

Rapunzel, Daughter of a Closet Narcissist

by Gudrun Zomerland, MFT

A couple of months before the movie “Tangled” came out I had come across the story of Rapunzel, again. Having grown up in Germany, I had heard it before but did not remember any of the details. The movie is a very changed version of the original; it is so changed that none of the ingredients that make Rapunzel’s psychological challenge so pronounced are present any more. In “Tangled” Rapunzel is a spunky, self-assured young woman. She is a worthy role model for girls but she is not what the Brothers Grimm had in mind. They were trying to teach girls the particular patterns, pitfalls, and tasks involved in growing up with a mother who is both abandoning and imprisoning, needing her daughter emotionally but rejecting and devaluing her at the same time.

For some time I had been searching for a description of a type of narcissism not usually talked about. When we hear the word narcissism most of us think of the exhibitionistic kind. We think of “Mommy Dearest”, the type of narcissist who is so obviously self-absorbed and flamboyant that she molds her daughter into an idealized extension of herself. If there are multiple children, she will reject the other ones, but with the first one (usually) she will stay fused or try to stay fused for the rest of her life. But there are other types of narcissism, not so obvious.

In recent years professionals in the mental health field have started to distinguish between those other types of narcissism. There are so many subcategories at this point, both among clinical as well as lay publications, that it can be quite confusing. So, when I listened to the original Rapunzel story, I experienced a moment of wonderful recognition. The Brothers Grimm, over two hundred years ago, described my mother and my journey and the mothers and journeys of many of my clients! The best diagnostic label for these mothers is “closet narcissists”.

Narcissistic mothers, whether “closet” or otherwise, are not bad people; they are adult children who have been deeply wounded and traumatized at a very early age. In my mother’s case, she was orphaned at age 1½ and grew up with relatives who were not very capable parents. She described her childhood as that of Cinderella. She had her own fairy tale to live through. However, without her having inner and outer resources for healing herself, her trauma became generational and it was passed on to me.

What causes the narcissistic injury?

Every child, from age zero to about two years old is completely fused with the mother. The child sees her mother as an extension of herself. During this time the child needs to feel her omnipotence, meaning she must get a sense that she can be in charge of her needs. If she cries because she is hungry and the mother (her extension) feeds her, the child learns that she is worthy of attention and develops confidence that she can act upon her world.

Besides physical needs, the mother must be able to mirror her child emotionally. She must be able to sense when her child needs emotional comfort and put any of her own needs or anxieties aside in order to be there for her child. This is called “mirroring”. None of us receive perfect mirroring; that is not necessary. However, we do need to receive “good enough” mirroring.

When these omnipotent desires during infancy are not attended to two things happen, 1) the child becomes permanently stuck in this phase and stays narcissistically needy, and 2) a deep shame develops about not being worthy of love and not being capable in the world. From this time on the child, and later adult, will need 1) a “narcissistic supply”, people who will feed her unmet needs, and 2) a defense against the deep shame living inside of her. The exhibitionistic narcissist accomplishes this by using a multitude of people for the much needed attention and adoration and trying to avoid the shame at all costs. The closet narcissist accomplishes this by fusing with one person to try to get all her needs met and by projecting her shame onto others. She does this by mercilessly criticizing and devaluing her spouse or any of her children.

The closet narcissist will try to find a partner whom she can either adore or who adores her, with whom she can act out either the needy child or the harsh mother. She will try to attach to this partner with the fierceness of a young monkey clinging to a wire mesh mother. She most likely will also cling to at least one of her children since the adult relationship can never truly fulfill her infantile needs. She will want more.

Strangely enough, this family can look good on the outside because the acting out of the harsh mother will usually happen only in the safety of the four walls at home. Unlike the exhibitionistic narcissist the closet narcissist will appear socially competent. This is why it is so necessary to have validation for the craziness that develops in the psyche of a daughter with a closet narcissistic mother.

Rapunzel is the story of a girl who grows up, or is trying to grow up, with just such a mother. In the story this mother is split in the two major ways she influences her daughter, (1) by abandoning her because she is unable to meet the myriad needs of her child, and (2) by clinging to her to such a degree that the daughter feels imprisoned. The daughter in turn has no way of developing as a self-reflective person, unless, that is, she is willing to abandon the impossible task of taking care of her mother and to face the deep pain living inside her own psyche.

Here is the fairy tale followed by my interpretations of the symbols the Brothers Grimm used and by actual stories I have been privileged to hear from my clients or have experienced myself. I have changed names and circumstances to insure everybody's privacy.

Rapunzel

Once upon a time there was a couple who had long in vain wished for a child. At length the woman hoped that God was about to grant her desire. The couple lived in a small cottage that bordered on a splendid garden which they could see through a window. The garden was full of the most beautiful flowers and herbs. It was, however, surrounded by a high wall, and no one dared to go into it because it belonged to an enchantress, who had great power and was dreaded by all the world.

One day the woman was standing by the window and looked down into the garden, when she saw a bed with the most beautiful rapunzel. It looked so fresh and green that she longed for it and had the greatest desire to eat some. This desire increased every day, and as she knew that she could not get any of it, she quite pined away, and began to look pale and miserable.

Her husband became alarmed and asked, "What ails you, dear wife?" "Ah," she replied, "if I can't eat some of the rapunzel, which is in the garden behind our house, I shall die." The husband, who loved his wife, thought to himself: "Sooner than let my wife die, I will bring her some of the rapunzel, let it cost what it will." At twilight, he clambered over the wall into the garden of the enchantress, hastily clutched a handful of rapunzel and took it to his wife. She at once ate it greedily. It tasted so good to her that the next day she longed for it three times as much as before. If he was to have any rest, her husband had to descend into the garden once more. In the gloom of evening, therefore, he stole into the garden again. But once there he became terribly afraid, for he saw the enchantress standing before him. "How dare you," she said angrily, "descend into my garden and steal my rapunzel

like a thief? You shall suffer for it." "Ah," answered he, "have mercy. I only did it out of necessity. My wife saw your rapunzel from the window and felt such a longing for it that she would have died if she had not got some to eat."

Hearing this, the enchantress said to him, "If this is so, I will allow you to take away with you as much rapunzel as you will. Only I have one condition: you must give me the child which your wife will bring into the world. It shall be treated well, and I will care for it like a mother." The man in his terror consented. When the woman delivered her child, the enchantress appeared at once, named the child Rapunzel, and took it away with her.

Rapunzel grew into the most beautiful girl under the sun. When she was twelve years old, the enchantress shut her into a tower, which lay in a forest, and had neither stairs nor door, but at the top it had a little window. When the enchantress wanted to go in, she placed herself beneath it and cried, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!"

Rapunzel had magnificent long hair, fine as spun gold. When she heard the voice of the enchantress she unfastened her braided tresses, wound them around one of the hooks of her little window, and then let her hair fall twenty ells down. In this way the enchantress climbed up to visit her.

After a year or two, it came to pass that the king's son rode through the forest and came upon the tower. He heard a song, which was so charming that he stood still and listened. It was Rapunzel, who in her solitude passed her time in letting her sweet voice resound. The king's son wanted to climb up to her, and looked for the door of the tower, but none was to be found. He rode home. But the singing had so deeply touched his heart, that he went out into the forest every day and listened to it. Once, when he was thus standing behind a tree, he saw the enchantress and heard her cry, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!" Rapunzel let down the braids of her hair, and the enchantress climbed up to her.

"If that is the ladder by which one mounts, I too will try my fortune," thought the King's son, and the next day when it began to grow dark, he went to the tower and cried, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!" Immediately the hair fell down and the king's son climbed up. At first Rapunzel was terribly frightened of the man for she had never seen one. But the king's son began to talk to her quietly, like a friend. Rapunzel lost her fear, and when he asked her if she would take him for her husband, and she saw that he was young and handsome, she thought, "he will love me more than the old enchantress does." She said yes, and laid her hand in his. "I

will willingly go away with you, but I do not know how to get down. Bring with you a skein of silk every time that you come, and I will weave a ladder with it, and when that is ready I will descend, and you will take me on your horse." They agreed that until that time he should come to her every evening, for the old woman came by day.

The enchantress noticed nothing of this, until once Rapunzel said to her, "Tell me, dame, how it happens that you are so much heavier for me to draw up than the young king's son who comes every evening." "Ah! You wicked child," cried the enchantress, "what do I hear you say. I thought I had separated you from all the world, and yet you have deceived me." In her anger she clutched Rapunzel's beautiful hair, seized a pair of scissors and snip, snap, cut it off. The lovely braids fell to the ground. The enchantress was so merciless that she took poor Rapunzel into a desert where she had to live in great grief and misery.

On the same day that she cast out Rapunzel, however, the enchantress fastened the braids of hair, which she had cut off, to the hook of the window, and when the king's son came in the evening and cried, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!" she let the hair down. The king's son ascended, but instead of finding his dear Rapunzel, he found the enchantress who gazed at him with wicked and venomous looks. "Aha," she cried mockingly, "you would fetch your dearest, but the beautiful bird sits no longer singing in this nest. The cat has got it, and will scratch out your eyes as well. Rapunzel is lost to you. You will never see her again."

The king's son was beside himself with pain, and in his despair he leapt down from the tower. He escaped with his life, but the thorns into which he had fallen pierced his eyes and blinded him. Thus he wandered about the forest, ate nothing but roots and berries, and did naught but lament and weep over the loss of his dearest beloved.

He roamed about in misery for some years, and at length came to the desert where Rapunzel, with twins she had born, lived in wretchedness. He heard a voice, and it seemed so familiar to him that he went towards it. As he approached, Rapunzel recognized him at once, fell around his neck and wept. Two of her tears wetted his eyes, and they healed immediately and he was restored to sight. He led her to his kingdom where he was joyfully received, and they lived for a long time afterwards, happy and contented.

The Players In And Around The Closet Narcissist

Let us start with introducing the players. First, there is the couple who lives in a small house next to a walled-off garden. The wife believes that her wish for a child is about to be realized. This wish to give birth represents the inner experience of the closet narcissist. She has an unconscious longing to know her own inner self but has no access; she does not have the inner or outer resources. Narcissistic women will frequently compensate this unconscious desire for healing by choosing to have a child. They falsely believe that having a child will make them magically feel good about themselves. They have no awareness of the challenging task of raising a human being.

In the story we are told that the wife is consumed by a yearning for something outside herself, something beyond her own boundaries. Her husband is trying to give her what she wants but by doing so he goes against his own values, exposes himself to danger, and ultimately becomes equally responsible for the later abandonment of the child. He represents the person who functions as narcissistic supply for the wife's infantile needs, the person who will forego his own well-being under the illusion that his actions could possibly fill the seemingly endless pit of neediness of the narcissist. He is the enabler or, what is also called, a co-narcissist.

The wife craves the plant rapunzel. This plant, in real life, has herbal qualities and is associated with hair growth. Hair typically symbolizes self-expression and personal strength. In telling the story, the Brothers Grimm emphasize how green the plant is. Green is the color of envy, which is very often a mindset of people who feel an inner emptiness. The wife craves for something that would give her what she lacks, namely personal power and self-expression. In the story she craves for it so desperately that she tells her husband she would die without it. In essence, she tells him that she feels unable to exist on her own.

The third player early in the story is the enchantress, the person with the beautiful garden. Again, the Brothers Grimm are specific. They do not present a witch, who would be a symbol of social isolation. No, the enchantress looks good to the outside world. She represents the part of the closet narcissist who functions quite well in the world. She can hold a job; she has friends; she seems to care for her family. But at her core she still misses something. When the opportunity arises to feed this empty core, the enchantress grabs it; she uses the trespassing husband for her own narcissistic supply and ensures ownership of the future child.

The wife and the enchantress represent the two sides of the closet narcissistic mother, the abandoning and the imprisoning mother. She cannot

take care of her daughter, because she does not know how, but she needs her daughter for her own unmet infantile needs and therefore holds on to her. This is a crazy-making dynamic for the child and will influence her later relationships. She will need to wake up to the reality of her predicament, namely that she grew up without a nurturing and reflecting mother; and she will have to grieve her lost childhood.

Closet Narcissism: The Abandoning Mother

Let us turn first to the abandoning quality of the closet narcissistic mother. In the story, when the child finally arrives, the wife does not protest against the inhuman deal her husband made. Neither does she utter one word of lament or grief. The child appears not to be connected to her. The abandonment is profound.

This does not mean that in real life a closet narcissistic mother would not grieve if her infant were to die, for instance. This part of the story symbolizes the emotional inability of the mother to turn herself over to the world of the infant. Even though the mother may be able to provide her child with food, shelter and necessary physical care - after all she wants to look good in the eyes of others - she does not truly turn herself over to focus on this new human being. Her self-absorption is primary. In real life this kind of emotional abandonment can have emotional as well as physical consequences for the child.

Kathy is a woman in her mid-thirties. She does not understand why she is unable to attract a good man to her. All her relationships so far have been with men who cannot commit or emotionally abandon her. She reports having had a happy childhood, with loving parents and all her needs met. She describes her parents as openly affectionate with each other which makes her inability to attract a good spouse even more pronounced.

Upon further exploration over the next several months a different picture emerges. Kathy's parents were indeed devoted to each other, or rather, her mother anticipated all her father's needs and was rewarded with his attention to her. However, neither parent paid particular attention to Kathy and her brother. Even though all their physical needs were taken care of, Kathy does not have one memory in which her mother comforts her emotionally. On the contrary, she recollects numerous incidences

where her mother overtly pushes her away when Kathy expresses her neediness for her.

Kathy has grown up to believe that she should be happy since she had all her material needs met and that she shouldn't feel needy. Kathy's mother seems to have clung to her father to get her own needs for attachment met but had no emotional resources for Kathy and, therefore, abandoned Kathy emotionally.

Nora, a client in her mid-fifties, reports how her mother frequently told a story about an almost fatal incident Nora went through when she was 18 months old. The story was that her mother had gone shopping and left her alone in the house without a babysitter. Her mother told her that when she came home from her shopping trip she found her blue in the face, with the pacifier squarely lodged in her throat, catching breath only with tremendous difficulties. Nora's mother always ended her retelling of the story with a giggle: "You almost choked to death."

It's not only the fact that Nora's mother left an 18 month old without supervision, more telling is the giggle the mother employed when recounting this traumatizing event to Nora. The mother is totally disconnected from the emotional reality of almost losing her daughter. With the childlike laughter she conveys to her daughter that the potential loss of her was not a very serious event. The mother shows no connection to Nora.

Nora's mother also has to defend against the shame and guilt such failure to provide for her child must have evoked in her. She does this by making light of the event. Nora reports that even after this incident her mother left her alone, without supervision, many more times, further underlining her mother's disconnection to her.

Abandonment is not confined to the early years but continues throughout childhood and into later adulthood. As long as the daughter is unhealed herself, she will be affected by the rejection. As we shall see this pain becomes confusing or goes altogether unconscious when coupled with the mother's emotional neediness. Now the daughter experiences both abandonment and imprisonment.

Closet Narcissism: The Imprisoning Mother

We turn now to the enchantress in the story, the symbol for the mother who looks good on the outside but who imprisons her daughter. In the fairy tale, the enchantress bans Rapunzel by leaving her in a tower deep in the forest when she is twelve years old. The tower has no door and no stairs; it has only one window at the top through which Rapunzel is able to look out.

I believe the Brothers Grimm chose the age and the particular symbol of imprisonment with deliberation. Twelve is roughly the age at which girls start the change toward being the budding young women they will one day become. They want to separate psychologically from their mothers. As we all know this can be a very challenging period for both mothers and daughters. The enchantress in the story solves this problem by simply making it impossible for Rapunzel to engage in this developmental task. She shuts her away from the world and continues to use her for her own narcissistic supply.

Rapunzel's confinement is not only in a tower but the tower is in a forest. Forests in fairy tales typically represent a place of danger and of feeling lost. Indeed, Rapunzel is in danger and is lost. What is at stake is her ability to have her own life. Furthermore, the tower has no door and no stairs. Her confinement is absolute. On her own, she cannot descend and leave. Even the enchantress, however, has no true access to Rapunzel. She has no way of reaching her daughter through direct means, a door and stairs. She has to seduce her daughter into letting her borrow her very essence, her hair.

The tragedy is that Rapunzel readily cooperates. She does not know any other way of relating. She gives to her mother what the mother needs. In real life this is played out by daughters taking care of their mothers emotionally without having gotten this necessary attention for themselves.

Kathy, the woman whom I mentioned above, tells me that she always sensed when her mother was hurt or sad, which was - despite the seemingly good relationship with her father - often. Kathy used to pride herself for this sensitivity. She loved her mother and wanted her mother to feel better. When her mother felt low, Kathy talked to her, embraced her, nurtured her; and her mother took this attention readily.

This is a perfect example of how a narcissistically injured mother unconsciously turns her daughter into her own narcissistic supply. Kathy's mother cannot give to Kathy; she can only take.

Loretta was a woman in her sixties when she came to see me. She complained about her children not reaching out to her, her husband avoiding her, and her friends cutting her off. After telling me about her childhood I guessed that her mother was also a closet narcissist. Her mother had been single during Loretta's childhood. She was barely able to make ends meet and often received help from Loretta's grandparents. During that time, the mother told Loretta all her woes.

Loretta learned to listen and to be there for her mother. But not only did she learn to take care of her mother's emotional needs, Loretta also developed pride in her ability to sense other people's needs and to respond without being asked. She felt certain that she knew best what other people had to do. She considered this ability to be an asset in all her relationships, not realizing that she would never be able to create reciprocal relationships until she dropped the care-taking role.

This is an example of a daughter who has so thoroughly internalized the caretaker role that she has lost a sense of herself as separate from other people's needs. Loretta will have to stop this behavior before she can come out of denial about the reality of her childhood and move into grieving it.

Loretta is not alone. Daughters of closet narcissistic mothers are prone to become caretakers with little awareness of their own needs. Very often we can find them in the healing professions: nurses, therapists, social workers. Whether or not the daughters choose a helping profession, they will likely play out the known dynamic of taking care of their mothers in their friendships and their own families. Without having had the experience of someone taking care of them emotionally and/or physically, they have lost the connection to their own neediness. However, daughters of closet narcissistic mothers find ways to sooth their own unmet and unconscious needs.

Self-Soothing

While Rapunzel takes care of the enchantress' needs without complaint, she sings to herself in her solitude. This is a beautiful image of what daughters of closet narcissistic mothers learn to do. They somehow

learn to sooth themselves in their fundamental aloneness. If fortunate, daughters will sooth themselves through positive creative means; however, many times they will also or exclusively resort to negative means.

Shawna has sought my services because she feels crazy sometimes. When I ask her what she means by this, she remembers being four years old and finally being able to see herself in the glass doors of the antique china cabinet in her family's living room. From this moment on she takes every opportunity to dance in front of this imperfect mirror. While she delights in watching herself swirl around, she also imagines being watched by imaginary playmates. Imagining that others (usually specific people) watch her in various activities have continued to be important parts of Shawna's life - to the extend that she sometimes questions her sanity.

What Shawna describes is a typical self-soothing mechanism, employed by children who do not get the mirroring they need. When I explain this simple fact to Shawna and the fact that her form of self-soothing does not hurt anybody, she is able for the first time in her adult life to let go of the thought that she is crazy. During our continued work together, in which I provide the mirroring that was so sorely missing when she was small, her fantasies eventually diminish.

Dianne was a divorced woman in her early fourties. Her ex-husband had been emotionally and physically abusive, and it had taken her a long time to leave him. She had only been able to do this with the help of a therapist. However, instead of her life getting better, Dianne still lives with lots of chaos and drama.

The reason she had come to see me was that she felt really bad and responsible for a pet dying in her care. She reported having a few birds and a number of cats at home. She figured that she must have left the bird cage open when she left for work a couple of weeks ago. When she returned home she found one of them dead on the ground, half-eaten by one of her cats.

When I inquire further, it becomes clear that since the separation from her husband Dianne has become a cat hoarder, someone who has so many cats that none of them receive adequate care. Her household is in a constant state of disarray. Even though she knows that having so many cats is wrong, she

cannot help herself when seeing a homeless kitty, when asked to take a kitten or to adopt a cat.

Dianne's family history reveals a very abusive father, an ineffectual infantile mother, and children who did not receive any protection, guidance or nurturing. Dianne lived in constant fear of her father and constant fear for her mother. She learned to not rock the boat and to ease her mother's life wherever she could. Her family usually had one or two cats and these animals were her only source of love and affection. Even though this source of soothing herself had enabled her to survive her horrific childhood, it had turned out to be very detrimental in her adulthood.

Soothing mechanisms are as varied as people's personalities. They range from fantasies to obsessions, from benign to dangerous. Unfortunately, soothing mechanisms can become themselves imprisoning later in life. Often they move into compulsions or addictions to substances or behaviors. Once a daughter is in the grip of this type of self-soothing without the ability to stop, she is actively feeding a shame already living inside her. Each time she engages in the undesired behavior or substance, the daughter devalues her own self.

Closet Narcissism: The Devaluing Aspect of the Imprisoning Mother

Just like in actual prisons, in which dehumanization is part of the institution, so is devaluation part of the closet narcissistic mother. She perceives any movement toward freedom, any sign of self-determination, self-expression or growth in her daughter as a threat to her narcissistic supply. Without holding her daughter hostage and having her to emotionally lean on, the mother unconsciously fears that she might have to face the emptiness, shame and profound grief living inside of her. Because this potential inner task seems too overwhelming, the closet narcissistic mother resorts to attack. She does not want her daughter to find her own inner strength which would take her away from her. In order to keep her daughter from leaving, the mother will have to cut her down.

In the fairy tale two years have passed since the enchantress put Rapunzel into her version of prison, the tower. Rapunzel is now 14 years old, well into her adolescence, and with that well into the developmental stage of self-determination. Along comes the son of a king whom I will call the prince, for short. He represents the male energy in Rapunzel, or the animus, the energy that enables women to act in the world, and to move toward achievement.

At this point in the story Rapunzel stops being docile. She questions the enchantress' weight on her. But not only that; Rapunzel also lets the enchantress know that she herself feels lighter. Rapunzel compares herself to her captor. The unfavorable comparison confronts the enchantress with the possibility that Rapunzel might outgrow her and leave her. The enchantress cannot allow this to happen. She has to defend her narcissistic supply. She cuts off Rapunzel's hair and with that her self-assertion.

Even though in the fairy tale the enchantress devalues Rapunzel at the most crucial stage of her individuation, namely adolescence, in real life the closet narcissistic mother will try to suppress any attempt of her daughter to outgrow her. She will devalue her at any age.

Devaluation can come in many different forms and levels. Foremost, of course, is the mother's devaluation of her daughter's attachment needs. But after infancy, the daughter will attempt to master other developmental tasks, such as learning, playing (or being creative), growing into her body and eventually into her sexuality. The mother might attack all or only some of these areas.

Devaluation of Attachment Needs:

Nora, whose story I talked about above (she almost choked to death as an infant), remembers being four years old. Her mother tells her that she will be back in twenty minutes. Nora doesn't know how to tell time. She initially occupies herself. Then, because she gets a little anxious, she pulls a chair in front of the window, climbs on top and looks out for her mother. More time goes by and her mother is not appearing. Nora's anxiety rises. She starts crying a little. More time goes by. Nora is becoming desperate. She starts sobbing, then screaming.

Her mother finally comes home and sees Nora in the window. Some neighbors are looking too. Once inside, her mother admits that she is late but tells Nora: "You should have known that I'm coming back."

Nora's mother not only ignores her daughters emotional distress, she actively shames her daughter's attachment need for her. Nora's mother is defending against her own grief living inside of her. She also defends against shame for leaving her daughter alone and not providing for her by projecting this shame onto Nora. Nora is left believing she should not need her mother.

Intellectual Devaluation:

Carmen's mother was not allowed to finish High School, and Carmen heard about this throughout her childhood. Frequently her mother would ask her for reassurance: "I'm not dumb, am I?" At the same time, her mother could be mercilessly critical of Carmen's learning attempts.

Carmen remembers being four years old and talking to her brother. She still has trouble with pronouncing *th* (a task that is not expected to be completed until about age six). While passing, her mother snips at her: "Don't babble so much. You can't even pronounce *th* yet."

In another memory Carmen is six and has just discovered that by putting certain letters together she can make words. Full of pride she goes to her mother to show her that she knows how to spell her auntie's name: Mari (Mary). Her mother takes one quick look at the sheet of paper and says to her: "Come back when you can spell it."

Carmen's mother is insecure about her own intellectual development. Unconsciously, she cannot tolerate Carmen's intellectual unfolding. She shames Carmen into feeling insecure also. Carmen fails High School and is called lazy by her family. In her late teens and early adulthood she jobs around and engages in many self-defeating behaviors. She has learned to devalue her intellectual capabilities.

Physical Devaluation:

Cherie's mother is good-looking but doesn't think of herself as such. She constantly laments not looking like the thin models on TV or in magazines. Cherie grows into a healthy, athletic adolescent. Her mother takes every opportunity to sneak up behind her, pinch the skin in her waist, and to make snide comments about her weight. When Cherie complains, her mother tells her: "Don't be so sensitive; I'm only joking." By the age of eighteen Cherie is anorexic.

Cherie's mother cannot tolerate her daughter looking good and projects her own poor self-image onto her. She avoids responsibility by claiming to be humorous. Cherie has learned to devalue her body to the point of starving herself.

Sexual Devaluation:

Loren has been working with me for a while. We have explored many incidences of her mother abandoning her and being critical of her. We have moved on to explore her sexuality since she was also molested by a family member when little.

She all of a sudden remembers one strange incident involving her mother. She is nineteen years old and has just returned home from college. It is morning and she is just getting up. She is sitting on her bed and is about to put on her bra. Her mother barges into her room, as usual without knocking, to get something but as she passes she looks at Loren's chest and says: "You used to have nicer breasts when you were younger."

Loren's mother undercuts her daughter's sexuality in a couple of ways in this example: 1) by ignoring her privacy and 2) by making a senseless and insensitive remark about her physique. We don't know what happened in her mother's past. However, the fact that incest happened in this family and that the mother shows not only poor boundaries but actively shames her daughter's budding sexuality, points toward some deep-seated sexual injury and shame within the mother. The only way she knows how to defend against this is by projecting it onto Loren and to cut her down sexually.

By her late teens Loren is acting out sexually by having unsafe sex with multiple partners, usually quite a bit older than her. She contracts STD's numerous times and carries away life-long physical consequences.

Devaluation of Creativity:

Kim is in her early thirties. She has come to see me because she suspects that she is an underachiever. She works as a receptionist, but at times she dreams of having her own business. As I talk to Kim, it becomes clear that her mother used to undervalue her own capabilities. For instance, her mother was an excellent cook and frequently received rave compliments, followed with versions of: "You could be a chef or could have your own catering business". Every time she received praise, her mother rebuffed it and claimed her skill was not good enough.

At the same time, Kim's mother was very critical of any efforts made by others around her. When I ask for an example of how her mother was critical, Kim tells of an incident when she was

five or six. She sits on the living room floor, playing with her dolls and stuffed animals. She is exuberantly singing to them. Her mother walks by and says: "Don't try so hard, will you." Kim remembers feeling crushed and confused.

Kim's mother internally devalues her own creative expression, namely cooking, and cannot tolerate any independent creative expression in her daughter. By crushing her daughter's exuberant singing, her mother can continue in her own unhealed homeostasis.

Kim's memory of feeling crushed and confused is telling. Each time a closet narcissistic mother devalues her daughter, these feelings of pain and defeat get reinforced and deepen until the daughter lives in an emotional wasteland.

The Emotional Wasteland of the Narcissistically Injured Daughter

In the fairy tale, the Brothers Grimm tell us that the enchantress is merciless and that she takes Rapunzel into a desert where she had to live in great misery. This desert is the emotional experience of a daughter who is trying to grow into adulthood and whose efforts have been crushed repeatedly all through childhood. The resulting misery may include depression, anxiety, addictions or just a general floundering and lack of direction in life. It may include inappropriate romantic relationships or lack thereof. Like being lost in a desert, the overall feeling will be one of lack of direction in life. Even if the daughter is an overachiever to make up for any lack during childhood, at some point she will come to realize that this type of achievement alone is not truly feeding her sense of purpose in life. She will also feel rudderless.

This lack of direction is the loss of the daughter's animus, or the life force inside of her that would give her motivation and urge her to search for a way out of the desert. In the story, this loss of motivation is represented by the prince, the animus, leaping from the tower. Even though the enchantress is responsible for luring him into the tower, he jumps on his own accord; the enchantress does not push him. This symbolizes the dynamic between the closet narcissistic mother and her young adult daughter. Even though it was the mother who cut down the daughter's motivation to grow, the lack thereof now lives on in the daughter. The daughter is embodying her own downfall.

The Prince not only jumps, in addition he lands on thorns which rob him of his eye sight. This is a striking image of Rapunzel's denial. She cannot

see and discern what happened to her. Denial prevents her awareness and lack of awareness prevents her from moving on with her life.

The Brothers Grimm are not done yet, however, with loading on the symbolism at this stage of the fairy tale. They further tell us that Rapunzel gave birth to twins. Since the twins are not mentioned at the end of the story, when the prince and Rapunzel unite, I am assuming that they are not meant to be taken literally. In dreams twins can point toward an issue that is divided or a person who is of two minds.

Even though Rapunzel lives in an emotional wasteland and is in denial about her past, she has retained a spark of her inner spirit. In this sense she acts like she has two selves. She expresses this inner spark by singing. Creative expression is extremely important in recovery from both denial and emotional pain. Through creative expression adult daughters of closet narcissistic mothers can find their own true selves. Many of my clients write, draw, paint, sing, compose or find other ways to express themselves. Some do it through physical activities, such as dancing or athletics. Yet others pay attention to their night dreams in order to find a connection with their inner spirit. Some join a 12-Step Program to get in touch with a spirituality that leads them out of denial and out of the wasteland.

In the story, the prince, in his wanderings, recognizes Rapunzel's voice; he hears her sing. Rapunzel's grief, symbolized by the two tears that fall onto the prince's eyes when they reunite, enables her to come out of denial. She starts to see. When daughters of closet narcissist mothers can grieve the loss of childhood, they unite with their true selves. When they can let go of feeling responsible for their mothers' and by extension other people's needs, they can start to get to know their own needs. When they can learn to take care of their own needs, they will find a person who is unique, with many talents and gifts to give to the world and with some character traits that might warrant caution and containment. They will find that they are human, with both positive and negative qualities, and that being human is enough and beautiful. They will have reached the castle.

The castle represents the inner home, a place where the daughter of a closet narcissistic mother has a new internalized mother; one who sees her for who she is, without shame; one who has stopped being hard on her daughter and instead celebrates even small steps of growth and achievement. I dedicate Rapunzel to all those girls and women.

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