The Despair of Emptiness: Narcissism and the Reversal of Giving into Taking

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The Fulfillment Of Giving and Being Appreciated

There has been many a cold winter night in Chicago when I dread trudging through the snow to walk my beloved dog Andy. I briefly race through my thoughts searching for an escape hatch from the arduous task lying before me, but then I realize there is none because he is counting on me, and that helps me accept my responsibility. Somehow then, on the walk itself, as is often the case with anticipated dread, it is not as onerous a burden as I thought it would be. And then suddenly something happens that makes it all eminently worthwhile: on the last leg of the twenty minute walk, Andy stops, looks up at me in gratitude and communal solidarity for the time he and I just spent together in the twenty degree weather. In that moment, I, too, feel the warm glow of a fulfilling kinship and my own gratitude to Andy, fully understanding that my seemingly selfless sacrifice of walking in the cold was not so selfless because it was at least as much for me as it was for him. It was for us.

Unfortunately my patient Lisa has rarely experienced the privilege of giving and feeling that her contributions significantly enhanced the lives of the people around her. She knows of that kind of self-fulfillment, and very much wants to taste of its sweet depth, but fundamentally Lisa does not believe that if she entrusts herself to others that they will recognize her value, or that they will safe keep her wellbeing for her. Ultimately, she does not believe in the truthfulness of the saying, “what goes around, comes around.” Since no one else will look out for her, she must take care of herself,
which then leads to a moral disquiet and despair about her own sense of selfishness.

When Lisa’s baby daughter was five months old, her resentment of being woken up from a dead sleep overwhelmed her. She set her daughter’s need to be nursed and comforted against her own wish to remain in bed. That inclination toward her own immediate desires is not an unusual sentiment for Lisa. As she puts it at various times in various ways: “I want my own way.” “I want to do what I want to do.” “I am selfish.” “Her husband often has been dutiful in his efforts to please her, but if he or her daughter or son stray away from her fantasies of what they should be, she begins to feel a perseverating “hatred” toward them. As Lisa put it recently, she is always “fighting” everybody in her own head. Getting her husband or her children or other people to do or be who she wants them to be ultimately does not work for her. She remains chronically unfulfilled, empty, and desperately restless for something to shake up her life and change it.

What then is Lisa searching for? How do we understand her restless “emptiness”? Do the experiences of “getting her way” really register inside of her, that is, do they satisfy her emptiness in any sustained fashion? In this paper, I will view emptiness as a metaphor that gives expression to a despair of feeling unwanted and unacceptable to significant people in one’s life. I will suggest then that the resulting sense of unworthiness results in not being able to internalize anything good for oneself and thus becomes reversed into an urgency to take and fill oneself up.

Lisa: Desperate Longing

I entered upon Lisa’s life stage six years ago when a friend who taught at the same college where Lisa was a humanities professor referred her to me. Lisa is a thirty-seven
year old woman who grew up in a Jewish family in Bucharest, Romania. She is a slight woman whose timid manner made her seem somewhat smaller than she actually was. Even though she wore a short fashionable hairstyle, she came across as a young girl with alert and watchful eyes. She initially sought psychotherapy because of a longstanding depression and loneliness, and because she lacked “good friends.” She said that although she knew a number of women, none of them were interested in confiding or “speaking deeply” to her. At the end of the first session, Lisa was quite eager to come back.

Early on, Lisa said she was quite affected by our sessions. She was excited by the prospect of someone understanding her and her suffering, someone who she could confide in at a deep level. It soon became very difficult for Lisa to wait to come in again, and she began obsessing painfully about me when she was not in session. At my urging, she agreed to come in twice a week but let me know that it stretched her budget. After a number of months, when the painful intensity of her obsessions did not subside, I suggested that she come in for analysis, but she insisted she could not afford the expenditure. After a year, I once more suggested analysis, at least three times a week, and that I would adjust the fee. We then began three times a week analysis four years ago.

Lisa is the youngest of two children (she has a brother who is nine years older than her). When she was three years old, her mother put her in pre-school but her separation anxiety and inability to attach to other children was so great that after a few weeks she was taken out of school and sent to stay with her grandmother on weekdays, including overnights. This arrangement of having a grandmother take care of a grandchild while both parents worked was not at all unusual for Romanian society. What was unusual was
the mother’s decision to give Lisa over to her grandmother for full-time caretaking during the workweek, and then to take her back home only on weekends.

Lisa described her grandmother as a harsh and controlling woman who cared only that homework got done and that Lisa should receive straight As in what was quite a joyless world. One enduring memory Lisa had of this period, one which she was not sure whether she had made up or actually happened, was of her grandmother holding a knife and “looking like she wanted to stab” someone. Whether true or not, this memory trace testifies to Lisa’s image of her grandmother as a threatening and dangerous woman.

Lisa, like the children from Bowlby’s (1975) classic study on separation, desperately longed for her mother to come get her and take her home, or to put it in Bowlby’s words, she “pined for the lost object.” Each week, however, the routine repeated itself: she was picked up from her grandmother’s on Friday nights and brought back on Sunday evenings. When she did return home on weekends, her mother was busily preoccupied with all things except for Lisa -- cooking, cleaning, and vacuuming. This caretaking arrangement lasted about four years until Lisa was seven years old.

Lisa’s parents were greatly suspicious of the anti-Semitism around them, and lived on the periphery of Romanian society. Their wariness justified the huddling together of family enmeshment, and overprotectiveness of their daughter. Fittingly, in their implicit warning to Lisa to “beware of strangers,” they did not extend their warning to the emotional incest lurking within the family. Lisa had few friends her own age, and instead accompanied her parents to plays, symphonies, and operas. When she got older, she wandered out on her own more, but the echo of her father’s mistrust of the outside world and her mother’s admonitions of precaution still followed her around.
On one occasion, in particular, she remembers that while spending an afternoon with her aunt and cousin, she fell off a bike, muddied her white gloves, and became quite worried about her mother’s reaction to her mishap. In session, I have often referred back to those “white gloves” to describe a primary conflict of Lisa’s: her retreat to a tidy, walled-in fantasy life from the “messy” unpredictability of experiences with other people.

Like many Romanian families at the time, Lisa’s family shared two small rooms between themselves. Lisa stayed with her mother, while her father slept with her older brother. This arrangement dramatized a schism also in the parents’ relationship, which was reinforced by her mother’s declarations to Lisa not to expect much from marriage. Perhaps most damaging in this regard, when Lisa got older, her mother confided in her about her father’s erection problems and not enjoying sex with him.

Lisa recounted, often through a vale of laughter and tears (which was not unusual for her), memories of accompanying her mother to the outdoor market. She noticed how her mother would search out rotting fruits and vegetables that were especially mottled, and even a few days old, as the ones to buy. Perhaps more embarrassing to Lisa, and as she spoke, her tears began to outweigh her laughter, she said her mother only possessed three items of underwear, which she kept washing over and over again – this despite the fact that the underwear began to have holes in them.

Lisa’s mixture of pity, shame, and disgust about her mother’s pathos has led to a survivor guilt for wanting something better, and has made it very difficult for her to embark on her own separate life path. A child cannot easily leave a depressed mother in good conscience. Since Lisa did not feel her contributions were sufficient to uplift her mother’s life, she had to up the ante and give all of herself away in loyal commiseration
of identification with her mother’s downtrodden condition as a token of her love and to silence any echoes of survivor guilt.

To illustrate this sense of guilt further, in a recent session Lisa spoke about her deep frustration with her mother complaining about her physical ailments, but not doing anything to help herself. Despite being frustrated about her mother’s inaction, she feels sorry for her as well. She said that her mother likes to send her home with soup for the family. Since no one in the family likes soup, she ends up throwing it away, at which point she not only feels she is throwing the soup out, but throwing away her mother as well.

Lisa’s perception of her father is of a weak man for whom she feels also a mixture of contempt and pity. She remembers more frequent quality times with him than with her mother. On the whole, however, especially since her parents joined her in the United States, her father’s continual worrying and ineffectual fretting about the future have disgusted her. Lisa’s view of her father, who reminds her often of an “old woman,” also has not been helped by her image of his flaccid penis.

Lisa went to college in Missouri, where she met her husband. Although he was interested in her from the beginning, she initially only wanted a friendship. Yet she valued his devotion and loyalty to her, and eventually they got married. At that point, she urged her parents to join her from Romania to join her. When I began seeing Lisa, she had a two-month old daughter.

The entirety of the analysis has been very much dictated by the overarching effects of Lisa’s intense transference feelings. Perhaps the effects of her transference were most conspicuous in how she began to feel about her marriage. When Lisa began treatment,
she was unhappy but not very aware of the sources of her discontent, especially her disillusionment with her marriage. Soon after analysis began, however, Lisa, not ever having dated in her life, felt that she had “settled.” As she increasingly longed to come in to her sessions, she became more annoyed at her husband. She spoke of her sexual dissatisfaction with him, but as with many other things, she immediately began second-guessing herself. She wondered whether the problem lay with her sexual inhibition, and not in her lack of attraction to her husband. I suggested that perhaps it was preferable for her to place the burden of the problem on her own neurotic conflict rather than viewing it as endemic in the relationship. At least that way, there was a potential solution of “getting better” herself rather than be faced with the real life trade-offs of staying or leaving an unhappy marriage.

Lisa’s marital discontent gradually began to extend to her daughter as well. After her son was born, Lisa increasingly began to complain that her daughter’s aggression did not match the child of her idealized conception: quiet and obedient like she had been as a child. She often behaved, in her words, like a “wild child.” Even when she became older, she ran around the house naked, and would frequently become verbally aggressive with Lisa. Lisa would become angry, get her “feelings hurt,” and nurture a grudge against her, when she did not seem to listen or to respect her. She and I came to understand that her own conflicts with her parents were being played out between her and her daughter, whereby she projected onto them her own hatred of adult rules and her own bygone wish to have rebelled against oppressive limits. The problem here is that she very much envied in her daughter the freedom she never was able to claim as her own, and so by identifying with the aggressor in her mother and her grandmother, she lay down
controls, which were often arbitrary, on their pleasures and freedom, and thereby acted out her own envy.

This problem of envy and rivalry became especially acute. To the extent that Lisa has retained secret fantasies of re-living her own childhood in a more perfect way, she has been engaged in a life-and-death struggle with her daughter for a “new beginning,” (Balint, 1968) to see who will be the little girl with fresh new opportunities in life.

In the past year, Lisa’s marital discontent and alienated sense of entrapment in her family reached an intensely feverish pitch. For a number of months, she struggled with indecision of whether to leave her family and reach for a freedom she had never experienced, or to stay. Lisa felt the solitary burden of this freedom to decide for herself quite heavily, and often cried despairingly over what she would lose in either choice: a life of entrapped unhappiness or a difficult life of solitude and guilt for having left her child. Eventually, Lisa decided to stay with her family.

To some degree, Lisa has been able to sublimate her transference into the work of analysis. She has been open, intellectually curious, and consistently interested in becoming more aware of herself. For my part, I have been interested in helping Lisa gain an inner freedom for her life that she had never possessed, and in that endeavor I have been task-oriented, perhaps as my own kind of dispassionate defense against her insatiability.

Concurrent with this working relationship, however, there has also been a silent undercurrent of frustration whereby Lisa is continually unsatisfied. The sessions with me have evoked intense fantasies that Lisa hangs on to for dear life, and there have been many occasions where she has viewed her family’s need of her attention as an intrusion
on those fantasies that she feels are her one link to me when I am not there.

She has told me variously that she has had thoughts of what it would be like to be in my family, wondering what I am doing on holidays, wishing to cook and clean for me, wanting me to see her in a bikini on the beach, having masturbatory fantasies and of having sexual intercourse with me -- in short, being part and parcel of my personal life. She has also seen my wife, who works down the hall from me, and has had fantasies of becoming her friend. On one occasion, after a weekend (which have often been difficult for her) Lisa told me that she drove by my house and peered in the window.

One major point of departure that Lisa and I have used to understand her transference longings to me and her adhesiveness to the process of longing itself, at least developmentally, has been through the trauma of her parents sending her off to live with her grandmother from three to seven. This traumatic episode of major loss and Lisa’s experience of that time led to a dichotomy in her psyche between what is shared and made public on one hand, and the sacred possessions of her mind, namely her fantasies and longings for something better, on the other. In the public sphere of actual relationships with her caretakers, Lisa was objectified, exploited, and consumed by her grandmother and mother’s conceptions of her. She felt she had no choice but to remain enslaved to their whims and commands. To preserve her own sanity, a general fantasy eventually emerged that the “grass is always greener” on the other side, a more perfect life lay elsewhere from wherever she was located.

The markedly separate spheres of public and private have been most dramatically evident in Lisa’s approach to reporting dreams. In general, she has not reported many dreams at all. When she first wanted to tell me a dream, she broke into prolonged,
embarrassed giggling and laughter. Eventually, she sputtered out phrases, interspersed by more laughing, like “But, it’s so ridiculous.” “It’s crazy.” which then itself became the subject of exploration. (Since I completed this paper, her uncontrolled giggling took center stage in a few of her sessions as did our attempts to understand it).

Here is one dream she did remember and report: “I was on a swing in your backyard, enjoying myself. You were watching over me, and then your wife came out, saw me, and said: ”What is she doing here?” You responded by saying, “Leave her alone.” In the second part of the dream, there was a statue in your front yard, and I was cleaning and rubbing it. I remember how I wished I could make the statue come to life.” She associated the cold immobility of the statue to her own inhibited sexuality. Being on the swing reminded her of me sitting behind her while she is on the couch. I wondered also whether her rubbing the statue also was a masturbatory gesture in her attempt to bring the statue to life.

Lisa’s polarization between public and private paralleled a central internal conflict in Lisa between a harshly self-shaming superego she introjected from her grandmother’s and mother’s moralisms on one hand, and a contrasting sense of self-pity and resentful entitlement to a compensatory restitution at an indefinite later date. As she grew into adulthood and that redemption never arrived, however, Lisa’s idealized fantasies increasingly began to curdle sourly into a despairing bitterness. This bitterness reverberates back to the very real experiences of disillusionment and despair that fueled the desperate hope of the idealizing transference in the first place.

There is a quality of Lisa’s hunger that I have perceived to be surreptitiously ill-wishing for me, in which her negative transference is covertly embedded in seemingly
innocent questions. Since one of my countertransference proclivities is to be somewhat suspicious of hidden darker motives behind seemingly innocuous and pleasant facades, (you notice how perfectly suited I am to be a psychoanalyst), I have reacted somewhat defensively to this disguised underpinning of Lisa’s negative transference. On those occasions, for example, when Lisa has asked me whether my vacation was good or whether the bad weather interfered with my trip, or when I have had morning sniffles whether I have a cold, I have been more circumspect, and perhaps withholding, than I normally am. One such time, she noted that I seemed especially close-mouthed in my response, and I told her that I was not always sure of her underlying motives in the phrasing of her questions. She laughed, somewhat embarrassed by my forthrightness, but agreed that she did not always harbor good wishes when asking those questions because those trips took me away from her.

Perhaps along these lines of wishing to open up the space between us, I remarked to her a number of months ago about a certain indirectness that she displayed in the waiting room when she greeted me. I told her I noticed that she would look up suddenly from a magazine that she was reading, and look at me out of the corner of her eye, as if she were surprised to see me; this, despite the fact that she most definitely heard my familiar clump of footsteps. I followed up this observation with my thought that it seemed, at such times, that she was self-conscious about her anticipatory excitement of seeing me, an excitement she had mentioned on a number of occasions.

As she often does, Lisa laughed when I made my observation to her, and she seemed pleased that I brought it up and was open to talking about its meanings. She said she felt gratified that I paid such close attention to her and cared enough to mention my
observation to her. This then led to a fruitful discussion about shame and the taboo of her pleasurable excitement in coming to analysis.

At first blush, many of you might ask why risk shaming Lisa, let alone risk presenting this exchange to you and coming across as quite narcissistic in my need to be greeted in some particular way (perhaps since you don’t know me very well, you might believe I insist that every human being greet me as warmly as my dog Andy does). My intention, in a sense, was to use Lisa’s self-consciousness to deconstruct the paralyzing effects of her self-conscious behavior. I sometimes have found with other patients as well that these rather direct comments about their waiting room behavior to lead to useful lines of inquiry.

On another occasion, a few months ago, during a late afternoon session, I was feeling particularly sleepy. I thought that some instant coffee I had in the waiting room would help me perk up, but I did not want to disturb Lisa’s flow of associations. I deliberated and struggled for a few minutes with my ambivalence, and decided it was more respectful to Lisa to be alert to what she was saying. At an opportune pause, I asked her whether she would mind if I help myself to coffee in the adjoining room, and she said “of course.” When I came back, I apologized for the interruption. She fell silent, and started crying. She said that she was touched by my apology. Lisa spoke of how surprised she was and how important it was to her that I apologized, and that I treated her as an equal. She views our relationship as she does virtually all other relationships as hierarchical, and said she never expected her “betters” to apologize to her. This exchange then initiated a number of sessions in which our relationship seemed to come alive a little more in the room, especially with regard to her speaking more openly about her negative transference
that she mostly kept well hidden.

Soon after the coffee interaction, Lisa said she had a very difficult weekend. She then continued: “I want things, I want to “possess” things, but “I don’t even know what it means to have something. I just want to fight everyone. If I don’t get what I want, I just start hating people. I am cynical and have no hope. I just want to destroy everybody, including you. I’m better today when I’m in here, but I had a very difficult weekend. I was really angry toward you and terrified of it. Maybe I shouldn’t be in analysis.” I responded that, “It seems that it is very hard for you when I am not there on weekends.” She continued, “I wanted to pull you into my suffering. It’s different when you are not there. I’m frustrated by the limits here. I want to have a special effect on you. And when I can’t, I want to destroy you.”

I responded, “I will live through it, and I invite you to express any feelings you have, including the hate you are so terrified of.” Lisa began crying, “When I hear you speaking, I feel love for you, I am at peace.” I then said: “I think you are terrified of hating the ones you love.” Through her tears, she said, “Yes. I am both afraid of you retaliating and of not having any effect on you.”

During the next session, she told me that she had been longing to be with me the night before. Her family was playing WE in the adjoining room, and she could have joined them, but she did not because she wanted to stay with her thoughts of being with me. She said, “I saw last night how I could be a happy adult if I had joined the family and I know it, but I did not do it.” I responded that perhaps for her there was a self-betrayal in that kind of happiness, since by remaining indefinitely in her suspended animation of desperate longing, she was holding true to age-old memories. In that sense, there was a
pride in her loyalty in holding out for what she wanted, and not going down to defeat and settling for what is practical. In this same sense, not giving in to the practical may also mean holding progress in the treatment hostage until she and I achieve some sort of idealized romantic destiny.

When I decided to present Lisa here, I spoke to her about my talk and told her that I would show her the paper before I presented it. She became very excited about the prospect of including her, and said that I was giving her a gift because she felt like she had been a special inspiration to the ideas in my paper. Her attitude was not surprising since a few years ago she had hinted that if I ever wanted to present her in a paper, she would welcome it. She asked about who had ultimate power over the copyright, and when I asked what she meant, she said that she was curious about the audience response and asked, “Do I have a right to know what they say?” I responded that she did have a right to know, and that I did not want to participate in objectifying her, of speaking to a third party about her, without her knowing what is being said.

At the next session, Lisa said that her daughter woke up with a sore throat but she pressured her daughter to go to school anyway. When Lisa was getting ready to come to her session, the nurse called her to pick up her daughter up from school. She then quickly dropped her daughter off at her parents before coming in. She said, “I was selfish, I wanted to see you. I feel like a bad mother. I was stirred up by our session on Tuesday, but family demands did not allow me to keep thinking about it. I did not want to be taken away from my thoughts. I felt lighter, better, and I wanted to keep thinking about it because I was afraid I was going to lose the good feeling. When I am getting better or when I feel you are especially nice to me, I take it away from myself. I treat bad things
well, and bring the good down. I responded, “When your grandmother and mother begrudged your pleasure, you learned to envy yourself and questioned any happy thoughts you might have, and then of course, you will also begrudge good things to other people, like your daughter. “ She then ended the session by telling me a Romanian saying: “When things get worse, they get better.”

At the following session, Lisa came in and said she was very excited. She had thought a lot about the sharp divide she makes between what is inside and what is outside, and she stumbled upon some memories that she really felt rather than just remembered. She spoke about the “darkness of the atmosphere in her grandmother’s house and that when she left there, it was as if she “turned a light switch on and when she arrived back the light switch went off.” She also recalled one big fight with her grandmother, and how much she cried to the point of hyperventilating. As she sat and cried without being comforted for what she thought was a very long time, she felt that “her soul had died.” She always looked for an escape hatch from the oppressive atmosphere, and only at her family’s house in the country, did she finally feel relieved to breathe in the fresh air of nature, to get out of her head.

At the last sessions before this writing, Lisa said she was trying to decide whether to go to Bucharest with her daughter this coming summer or not. She said that she would like to show her daughter where she grew up, and that her daughter seemed connected to and curious about Romania. I said this plan to go seemed to be a constructive way to accept the passing of the torch from mother to daughter and thereby mourning her own childhood. By showing her daughter her childhood home, and therefore having her daughter pay her respects of witnessing Lisa’s roots, Lisa might be able to better muster
the generosity of letting go of re-living her childhood. She could then allow her daughter to be the child and she the mother who reminisces about a past on which she now has a perspective of psychic distance.

Lisa said her mother was very discouraging about her plan to go to Romania, saying it was a “crazy idea,” “not safe,” and that she, herself, “would not want to return there.” Soon after that, Lisa began to doubt the wisdom of her trip and became acutely aware of how her mother’s inhibitions lead to her own self-denial. She then recalled as a child that when she was a little sick, her mother often wanted her to stay home, while Lisa preferred to go to school. She continued, “No wonder I always want to get out into the fresh air.” She then spoke of her mother’s fragility, of her own “deserving to suffer” because she was a disappointment to her parents, for letting them down. Her proof is simply their unhappiness. Indeed, often when Lisa’s mother gave her a gift, she would say: “I don’t have many years to live, my life is over. So, I am giving it to you.” Lisa, frustrated when she told me this story, said: “If she was not happy, the gift was ruined for me.”

Lisa does not receive for herself and “deserves to suffer” because as she said, whatever good she receives is “ruined” if her mother cannot be happy. Lisa recalled that when she was a child, her mother spoke of her regret in not dating a couple of young men in her earlier life. Lisa then responded: “But Mom, then you wouldn’t have me.” And then added, “It was so deflating when she said that.” It is that sense of unfulfillment for feeling “unwanted” which I am suggesting here is then covered up and reversed into a state of “want” where Lisa is left continually “wanting” to fill up her “empty spaces.” She never was able to give of herself and to be received and recognized appreciatively as a cherished object who had a uniquely constructive effect on her mother’s life.
Giving and Receiving Between Parents and Children

We cannot create meaning only in and of ourselves as individuals. The need to create existential meaning and entrust ourselves to the mercies of others is built in to us from the very beginning of life. Levinas (1961) has emphasized that each human being has an ethical mandate of devoting his or her life to an Other. We shape our individual selves as creative vessels in order to give of ourselves to an Other who is beyond our omnipotent creation. As the philosopher James Carse (1980) put it: “Our life is not our own in the sense that it belongs exclusively to us; however, it becomes our own to the degree that we share it, make a gift of it to others.” Since we cannot help but perceive others through our transference lenses, however, at least to some degree, in which we are always re-framing the new in terms of what is familiar, the notion of perceiving and living for an Other is an ideal toward which we may strive, but never fully reach.

Although Fairbairn (1941) says we begin life with an object-seeking libido, our eventual aim is to seek not an object that is an extension of our imagination, but a subjective Other, as Winnicott (1969), and more recently, Benjamin (1995) have emphasized. More concretely, the inherent potentiality and gradually increasing capacity to reach out to an Other evolves through the interchange between parents and children that involves the child giving, being received appreciatively by the parent, and then giving again.

We typically think of development in terms of parents giving and children receiving emotional “supplies’ or sustenance. For example, we may view unconditional acceptance as something that children receive from their parents. Yet when we consider the meaning of acceptance in this context, the word refers to the parents’ capacity to graciously
receive, to welcome, and ultimately to internalize the child as a gift who has dramatically enhanced their lives -- quite the opposite of what often occurs in relation to a depressed, downtrodden parent. When patients complain that no matter what they do, they cannot gain their parents’ approval, that nothing seems to be good enough to please them, (for example, Lisa’s inability to have a visibly uplifting effect on her mother’s life) they are conveying how difficult it is to be accepted or received as a treasured gift by their parents.

In this regard, I would reverse the developmental priority of giving and receiving, that is, the need of children to give and be received appreciatively by their parents occurs before they are able to genuinely receive something good that is emotionally sustaining for themselves. The child’s offering of herself is a means of entrusting herself to the care and ministration of parents. Winnicott (1956) describes the first building block of originality and agency, “the spontaneous gesture” also as a “gift gesture.” This notion corresponds to Ghent’s (1990) description of a universal longing for surrender. Searles (1975) emphasizes as well that already in the earliest months of life human beings manifest “psychotherapeutic” strivings to each other.

The reception of parents to their child as a “gift from heaven” provides a fundamental sense of being “wanted,” which, in turn, helps the child plant seeds of belonging to and participating in something larger than her own existence. Moreover, children not only have a relationship with their mother and father, but also a relationship with their parents’ relationship with each other, the primal scene in the broadest sense of the term. The conjoint hospitality of the parental union establishes the secure roots for the child that her conception was not a “mistake” nor an ”accident,” but something that was “meant-to-be.”
This meant-to-be feeling then propels the child forward to find an individualized niche within the larger human enterprise.

The graciousness with which the parent receives the gift gesture of the child’s trust greatly influences the child’s initial ethical sense of the constructiveness of her own spontaneous passion. When a child feels that her love is fruitful, that it is useful and worthwhile to someone else, she is able to receive something sustaining back for herself and to embark on a destiny that has purpose. Here, I very much want to emphasize that the ethical sense about one’s existence being good or somehow right inspires development to move forward, whereas the feeling that there is something wrong about oneself freezes and inhibits that movement of growth. As Fairbairn (1941) remarked, “the parent’s acceptance of the child’s love enables the child to renounce infantile dependence without misgiving.” A mother’s cherishing smile toward a baby or her warm “Thank you” after the child spontaneously puts a spoon in her mouth at mealtime, or after receiving a toddler’s stick figure drawing as a gift, or her emphatic, excited praise after the child walks across the room for the first time, all inspire a gratitude and spirit of generosity in the child to move forward and provide the mother with another such offering of himself again. This generosity to give of himself then facilitates a courage to affirm his passion, move toward the Otherness of the future, and transform the times and spaces separating himself and others into ever-new creatively fashioned offerings.

As Benjamin (1995) has emphasized, recognition is a crucial dimension of this developmental process of giving and being received. Re-cognition is a repeated re-knowing, a re-discovery of someone familiar, as in “Oh, I know you.” To recognize another person is similar to Freud’s (1905) notion that each “finding of an object is a
refinding” and being recognized is when the object “refinds us.” There is an implicit memory embedded in the receptive recognition of the gift offering that reconfirms the giver’s renewed presence, her very existence, and ultimately her “unforgettableness.” In response to the question that at some level is always in doubt: “Do I still exist?” being recognized provides a resounding appreciative answer: “Yes, you still do.”

It is this continual rebirth of being rediscovered and known again that provides the pleasurable spark of childhood games such as peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek.

There is also a paradoxical dimension in recognition, in which a person and her gift offerings are being re-discovered as if for the first time. This element in recognition in which one is taken by surprise by re-appearance prevents children and their offerings from being exploited by the entitled expectations of parents. The “miracle” of the appearance and reappearance of a child as a gift as if from nowhere demarcates boundaries between where the parent’s expectant fantasies and the uncontrollable and unpredictable individual existence of the actual child.

A human life may be viewed then as an evolving ethical/relational medium that is both inspired by and generated toward an Other. Our gifts and their reception are the meaning-making commerce through which we discover that as individuals we have a special contribution to make beyond ourselves. A resonating reply from an Other consecrates our dramatic stories by completing the circle of meaning from without, thereby allowing us to realize that we are not merely conjuring up the world in which we live, reassuring us continually that we are not all alone. Very much of what is entailed in being oriented toward an Other is an open-faced, hopeful and giving attitude toward one’s own future and toward other individuals. It is precisely this open-heartedness that
becomes reversed when people encounter too much suffering, trauma, and cumulative buildup of frustration and disappointment.

Shame and the Reversal of Narcissistic Self-Preoccupation

What then happens when cherished hopes are dashed and dearly held expectations are ignored or rebuffed? When a mother does not return her baby’s smile with her own delight? Or withdraws her affections from her previous only child because she now has a new baby? In Lisa’s case, a profound shift in her life occurred most obviously when her mother sent her off to live with her grandmother.

Many parents, of course, have their own lifetime of disappointments and bitterness of hoping for the best that have long since soured into fearing for the worst, with the consequence that they have numbed themselves to receiving anything good coming their way, including their own child. When the appreciative recognition from a parent is not forthcoming, the child is stopped cold in his tracks and ejected from the containing embeddedness of the significant relationship.

The experience of exposure to a ruptured relationship, even momentary, may give way to a reflexive shift from relative unselfconsciousness to self-conscious preoccupation with oneself, as if one were on the outside looking in. As a reflexive movement triggered by a severed relational connection or to a relationship that was sought but never found, the experience of rebuff boomerangs as a self-conscious sense of having done something wrong or somehow not being adequate enough. This automatic taking on the burden of responsibility for the bad things that happen to us, almost all of which are not in our control, dovetails with Winnicott’s (1960) statement that “There is no trauma outside of omnipotence. “ That is, frustrations, disappointments, traumas, and even random
misfortunes do not happen by accident, but always leave a trace of introjected shame and self-consciousness in their retroactive wake.

We can’t help but form a relationship, even an enclosed one with ourselves, when the one we are depending on is available. Rather than be half-open circles offering ourselves to be completed by an Other, in being self-conscious, we like Narcissus, close the relational circle upon ourselves. In addition to being a preemptive defense against shameful exposure to a relational void, self-consciousness is also an attempt to compensate for the absence of a recognizing other.

A phrase often used to describe a narcissist, “stuck on himself,” demonstrates how the relationship with an Other becomes inverted into the stuckness of self-conscious preoccupation. The narcissist is stuck on an unacceptable self that was neither received nor recognized adequately, and then attempts to patch together a homegrown mirror in the attempt to recognize himself. But loneliness is a subtle destroyer of a sense of the real. The problem here, Descartes’s dictum of “I think therefore I am” not withstanding, is that there is an absurd circularity to validating one’s own existence from within one’s own mind. Momentary answers only lead to an endless feedback loop of more questions – all in the attempt to capture something essential about oneself – without opening up to an Other. It is noteworthy then that as Paul Russell (1992) commented: “The compulsion to repeat is an illness of loneliness.”

Through the foreclosure of otherness, change, separateness, loss, and ultimately death, life is increasingly emptied of a transformative, spiritual meaning. When living for an Other becomes inverted into self-preoccupation, the despairing, intangible quality of not being received as a treasured gift is covered up and reified into a concrete physical space,
an “empty self” seeking to fill itself with a compensatory quantity of tangible material.

It is noteworthy that the Latin root of material, *mater*, signifies mother. To take the analogy further, the child makes up for the shame of feeling “unwanted” by a mother by transforming her into a quantity of material that he “wants” urgently to incorporate. The narcissist thus seeks to exhibit the visible trappings of his worth and thereby prove, or “sell” his significance by taking in quantities of material such as food, land, money, or even other people.

The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1889) has pointed out, however, that the emotional quality of intensity cannot be translated into a measurable quantity of what he called extensity. Measurability or quantification may often refer to visible, physical phenomena that cannot readily be applied to the difficult-to-grasp quality of emotional life. Since no amount of quantity of material can satisfy a missing emotional quality, the desperate short-term filling up of one’s emptiness with material is insatiable, and therefore repeated.

The shame of feeling undeserving of anything good becomes an internal sieve, making it difficult even to internalize what is most desired, a feeling of being valuable to another person. It is one thing for a wife to hear her husband’s declarations of love and knows that he means them, and another for her to actually believe him, to feel his love inside. For that to happen, she would have to feel loveable. It is thus not unusual that a person may be accepted by nineteen people and rejected by one, but it is that one who sticks in the craw, since it is that one rebuff which resonates with one’s own sense of unworthiness. Taking in perpetual quantities of material then is a desperate compensation for the inability to genuinely receive or internalize the good.
The empty person often attempts to conquer what feels like the impenetrable subjectivity of an Other by transforming and “swallowing” others as fantasied objects of her imagination. Levinas (1961) has referred to this tendency to subject the Other to one’s illusion of omnipotent mental control as “totality.” In this sense, when the subjective freedom of other human beings cannot be trusted with the profundity of one’s basic acceptability, then one must guarantee one’s place in the world through the objectifying uses of “power.” Lisa’s mistrust of her own worth to others thus leads to her insistence in getting “her own way.”

Because of this perpetual sense of emptiness, the person who takes is often more interested in the pursuit and conquering of what seems unreachable rather than internalizing and retaining what is accessible. Perhaps this is one way of understanding why the alternating relational game of seesaw, of chasing and winning over individuals who are rejecting and disinterested, and moving away from those persons who are accepting, pervades the singles dating scene.

In this problem of liking and being liked at the same time, individuals feel they must prove their worth first to those who are unattainable before they feel worthy of a loving mutual interchange of giving and receiving. Instead of entrusting themselves to the win-win scenario involving the simultaneity of mutual love, such persons attempt to ensure the impact of their life through the mastery of others as controlled objects.

In thinking about Lisa and other patients I have seen, I believe we psychoanalysts would do well to re-consider the metaphors we assume with regard to giving and receiving as they apply to emptiness. I am proposing specifically that we not think of the analytic situation as one in which the analyst gives and helps fill up a tangible empty
space in a patient who receives those emotional supplies in a way that we often think occurs between parents and children -- that we not think of patients as cases of diagnosable “illness, but appreciate them as creative individuals who are offering their own special contributions to the analysis and to the personal life of the analyst. Searles (1979) asserts: “The more ill a patient is, the more does his successful treatment require that he become, and be implicitly acknowledged as having become, a therapist to his officially designated therapist, the analyst.” (p. 381).

If we take these psychotherapeutic strivings seriously, then a clinical paradox emerges from Levinas’s theory in which the analyst is obligated to be there for the Other, the patient, but the patient also is ethically mandated to be there for the Other, namely the analyst. If this is so, do we then not have an ethical obligation to serve the creative dignity of the patient as an Other by being accessible to his or her need to contribute and enhance our lives in some fashion? Donna Orange’s recent thinking on clinical hospitality speaks to this ethical responsibility of the analyst. In preparing and writing this paper, I certainly have learned to take seriously Lisa’s need to give, to contribute, and to have a special effect on my life.