

The State of Our Country

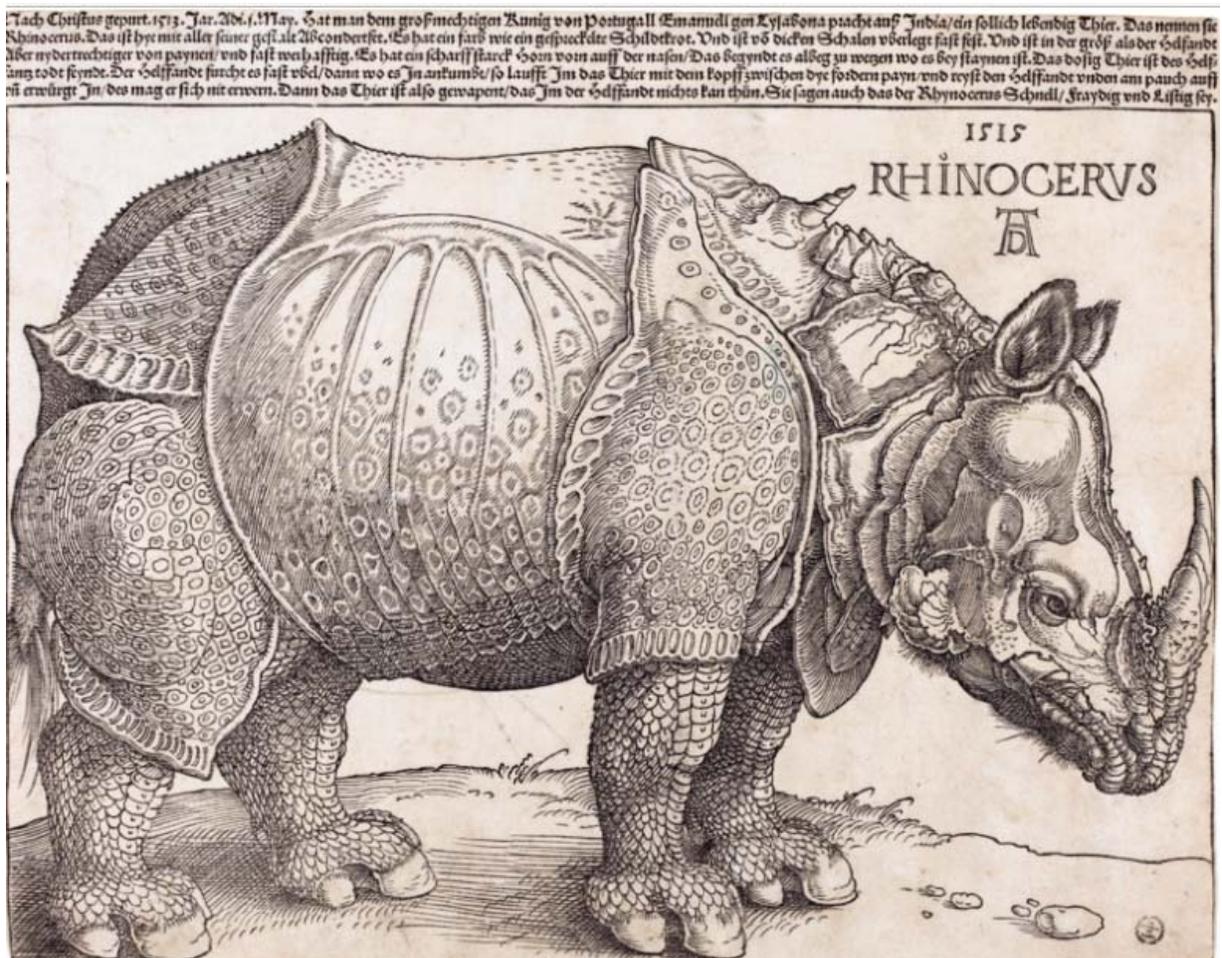
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Any number of us here are wrestling, intensely, with upheavals in our personal and collective psyches, the rumblings and eruptions over the past many months, the startling, even shocking results of the election last week . . . and the subsequent vivid and distressing clues about how the structures of our country will be re-interpreted by the appointments of our President-elect and how his policies will transform our lives, explicitly and implicitly. My immediate reaction to the results of the election was, to express it in an acronym, WTF!! . . . which carries a good dose of anger, paired with a half-question, and which carries an invitation to reflect. Both the energy of outrage and curiosity of mind are essential to using our voices. I think the most crucial position we can each take at this point is for each of us to find ways of using our voice – in words and in action.

Over the past few years I've been writing – and talking-- about how I see our nation as being in the grip of what I call “Alpha Narcissistic dynamics”. During the past year, the heat of these dynamics rapidly increased. They have found their embodiment spectacularly in Trump. I want to offer some reflections

about these dynamics that I hope may strengthen each of our individual and collective backbones in this time of intense stress. I will begin with an image and a play that I think reflect our situation. The play, by Eugene Ionesco, is titled, “Rhinoceros,” and is discussed at length in a [New York Times article by Teju Cole](#) which he entitles, “A Time for Refusal.”

IMAGE OF DURER'S RHINOCEROS



Rhinoceros -

Caption: Rhinoceros by Albrecht Durer

Source: National Gallery of Art and [Wikipedia](#)

But let's start with the image. The image, and the play that refers to it, are a way for us to explore the captivating power of Alpha Narcissism—along with how that power is being enacted in our midst today.

Ionesco's play opens at a street café in France. The protagonist, Berenger, is animatedly talking with a friend when a mammoth Rhinoceros comes thundering down the street, stamping and snorting! The people gathered there are startled but quite shortly return to their conversations. Soon, however, they are startled once again to see another charging Rhino pass by. This time, they stop to say that they are disturbed: "It's outrageous. Something must be done." And then, what they begin to do is argue heatedly about whether there might be just one rhino not two, and whether the Rhino comes from Africa or Asia. They also begin to ponder: some insist that they never believed the Rhino sightings in the first place, some acknowledge that they admire the Rhino's brute force, others speculate that the Rhinos are messengers of liberation.

As time passes, and this event recurs, Berenger observes that as the Rhino sightings continue to be the subject of pointless dispute, one by one, various people in the town begin to turn into rhinos. Their skin hardens, bumps appear over their noses and grow into horns. Even Berenger's friend begins to Rhino-orphize. Berenger argues with him: "You must admit that we have a philosophy that animals don't share, and an irreplaceable set of values, which it's taken centuries of human civilization to build up." His friend, who is caught in the delusion that the Rhino is somehow related to liberty and who is well on his way to being a rhino himself, retorts, "When we've demolished all that, we'll be better off!" Relentlessly, the number of stampeding beasts increases . . . and increases.

The play ends when almost everyone has succumbed to the call of the Rhino herd. Berenger, all alone, determined to retain his humanity but racked by doubts, looks into a mirror. Seeing how he is so out of step with the consensus, he slips towards a strange sense of being a monster himself. But he then summons his resolve - and refuses to accept the call of the herd.

Ionesco wrote *Rhinoceros* in 1954, as an expression of horror about his experience of the rise of the Romanian fascistic Iron Guard during the 1930's. In *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco places Berenger in the seat we are invited to occupy: the seat of reflective consciousness. Berenger is a person who consistently sees that the beast is a beast, and he refuses to become one himself. Meanwhile, Berenger's acquaintances one by one, employ defensive maneuvers to accommodate to the Rhino, and they become Rhinos themselves, part of the herd.

In his New York Times article on the play, Teju Cole is suggesting that we hold a mirror up to our own country. He reminds us of the list we've read so many times over during these past months: racism, hate speech, sexual violence amidst blatant misogyny, the advocacy of war crimes, an explicit declaration that torture will be validated. He argues that each item on this list supports the explicit, and treacherous promise that Donald Trump, then one of our Presidential candidates and now President, will turn this country around. Cole then grieves about the tremendous speed at which, in the immediate aftermath of Trump's election, we heard complacent acceptance, along with an optimistic hope that the "gifts" of Trump would be creative. Cole ponders:

“Evil settles into everyday life when people are unable or unwilling to recognize it. It makes its home among us when we are keen to minimize it or describe it as something else. This is not a process that began a week or month or year ago. It did not begin with drone assassinations, or with the war on Iraq. Evil has always been here. But now it has taken on a totalitarian tone.”

As I mentioned earlier, I think that America is in the grip of Alpha Narcissistic dynamics. America, like every other nation, has a personality. It is an organ within the psyche of our world, to some degree a conscious organ, and it emerges from each and every American. To use Ionesco’s artful language, we are being over-run by the Rhino. I understand Ionesco’s play as a call for us to face the Rhino.

Taking in this dramatic material, as Jungians, we then naturally ask: “So what are the archetypal energies that fuel these patterns? What are the archetypal roots of our country -- and what are the archetypal forces within each of us that co-create this collective character?” It is time for each of us to hold up a mirror, to face and wrestle with the Rhino who is a natural and present force in every one of us. As we individually face and wrestle with this archetypal force, we strengthen our capacity to bring consciousness and responsibility to our collective character, the character of our country. Recognizing the Rhino within each of us individually and realizing that we each contribute to the state of our country’s character, emphasizes how essential it is that we learn how to develop a creative relationship with this Rhino force.

Now, a little background for this idea of Alpha Narcissism. In 2007, Nancy Dougherty and I published *The Matrix and Meaning of Character*. The basic

concepts in this book underlie my suggestion that our country is in the grip of Alpha Narcissism and have led me to suggest that Trump, individually, appears as an Alpha Narcissist, a stunningly cunning manipulator, a pathological trickster.

Alpha Narcissism, as I see it, is formed when the archetypal forces that underlie *dynamic action* arise in the psyche of an individual or a nation that is not prepared to meet these forces creatively. This is a complicated assertion, and in order to clarify it, I'll just briefly introduce my notions about how the formation of our individual character is rooted in both archetypal and developmental dynamics.

Archetypally, some of us are born with a primary root in *archetypal action*, others in *archetypal affect*, and others in *archetypal mentation*. Each of these forces is truly archetypal – we do not experience them directly, but through their manifestations. These primary wellsprings inspire, inform, and infuse our development, our becoming who we are. While we each have a primary archetypal ground, all three archetypal forces, to some degree, are at play in each of our psyches; they are necessary to our wholeness.

Developmentally, as an infant is created and born, an embodied life begins, rooted particularly in one or another of these three archetypal forces. In the early months of life, from birth to roughly 18 months of age, the infant is naturally wrestling with the issue of separation from the mother. As she continues to encounter reality in terms of ever-changing oppositions, her first line of defense is to split experience into “good” and “bad” and to get rid of, (project), the bad. A dance of polar opposites begins. During this *Primal Phase*,

the child continues to be well occupied with separations – and with the relationships between her separated parts. In the midst of sorting out the essential relationship between her nascent consciousness and the archetypal realms, she finds herself exploring the relationship between her infant body and her mother's, her hunger and her satisfaction, her power to affect the world and her powerlessness, the good mother and the bad mother, love and hate, happiness and sadness. This dance of the opposites has the potential to lead to psychic awareness and to differentiation of them, yet it also may lead towards entrenched polarization.

From eighteen months onward to roughly three years old, the child, primarily through her interactions with the mother, is exploring and managing what can be seen developmentally as narcissistic dynamics. Discovering the dimensions of her individual presence, in *The Narcissistic Phase*, she establishes her selfhood in the world. She learns, at best, how to integrate the basic narcissistic dynamics of exhibitionism, grandiosity, and omnipotence in a healthy way; at worst these dynamics become employed defensively.

Returning to the question: What is Alpha Narcissism?, we can say that Alpha Narcissism arises when the archetypal ground of the infant psyche is rooted in dynamic action. When such a child is in an uncertain moment, she turns either towards “tucking in” or striking out and this tends to develop into an identification with the predator *or* with the prey. Generally the predator then defends wildly against being prey, while the tucked in child subjects her life to the eternal and tragic search for someone with the power that she is split off from. If the child's development is severely disrupted in the very early months of her life,

she is likely to find herself developing either a psychopathic character structure or to become a fearful, even paranoid, compulsive victim. In the narcissistic phase, these basic dynamics tend to emerge either in a person's powerful, even compellingly charismatic drive to dominate, or a person's unreflective identification as a "follower" who is entranced with someone else who is in power.

At a broader level, it is difficult *not* to see that Alpha dynamics have been our predominant form of narcissism. The archetypal raw action that lies in the roots of Alpha dynamics has fueled our country since its birth. These dynamics served both the adventurous settlers and the subsequent inhabitants of these lands both creatively and destructively. Historically, they supplied the forceful energy required to explore and develop our country. However, these dynamics also inspired the settlers, for example, to ruthlessly take over these lands from their Native American inhabitants whom they mercilessly slaughtered in a virtual genocide, to initiate a cruel industry of slavery, and to slaughter innumerable herds of buffalo that roamed the prairies. To this day, these undeniably destructive early expressions of Alpha dynamics lie deep within American narcissism, driving us into ruthless domination over and over.

Currently, this ruthless determination to dominate still appears pervasively. Not only is there now a well acknowledged and unprecedented gap between the 'haves and have-nots' in terms of money, power, and the ability to obtain justice. Huge amounts of our national wealth, both economic and environmental wealth, are in the unregulated hands of people for whom amassing and spending more and more of it is a thrill, a challenge, and yet

another star on their shield. Insatiable greed partners with the drive to win, each and every time. This is perfectly personified in the entire life trajectory of Trump.

Alpha dynamics also hold a tight grip on our various forms of national security. When we perceive that our national security is in any way questioned, not only a determination to protect, but also a fierce determination to dominate quickly reigns supreme. Also, within our own boundaries, we see a penchant for punitive action applied to the disadvantaged, to someone whose vulnerability calls out the predator. Any number of other examples also demonstrate that, in our country, vulnerability, in any form, is soundly denied or devalued; it is routinely defended against by us as individuals.

As a nation, we remain intent upon waging numerous international wars that are persuasively presented initially as an effort to rid the world of “evil” and bring democracy to all. Just a few years ago, the fear and despair generated by the boldness of these dynamics was expressed in numerous images of the apocalypse - appearing in the news, films, internet conversations, etc. And now our wars continue at an alarming rate – even though they are minimally recast as efforts to support the fights for freedom abroad. These aims are expressed with intrepid gallantry accompanied by indisputable assertions that we have the strongest military in the world; we are, in all accounts, #1, without question. Sensing the expanding inflation and self-righteousness at the core of each of these national positions, many people have recently expressed fears that we are becoming an authoritarian, if not a fascist, state. Fears of global disorder have ‘come home’ and now include a deep dread that we might well lose our essential democratic values and be faced with totalitarian control. Forecasts of doom aside, it does

seem apparent that Alpha dynamics not only fuel our country, but that they have us in their grip.

But how have Alpha dynamics become so predominant in our country's character? It is clarifying to recall that while a number of us are born with a primary root in archetypal action, others are rooted in archetypal affect, and others in archetypal mentation. The inter-relatedness of these various character structures leads us to inquire, particularly, about the lines of interaction between the three forms of narcissism.

In general, each character structure tends to project its shadow onto those structures that are rooted in the *other* archetypal wellsprings of psyche. Given that an Alpha Narcissist is attempting to get rid of his vulnerability, he will look for another whom he sees as vulnerable. He will dismiss and diminish the other, to guarantee that he remains free of this disowned part of himself. Meanwhile, people who are well rooted in the wellsprings of mentation or affect will tend to sense that raw action is so utterly other from themselves that they disidentify with it altogether, leaving the force of archetypal action projected onto the apparently powerful and effective 'other,' the Alpha.

All this rejected and projected archetypal, raw action is easily seized and put to predatory use both by Alpha individuals and by the collective psyche of our nation. This is one of the trickiest dynamics at work today in our country. Briefly, those of us who disidentify with aggression of any sort and then proceed to project it onto Alpha individuals as well as onto Alpha-spirited collective movements, are in effect handing over their share of this energy, effectively

handing over their power to Alpha Narcissists. This amounts, in essence, to a collusion with Alpha values.

Furthermore, once we have thrown out part of ourselves, we're not only psychically much poorer, we have lost the possibility – and the responsibility – to maintain a relationship with these disowned parts and thus contribute to their integration. One is left with virtually no capacity to truly own her aggression and therefore to assume responsibility for it. In each case, whether through rejection of raw action altogether or from identification with the split off predator, the key individuals involved, as well as our national psyche collectively, are ill-equipped to enter into a creative dialogue that might release us from such rigid oppositions.

So here we are, as Americans, more at odds with each other than ever – to put it quite mildly. When we are so crippled by our defenses, we become part of the herd. We don't grow hides nor horns, but I think what Ionesco was bemoaning, is that by splitting off from our own potential for dynamic action, we in effect gift it to the predator – to the Alpha who is ready and able to use it for his agendas. We become the Alpha's herd. Even though we may well excuse or explain or justify our quietude, or suggest that our lack of participation is “resistance,” at a psychic level we're handing this rich, powerful force of ours over to those in the thrall of the dictator's generally quite violent and cruel dominance.

It seems apparent that in order to deal with the current predominance of unbridled Alpha dynamics in our country, we must challenge every one of us to assume responsibility for and to address the individual integration of our split and dissociated inner selves. Naturally this would entail not only our developing

the capacity to recognize who we choose to carry our projections and why, but also our endeavoring to withdraw our own projections. When we hold up the mirror do we each see ourselves wrestling with the predatory beast within? Can we truly see it in ourselves?

In Ionesco's play, Berenger's capacity to see, face, and refuse to join what was happening around him, was his *Refusal*; it was clearly his form of saying "no". I can't say enough about how essential I think the capacity to say "NO" is. It is a basic assertion of self in the face of violation – however subtle, however extreme. This includes a loud NO to our own inner dynamics that keep us from our using our own power responsibly. *And* it includes our facing the predatory aggression that is running wild in our country. We may find this NO in words, out-loud or written; we may find it in contributions to collective action, in voice, money, or spiritual support. The key here is that your NO is rooted in your psyche, deep in the archetypal wellsprings. This is indeed a time for refusal, a time to know when – and how – to say NO! Forging the strength in your backbone, supplementing your access to the archetypal realms in general, you not only find yourself saying NO when faced with violation, you find access within yourself to a truly deep-seated YES – the yes that lights your life with active joy, deep security, and a profound sense of love – for yourself, for others, and for our country.

In our current political chaos, steadily studying the tricky dynamics of the predator at work in our world may well prove to be invaluable. Each step along the way will prompt further, deeper explorations: for example, deliberations about the nature of responsibility, considerations about conscience, questions

about the conscious use of violence, ponderings about what it takes to smell and face a predator, and what it takes to further the development of empathy, generosity, and caring.

Truly understanding the potential power accessible to us through such psychological work is a first, and perhaps an essential step in loosening the grip of Alpha dynamics. Developing an individual relationship and collective relationship to our aggression that renders it creative rather than destructive may well be one of the most effective and responsible steps we can take. Asserting our knowledge about transformation through the development of integration and balance within psyche would be, in itself, a form of creative aggression, one we can enact with conscience. I think this has been, historically, an essential challenge for the human race, and it is, *right now*, an increasingly demanding – and potentially evolutionary - challenge in our country.

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