is the experience of the self as not good enough.

I think it was just such feelings of inadequacy that impelled my father to seek fame; fame did not simply come to him because he was an extraordinarily brilliant thinker and writer, which he certainly was. But from early childhood on I was aware that his drive to achieve recognition was monumental. When he did anything other than work, he did it because others -- especially my mother -- insisted on it. Family friends learned to treat with good humor his disappearances from picnics or parties to find a quiet place where he could read or write. His brilliance was coupled with an overwhelming need to achieve. I suspect that the full realization of great talent is always fueled by such an intense need. And what, exactly, is the source of this drive? An early experience of shame so overwhelming to the sense of self that to become someone extraordinary seems the only way to defend against it.

When a person feels so deeply flawed that he or she cannot imagine ever "fitting in" in human society, a solution is to imagine rising *above* human society. This is the narcissistic solution to shame: If I am not lovable for who I am, I will have to make people admire me for what I can do -- and that is how I will make sure that I am never abandoned and alone. The ultimate threat of the experience of shame, after all, is that one will be rejected or ostracized as unworthy of human companionship. And the ultimate motive for seeking extraordinary success, power, or fame is to make sure that this most feared rejection never happens.

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ET me suggest some of the early-childhood experiences that can give rise to an overwhelming sense of personal shame. One that is common to superachievers is abandonment or harsh emotional rejection by one or both parents, which leaves a child feeling deeply defective and unlovable.

My father never knew his father, or even who his father was. One of the saddest things about that, from my point of view, is that his mother refused throughout her life to tell him the identity of this all-important person. Her stated reason was that she had promised the man she married when my father was three that she would never divulge this information. But her explanation conveys a greater concern for someone else's wishes than for my father's aching need to know. Her unwillingness to tell him even after her husband's death felt to him like a painful betrayal.

My father's way of coping with this emotional wound illustrates, again, the connection between feelings of shame and the need for a grandiose self-image. It was my father's fantasy throughout his life that his father might have been a member of the Danish royal family. Relatives still living in Denmark suggested that this could have been the case, but the truth has always been and continues to be elusive. What is revealing, I think, is that my father found much comfort in the thought that his father might have been of noble birth; thus an abandoning parent was transformed into a source of pride.

The painful fact was that my father's father never made an effort to know him -- if, indeed, he was aware of his son's existence. My father's drive to become famous may well have been, at least in part, an effort to win on a wide scale the attention and admiration that he could not obtain from his father. He may even have had the fantasy that his fame would bring him to this elusive man's attention.

Laurence Olivier's father was present during his childhood but "couldn't see the slightest purpose in my existence," Olivier writes. "Everything about me irritated him.... The slight disgust that he felt at his first viewing of me seemed to me ... to last all my boyhood." Charlie Chaplin hardly knew his father, who abandoned his wife and children when Chaplin was still a little boy. More than one

biographer has described JFK's mother, Rose Kennedy, as cold and unnurturing with her children; one called her "a literal majordomo: a management executive rather than a mother." After his bout with scarlet fever, little Jack was sent alone to a sanatorium for three months to recover. That must have been a terrible abandonment.

This kind of childhood experience can easily give rise to the belief (part conscious, part unconscious) that in order to secure the love and loyalty of important others, the rejected child must be or do something very special. In that sanatorium, Seymour Hersh tells us, Jack, "torn from his parents and left in the care of strangers, demonstrated the first signs of what would be a lifelong ability to attract attention by charming others. He so captivated his nurse that it was reported that she begged to be allowed to stay with him."

Thus is charisma born. Becoming someone special -- being charming, talented (musically, artistically, intellectually, politically), magnetic -- becomes the vehicle for a desperate pursuit of emotional nourishment. It seems the only reliable way to secure care and affection, or to wield any real influence over the feelings and behavior of others. Of course, there is enormous gratification in exercising one's talents for their own sake -- a joy in one's mastery of any highly skilled activity. But I would suggest that extraordinary talent is characteristically fueled by a desperate longing for human connection.

In *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979), Alice Miller wrote eloquently about another kind of abandonment that is common to a great many superachievers. What we need and long for most as children, she reminded us, is to be loved and accepted for the small, fragile, needy, imperfect beings that we are. But when a mother's narcissistic needs are so great that she cannot relate to her child as he really is, she loves her child as a self-object -- that is, as someone put on this earth to meet *her* needs. Her love may be intense, but it doesn't make the child feel loved for himself. In the

context of this crucial relationship the child is actually discouraged from experiencing his own feelings and wishes. Instead he is called upon to develop aspects of his personality, and particularly special gifts, that make his mother (or father or other primary caretaker) feel enhanced. This secures the desperately needed love of the caretaker, but may deny the child knowledge, throughout his life, of his *own* needs and desires.

My father's mother perceived him as gifted and took pride in his obvious intelligence. She had become pregnant out of wedlock, had been abandoned by the father of her child, and lived far from home during her pregnancy and the first three years of my father's life (before she married my father's stepfather). This was a lonely and scandalous position in the early 1900s. She needed from my father not only emotional comfort but also help in restoring her damaged pride. She needed him to ennoble her situation with his special gifts. She was an intellectual and an avid reader, and shared that passion with him. She encouraged his pursuit of intellectual interests from an early age. He invested his trust that she would not abandon him, as his father had done, in this bond between them.

So my father was well trained as a small child to deny his own feelings, since his emotionally depleted, depressed mother could not be empathic with them. But he learned to use his intellect to connect with her, to empathize with her, and to gratify *her* needs. It makes sense, then, that as an adult he could be exquisitely attuned to the feelings of others and could, by using his intellect, empathize with and clarify their experiences. Yet his own feelings remained a mystery to him.

When asked "How are you?" he would often look puzzled for a moment, as though unsure how to access information about his state of well-being. And if my mother was nearby, he might consult with her: "Well, Joan, how *are* we?" A similar consultation might be necessary if food was unexpectedly put in front of him --

perhaps a bagel or a sweet roll: "Do I want this, Joan?" And as for the real sources of his unremitting self-doubt, they remained an enigma to him.

Laurence Olivier was doted on by his mother, who was emotionally deprived in her marriage. She adored her son and had great ambitions for him. He began at the age of five to act out plays on a makeshift stage in the nursery. As long as his mother was at home, he remembers, he "never played to an empty house." As for JFK, we know now to what extent his career was driven, orchestrated, and often paid for by his father, who had been thwarted in his own political ambition. Joseph Kennedy insisted that all his children discuss politics at the dinner table and was determined that one of them should become President.

When a parent's feelings of self-worth depend on the accomplishments of a child, this reinforces the child's belief that *only* his exceptional abilities can be relied on to secure the love of someone important to his survival. But at the same time it affirms that those talents are a powerful asset in the quest for connection with others. Such a "gifted" child has had the experience of being important to the one whose love he needs most. The grandiosity behind the most extraordinary performances in any field grows out of this early experience of having felt very special to a parent or another primary caretaker.

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REAT talent, then, leads to recognition on a grand scale. And, of course, it is gratifying to be able to command the attention of large numbers of people with a display of one's special gifts and abilities. But behind the performance of the gifted child -- no matter how successful that performance may be -- the original narcissistic wound remains unhealed. This, I believe, is not well understood. Fame is not a successful defense against feelings of inadequacy. It only appears to be. This is where the greatest

distortion lies in our idealization of the famous. We imagine that our heroes have transcended the adversities of the human condition and have healed their childhood traumas by achievement of the extraordinary. We want to believe that they have arrived at a secure place of self-approval; that achieving recognition -- success -- can set us all free from gnawing feelings of self-doubt. We want to believe that if we ourselves could just secure enough recognition and approval from the outside world, if we could feel sufficiently admired, we would be healed and our self-esteem secured. Like the celebrities we admire so much, we would be rescued from the relentless need for validation.

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But the truth is that the security of the self is never stable. My father never felt that he had arrived safely anywhere. He continued to feel anxious at the height of his success, uncertain that he could maintain the reputation he had won or that he could write again as

well as he had written before. His success rested on gifts that he feared might abandon him. And eventually they did.

The famous live with the constant, terrifying possibility that their special gifts or their celebrity will vanish, exposing them as the insecure mortals they are in their own experience. The horror of such exposure is exquisitely portrayed in *The Wizard of Oz*, when the Wizard's façade is stripped away and he is revealed as an ordinary man with profound feelings of inadequacy.

Public applause and admiration are intoxicating while they last. More than that, they are addictive, creating an appetite for the heightened feeling of acceptance that comes with being adored and revered. But when the applause was over, my father experienced a letdown, a feeling of abandonment, a depression, that diminished his pleasure in everyday living. After one has been publicly celebrated and is again in the privacy of home, the sense of isolation can be the more acute because of its contrast with that exhilarating moment when one felt like the center of the universe. And there is always the haunting question Will I ever get that kind of affirmation again? Will my next performance (or my next creation) be received with the same excitement as my last?

In a recent television biography of Leonard Bernstein his adult children described the depression that came over him after a concert tour. It was torture for him to be alone. He needed the applause so desperately that it prevented him from composing the serious music he had always believed was in him. The tragedy of his career was that he never felt his work was good enough. He had wanted to be another Gustav Mahler. This revelation touched me deeply, because my father never felt he had achieved enough either. He had wanted to be another Sigmund Freud.

To know a famous person well is to know what cherished fantasies that person has *not* fulfilled. My father spoke wistfully of the

Nobel Prize, believing, I think, that this exalted form of recognition would finally convince him that his work was genuinely important. Yet our house was full of plaques and honorary degrees and awards, including a Pulitzer Prize, that had failed to secure for him the true sense of accomplishment for which he longed.

If enormous success like my father's is not a reliable cure for feelings of inadequacy, then what is the road to self-esteem? I would propose that self-esteem is experienced in the context of authentic interpersonal encounters in which the self is revealed and acknowledged rather than obscured by idealized self-images. This is the model of a truly intimate interpersonal relationship, including, of course, the analytic relationship. The real cure for shame is a gradual willingness to expose to others what you are most ashamed of, and the discovery that you will not be cast out for making your shameful self known -- that you are still a member in good standing of the human community. You are acceptable for who you are.

When you have created a public image that denies your private experience of yourself -- one that is, in important ways, the reverse of the shameful self -- the contrast between the two creates feelings of personal fraudulence. I think my father suffered terribly because he could not in his intimate relationships be what his image suggested he would be. More than once he expressed the hope that we his children would feel nourished by his success, because he knew that his career had received most of his attention.

Fame does, of course, have a powerful impact on the personal relationships of the celebrity. But it is not so easy to distinguish the effects of fame from the effects of the narcissistic disturbance that motivated the achievement of that fame. My longing to connect with my father was thwarted by his need to avoid feelings of inadequacy -- by the defenses he had developed early on to ward

off shame and depression -- and not by his fame.

In the interaction when I surprised both of us by bursting into tears, he was unable to comfort me, and that was painful for both of us. But what made it especially disappointing and confusing was that Dad's fame -- particularly his idealized image as a father figure -- engendered fantasies in both of us: he *should* be the perfect father, and I *should* be the ideal daughter that one would expect a perfect father to have. We were both drawn to the illusion of specialness that his public image seemed to offer us. As a result, the experience of disconnection left us both feeling more deeply flawed and ashamed. When we were in public, we often tried to act as if we felt the special connection that we knew his image prescribed. Fame enhances the desire to hide feelings of deficiency. It enhanced the family tendency to hide many things.

More than once my mother explained to me that neither of my parents could consider further psychoanalysis because of their need to protect my father's reputation. She was unwavering in her commitment to his image -- a shared illusion, after all -- and in her distrust that anyone in the field could be counted on to keep their personal secrets. As a result they endured even traumatic misfortune without seeking professional help.

That made it particularly difficult for me to begin my own psychotherapy, years ago. As much as I longed to be the recipient - - *finally* -- of the kind of nourishment that others had gotten from my father in the analytic setting, I was also plagued with feelings of guilt at exposing his imperfection -- and to a member of his own profession! (The guilt was amplified, of course, by a secret yearning to shout it from the rooftops.) As a result of this emotionally charged issue I had to be reassured more than most about the confidentiality of the therapeutic relationship. I knew how important it was to my father -- and to those who idealized him -- that I not impose reality on a mutually gratifying fantasy

that he was the quintessential father.

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O why are we mortals so eager to idealize the famous -- to suppose that the public image is an accurate reflection of the celebrity's private self? Ernest Becker wrote, in *The Denial of Death* (1973),

The thing that has to be explained in human relations is precisely the *fascination of the person* who holds or symbolizes power. There is something about him that seems to radiate out to others and to melt them into his aura, a "fascinating effect" ... of "the narcissistic personality" or, as Jung preferred to call him, the "mana-personality." But people don't actually radiate blue or golden auras. The mana-personality may try to work up a gleam in his eye or a special mystification of painted signs on his forehead, a costume, and a way of holding himself, but he is still *Homo sapiens*, standard vintage, practically indistinguishable from others unless one is especially interested in him. The mana of the mana-personality is in the eyes of the beholder; the fascination is in the one who experiences it.

Freud was the first to illuminate the phenomenon we call transference, whereby we transfer feelings we have had toward our parents to the person of the physician. In transference the grown person experiences the feelings of a child -- a child who distorts his perception of reality to relieve his feelings of helplessness, to make himself feel safe.

Becker expands on this theme: we frail human beings occupy an overpowering universe. We have little control over the forces of nature or life and death. We are born small and helpless, and we continue to feel small, often powerless to affect our fate. Man is the only animal that is burdened with the unbearable knowledge that he will die.

The purpose of setting up figures who seem superpowerful, infinitely wise or infinitely kind, larger than life itself, is to make us feel safe.

The psychoanalyst W. R. D. Fairbairn was one of the first to describe how this process begins in childhood. Every child needs

to maintain an exaggerated belief in the competence and benevolence of his parents. Children are quick to deny their own perceptions of reality in order to protect this idealized parental image. When parenting is inadequate or even abusive, the child takes the blame on himself: I am bad, and therefore deserve any mistreatment I get. In this way, Fairbairn points out, the child purchases outer security at the price of inner security.

In adulthood we idealize the famous as a way of sustaining the belief we held as children that we are protected by people more powerful and capable than ourselves in a world too frightening to endure without the comfort of this illusion. I doubt that it is psychologically possible to give up our emotional dependence on heroes. An idealized view of our parents, teachers, mentors, and leaders is an essential force in our sense of emotional well-being and in our capacity for emotional growth throughout our lives. And it plays an indispensable part in social organization and in history. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to acknowledge the cost to interpersonal relationships of this human compulsion to idealize. I have witnessed the way successful and able adults become childlike in the presence of a father figure, giving over to him their power and authority and diminishing their sense of personal importance in the process of magnifying his. When we grant another person the status of hero, we instinctively protect his claim to superiority by denying our own full potential for empowerment. Too often in history people have exposed themselves and others to great harm by suspending their own judgment in the adulation of a charismatic leader like Adolf Hitler or Jim Jones. And the danger of personal abuse is present in all relationships in which the judgment of one participant is suspended out of a need to idealize the other. Even under the most benign circumstances adulation dulls our awareness of the human dimensions of those we idealize, limiting our knowledge of them and of ourselves as human beings. The cost is a loss of genuine connection between worshipper and worshipped.

But Becker deepens our understanding of what is nevertheless

invaluable about transference or idealization as a way of coping with the human condition. He writes that transference is also

a natural attempt to be healed and to be whole, through heroic self-expansion in the "other." ... People create the reality they need in order to discover themselves.... If transference represents the natural heroic striving for a "beyond" that gives self-validation and if people need this validation in order to live, then [idealization] ... is necessary and desirable for self-fulfillment. Otherwise man is overwhelmed by his loneliness and separation and negated by the very burden of his own life.... What makes transference heroic's demeaning is that the process is unconscious and reflexive, not fully in one's control.

Nor can it ever be. But we can strive to be more aware of idealization wherever it occurs in our relationships -- to make it a less reflexive part of our way of relating. This is the essence of the struggle to release ourselves from our childhood ties to our parents, to individuate, to accept a greater sense of separateness and independence in the world, and to experience ourselves as powerful rather than projecting our power onto others. We can try to be aware of our need to idealize as well as our need to *be* idealized. How much do we invest in the illusion that fame or success heals? How much do we hide behind the illusion that we are somehow larger than life, out of fear of acknowledging to others how needy and inadequate we sometimes feel?

The need to appear larger than life -- like the need to believe in the superhuman status of others -- helps us to cope in a frightening universe, but it also limits our capacity for intimacy. When feelings of shame are concealed by withdrawal from communication or by the creation of a false or grandiose facade, the potential for real healing of our childhood wounds, or for the achievement of a more authentic self-acceptance and acceptance of those closest to us, is blocked. Conversely, a willingness to reveal how fundamentally human we really are -- in our feelings of inadequacy, unworthiness, and shame as well as of personal strength, pride, and self-acceptance -- can help us to feel more authentic to ourselves and to others, and can draw us together in appreciation of what it

means to be a member of this flawed but wonderful species.

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