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The Odysseus Complex

One Root To Addiction: Exploration and Adventure

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The Odysseus Complex: One Root To Addiction: Exploration and Adventure

The Odyssey is a larger than life adventure story. It is a story about thrills, discovery, temptation, and sensations. It is about attitude, the warrior mind set, men living at the cutting edge. But most of all it is the story of a journey, an “odyssey” of a man who has gotten “off the path” and who is unable to get back home, home to his kingdom, his wife, and to his son. It is the story of Odysseus.

OEDIPUS, NARCISSUS AND ODYSSEUS

If Oedipus (incest, love between son and mother, rivalry, and murder) is the mythological paradigm for Freud’s psycho-neurosis, and Narcissus (extreme self love, aggression and death by neglect) is the mythological paradigm for psychosis, the narcissistic disorders, then the idea is being put forth here, it is Odysseus who provides us with the mythological blueprint, either by himself or in combination with Narcissus,² for alcoholism and the addictive disorders.³⁴

ODYSSEUS THE KING

Odysseus is King of the Island of Ithaca. He is son of Laertes, husband of Penelope. Odysseus has spent 10 years in the Trojan wars. Now he’s spending the next ten trying to get home. This is in fact his main problem. Odysseus can’t get home, to the Island of Ithaca, to his wife Penelope, (an extraordinary loyal wife), his son Telemachus, (an immature son who needs his growth

provoked), to his slaves, his lands, his Kingdom.

The attempt to get home takes the form of a series of heroic adventures and experiences, much bigger it seems, than ordinary life. Involving the gods and god-like creatures with fantastic powers.

WHY IS ODYSSEUS HAVING SO MUCH TROUBLE GETTING HOME?

Odysseus had blinded the one-eyed Cyclops, Polyphemus (thought to be more than human) whose mother Thoosa was lovers with Poseidon (a god). Poseidon doesn't kill Odysseus. He just keeps him from getting home. He keeps him wandering.

THE GODS INTERVENE

Athena asks her father Zeus why Zeus is at Odds with Odysseus. Zeus says he is not. He realizes that the situation has gone on too long. He decides that all of the gods should come to Odysseus aid. Poseidon will have to give up his anger against so many.

Athena starts to move the situation. She flies to Ithaca and speaks to Telemachus. She encourages him to believe that his father, Odysseus is still alive. She encourages him to move from boyhood to manhood. He has been longing and waiting for his father to return to correct the situation, to drive the suitors out and to restore dignity to his home.

Athena encourages him to resolve the situation. She tells him to initiate a search for word of his father. If he thinks he is alive then Telemachus should hold out for another year. If not he should light the burial candles and then find a husband for his

mother. But first he must drive the suitors out. He should if needed kill them, directly and quietly. Athena told him that he, like Prince Orestes, who killed his fathers' murderer, would become famous throughout the world.

A MANUAL FOR THOSE WHO WANT THE THRILL BUT NOT THE SIDE EFFECTS-A MODEL FOR ADDICTION PREVENTION

With this as backdrop, Odysseus has just returned from Hades (literally) and he's really anxious to get home now. There will be many dangers along the way. Circe helps him map the path.

He is advised by Circe.⁵ She says to him (and it might be considered a manual for those who want the thrill but not the side effects)

“First you will come to the Sirens who bewitch every one who comes near them. If any man draws near in his innocence and listens to their voice, he never sees home again, never again will wife and little children run to greet him with joy There in a meadow they sit and all around is a great heap of bones, mouldering bodies and withering skins. Go on past that place, and do not let the men hear; you must knead a good lump of wax and plug their ears with pellets. If you wish to hear them yourself, make the men tie up your hands and feet and fasten your body tight to the mast, and then you can enjoy the song as much as you like. Tell them that if you shout out and command them to let you loose, they must tie you tighter with a few more ropes.” pgs 129-130.

DESIRE FOR SENSATIONS, LONGINGS, AND THRILLS

The desire for sensations, longings, and thrills is not just that of Odysseus and his men but of all around him.

Circe assumes in her tone that Odysseus would of course want the pleasure of hearing the Sirens. Also when she alerts Odysseus that the Sirens are just a minor problem, and that he faces his major test where his ship must pass a narrow passage, past Scylla and Charybdis. She advises that of the two he should

pass Scyllas rock.

To this Odysseus says,

“What do you say to this my goddess- Suppose I slip away from Charybdis, and show fight when the other attacks my men?”

(As good a line as any we might hear in “Top Gun”.) She answered at once.

“You hot-head! Fighting and asking for trouble is all you care about! Will you stand up even to the immortal gods?”

And later when Odysseus and his men have past the Sirens and are approaching the dangerous point with Scylla on the one side and Charybdis on the other. Odysseus says,

“At that moment I quite forgot Circes injunction, when she told me not to arm myself. I put on my armour and caught up a couple of spears and took up my stand on the foredeck; for that was where I thought Scylla would show herself on the rock”
p.133.

THRILLS, RISK AND SENSATION SEEKING

The idea of sensation seeking⁶ as a distinct strand associated with addiction is consistent with one popular view represented in the film *Action Jackson* as well as *Lost Boys* and *The Night Before*. Here the drugs are interwoven with sexual passion. They increase and enhance the intensity and quality of experience and seem also to serve as a substitute. In fact, why bother with real people at all? See *Action Jackson*, especially the scene played between Vanity and Craig T. Nelson.

SENSATION SEEKING AND THE DEATH INSTINCT

These popular versions seem to contrast with Kohut's view⁷ and seem to be in line with Freud's later theorizing about

the death Instinct, whose “tricky” aim it is through stimulation and altered states of mind, to eliminate all stimulation.⁸ The “Odysseus Complex” may be one of the roots of addiction serving the death instinct.

THE PROFIT MOTIVE - GREED

These popular versions also direct our attention to the problem of huge profits- greed as a link or as interwoven with addiction; e.g., *New Jack City*, the Sci Fi film- *I Come In Peace*, and the ultra - realistic *Black Rain*.

DEFENSE, DEFECTS IN MENTAL STRUCTURE, SENSATION SEEKERS

Researchers are attempting to distinguish between (1) people who get addicted and who follow “the pleasure principle”, versus (2) those who may be suffering from defects in their mental structure, and whose addiction may paradoxically produce negative effects versus, (3) those who are defending against experiencing intolerable feelings, severe anxiety and depression.

| | Frequent | Very Frequent | Occasionally | Almost Never |
|--|----------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1. I do risky things just for excitement | | | | |
| 2. I do risky things on the spur of the moment | | | | |
| 3. I take chances | | | | |
| 4. I do what I feel like doing without thinking what will come of it | | | | |
| 5. I easily become impatient with people | | | | |

Taken from Climent, Carlos E. Lyda Victoria de Aragon, and Robert Plutchik. Prediction of Risk for Drug Use in High School Students, *The International J of the Addictions*, 25, (5) 545-556. Also Lopez, R.E. 1987, Adolescent drug abusers: In and out of the pleasure principle. *J. Melanie Klein Society*, 1987, 5 69-88; Teichman, Barnea, and Rahav, 1989, Tel Aviv University, Inst. of Crim; *Inter J Addictions*, 24, 87-99. Sensation Seeking, ...

People who are using drugs to ward off particular symptoms or particular intolerable feelings are more selective about which drugs they use than those who are sensation seekers and who are more interested in the adventure and possible experience per se. Although, *once a drug is used that experience will contribute enormously to the potential for future drug abuse.*⁹

THEORY -THE ODYSSEUS COMPLEX

The desire to change our state of mind, and to seek stimulation and adventure, and the “warrior mode” may be one of the roots of addiction. The Odysseus Complex, in addition to the longing to regress to pre-ego oceanic states of infancy, or to defend against experiencing intolerable feelings, or to correct defects in our mental structure, or to manage a potentially progressive disease, may be an entirely separate strand of causation.

PARTYING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE MILITARY ALCOHOL AND RAPE

According to hearings on C-SPAN and reports in the N.Y. Times (Eric Schmitt, Aug. 2/92) alcohol, aggression and sexual harassment go together in the military. Most recently, a report on *60 Minutes* indicated that alcohol is a factor in seventy percent of all cases (2/20/05).

As seen on C-SPAN and the popular press partying and sexual harassment in the military is very much alive. And relentlessly updated, according to a special report by MSNBC (3/8/04) on sexual assault in the military. And most recently by David Stout of the *The New York Times* (Pentagon Toughens

Policy on Sexual Assault, January, 5, 2005.)

Looking over these reports and listening over the years to the plight of the victims involved, it sounds like “Groundhog Day” in which every day is a new day and anything learned on the previous day is forgotten on the next day.

PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Although consciousness is being raised, and prevention programs are being put in place, some remain pessimistic, “They’ll never change”

The problem, according to our Odysseus complex idea, is that we need a military that is at the cutting edge, physically and mentally, so that we maintain our ability to dominate and not be dominated. Yet it is just that state of mind that may lead to “harassment and violence against women,” Chaired by Rep. Pat Schroeder (former D - Colorado).

Footnotes

¹ The idea of the Odysseus Complex was originally put forth in two parts in Landau, J.S., 1992a and b, and is essentially reprinted and reformatted in this edition. The Odysseus Complex is hypothetically an energized path which is a direct path to alcoholism and the addictions and which is distinct from the concept of addiction as a defense against experiencing intolerable feelings (anxiety-defense), or as addiction resulting from a defect in self development, or as addiction as a disease.

² Both, possibly reducible to Freud's death instinct, or some form of dual drive theory.

³ Landau, J.S., 1992 a,b

⁴ Triebel and Lucking (1998) analyze Odysseus at the level of Oedipal dynamics focusing on the "father-son" relationship. They show the story of Oedipus to be an "either-or father-son relationship"; whereas, Odysseus and his son Telemachus do everything possible to keep all in the family alive. They discuss the "me and you" relationship versus the "me or you" relationship and the inter-generational impact of these contrasting modes as either death and destruction or continuity; see, Triebel, Axel and Lucking, Irmgard, Laius and/or Odysseus – Divergent Patterns of Intergenerational Conflicts, *Int Forum Psychoanalysis*, 1998; 7:19-23. Stockholm.

⁵ The quotes above are from Homer, *The Odyssey* translated by W.H. Rouse, A Mentor Classic, 1937; whereas much of the story is taken from Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Walter Shewring, Oxford, New York, 1980, 1987. The latest and most highly regarded version is the Fagles translation. Homer, *The Odyssey* translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin, 1996.

⁶ See, Lopez, R.E., Adolescent drug abusers: In and out of the pleasure principle. *J. Melanie Klein Society*, 1987, 5 69-88; Teichman, M., Barnea, Z., and Rahav, G., 1989, Tel Aviv University, Israel, *Inst. of Crim; Sensation Seeking, State and Trait Anxiety, and Depressive Mood in Adolescent Substance Users; The International Journal of the Addictions*, 1989, 24, 87-99. Teichman, M., Barnea, Z., and Rahav, G., 1989, Tel Aviv University, Israel,

Inst. of Crim; Teichman, M., Barnea, Z., and Rahav, G., 1989, Personality and Substance Use Among Adolescents: a longitudinal study; *British Journal of Addiction*, 24, 2, 84, 181-190.)

⁷According to Kohut, the interference with the narcissistic equilibrium (the general ebb and flow of erotic narcissistic energy in early infancy) characterizes addicts. The absence of an empathic, soothing mother at a time when the infant is supposed to form a mental structure an “empathic idealized self-object” (an internal ability of the mind like an arm, an eye, a kidney), deprive the child of the ability to optimally soothe itself. The child/adult remains fixated on aspects of archaic objects (anything that actually did soothe during the first weeks/months of life) and then finds them, as a teen or young adult in some analogous form; e.g. drugs, alcohol, and other people. The drug, Kohut (1971) states, is not a substitute for love or for archaic love objects nor for a relationship with them, but is a replacement for a defect in the psychological structure, the ability to soothe oneself, The drug also serves as a means of medicating the self or anaesthetizing ones inner conflicts (defense against feelings).

⁸ In Freud’s later work (Freud, 1920), Freud analyzed the source of some aspect of the transference as ‘being beyond the pleasure principle’, as stemming from the repetition compulsion, the death instinct, or the aggressive drive, and becoming intermixed with the sexual history and development of the patient. This was necessary to explain a number of clinical phenomena which could not be explained by the frustrations induced by reality on psycho-sexual development alone. Especially problems of masochism, forms of depression, and various “pre-oedipal” disorders which were resistant to Freud’s form of Psychoanalytic Treatment. These disorders are characterized by self-hatred and self-attack and include those of alcoholism and addiction.

⁹ See, Landau, J.S.; Let’sTalk-InterviewsDrSpotnitz, p.11; www.innerresources.org

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