HOW SERVICE-LEARNING CAN COUNTER CULTURAL NARCISSISM

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By Gretchen Jordan

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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This thesis defines and describes cultural narcissism as a societal syndrome and details the causes and perpetrators of this cultural shift in the United States. More specifically, it explores the implications of cultural narcissism in our youth and the educational system. Next, it looks at the responsibility of public and private schools as civic education centers. This thesis proposes service-learning as a viable solution for the educator to combat cultural narcissism.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father and research assistant, Danny Struble, for his unlimited support and encouragement.
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1. Introduction

In packing for my annual Dominican Republic trip one year, a child-sized t-shirt in the donation pile caught my eye. At first it made me laugh, then it made me cringe as I thought about the truth it represented. The shirt featured a smiling pink rabbit, dressed up like the Statue of Liberty with sparkly green glitter headdress, parading across the front. Across the top it read, “I pledge allegiance to… ME, ME, ME, ME!”

Ironically enough, it would be soon worn by a child in a third-world country whose perception of the greatness of the United States weighed heavily on the tri-annual arrival of teams of church missionaries with bags and bags of surplus clothing and material goods to be distributed to those deemed the most needy in the impoverished neighborhood. The greatest irony in the shirt lay in the fact that we are conscious enough of our self-centered society in the US that a t-shirt celebrating this attitude would be conceptualized, produced, marketed, purchased and then that same person who purchased it would donate it to a cause such as this. What a place the US must be, the children often remark to me at the school down there, that we not only have the privilege to travel and can afford it, but that each time we arrive, we dump thousands of dollars of material goods on their doorsteps. And what admiration we ceaselessly receive each time we drop our leftovers on their doorsteps. Why do we do these trips, anyway? I questioned myself. Is it really just a way to feel good about oneself, dumping material wealth on the have-nots, or a way to reconcile with oneself the unjust distribution of wealth in the world?

I showed the t-shirt to the two students sitting in my living room, packing their bags full of donated goods for the trip. “Ha ha ha, so true!” was the response. For the
first time I would be taking two of my own students on this service trip, with the desire to fulfill one of my own life-goals by altering the course of a student’s future for the better as a result of my career. When I decided to become a Spanish teacher ten years ago, the motivation behind my career choice was that I wanted to instill in kids a love of language and a love of travel. If there was one pivotal change in my life and my consciousness, it was my study abroad experience in Mexico. The scenes glimpsed through Mexican bus windows of whole neighborhoods built of scrap metal, tires and blue tarps confused me, challenged my thinking, and left an impression on my mind never to be forgotten. Not that I actually had any worthy motivations behind my choice to study abroad, nor that it motivated me to immediately change my self-centered behavior upon arriving home, but it was the beginning of a long road to understanding that the world is much greater than pledging allegiance to “ME, ME, ME, ME!” I was the typical narcissistic college student. Many years later, I now understand the dangers of this attitude, and also what is required to change this mindset, thanks to my own journey.

Now in my sixth year teaching high school Spanish, I feel increasingly frustrated with the lack of results of the dream-job I chose. I spend many hours of my day simply justifying the purpose of learning a second language, or the purpose of understanding a different culture. Granted, it’s part of their developmental age, but some days I think the teenagers in my classroom are so self-centered and egotistical that it doesn’t seem we will ever even approach that idealistic understanding of others and cultural empathy that I envisioned. “Why would we want to learn about them when we are the best country in the world? They should be learning from US!” is a common response from students when we tackle topics of cultural differences. I understand that I live in a state, and an
area of that state, particularly isolated from racial diversity and “multiculturalism.” Of
290 students in our school, one is African American, three are of Hispanic descent, and
three moved to the area from China several years ago. But the problem, I’ve come to
realize, is much greater than a lack of diversity or eye-opening experiences in life.

Over the last few years, a great number of books and newspaper articles have
been written on what has been termed “cultural narcissism” and the causes and effects of
this trend in the United States. The teenagers I work with are, in many ways, victims of
this cultural narcissism and what our society has raised them to be and believe. One or
two people in their lives steering the ship a different direction for only a few hours a
week may or may not have any influence on the long-term course of that ship.

About a year ago, my father sent me a book called The Narcissism Epidemic, by
Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D. and W. Keith Campbell, Ph.D. Finally. Documentation and
research supporting and spelling out the mental and moral struggles I’ve been dealing
with for years as an educator. According to Twenge and Campbell, since the year 2000
the rise of narcissistic personality traits in our culture has been accelerating.¹ The most
dangerous perpetuators of this increase in narcissism are the components of our culture
feeding this trend, as well as the decrease in institutions that once battled the admiration
of the narcissistic personality. Since the invention of the television, and later the Internet,
mass media and advertising have accelerated the spread of consumerism, materialism and
the cultural narcissism that is a result of this. Our cultural focus on physical beauty,
celebrity idolatry and personal fame and fortune are some of the identified perpetuators

¹ “By 2006, 1 out of 4 college students agreed with the majority of items on a standard
measure of narcissistic traits” (Twenge and Campbell 2).
of this trend. In addition, personal happiness at all cost, and a modern disbelief that societal rules and norms should apply to us and are put in place for the benefit of the greater good are also contributors to the problem. It is speculated that “a millennial mixture of video games, social media, reality TV and hyper-competition have left young people self-involved, shallow and unfettered in their individualism and ambition” (Paul).

While it’s hard to say whether rampant and irresponsible consumerism is the result of narcissism or rampant narcissism the result of consumerism, we can definitely say that they go hand in hand. According to Sue McGregor in her paper “Consumer Entitlement, Narcissism, and Immoral Consumption,” amongst other equally shocking statistics, “a child born in North America or England will consume, waste and pollute more in a lifetime than as many as 50 children in a developing country.” The affluent (or pseudo-affluent) consumer mentality so prevalent in the United States leads citizens to feel they have a right to purchase whatever will feed their ego and pride at the expense of other human beings. McGregor does admit that consumer entitlement is a mentality so embedded in our culture that it has largely become an unconscious lifestyle. However, when we do become aware of the implications of our actions, we put on the blinders anyhow. “The idea of a common good is merely a puzzling and inconvenient abstraction (Hare, 1995)” (McGregor).

I, too, was adept at ignoring the implications of our consumerist society for many years. However, through service work in the Dominican Republic I met a woman my age who is now one of my best friends. For the last ten years she has worked in an electronics factory, making cell phones and other devices for export. Her coworkers are plagued with respiratory health problems and high rates of cancer, and she knows that it is only a
matter of time before such a toxic work environment affects her too. Nevertheless, her family depends upon the meager $30 a week that she earns working 9 hours a day, 6 days a week. To her, this job is better than no job. Because of her, every time I see a broken or new cell phone I cringe, knowing that someone’s health is being destroyed so that we can all have the latest gadgets. It is precisely our narcissistic sense of entitlement and arrogance that allows us to convince ourselves that we have a right to exploit others in the name of producing cheap consumer goods. We believe we are on a morally higher ground due to our birthright of being part of the affluent consumer culture, when in reality “the result is consumers who consume to feed their images of themselves, be damned the consequences on others or the environment” (McGregor). This narcissism-fed, immoral consumerism is not only an issue for those working in toxic sweatshops and on plantations, but is slowly and surely leading us to environmental disaster as we deplete the world of resources faster than it can replenish itself.

Some reports actually attribute the roots of this trend of consumerism to the Baby Boomer generation, and its subsequent “boomeritis,” a result of growing up in the post-WWII time-of-plenty in America. “The conditions were ripe in post-World War II America for mothers (and fathers) to raise a generation of narcissistically-inclined children” (Swann). This wartime generation in turn raised its own entitled generation of affluent children, until we arrived at the completely self-absorbed generation of today. “Narcissistic parents beget narcissistic children and, as boomer parents pass the torch to a new generation, they are also handing over a legacy of narcissistic dysfunction” (Pinsky and Young 249). A lifestyle of luxury and a mentality of needing to provide for our children more material comforts “than we had as children” are actually undermining their
ability to function as productive adults, and their ability to form solid relationships in the home, the workplace, and the communities they live in. “Child-centered parenting styles and the “helicopter-parent” syndrome have also reinforced in children the perception that they are indeed the center of the universe and that everyone in their lives should in fact cater to their needs” (Twenge and Campbell 79).

The students’ performance in the high-school classroom, unfortunately, is simply a precursor to their performance in the workforce. As teachers, part of our responsibility is to educate not only the minds of our students, but prepare them for success in life after high school. I keep in touch with several former students and have a sister and a cousin in their early twenties. I watch in wonder as these students unsuccessfully engage in the same helpless, self-centered behaviors in college and the workforce as they had in high school. Many don’t make it to their sophomore year. They bounce from major to major, school to school, job to job in the pursuit of “happiness” and the American dream, which arguably seems to have increasingly become simply the accumulation of stuff. It worries me that we, as educators, as parents, as a community, are not preparing our next generation for the realities of life. They lack the tools necessary to face basic adversity, such as perseverance, patience, and interpersonal relationship skills.

Narcissism has been around for centuries and battling it has been a focus of religions for millennia, as is evident in ancient religious texts such as the Bible. Religious texts at one time having been the primary reader in elementary schools, the values inherent in these texts were a unified message at home and at school. Humility, industriousness, and heed to correction, in other words the opposite of pride and narcissism, are virtues stressed repeatedly in the religious texts that our nation was
founded upon. “‘Pride is more than the first of seven deadly sins,’ writes John Stott, British Evangelist and author, ‘It is itself the essence of all sin’” (Lawrence). The removal of religion from American schools and the more recent general disintegration of religious institutions in the name of personal spirituality have also been named as factors in the increase of cultural narcissism.

Nevertheless, the trend of mandated volunteer service hours in schools and its cousin, service-learning, have been on the rise. One would imagine that these are antidotes to this growing admiration of self. Yet according to the 2006 Pew survey of 18-to 25-year olds cited by Twenge and Campbell, “only 31% said ‘helping people who need help’ was an important goal of their generation, coming in a distant third behind ‘getting rich’ (81%) or ‘becoming famous’ (51%)” (253). It seems that volunteering has simply become another avenue through which students can gain praise and admiration. This is somewhat contradictory to the nature of the work, but is, nevertheless, “shifting the focus from the society and the needy to the benefits to the self, especially if the benefit involves having a big impact, a personal role, or garnering praise” (Twenge and Campbell 253).

Likewise, technology in the classroom and exposure to images and videos of other cultures via the Internet have been touted as a cure for the effects of cultural isolation of rural communities by bringing us virtually face-to-face with the other side of the world, and thereby creating increased awareness of globalization and interdependence of peoples and societies. Nonetheless, technology provided without proper direction and monitoring simply leads to greater self-absorption and self-admiration.

The media have become the conduit for the spread of narcissistic behaviors … the sources are all around you: your television, your
computer monitor, the magazines on your coffee table, classmates at your child’s school. They are feeding your children the most dangerous possible messages: telling them that heavy drinking, drug use, hypersexuality, rampant entitlement, eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, and dangerous acting-out behavior are all normal, glamorous, even valuable parts of human life, rather than extreme behaviors that need urgent correction. (Pinsky and Young 250)

Controlling our children’s and students’ exposure to mass media sources such as these is of primary importance if we are to shift their daily focus to more valuable pursuits. Simply providing children with the latest technology in the classroom (or at home) by no means signifies that they will learn from it what we intend for them to learn. Without specific and proper guidance, technology is just as likely to create misperception and misunderstanding between cultures as it is to foster empathy and open minds.

So where is this trend toward cultural narcissism headed? And where will it end? Why should we be worried as educators about this trend? Cultural narcissism causes a widespread lack of empathy for others, which is the root cause of many of the larger problems of society. “Low empathy is associated with criminal behavior, violence, sexual offenses, aggression when drunk and other antisocial behaviors” (Paul). If we hope to live in a more harmonious society, with fewer broken homes, less greed, pride and self-centeredness, we, as educators must take a stand against the contributors of this growing cultural narcissism.

As evidence shows in case studies, research and anecdotes, service-learning does counteract cultural narcissism in that youth become more open-minded and conscious of something beyond the self. Immersion in a community that lives in poverty can also provide an awareness of the importance of societal wellbeing and the complexities of the problems associated with poverty, such as school delinquency, teen pregnancy, illiteracy
and so forth. The Spanish language classroom in particular has been recognized, at least at the university level, as a place for students to experience true service-learning. An integral part of service-learning in the Spanish language classroom is the travel usually associated with language study at the university level. When true community immersion is involved, travel can produce great observations and cognitive shifts in students. It is the reflection process that gives service-learning its potential as part of the cure for cultural narcissism.

The true treatment of our cultural narcissism lies in the model used by psychotherapists to treat clinical narcissism. This model can be simulated through the service-learning process.

Good therapy provides a safe container and the right support and challenge from a fellow traveler in finding and facing existing wounds and seeing beyond them; good therapy helps us learn humility through living toward our strengths through our weaknesses; it helps us learn how to take responsibility for meeting our own needs – discovering them through the pain in their not being met – which is a necessary prerequisite to “caring beyond ourselves.” (Swann)

Service-learning, and the reflection process that is integral to its success, can provide the perfect catalyst to counter cultural narcissism and trigger the necessary mental shift in a teenager. Honest reflection of skills and shortfalls must take place in order to produce change. The vulnerability inherent in travel and performing works of service for others puts students in a position to truly be dethroned from their upbringing of false exceptionality and superiority. With proper guidance from a teacher who models humility and true focus on benefit to others instead of building of self-worth and admiration as the outcome of the service, the ideological outcomes of service-learning have the potential to occur, transforming society student by student. And the relationships formed through the
service work help students to learn true empathy, to break down barriers and judgment, and gain “new insight into their behavior and the impact it [has] on others around them” (Pinsky and Young 244).

In this thesis, I will first define cultural narcissism as a societal syndrome, and expose specific manifestations of such in the classroom and the home. Next, I will look at the responsibility of public and private schools as civic education centers. I will then define service-learning and differentiate it from volunteerism. This thesis ultimately focuses on service-learning as a viable solution for the educator to combat cultural narcissism as well as some of the dangers we must be aware of when we employ service-learning.

The propensity toward self-centeredness so common in the teenage years may make it seem like the most difficult time to fertilize any tendencies toward empathy in students. Because of this, it is actually the most crucial time. “‘We need to stop endlessly repeating ‘You’re special’ and having children repeat that back,’ Twenge said. ‘Kids are self-centered enough already’” (Carvin). The truth is, “adolescence is the last chance for parents and other influential adults to steer their children toward empathetic engagement with the world around them, and to help teens channel their narcissism toward healthy outlets,” (Pinsky and Young 207). There’s no time like the present if we, as educators, are going to change our society for a healthier, kinder future.

2. Defining Narcissism

Narcissism has become a buzzword in the media for citizens’ of the United States blatant and ever-increasing focus on, well, themselves. The term narcissism stems back
to the mythological tale of Narcissus, a young man who is so good-looking that he is unable to find a suitable mate that he believes worthy of his beauty. “When he had reached ‘his sixteenth year,’ (fifteen years of age, by modern reckoning) every youth and girl in the town was in love with him, but he haughtily spurned them all” (“Narcissus”). As punishment, a curse is put upon him that causes him to vainly fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. The tale ends with complete self-absorption, unhappiness and the demise of Narcissus, his soul being sent “to the darkest hell” (“Narcissus”).

One of the primary psychoanalysts to discuss and explore narcissism at length was Sigmund Freud. In 1914, he published his work titled “On Narcissism,” also his first work focusing specifically on narcissism. According to Freud, primary narcissism is the drive we are all born with for survival and self-preservation and appears in infancy. During early childhood, this primary narcissism is intruded upon by the outside world, “usually in the form of parental controls and expectations … teaching the individual about the nature and standards of her social environment from which she can form the ideal ego, an image of the perfect self towards which the ego should aspire” (“History of Narcissism”). It is the giving away of this self-love to others and its return by those others that actually reduces narcissism in the child. Usually the first person to whom the child projects this love is the mother, and then other family members. Failure to achieve balance in this new system of giving and receiving love results in a psychological imbalance wherein the child withdraws object-libido, or love of others outside oneself, in order to replenish ego-libido, or love of oneself. This withdrawal and self-focus is termed secondary narcissism. Symptoms of secondary narcissism include resisting bonds
with others, as well as scenarios “where older children and adults seek personal
gratification over the achievement of social goals and conformance to social values”
(Straker). Freud theorizes that the origin of narcissism, therefore, is actually a result of
unsatisfactory personal bonds in childhood.

For Jacques Lacan, a successor and subscriber of Freud’s theories, the tendencies
and potential development of narcissism as a personality trait arrive in the mirror phase,
which is reached between six to 18 months of age. In this phase, the infant is able to
recognize itself in a mirror reflection, and “misrecognizes in its mirror image a stable,
coherent, whole self, which, however, does not correspond to the real child (and is,
therefore, impossible to realize)” (Felluga). For the child, this unattainable image of
perfection that they see in the mirror sets him or her up for a never-ending struggle
toward perfection, and a fixation on the perceived lack, or the fantasy image he or she
creates in order to compensate for the lack. “That fantasy image of oneself can be filled
in by others who we may want to emulate in our adult lives (role models, et cetera),
anyone that we set up as a mirror for ourselves in what is, ultimately, a narcissistic
relationship” (Felluga). This explanation of the origins of narcissism in the psyche goes a
long way toward explaining the obsession of our culture with physical beauty, celebrity
lifestyles, and choosing role models who seem to be the image of perfection, rather than
looking at real people, flaws and all, and recognizing their true strengths and weaknesses.
As Lacan suggests, the desire created by this perceived lack first noted in the mirror stage
continues to motivate our actions and shape our desires well into adulthood, especially in
the bedroom. “The act of sex for humans is so much caught up in our fantasies (our
idealized images of both ourselves and our sexual partners) that it is ultimately
narcissistic. As Lacan puts it, ‘That's what love is. It's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level’” (Felluga). Needless to say, our culture’s obsession with sex, pornography, and conquest in the bedroom can be attributed to the narcissism first experienced in Lacan’s mirror stage, and our failure to move beyond this infantile fascination.

No matter to which theory of the origins of narcissism we ascribe, it can readily be observed that our infantile ways are inherently narcissistic, and in turn perpetuating the cycle. The issue of cultural narcissism, as it is termed, has recently become a news topic that is mentioned, written about and discussed weekly if not daily in major media outlets.

Narcissism does not merely incorporate self-admiration; it also implies a particular mindset of an individual, a group, or even a culture … In general, this mindset incorporates several traits that result in a self-centered, self-indulgent, hedonistic way of thinking and living. (Mason and Brackman 2)

Lacan and Freud would likely agree that something is going wrong at the stage where narcissism takes root for these narcissistic traits to be so pervasive in our culture.

Although narcissism has been used as a clinical psychology term for years, the culture of narcissism, while usually less severe in its manifestation, affects a much greater percentage of the population. But what does cultural narcissism mean exactly in our society, and how is it changing the face of our nation?

In 1979, Christopher Lasch, in one of the first works on cultural narcissism, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, noted an increase in patients in post World War II that did not fit current diagnostic categories, and instead suffered from “‘vague, ill-defined complaints’” (Giovacchini qtd. by Lasch 42),
yet commonalities were observed among them. “The growing prominence of ‘character disorders’ seems to signify an underlying change in the organization of personality, from what has been called inner-direction to narcissism” (Lasch 42). According to the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), five or more of the following criteria need to be met for this diagnosis:

- grandiose sense of self-importance and expectation to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements; preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; belief that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by or should associate with other special or high-status people (or institutions); need for excessive admiration; sense of entitlement (unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations); interpersonal exploitation (takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends); lack of empathy and unwillingness to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; envy of others, or belief that others are envious of him or her; and arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes. (Medical Disability Advisor)

While the clinical definition of narcissism has been one reserved for those whose narcissistic tendencies seriously impede their ability to form solid relationships and function appropriately in society, our changing societal norms and our shift to more permissive attitudes and a broader definition of what is considered “acceptable behavior” is acting as a catalyst for more widespread narcissistic behavior.

Narcissists are also sometimes described as exhibitionistic, requiring constant attention and admiration, believing that they are entitled to special favors without the need to reciprocate. They tend to exploit others, to be seekers of sensations, experiences, and thrills, and to be highly susceptible to boredom. Many of these characteristics of narcissism seem to apply to our culture in general, and to many of our youth in particular (Katz).

In other words, our permissive attitudes are allowing mild to moderate narcissism to become the norm. In the news recently has been the decision to remove Narcissistic Personality Disorder along with four other personality disorders from the new edition of
the DSM, due out in 2013. The elimination of this trait has been attributed to a shift from a prototype method of diagnosis to a dimensional approach (Zanor). Rather than observing a cluster of related traits and then diagnosing Narcissistic Personality Disorder, the dimensional diagnosis approach consists of “making an overall, general diagnosis of personality disorder for a given patient, and then selecting particular traits from a long list in order to best describe that specific patient” (Zanor). This news, however, has been met with much criticism, primarily from clinicians, as they fear that the elimination of the narcissistic label will in turn reduce the proper treatment of the disorder, as well as water-down the significance of the disorder. Perhaps the elimination of specific labels for personality disorders is simply a reflection of society’s willingness to accept a wide array of antisocial behaviors without labeling them as destructive or particularly negative.

Because adolescents are subject to “heightened degrees of self-consciousness, self-centeredness and egocentrism, which are normal by-products of formal operational thinking” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 48), they are especially vulnerable to the influence of the sources of narcissistic behavior aggrandizement to which they are exposed. The pervasive messages in mass media that adults can usually filter out and moderate are much more influential for the still-developing adolescent mind. Nevertheless, it must also be said that those producing the advertising are adults, and are knowingly perpetuating this infantilism.

One result of living in a culturally narcissistic society, exacerbated by the images broadcast constantly on TV and Internet, is that everyone is more concerned about appearance and improving appearance than in being human and improving one’s actual self. If it looks okay on the outside, it doesn’t matter what is truly on the inside.
“Narcissism refers to a syndrome characterized by exaggerated investment in one’s own image versus one’s true self and in how one appears versus how one actually feels” (Katz). Like Lacan’s baby gazing in the mirror, we strive to perfect the image, even though we feel a disconnection from our authentic selves. Katz lists some traits of the narcissist as “insensitivity to others, with excessive preoccupation with the self and one’s own image and appearance in the eyes of others.” To the innocent bystander, this means that on the surface, at least, narcissists will seem fine. Their delusions about their own abilities, importance and success will buoy them through hard times. “Subclinical narcissists are happy. They are less likely to be depressed, sad or anxious, and rate their subjective well-being more highly” ("A Field Guide").

Because of this outward appearance of happiness, the narcissist can be hard to define in real life, and it can be difficult to argue that mild-to-moderate narcissism as a personality trait is necessarily detrimental.

A narcissist could be hard to identify, in part because he is likely to be much more fascinating than you would expect for someone so self-absorbed … Deep desire to be at the center of things is served by extreme self-confidence, a combination that makes narcissists attractive and even charming. Buoyed by a coterie of admiring friends and associates—protected by the armor of positive self-regard—someone with a mild-to-moderate case of narcissism can float through life feeling pretty good about himself. Since they feel entitled to special treatment, they are easily offended, and readily harbor grudges. Yet narcissists are often very popular—at least in the short term. The beauty of being a narcissist is that even when disaster stares you in the face, you feel neither doubt nor remorse” ("A Field Guide").

As stated above, narcissists are also known to be more demanding of those around them, and while they may be outgoing and make friends quickly on the surface, their lack of long-term meaningful relationships can leave them feeling empty over time. “Adults diagnosed as suffering from the narcissism syndrome often complain that their lives are
empty or meaningless and they often show insensitivity to the needs of others. Their behavior patterns suggest that notoriety and attention are more important than their own dignity” (Katz).

What may come across as solid self-confidence is actually an over-inflated self-esteem. “Feeling good about oneself without demonstrating competence does lead to narcissism” (Collins). This surface confidence turns out to be an inability to perform at the level of which they believe they are capable. Narcissists may truly believe that they are capable of a great feat or great job-performance and brag about such, however in reality “they are self-centered and overconfident in their own abilities,” and without extreme image control, the truth is soon exposed, at least to those around them (“Narcissistic People Most”). Narcissists may live in denial of their shortcomings and failures, blaming the failure on anyone and everyone around them, which leads to broken relationships. A side effect of cultural narcissism, therefore, is widespread self-centered lifeplans, where personal happiness and maintenance of an image is of the highest priority, and the good of others, individuals or community, is sacrificed for personal pursuit of happiness.

2.1. Narcissism Versus Self-Esteem

*The best thing I ever did for my self-esteem was to divorce Roger.* This is the sample sentence of how to use the term self-esteem, as listed in the MacBook thesaurus. It goes on to list synonyms of self-esteem as such: self-respect, pride, dignity, self-regard, faith in oneself; morale, self-confidence, confidence, self-assurance. See note at PRIDE.”

The note at pride reads:
If you take pride in yourself or your accomplishments, it means that you believe in your own worth, merit, or superiority—whether or not that belief is justified … While no one wants to be accused of arrogance or egotism, there's a lot to be said for self-esteem, which may suggest undue pride but is more often used to describe a healthy belief in oneself and respect for one's worth as a person (she suffered from low self-esteem).

As the note shows, crossing the line from self-esteem to pride is easy. Roger and the kids would probably agree, especially if the best boost to his wife’s self-esteem was accomplished by kicking him to the curb. Want to raise your self-esteem? Get a divorce.

This new culture of narcissism has often been blamed on over-shooting the goal of 1980s education and parenting of raising individuals with high self-esteem. As James Twitchell, an author on cultural shifts in the United States says, “I can’t imagine you can do a study on Gen-X, Gen-Y, Gen-Z and not have the takeaway be an inappropriate application of self-esteem” (qtd. in Collins).

A healthy belief in one’s own abilities is of course necessary for personal and relational success. “Psychologically healthy people generally twist the world to their advantage just a little bit … By telling ourselves that our faults are universal but our strengths are unique, we can get through life’s trials without losing faith in our own abilities” (“A Field Guide”). It has even been argued that a healthy amount of narcissism is beneficial in the competitive corporate world, and that an over-confident personality is admired in the business world.

However, the true test of healthy self-esteem versus over-inflated egocentric self-esteem is the way a person interacts with others, their concern for those around them, and their willingness to put themselves on a limb in order to benefit others. Their concern is no longer solely or even primarily about themselves. Instead, they demonstrate confidence in their own abilities and accomplishments so that they can humbly work on
self-improvement, recognizing strengths and weaknesses. They strive to help and develop relationships with others by putting their own skills to use.

A person with high self-esteem is confident and charming, but they also have a caring component and they want to develop intimacy with others … Narcissists have an inflated view of their talents and abilities and are all about themselves. They don’t care as much about others. (“Narcissistic People Most”)

This not caring about others, or lack of empathy, is why we as educators and members of society in general should be concerned about the rise in narcissistic behaviors.

Syndicated columnist Pitts (1998) attributed so much of adolescent violence to “our national culture of brattiness” … because “they live lives of entitlement, their every waking thoughts revolve around themselves … We blame so many dysfunctions on low self-esteem, but I wonder if some don’t suffer from the opposite affliction – if some aren’t so steeped in self-esteem that they can’t see or sympathize beyond the borders of their own lives.” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 32)

Drawing the line between a healthy fostering of self-esteem and an approach that leads to a narcissistic belief system in the adolescent is critical. Without an accurate picture of themselves, narcissistic adolescents and adults alike may act out through violence, a tendency which has formerly been pegged on low self-esteem.

It has been widely asserted that low self-esteem is the cause of violence. [Bushman and Baumeister’s] research challenged these assumptions and demonstrated that ‘inflated, grandiose, or unjustified favorable views of the self would be most prone to causing aggression.’ They maintained that narcissism is marked by a sense of superiority over others. (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 33)

With an over-inflated sense of self-worth, narcissists may believe it is their right and need to exert control over others in order to maintain their false sense of superiority.

The effort to foster appropriate self-esteem must be based on accurate feedback from the people one interacts with, and not on being rewarded for a job poorly done, simply because rewards and awards make people feel good. “All individuals must
experience some negative feedback from their social environment, some of which is bound to be valid. Thus a significant aspect of the development and maintenance of self-esteem must address how individuals cope with negative feedback” (Katz).

It is necessary, as will be discussed in other sections of this thesis, to accurately give feedback to students so that they can learn and foster confidence in their actual abilities, and to be cautious not to instill in them a grandiose and inaccurate sense of importance. Later in this thesis I will discuss the possible triggers of narcissism in the classroom, as well as the use of service-learning as a methodology that helps combat cultural narcissism. However, I must first briefly discuss other sources that are promoting the growing culture of narcissism in our society.

3. Contributors to Cultural Narcissism

3.1. Parental Roles

Hand in hand with the over-emphasis on high self-esteem in the classroom is the recent shift to parenting styles that are increasingly permissive, and give more and more authority to the child in family dynamics. Within the last few decades, the role of a parent has shifted from one of raising a child to be a good citizen, to one of ensuring a child’s relative happiness at all cost.

Until recently, parents considered it their responsibility to deal with these emotional storms [of a child not getting their way] by standing their ground. Many of today’s parents instead seek to raise children high in self-admiration and self-esteem, partially because books and articles have touted its importance. Unfortunately, much of what parents think raises self-esteem – such as telling a kid he’s special and giving him what he wants – actually leads to narcissism. (Twenge and Campbell 74)
Children who scored high on the scales for narcissistic personality traits report having parents who put them on a pedestal when they were young, or believed that they had exceptional talents and abilities. They state having been praised for “virtually everything” they did, and being rarely criticized. Basically, “if you’re told over and over that you are great, you’ll probably think you are great” (Twenge and Campbell 80).

The beginning of this shift toward more child centeredness in the household has been attributed to the Baby-Boomer generation. The boomers “have translated their introspection and desire for a more perfect world into a legacy of intense individualism and complacent self-importance for their children” (Pinsky and Young 211). With this generation came not only the desire for greater freedom and independence for their children, but also a higher standard of living than previous generations. This new disposable income allowed parents to provide for their child’s every wish materially like never before, and required much less sacrifice on the part of the child for the benefit of the family. With fewer children per household, children became accustomed to having their desires met, and having their very-own room and stuff too.

Another contributor to narcissism in our culture is the over-rewarding of students for just so much as participating, not even for winning or demonstrating some exemplary skill or act that is worthy of reward.

Ray Baumeister, a psychology professor at Florida State, has pointed to the explosion of trophies as a result of the self-esteem movement that began in the 1970s. This movement was largely the result of boomer parents trying to raise more successful kids; unable to maintain boundaries with their children, the parents couldn’t tolerate their children’s disappointment at not winning, and invented more and more awards to ensure that everyone walked away with some kind of reward for showing up. (Pinsky and Young 227)
Over time, when children become accustomed to being rewarded for everything, the awards begin to lose their value. Children feel pretty good about themselves, but don’t feel the need to actually perform at a commendable level because a reward will be given either way.

What began with the baby boomers as an attempt to provide for their children a more materially fulfilling childhood than they had experienced has resulted in narcissistic behaviors becoming increasingly the norm and less the exception.

Narcissism in its varying degrees is fostered by an adoring parent who mirrors those ‘exceptional’ attributes in the child that will allow both parent and child to view themselves as somehow superior and gifted in the world. Bypassing many of the child’s other qualities or needs (especially their vulnerabilities), narcissistic parents raise narcissistic children who feel the compulsive need to feel uniquely above others, special and exceptional. The child develops an inflated ‘false self’ – either grandiose, victim-like or both” (Swann).

The desire to provide for one’s children a “better” childhood than one had is not inherently a bad desire, but the long-term effects of raising them to feel entitled is certainly detrimental. According to Polly Young-Einsendrath in her book The Self-Esteem Trap, “treating kids as ‘special’ leads to young adults who are self-absorbed but fragile in the face of hard work and negative feedback. They feel entitled to high-status occupations but quickly become discouraged when they aren’t successful right away” (qtd. in Twenge and Campbell 83). This attitude can be seen in the job market, where students right out of college believe they should be given a high-paying, high-powered job, and when they can’t find it, either change jobs often or won’t work at all until they
are given the job they think they deserve. This mentality is a result of children raised with too much self-esteem and not enough work ethic.

In order to successfully redirect this parenting trend and create less narcissistic children, we must do away with the stereotype that an unhappy child is the result of a bad parent. It is the responsibility of a parent to see the bigger picture and show love to the child by acting in the child’s best interests, whether or not the child is in agreement at the time. Realizing that gratifying your child’s every need, whether to compensate for your own guilt, or because you cannot tolerate the idea that others might judge you for having an unhappy or unsatisfied child, will only fuel your child’s sense of entitlement and grandiosity. A child raised in a blatantly lenient, overindulgent atmosphere will emerge as an adult with an over-inflated sense of self-sufficiency, without the skills to back it up. (Pinsky and Young 220)

We are doing our children a gross disservice by raising them to feel entitled. When children are over-indulged, child-psychologist and author of Too Much of a Good Thing, Dan Kindlon, argues that “it leads to outcomes resembling the seven deadly sins: pride, wrath, envy, sloth, gluttony, lust and greed. The seven deadly sins are, of course, a succinct summary of the symptoms of narcissism” (qtd. in Twenge and Campbell 76).

Nevertheless, despite the best of parental intentions, the intensity of cultural messages received outside the home can often seem to outweigh any influence parents have on their children. However, “teens may get ideas as to how to conduct themselves like celebrities from the media, but their narcissistic traits really flourish when their

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2 My father, responsible for hiring consultants at an actuarial firm, complains about the recent college graduates he feels forced to hire. They are unwilling to work hard or long hours, but they feel they deserve a big paycheck, i.e., expect to do less work for more money. They can’t take advice, and quit if they feel they are not earning either the check or the recognition they deserve.
family is reluctant to impose moral standards or share value judgments on those unhealthy behaviors” (Pinsky and Young 194). We may not have control, as parents or teachers, over the mass media. But, as the saying goes, charity begins at home, just like most other social values and morals. While the root of the phrase is most often attributed to the work of Sir Thomas Browne in 1642, Charles Dickens is quoted as saying, “Charity begins at home, and justice begins next door” (‘Who said’). If we want to see a change in the world, we cannot expect this change to begin in the world and work from the outside in. It is our responsibility as parents and teachers to model the change that we want to see in our children and hold children accountable for behavior that does not reflect empathy and kindness. Undoubtedly, “parents who stick with the older model of child rearing that downplays materialism and emphasizes politeness and discipline are swimming against the cultural tide,” (Twenge and Campbell 74) but the tide will carry us to deeper and more dangerous waters if we don’t turn it now.

Also affecting our homes and family structure as a part of the pursuit of personal happiness is a cultural shift toward widespread acceptance and promotion of casual sex, or “hooking up.” Anyone who reads the front of magazines at the grocery-store checkout can attest to this. Our culture blatantly advertises who’s having sex, how much, when and where, and to be normal, you too must be having lots of sex, all the time. “In this sacred status of the self, sexuality seemed to fill a critical function of the individual’s quest for self-expression and self-realization” (Shelley 474). This of course leads to the rise of STDs, including HIV and AIDS, as well as infidelity, broken relationships, and broken hearts, damage which is not always recognizable on the surface, but will manifest over time and be longer lasting than many STDs.
Of course all of the above constitute a recipe for a very uncomfortable and non-nurturing home life in which to raise children.

Male adultery (especially for men in their twenties and thirties) is statistically increasing at an alarming rate. Fogarty, author of *Overindulged Children: A Parent’s Guide to Mentoring*, suggests this is fueled by the narcissistic belief that if an individual wants to engage in this behavior, he can logically justify the need to do so. (Mason and Brackman 20)

Because narcissists believe themselves above the traditional boundaries of marriage and refuse to admit the implications for their wives and children, the rest of the family suffers. “Narcissists are more likely to have romantic relationships that are short-lived, at risk for infidelity, lack emotional warmth, and to exhibit game-playing, dishonesty, and over-controlling and violent behaviors” (Carvin). Our lacksadaisical attitude toward divorce and marital infidelity is destroying the enduring, nurturing environment in which children used to be raised.

While “non-traditional” family structures have become so commonplace that we almost consider them the norm, there is something to be said for marital fidelity, and the stability that it provides for raising children. Although we all know people who have survived divorce and seem none worse for the wear, psychologists agree that the situation that divorce creates in the home is certainly not better than a stable, two-parent family home.

One of the most common scenarios that triggers this unavailable parent/narcissistic child dynamic is divorce. In the aftermath of a divorce, many parents are emotionally and even physically unavailable; others may try to manage their own guilt by overgratifying their children. Either situation can be traumatizing for the child, who may conclude that the split is somehow his fault and connect his parents’ behavior to his grandiose sense of blame for the breakup of the family. (Pinsky and Young 214)
Of course, leaving a relationship suits the narcissist much more than learning the interpersonal skills necessary to live with others harmoniously. It’s less painful, takes much less self-sacrifice, and can be performed in a stage of denial, protecting the ego. Just as the interpersonal skills are not being practiced at home, they are not being passed on to the next generation either. Instead, kids learn that “love ‘em and leave ‘em” is an acceptable approach to romantic relationships. Teenagers, especially, struggle with forming their own solid romantic relationships when their role models engage in fleeting, personal-happiness-based liaisons, with no regard for the damage done to the partner in the relationship.

3.2. The Influence of Mass Media

The contributors and catalysts of this “epidemic” of cultural narcissism are much broader than simply a movement in education and parenting toward increased emphasis of high self-esteem in children. In the last fifty years, our society has witnessed an exponential growth in mass media outlets. These include television, the arrival of cable and the extensive programming it provides, magazines of every topic, pop music and celebrity idolatry, advertising in all forms coming from all sides, video games, and the Internet, which in turn brought social-networking, self-promoting websites and pornography into our homes. In addition, we now have cell-phones that deliver all of the above, all the time, into the palm of our hands. “[The culture of narcissism] continues to influence various quarters of both popular and refined culture, and it is found increasingly in electronic media, where narcissistic belief-systems and self-lifeplans are transmitted every day into our homes via radios, TVs, and computers” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar
As early as 1976, Robert Hanvey recognized the influence of the media on our culture, as a perpetuating cycle of culture dictating what the media portray, and culture in turn reflecting what the media portray. According to Hanvey, the media are culture-bound and culture-generating … The culture says, “Consume!” and the media transmit that message—ingeniously, seductively, repetitively, persuasively. Very persuasively. And the audience responds to the cultural command. It does not question what it is told to consume. (4)

The media and advertising in particular keep Americans in a never-ending pursuit of personal happiness, because it is our perceived lack of happiness that triggers us to buy more stuff, just as Lacan theorized. “An ad for MyJet announces, ‘In today’s world, chartering a private jet has become a necessity.’ Just like food, clothing and shelter, right?” (Twenge and Campbell 168). Enough of these messages day-in and day-out, and US citizens certainly start to believe that poverty means not having a 52-inch-or-greater flat-screen HDTV. For teenagers, whose identity-seeking leads them to continuous comparisons of self against their peers, including those on TV, not participating in a materialistic lifestyle can make one feel like the odd-man out. They all are aspiring to make multi-millions, without any idea of what it takes to reach this type of wealth. “Not that long ago, low-income teenagers aspired to middle-class dreams, for example, a three-bedroom house in the suburbs. These days, disadvantaged youth are more likely to say they want a mansion like the one they saw on MTV’s Cribs” (Twenge and Campbell 171).

Emphasis on personal happiness and instant gratification, often at the price of dignity or self-respect, has been on the rise in the media. Cut-throat “game-shows” that encourage psychological coercion and plotting against other participants have been
popular for about the last ten years. “When success is more important than self-respect, the culture itself overvalues image and is narcissistic, and further, that narcissism denotes a degree of unreality in individuals and the culture” (Katz). Those voted off the show simply leave, never to be heard from again. In real life, participants don’t simply disappear once it has been decided not to like them; they continue leading lives, usually in the same community. We all hurt one another when the sole focus of our lives is our own “success,” which has come to be defined either as material wealth or personal “happiness.” Lifeplans, as they’ve been coined, that focus primarily on personal happiness are inherently unstable and produce ill effects for those left in our wake, as they are based on an emotion that is subject to circumstances and the passing of time. Inability to compromise or sacrifice selfish desires for the good of the family, classmates, or society as a whole, feeds the instability and superficiality of ever-shifting relationships.

Most affected by this instability are our children and adolescents who are continuously receiving and believing these narcissistic messages throughout the day. “In being submerged in the narcissistic belief systems and self-lifeplans of contemporary magazines, movies, media, music, advertising, and related forms of pop-culture, adolescents become vulnerable to the alluring facade and promises of the narcissistic lifestyle” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 50). The shift of adolescent attention to the constant and alluring stimulation of mass media has changed the circle of influence in an adolescent’s life. More and more, instead of real people having direct, deep relationships and friendships with an adolescent, they are likely to model their behavior on celebrities and reality TV stars.

As recently as a century ago, the group of people who had the power to influence an adolescent’s social development was relatively limited,
including their relatives, peers, neighbors, and teachers, with parents having the highest influence of all. As one British study from 2001 reveals, however, the explosion of mass media has changed this picture drastically. Several recent polls confirm that the behavior of media figures and celebrities is overtaking the influence of more traditional role models. (Pinsky and Young 194)

Who they choose to emulate may be entirely up to them, especially when there is little if any guidance from actual people in their real-life circle that can mediate and question the values of those media idols whom they choose to admire and in turn aspire to become.

3.2.1. The Internet

The increase in the influence of mass media often goes undetected, as it is a gradual one, over many years. The Internet, for example, was just beginning to be used widely in colleges fifteen years ago; we still relied on books and other static print sources for news and research information. These days, we often look there first. But the Internet as a source of news and information is just the beginning. Social networking sites, such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube more than any others have garnered criticism from those researching cultural narcissism.

In a survey by Twenge Campbell, authors of The Narcissism Epidemic, more than half (57%) said their peers used social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter for self-promotion, narcissism and attention-seeking. And 92% said they used MySpace or Facebook regularly. Two-thirds said their generation was more self-promoting, narcissistic, overconfident and attention-seeking than others. (qtd. in Jayson)

In addition, another manifestation of narcissism promoted by the Internet is the existence of blog sites. “Suddenly everyone is an expert of everything and feels the need to publish their opinion to the world. Credibility has become meaningless” (Twenge and Campbell
177). When everyone’s opinion is given equal value, truth and fact become more blurred, and the influence of credible sources becomes overshadowed by not-so-credible sources or outright lies, especially for, but certainly not limited to, children and teens, who are not versed in distinguishing between the two.

Commentary on sites like Facebook, or even news sites, has also fueled the fire of conflict beyond what would be possible in the real world. For the narcissistic individual, this becomes an avenue for attention seeking, and, more dangerously, hostility. “The system of comments, responses to comments, and so on encourages argument – and often one-sided argument … Doing it all onscreen takes out the human element of empathy, nuance and face-to-face interaction” (Twenge and Campbell 117). The ability to comment without the inhibitions that one would have in a face-to-face interaction can lead to increased drama, especially between teenagers who are still mastering impulse control.

On the other hand, some educators, such as Houston Dougharty, vice president of student affairs at Grinell College in Iowa, beg to differ about the evils of social networking sites. In an article titled “Are social networks making students more narcissistic?,” he commented, “I think there's a negative connotation to narcissism that I would not want to promote as a description of this generation. Social networking is a celebration of individuality and sort of promotion of one's own personality” (Jayson). Nevertheless, in my opinion the idea of celebrating one’s individuality and self-promotion sounds an awful lot like narcissism. While arguments can go either way, and many people do of course use the social networking sites for their intended purposes, for adolescents still trying to establish and define themselves, they can become dangerous
playgrounds and gossip generators. Once again, without adult moderators imposing healthy guidelines on the use of the Internet by children and adolescents, trouble begins. And it is nearly impossible to mediate the widespread Internet use available at home and at school.

Social networking sites also allow the creation of a pseudo-self, which may or may not be anything like the real self observed by the community. “Inspired by projections of celebrity glamour, and facilitated by sites like YouTube, MySpace and Facebook, adolescents have mastered the art of the pseudo-self” (Pinsky and Young 199). One problem with this pseudo-self is that over time it can become confused with and manifest itself as the real self, especially for teenagers.

Adolescence is a time to try out different identities, so their MySpace me could easily become part of their ‘real me’ as their narcissistic self-portrayal on the site is rewarded. Narcissistic traits like attention seeking, retaliation and looking hot lead to success on these sites – more friends and more comments. People tend to repeat behaviors that are rewarded. (Twenge and Campbell 115)

Last year, I lost a smart, polite, kind, 14-year-old freshman girl who got caught up in a social network site called VampireFreaks.com. Through this site she met “friends” who convinced her to go to New York and join them in their Vampire Freak lifestyle. Months later, she was picked up by the police and ended up in residential psychological care. The vampire culture portrayed in books like Twilight, TV and movies fascinated her, and she found connections to this culture on the Internet. To see her in the classroom, one would never imagine this curiosity in her, but the Internet gave her an opportunity to act out a fictional self that peers and adults in her life would not have promoted nor permitted. The narcissistic individuals who run the site and prey on adolescents like her won; in her world they had more influence over her decisions than parents or teachers,
who were largely unaware of her involvement with these people as she kept her Internet
use well hidden, going on at night and when unmonitored in school. Unfortunately,
stories like this where the curious and naïve fall prey to the narcissist, if not as extreme,
are all too common, especially among adolescent girls.

Not surprisingly, the cultural obsession with vampires in general is said to be
rooted in the pseudo-self and narcissism. According to University of New Hampshire
Cinematic Studies professor Delia Konzett, our culture’s recent fascination with vampires
goes hand-in-hand with the rise in narcissism.

Considering the commodity-driven, urbane, competitive, and youth-obsessed culture we live in today, it’s no wonder vampires are popular …
As card-carrying members of the exclusive society of the undead, vampires are the ultimate parasites living off of human blood. They’re selfish, narcissistic, unusually pleasing in appearance, possess unusual powers, and are potentially immortal. Those lucky enough to be converted young will remain forever at that age, a real asset in today’s culture, which prizes the appearance of youth, beauty, and stamina. (Cinematic Studies)

Konzett goes on to discuss one television show in particular, “True Blood,” which takes
place in the French and Cajun Creole setting of Louisiana. This setting in particular, she
claims, captures our current cultural moment, as it speaks directly to the “terms of
multiculturalism, diversity, compulsive consumerism, and the decadent narcissism of the
‘I want it now’ generation … Vampirism captures the ambivalence, both the attraction
and fear, which we harbor toward diversity, multiculturalism, and commodity culture”
(Cinematic Studies). Obsession with vampire culture, therefore, is one way of dealing
with the cultural confusion that surrounds current major shifts in our society, one being a
shift toward ever-increasing consumerism and narcissism.

In Psychological Perspectives on Vampire Mythology, Shanahan specifically
relates the work of several Jungian psychoanalysts to the relationship between vampire-
obsession, the pseudo-self, and narcissistic personality disorder. She describes the personality traits of a narcissist according to Otto Kernberg, which transparently parallel those associated with vampirism. Kernberg's description of the narcissistic personality sounds as if it were crafted to describe vampires: It is as if they feel they have the right to control and possess others and to exploit them without guilt feelings-and behind the surface, which very often is charming and engaging, one senses coldness and ruthlessness” (Shanahan). It seems obvious, then, that our culture’s increasing fascination with vampires is simply part and parcel of the trend toward increased cultural narcissism.

3.2.2. Celebrity Idolatry and Reality TV

Dr. Drew Pinsky, psychologist and co-author with Mark Young of *The Mirror Effect: How Celebrity Narcissism is Seducing America*, administered the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, the test used to determine the prevalence of narcissistic traits in individuals, to 200 of his celebrity patients and guests. The test includes 40 sets of statements. The subject simply circles which statement applies best to him or her. The questions fall into seven categories: authority, self-sufficiency, superiority, exhibitionism, exploitativeness, vanity, and entitlement, so that the psychologist can assess which traits are strongest in an individual. A few sample questions are as follows:

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3 Otto Kernberg noted that narcissistic personalities are characterized by a "very inflated concept of themselves and an inordinate need for tribute from others." Capable of only a shallow emotional life they have difficulty experiencing any empathy for the feelings of others. Their ability to enjoy life, except for their experiences of their own grandiose fantasies and the tributes that they can manipulate others into giving them, is severely limited. They easily become restless and bored unless new sources are feeding their self-esteem. They envy what others possess and tend to idealize the few people from whom they desire food for their narcissistic needs. (Shanahan).
23. A. Sometimes I tell good stories.
   B. Everybody likes to hear my stories.

31. A. I can live my life in any way I want to.
   B. People can't always live their lives in terms of what they want.

39. A. I am more capable than other people.
   B. There is a lot I can learn from other people.

Needless to say, Pinsky and Young found that celebrities scored significantly higher on these tests than the average person. However, highest of all celebrity scorers on the NPI test were the stars of Reality TV shows.

Reality TV shows, often the majority of the highest-rated shows, are a showcase of narcissism, making materialistic, vain and antisocial behavior seem normal. Fictional TV shows already have a large impact on children and teens, shaping how they view the world. This is even more true of reality TV with no fiction and no script to stand in the way of undeveloped minds’ belief that this is the way everyone behaves in real life. (Twenge and Campbell 90)

For adolescents, this gray area between what is real and what is fantasy becomes an area in which to test out their ideas about life. “For certain teens who are already disposed toward attention-seeking behavior, the celebrity-industrial complex makes it drastically easier and more alluring for them to act out their grandiose fantasies in public” (Pinsky and Young 185). The exaltation of celebrity bad behavior, whether it be on fictional or reality TV, permeates teens’ lives. “Americans are obsessed with people who are obsessed with themselves. In this new world, being narcissistic is cool” (Twenge and Campbell 90). And there is no greater obsession for the adolescent than coolness, in whatever form.

One such reality TV show, aimed at teens, is MTVs My Super Sweet 16, a blatant exercise in promoting narcissism. The show “features rich teens planning their extravagant 16th birthday parties. Each episode features almost every facet of narcissism:
materialism, overcompetitiveness, appearance obsession, the quest for fame, manipulativeness” (Twenge and Campbell 99). The most troubling aspect? These shows are on because people are watching them. For adults and teens alike, they provide a forum for viewers to construct and reshape their identities around the increasingly globalized values of capitalism, values rooted in consumerism, individualism, and narcissism. Constructing and reshaping one’s identity around these values has become an increasingly relevant task as more traditional forms of identity, such as national, gender, family, and class identity begin to lose salience in a globalized world. (Brundidge 4)

Rather than gathering identity cues from parents, grandparents, church members, teachers and other community members that might provide a multifaceted and interactive relationship, they instead prefer to gather cues from images that feed the extreme individualism deemed of primary importance in an individualistic, narcissistic society.

This celebrity idolatry can also manifest as an obsession in stalking celebrities, giving people, especially children and teens with a lot of time and technology on their hands, an errant perception that they are somehow part of a celebrity’s life. “The around-the-clock access fans now have through the media allows them to develop a more intense, more tangible fantasy of a genuine relationship … the non-stop delivery system amplifies the smallest details of the celebrities’ lives” (Pinsky and Young 184). Through these avenues, people start to develop fantasy relationships with celebrities.

The intense personal connection a fan feels for a celebrity is called a parasocial relationship: a voyeuristic one-way relationship in which one person knows a lot about another, but the other does not have the same knowledge. These relationships, actually, non-relationships, are based on the illusions of interaction and intimacy, such as those created by reality programs, talk shows, and Internet “chat” rooms where fans can “talk” with their favorite celebrities. (Pinsky and Young 183)
Combine the over-coverage of celebrities and wanna-be celebs on TV with the Internet, and you get celebrity stalking. Perhaps because the magazines and TV shows weren’t interactive enough or enough about ‘me,’ celebrity stalking has become the new American pastime.

The top three Google searches for 2007 according to Twenge and Campbell were *American Idol*, YouTube and Britney Spears, further illustrating America’s obsession with celebrities and fame. Some of those that are part of this generation are aware of the media’s influence on their peers.

“I know people who are attention-seekers and think only about themselves,” writes Jessica Riggin, a sophomore at California State University, Monterey Bay in Seaside, California … she attributes the behavior mainly to overconsumption of low-brow media, which leads to crass celebrity-emulation among many of her peers. (Collins)

However, seeking one’s five minutes of fame at any cost shows no sign of slowing, and the messages of admiring narcissistic behaviors in celebrities is ever more pervasive.

“Maybe that’s why American culture finds narcissism acceptable and even laudatory: it is a trait displayed in abundance by the modern equivalent of royalty – a royalty of fame that so many aspire to enter” (Twenge and Campbell 96).

### 3.3. Easy Credit and Overspending

One way for people to enter this celebrity zone without becoming an actual celebrity is through easy credit. The summer after graduating from college, I had managed to buy myself a practically brand new Jeep Wrangler (my dream car) for $18,000 with no co-signer, and had a MasterCard in my name with a $40,000 credit limit. I knew nothing about loans, credit, credit cards, interest rates, warranties, or cars, for that
matter. I just knew that this sales guy was going to give me the car that my own dad wouldn’t get for me. Sadly, the fact that I had all this credit didn’t seem at all out of the ordinary to me. Nor did the fact that I accomplished this accumulation of pseudo-wealth simply by earning a bachelor’s degree, and holding down a full-time job — as a waitress at Chili’s. Relative to my friends, my lifestyle and choice of vehicles were modest.

“Entitlement preaches that people deserve good things because they have been good, smart, diligent, or born in the right place” (McGregor 2). If anyone felt entitled to material wealth, it was us, a naïve group of recent college grads. We had worked hard and made it through college. We were now entitled to have whatever we wanted.

But this culture of overspending and living beyond our means is a disease in our society that feeds off of and perpetuates the culture of narcissism.

Take a culture that promotes self-admiration and material goods, add the ability to realize this self-admiration through buying things you can’t really afford, and many people live the narcissistic illusion that they are wealthy, successful and special. (Twenge and Campbell 123)

Statistics show that a 25-year-old that earns about $25,000 a year will spend all of that, plus about $4,000 more.

Now, people under the age of 35 spend 16% more than they earn … Average credit card debt now exceeds $11,000, triple what it was in 1990 … In 2006, before housing crashed, the bankruptcy rate in America was still ten times what it was during the Great Depression. (Twenge and Campbell 124)

Yet the world we live in looks nothing like a scene from *The Grapes of Wrath*. In their defense, however, the consumers often aren’t aware of what they can and can’t afford, and believe the messages they are fed that consumerism is an important part of our economic stability. It’s considered un-American to *not* consume.
Narcissists want the pleasure without the pain, they want the reward without the hard work, the sacrifice, or even waiting. Therefore, easy credit is the narcissist’s dream. However, in a study done on actual millionaires in *The Millionaire Next Door*, Stanley and Danko found that millionaires operate on two basic principles. “First, the authors found, millionaires live well below their means. Second, millionaires ‘believe that financial independence is more important than displaying high social status’” (Twenge and Campbell 137). They weren’t into showing off that they were wealthy, instead, they appreciated the sense of actual financial freedom that far outweighed any pleasures of looking wealthy.

The mortgage crash of 2007-2008 is an early sign that the consequences of our cultural narcissism are starting to manifest. Unfortunately, the aftermath falls on us all.

Even people who pay off their credit cards every month, have an affordable mortgage, and take few financial risks will eventually end up paying their share of the billions, and possibly trillions, of tax dollars it will take to pay for the bailouts of firms like Bear Stearns, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, and AIG. (Twenge and Campbell 134)

This recent economic downturn, however, may only be a precursor to a larger economic crisis if the spending habits of Americans are not corralled. As Americans rack up debt to support an image of wealth, our jobs are going overseas to people who will work for far less money and expect less material wealth. The danger is two-fold. “Americans have grown far too comfortable living in the fantasy of endless debt. Reality always intrudes eventually—and when it does its wrath is swift and final” (Twenge and Campbell 302).
3.4. A Decline in Organized Religion

A decline in organized religion in exchange for a “personal spirituality” may seem like a harmless societal shift over time, but this is in fact yet another catalyst for the rise in our culture of narcissism. Interestingly enough, our elders continue to believe in God, but a large percentage of college-aged kids will declare that there is no God. In an article in *The Washington Post* that ran in 2007, “Only six percent of those individuals in the United States over the age of sixty reported that they do not believe in God, while nearly twenty-five percent of Americans ages eighteen through twenty-two declared themselves *atheists*” (Mason and Brackman 21). Those with narcissistic tendencies often don’t see a need for a God, or any higher spiritual authority for that matter.

Just like permissive parenting, lack of a spiritual authority in people’s lives has led to a more relaxed definition of what is morally acceptable, and therefore has led to people acting more out of self-interest than out of any universal moral code of conduct or sense of a greater good beyond the self. “Preferring not to be formally affiliated with any organized religious group, these people [surveyed] nevertheless considered themselves ‘spiritually inclined’ and interested in spiritual things” (Shelley 472). This movement toward personal spirituality means that the universal lessons of empathy, kindness and humility that once were taught at church are often no longer being taught at all.

This is worrisome, because religion has traditionally put the brakes on narcissistic behaviors. Many religious beliefs directly promote the reduction of narcissism (or related concepts like pride and selfishness), teaching the belief in something larger than the self, the idea that one should live according to certain rules that apply to everyone, and the value of a community of fellow believers. (Twenge and Campbell 245)

It seems that society has learned over time that these universal truths found in all religions that adhere to any variation of the Golden Rule (“Do unto others what you
would have others do unto you” are essential to a well-functioning and progressing society. Nevertheless, our current culture of the pursuit of narcissistic individual happiness at the cost of others’ wellbeing seems to be enough to pull people away from churches, especially when accountability of behavior is a component. The narcissist’s morality is “egoism blended with pragmatism; hence, when any given morality is self-serving it is clung to with a strong sense of righteousness, however, when it is no longer self-serving, or even worse, when it is condemning of one’s actions, it is abandoned” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 49).

Long recognized as causing significant and substantial harm to the harmony of society, “spiritual teachers, within their own traditions, have been battling the narcissistic ego for millennia” (Phipps). As mentioned earlier, the seven deadly sins (solidified in the modern Roman Catholic Catechism as pride, wrath, envy, sloth, gluttony, lust and greed) sum up the traits of the narcissistic individual. Although this list of seven deadly sins has evolved over time, pride has almost always been considered the most deadly of all, and the root of the other sins.

In almost every list Pride (Latin, superbia), or hubris, is considered the original and most serious of the seven deadly sins, and indeed the ultimate source from which the others arise. It is identified as a desire to be more important or attractive than others, failing to acknowledge the good work of others, and excessive love of self (especially holding self out of proper position toward God). (“Seven deadly sins”)

Above all, and perhaps the root of the narcissistic personality, “pride is more than the first of seven deadly sins,” writes John Stott, the British Evangelist and author, “It is itself the essence of all sin” (Lawrence 3). After generations upon generations were taught that pride is a negative trait and perhaps will send a person to hell, it’s somewhat shocking
that at some point we decided that pride was not only culturally acceptable, but in fact a desirable trait to foster in our children.

In addition to preaching against the seven deadly sins, the Catholic Church lists seven holy virtues taught as the desirable traits in a person. “In parallel order to the sins they oppose, the seven holy virtues are humility, charity, kindness, patience, chastity, temperance, and diligence” (“Seven deadly sins”). These virtues can be found in countless references in the Bible, and, beyond the Bible, are simply recognized as personal qualities which foster a more harmonious family and society. Nevertheless, the tables seem every day tipped more in favor of the culture of admiring pride instead of admiring humility, and this is a frightening prospect. Even church-going youth are only exposed to between one and five hours of religious messages per week, versus countless hours at home and at school of the narcissistic messages transmitted by mass media through TV, Internet, magazines and peers.

Nevertheless, not all churches are waning in membership. Those that are growing in this culture of narcissism are the churches that give in to the self-interest of the “consumer.”

Human development professor Jeffrey Arnett found that “make-your-own-religion” was very common among the twenty-somethings he studied. One of them noted, “I believe that whatever you feel, it’s personal … Everybody has their own idea of God and what God is … You have your own personal beliefs of how you feel about it and what’s acceptable for you and what’s right for you personally.” (Twenge and Campbell 247)

This attitude certainly doesn’t lend to a population that would abide to a prescribed list of evils such as the seven deadly sins. Instead, it is a formula for a generation that is continually searching for “themselves,” instead of working toward a greater good.

“Happiness was promoted as a life rich in experiences; strong, sensual feelings; and self-
expression. Since the ‘real self’ was, in effect, a morally indefinable entity, most people considered its discovery an unending search” (Shelley 471). Some, in their search for self and purpose, look toward a spiritual authority of some sort to answer spiritual questions in their own personal interest. But given the wide variety of material available, especially being published on the Internet without any sort of moral authority oversight, this leaves the self-interested public searching for and therefore finding whatever might suit them best. “Without denominational brand-name loyalty, they were inclined to pick up most anything from the God shelf that seemed to offer a ‘quick fix’” (Shelley 473). The issue then, becomes one of every individual seeking to invent their own moral code, individuals who have been bombarded with selfish and self-serving messages from the media since birth. In addition, when the quest is ever-fleeting “happiness,” or the search for one-self, the pursuit is never-ending and ever-changing. “By stressing the liberation of the self, expressive Americans came to treat every commitment – from marriage and work to politics and religion – not as moral obligations but as mere instruments of personal happiness” (Shelley 474). A moral code based in self-interest and life experience of a single individual will seldom be one that is also beneficial to the betterment of our communities and mankind as a whole.

As a result of this waning interest in organized religion, the church has had to take a new approach to attracting members. “The religions and volunteer organizations that have aligned themselves with individualistic values have thrived, while those that have not have often withered … the religions and volunteer organizations that have succeeded have given people what they want, which is often self-admiration” (Twenge and Campbell 245). If the church has something to offer the member in this consumer-driven
market, people are more likely to try it out. This trend began as early as the 1980s.

“Americans in the 1980s and 1990s chose churches not so much to meet God and surrender to his revealed ways as to satisfy some personal need … church attenders seldom asked, ‘What must I do?’ They were far more likely to ask ‘What do I get out of this?’” (Shelley 479).

One type of church that has found a way to satisfy this need and has logically seen a boom since the eighties that continues today is the non-denominational mega-church. Bruce Shelley, in his book *Church History in Plain Language*, lists four reasons for why these churches are so appealing to the Me Generation. First, they seldom carry a denominational label, instead using the words “chapel,” “center,” or “community” in their titles. Second, they offer a wide array of services, well-trained staff, expensive facilities, and serve the immediate needs of their members. Third, they are like a weekly concert, offering fast-paced popular music for worship or “sheer entertainment.” And last but certainly not least, their ministry is built around the magnetic personality of a certain preacher. Loyalty is “to the pastor, rather than to the denomination or congregation” (Shelley 480). Nevertheless, many argue that over time, narcissists involved in a church, even of this sort, may indeed learn to change their ways. “It’s a bit of a narcissistic jujitsu; the promise of having their narcissistic needs met brings people into an [religious] organization, but their individual narcissism is ultimately reduced by the organization” (Twenge and Campbell 245).

One such successful mega-church pastor is Joel Osteen, of Lakewood Church in Houston, the largest church in the United States (Twenge and Campbell 248). His philosophy is one of “prosperity Christianity,” or the idea that *God Wants You to Be Rich.*
Osteen preaches material success as a measure of personal worth, a doctrine contradictory to the anti-materialism messages of the Bible, such as Jesus’ admonition in the book of John 12:15, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” But Osteen caters to the narcissistic personality focused on material possession and self-love.

To draw in Americans steeped in our self-focused culture, he begins with the contradictory premise that self-admiration must come first. ‘If you don’t love yourself, you’re not going to be able to love others,’ he writes, echoing the cliché proven wrong by all the self-loving narcissists who make terrible relationship partners. (Twenge and Campbell 248)

In addition, he encourages people to spend first, because God has bigger plans for their lives if that’s the desire He has put in their hearts.

This self-serving model of church more readily fits a narcissistic personality – they receive a lot, their needs are catered to, and there is little accountability for behavior with congregations in the tens of thousands than there is in a smaller, more intimate church. In addition, there’s a bigger audience and wider circle of recognition for good deeds, attention-seeking admiration being a motivator for the narcissistic personality. However, while many churches like Osteen’s do exist, some of these megachurches are using their appeal to our narcissistic culture as a way to draw thousands of people in, in hopes that a few will be truly changed and become less narcissistic as a result of their church involvement and Bible reading. “This odd bit of alchemy – taking narcissism and trying to turn it into altruism – is at the heart of much modern religion” (Twenge and Campbell 248).

In a culture based on the self and personal happiness, organized religions that expect a member to follow a certain code of behavior are indeed losing popularity.
However, without a spiritual grounding, many of these ‘selves’ are left wandering around, inventing their own rules to live by based on how others have treated them. They are spiritually searching, often looking to the mass media, an advertising-dollar-driven business, for idols and mores on which to base their own codes. “We find ourselves eating, but never quite swallowing or digesting, all the spiritual teachings we can in an endless effort to attain a sense of true being, integration and wholeness” (Swann). Pride, the most deadly of the deadly sins as we have already established, has a stronghold in the media, and contributes forcefully to our culture of narcissism. C.J. Mahaney, in his book *Humility: True Greatness*, says, “The proud person seeks to glorify himself and not God, thereby attempting in effect to deprive God of something only He is worthy to receive” (qtd. in Lawrence 6). The exodus from organized religion to personal spirituality leaves us instead a society where each individual is naturally embedded in a cult of self-worship.

### 3.5. Manifestations of Narcissism

In a Wall Street Journal editorial column, Peter Robinson criticized a strike and demonstration that engaged tens of thousands of university students and faculty members in California in March of 2010. Robinson argues, “they demonstrated the entitlement mentality and self-absorption that has come to dominate much of higher education.” Governor Schwarzenegger, facing the worst budget crisis in California state history, tried to cut funding from California’s higher education system, a system reportedly already spending about ten thousand dollars *per student more* than other similar state universities. The instigators of the protest, professors and students alike, likened the protests to the Civil Rights movement, and marches for rights for decent working conditions for migrant
farm workers, claiming that because of budget cuts, “we have all become students of color,” facing the same discrimination as black students in the 60s.

Yet what did the protestors demand? Peace? Human rights? No. Money. And for whom? For the downtrodden and oppressed? No. For themselves. At a time when one American in 10 is unemployed and historic deficits burden both the federal government and many of the states, the protesters attempted to game the political system. They engaged in a resource grab. (Robinson)

And they won. Schwarzenegger soon gave in to their demands and rescinded his plan for budget cuts to higher education.

Another even more severe manifestation of narcissism can be seen in the school-shooting trend. School-shooters and mall-shooters more often than not display signs of narcissistic behavior especially when their quest for fame, or infamy, motivates the attack. A fine example is Cho SeungHui, the shooter at Virginia Tech in April of 2007, and the media package that he mailed to NBC. He actually mailed the package between shooting rampages. And the media did indeed eat it up.

Reports by fellow students claim that SeungHui was withdrawn, and a loner. Although this personality description would not immediately cause us to label him a narcissist, Freud’s theory that the narcissist withdraws love from others in an attempt to give it to oneself would support applying this label. In addition, the media package and claims in his video manifesto certainly demonstrate that he had a grandiose, highly inflated opinion of himself and his importance in the world. Certainly anyone who would not only intentionally kill another person, but also plan ahead enough to produce an extensive media package, must consider himself quite a bit better than others. SeungHui killed 32 people, including himself. But why would a narcissist commit suicide? In order to establish a throne that lasts beyond this lifetime. He displayed extreme envy of the
upper class students around him, and idolized the Columbine shooters. In his mind, he likened himself to Jesus Christ, a martyr for the downtrodden. “‘Thanks to you,’ SeungHui states in his manifesto, ‘I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people’” (“Gunman mailed package”). In his effort to take a stand against the outward traits of hedonism and materialism that he witnessed around him in college-student “trust-funders”, his own inflated sense of self landed him the title role of biggest narcissist of all.

Ten years before the Virginia Tech shooting, a group demonstration of narcissism occurred at my own college: the University of Colorado, Boulder. On May 2, 1997, I was witness to the student vs. police riots which garnered national media attention. Reported by police as the worst riots in the city in 25 years, this was a multi-night standoff between the police and about 1,500 drunken college students on “The Hill,” Boulder’s primary college-student party zone (CU Students). Police attempts to crack down on underage drinking, drinking to excess, and the violence or accidents that often ensued as a result of this belligerent drunkenness were met with resistance from entitled, self-centered youth with too much money on their hands to waste on alcohol. As a response, students took to overturning and burning dumpsters and couches, throwing bricks and bottles, damaging vehicles and breaking business storefront windows, as well as attacking police. An article from the National Drug Strategy Network (ndsn.org) states that more than 100 police officers were called in, and an estimated $350,000 to $500,000 in damage was done. Eleven people were arrested. Twelve officers were injured (“CU Students Riot”).

Sadly, the student government, whom one would hope would not support this kind of debauchery, wrote a statement in favor of the students involved.
Following the riot, CU’s student government issued a statement criticizing the police for “mistreatment of the students.” “In an attempt to curb underage drinking throughout the Boulder community, students have been treated as a nuisance rather than valued members of the community,” said student executive Sally Hansen in a news release. (“CU Students Riot”)

And just how much value should under-age, binge-drinkers prone to violence really have in the community? As my dad sarcastically put it, quoting the Beastie Boys’ song of the early 90s, “You gotta fight for your right to PARTY.” As much as I considered it all somewhat amusing at the time, I now look back and realize that this incident was a result of our culture of narcissism, and I was as guilty as any other.

This incessant partying is a symptom of what we have earlier discussed as the pursuit of ever-elusive happiness. Studies characterize “this ‘Generation Me’ as unapologetically focused on the individual, with unprecedented freedom to pursue what they believe will make them happy” (Pinsky and Young 200). We, as college students, thought that freedom and our right to pursuit of happiness did indeed include the right to drink just as much as we wanted, as young as we wanted, as often as we wanted, wherever we wanted.

Likewise, as our society becomes increasingly individualistic, the perception and definition of what it means to be an adult has shifted. In McGregor’s paper on consumer entitlement, we read “there is a difference between perceiving adulthood as entitlement to individual rights and seeing adulthood as being responsible for others … ‘Generation Y’ is likely to exhibit this aggressive, non-altruistic behaviour, having grown up in an affluent society with a sense of entitlement” (McGregor 2). She speaks specifically of students who feel they are entitled to certain services and accommodations in return for the tuition and fees they pay for a college education. As consumers in a “the customer is
always right” society, they demand to be catered to by the providers of their education. The fact that student discontentment and perception of mistreatment broke into full-scale riots that attracted the focus of the national media shows that the issue of entitlement is not isolated to one spoiled adolescent, but a common generational mentality.

In this section we’ve briefly discussed the major contributors to the spread of cultural narcissism. Among them is the shift in parental roles, beginning largely with the Baby Boom generation over-fostering self-esteem in their children and focusing on personal desires and opinions rather than on cooperation and empathy. In addition, the exponential growth in mass media outlets has been a huge contributor; TV and Internet are particularly hazardous due to their ability to invade our homes with constant images of a narcissistic culture for people to emulate, adolescents in particular. Another contributor to the problem is easy credit, allowing people to live far beyond their means, exhibiting false wealth. And, although it may not seem like a direct contributor, the decline of churches or religion has also expedited this growth of narcissism. Each day we are bombarded with messages of materialism and pridefulness.

In the next section, I will discuss the history of morality education in American schools, some perpetrators of cultural narcissism in the modern classroom, as well as some ways we as teachers contribute to it and can also control it.

4. Cultural Narcissism in the Classroom: Problems and Solutions

Cultural narcissism manifests itself in many ways in the classroom, primarily in student and parent personalities. These personalities create headaches for educators, because the narcissistic parent and student believe themselves to be above the rules,
seldom taking responsibility for their own actions, and demanding more special attention and special treatment from educators. They demand more attention both outside the classroom and inside the classroom, with constant interruptions and calls for attention.

When a child believes his or her opinion to be of utmost importance at any given moment, of course they would interrupt a teacher or fellow classmate in order to share. As previously discussed, an offshoot of this culture of narcissism is the rise in school shootings. Having attended high school in Littleton, Colorado, in the 90s, although not at Columbine, an incident that took place this close to home seemed unreal. Although the reasons for acting out in such a manner are complex and multifaceted, students who repeatedly play the victim card in defending their misbehavior are also those who are most likely to strike out against their peers and teachers.

The featured school shooters often possessed a “me against the world” view of society. In many regards, narcissists view their lives as independent from the rest of society, often holding society in contempt – especially when a member of society would dare challenge their opinions, skills, intelligence, or appearance. (Mason and Brackman 47)

Needless to say, when more and more ‘average’ students are beginning to exhibit the inflated ego, entitlement, victimization and grandiosity of the school shooter profile, teachers begin to fret.

But how have educators, school programs and educational practices contributed to the rise in narcissism? And how can we curb some of these practices across the board? How is it that schools, once the civic centers of a community, have gradually become perpetrators of the trend toward narcissism? And why is it our duty as educators to counteract the messages of narcissism students are exposed to outside the classroom?
A Brief History of Morality in American Education

One of the myths of American education is that once upon a time (that is, before the Religious Right started to muck around in the public schools) public education was secular. This is simply not so. From their early-nineteenth-century beginnings, common schools were very much a part of an unofficial yet powerful Protestant establishment, which included the leading Protestant denominations and a ‘Benevolent Empire’ of nondenominational voluntary associations dedicated to improving the world through peace, temperance, abolitionism, and other social reforms. (Prothero 71)

From their inception, American schools have been moral and religious centers, whose first mission was to raise a literate public who could read the Bible, and in turn promote social order and benevolence in society. Without social order, the Spanish never would have conquered Latin America, and the British would have failed in this New World experiment. “In both Europe and North America it had long been understood that social order depended on morality, and morality on religion” (Prothero 60). The Bible was the number one text in schools, and our Protestant fathers wouldn’t have it any other way. All school curricula were based on Bible stories and proverbs, and required a great deal of memorization so that the morality of the Bible was instilled in each and every citizen. “‘If there was an overriding purpose to American colonial education,’ adds philosopher Warren Nord, ‘it was to nurture and sustain a Christian civilization’” (Prothero 70).

Rightly so, the United States should be admired as the first country to offer universal free education to its populace. A successful democratic government relied upon the education of its people if they were to rule with dignity and with the good of the country and not the individual in mind.

Now children needed to read not only to be good Protestants, but to be good citizens … the American experiment in republican government, which vested sovereignty in the people and, by the 1820s, extended suffrage without regard to economic means (though, it must be noted, still
in regard to race and sex), depended for its survival on an informed citizenry … These two impulses—one religious and one secular—would eventually conspire to produce the public school system we have today. (Prothero 61)

Americans believed that educating the poor as well as the rich was important, and although women were not allowed to vote or participate much in politics, they were still allowed to go to school, as their literacy and ideals were recognized as having great influence in the home, the heart of a family.

Instead of “three Rs”, there were actually four. The fourth, or rather the first, Religion, hardly needed mention, as it was the basis for the three Rs that came after it.

Today we often think of public schools as religion-free zones, as if the First Amendment guarantees not freedom of religion but freedom from it. In early America, however, religion permeated the classroom … religion was their first R, since in the hierarchy of knowledge theology towered above reading, writing and arithmetic. (Prothero 74)

While the Bible was the number one text used in schools, in later years equally pious readers hit the market. Noah Webster’s *American Spelling Book* was the first to be widely used throughout the country. It therefore had great influence on the education of our forefathers, the great men who raised our nation to the top.

The speller, also referred to as the “Blue-Backed Speller,” contained brief stories that emphasized American values, such as hard-work, diligence, compassion, helpfulness and fairness. The speller also included “Precepts Concerning the Social Relations,” a short guide suggesting ways for children and young adults to maneuver through social discourse and interaction. Here again, Webster infused these passages with proper American conduct and character. For instance, he recommended that a prospective husband look for a woman who has “softness of manners,” “modest deportment,” “an accomplished mind and religion,” and “a love for domestic life.” But he should reject any woman “devoted to dress and amusement,” who “delighted with her own praise,” and was “an admirer of her own beauty.” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 9)
The values that permeated the Blue-Backed Speller clearly spoke against narcissistic traits, especially when looking to find a wife. The fact that all boys were raised under this teaching must have certainly changed the girls’ behavior as well if they were to catch a man who believed what he was taught in school.

While this ideal of a good woman to marry seems to have gone by the wayside, many snippets that first appeared in the *New England Primer*, which predates Webster’s Speller, remain in the American subconscious. The bedtime prayer of generations (the one that always made me fret more than induce sleep), *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take*, was first published in the 1737 edition (Prothero 92). The next reader after Webster’s on the market was *The McGuffey Reader*. Touted as the “most influential volume ever published in America,” the McGuffey Reader made its debut in 1836. “God was these books’ leading character, piety their cardinal virtue, and the Bible their ultimate source of wisdom” (Prothero 77). William Holmes McGuffey was a Presbyterian preacher and college professor of ancient languages. As an ingenious way to avoid arguments between denominations on which version of the Bible to include in the reader, McGuffey instead took the essentials, such as the Ten Commandments, and rewrote them as rhyme, teaching poetry and religion in the same passage. “Thou no gods shall have but me, Before no idol bend thy knee…” (Prothero 78).

Nevertheless, the dissonance and disagreement between denominations of Protestant faiths became in increasing issue as the population of America grew and changed. In addition, immigrant groups were bringing large numbers of Catholics,
initially shunned by the Protestants. Somewhere around the mid-to-late 1800s, religion began to be edged out of the public schools.

Horace Mann, secretary of education in Massachusetts from 1837 to 1849, recognized this increasing religious diversity in our nation, and made a call for maintaining a common value system among American schools, for the survival of the nation. “Mann believed that a common culture, reflected in a common curriculum for all students and reinforced by a common value system, was essential for preserving the republican form of government established by the Founding Fathers” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 10).

What resulted was known as the “common school.” Mann’s interest was primarily in maintaining the unity of thought that was evident in religious schools, without the overt religion, in an effort to reinforce the ideals necessary for a healthy democracy.

The common school was conceived as a place where students, including an enormous and ever-growing immigrant community, could learn about the roots of American democratic and republican ideals. Its basic goals included assimilating these new arrivals into American culture, preparing workers for industry, and developing in young people the qualities necessary for them to become informed citizens and share in public discourse. (Perry 8)

Although the concept of the common school was not without fault, its goal of uniting Americans, *e pluribus unum*, was laudatory. Even today, educators recognize the value of a commonality in education. Rosemary C. Salomone, Director of the Center for Law and Policy at St. John’s University School of Law stated, “In the name of commonality, education must develop shared values, principles, and political commitments to promote stability, coherence, and justice for free and equal citizenship. In the name of diversity, it must recognize legitimate demands of pluralism and encourage understanding and
tolerance” (Perry 9). The overarching question posed by Perry is how to reconcile

*pluribus* and *unum*, an original goal of the common school.

It has been argued that the common school was actually a conscious effort to, in a way, save religion in schools. This was done by watering it down; turning strict doctrine into simplified morality and ethics. After the nineteenth century,

Americans gradually confused religion with morality and subsumed the former into the latter. The lowest-common-denominator Protestantism once preached in public schools morphed into generic Christianity, then into generic moralism … In postbellum McGuffey readers, the Calvinist theology of sin and salvation that pervaded early editions gave way to bland lessons on “a morality of industry, self-denial, sobriety, thrift, propriety, persistence, modesty, punctuality, conformity, and submission to authority.” And such virtues were said to beget not so much salvation as prosperity. (Prothero 100)

The last sentence of this quote provides us with some early insight into the shift of American ideals away from the religious virtues of Christianity, toward a society that values prosperity, or material wealth, and bases its moral system upon the means to attain this goal. Nevertheless, a saving grace in the later McGuffey readers was that at least thrift, modesty, conformity and submission to authority were included amongst the virtues, possibly warding off the rise of narcissistic traits such as pride and greed, at least for the time being.

In the early 1900s, John Dewey arrived on the scene of American education with his Progressivist approach to child-centered education. In an attempt to promote democracy and give students an opportunity to practice the virtues through cooperative learning groups instead of subjecting them to the top-down catechismal style of teaching morality, he “recognized that truthfulness, honesty, chastity, and related virtues stood out as being patently moral, but he likewise maintained that the prosocial dimensions of
human conduct, which were nurtured through cooperative learning, were also moral” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 14). In his own words, Dewey proclaimed that “To possess virtue does not signify to have cultivated a few nameable and exclusive traits; it means to be fully and adequately what one is capable of becoming through association with others in all the offices of life” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 14).

Nevertheless, Dewey’s approach to reach such a virtuous character relied on the child drawing his or her own conclusions of how to morally behave based on experience in group-work situations. “As a group, progressive educators expected social learning to teach democratic decision making, to help children break from tradition, and to create their own novel solutions to moral problems” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 14). And that it did. Without particular virtues taught by adults to children, the children, naturally in a state of psychologically egocentric behavior, will draw their own conclusions about the best way to act. More often than not, however, if a child can get his or her own desires served, he or she is unlikely to worry about what may or may not be in the interest of the group as a whole. Just like the movement from all religions being accepted to no religion even being acceptable, education moved from all benevolent protestant virtues being drafted into the curriculum of American education to NO virtues being the norm. The idea that any and all opinions of children being accepted as having equal moral value without adult intercession is a dangerous playing field.

As a response to Progressivism, William Hutchins authored the Children’s Morality Code in 1917. The code included such virtues as “self-control, good health, 

4 “Critics of the progressive approach argued that by denigrating tradition, confronting adult authority, and providing legitimacy to peer influence, such strategies rendered children vulnerable to the tyranny of both the immediate group and the present moment” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 14).
kindness, sportsmanship, self-reliance, duty, reliability, truth, good workmanship, and team work” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 15). This code was inspired by the codes or pledges of organizations such as the Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, and 4-H, which we all recognize as organizations that have stood the test of time in helping children develop their personal moral code.

Nevertheless, one issue with specific character education is that it is often “extra-curricular” and not integrated into the subject matter that consumes the majority of the school day. Even schools that employed the Children’s Morality Code often combined it with progressivism approaches in the classroom. When character education is delivered in one class period, and seven other periods go against what was taught by buying into messages from a narcissistic culture, the message isn’t going to stick. While they might show up on classroom posters, cafeteria wall murals and the like, unless the messages are an integral part of the curriculum, they are easily ignored. “The challenge is for the school to become a microcosm in which students practice age-appropriate versions of the roles they must face later in life — and deal with the related problems and complications” (Perry 7). Teaching about good character is not the same as putting it into practice and expecting children to be active participants in the process.

From about the 1950s and 60s on, United States’ schools saw a rapid decline in character education. In the 1950s, the Russians’ launch of Sputnik caused public schools to react with a more strenuous and extensive academic palette in an effort to prepare more students for college and a specialized workforce. Over time, classes on religion and ethics began to be edged out of the curriculum in exchange for more practical classes such as shorthand or college-prep classes. Throughout the 60s, in the wake of the
Vietnam War and as the American population became increasingly diverse, “a growing tendency to loosen the range of acceptable personal conduct challenged educators to find a common ground and especially a commonly held list of behaviors on which to base character education programs” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 16).

At this time America also “saw droves of students dropping out of high school and choosing nontraditional lifestyles with little responsibility or structure, often with little regard for ethics or law” (Mason and Brackman 59). Although character education made some appearance in schools in the 1960s, it mostly created dissonance between parents, administration and teachers. “Some feared that teachers would impose their personal values on students rather than students realizing their own values. Individuality and ‘doing what feels right’ was certainly surfacing as a popular theme in the country” (Mason and Brackman 59).

Add to the scene Piaget’s 1965 theory of moral development and Kohlberg’s 1970 cognitive developmentalist approach to character education. While these two remain stalwarts of American educational theory and practice, their application was not without fault. “Kohlberg believed that teachers should guide students to a higher awareness of moral thinking, not just instill in them specific conduct, which he denigrated as ‘a bag of virtues’” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 17). The moral development of students centered more around the process of reasoning, but little on absolute truths of benevolent behavior. “Values education teachers, in remaining morally neutral by not commenting on student discourse, failed to separate the truly moral from the trivial” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 18). For example, children’s views on giving homemade Christmas gifts are treated basically the same way and with the same amount of importance as their views on
abortion. Once again, we see the shift toward a narcissistic self-perception, where everyone’s opinion, no matter how trivial, is equally important and has value. Adding to this, teacher input in this model was to be minimized as students reached their own conclusions on what constitutes moral behavior. This dialogue-based model of morality also teaches students to debate a point and coerce others into seeing things from their perspective. “The heavy emphasis on moral discussion ignored the issues of motivation and resulted in a form of rhetorical sophistication that gave students the ability to rationalize their actions without inspiring them to behave in principled ways” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 18).

Although critics of Kohlberg initiated more traditional and more “solid” character education programs in response, most schools still lack any sort of consensus on what values will be taught. Therefore they teach none at all, leaving any moral guidance students may receive up to peer influence, the mass media, influences in the home, and their own self-centered mental state. The reluctance of teachers to infuse character education into the classroom emanates from the lack of consensus on values within the school community, rendering moral judgments increasingly problematic. For instance, a school district that imposes a strict policy against academic cheating and dishonesty may be challenged by parents who claim that some forms of dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism) are actually coping strategies caused by intense academic competition, and thus should be excused or at least handled trivially. (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 20)

However, by taking no stance on the values and virtues that we as educators deem important to the future of the United States, we in essence are allowing the other influences in a child’s life to be the primary decision makers, teaching our students what to think, feel and believe.
One would imagine that even though we can’t agree on a specific set of values to live by, we could agree on certain civic and citizenship virtues essential to upholding a democratic nation. This was the original goal of the common schools, as previously discussed. *E pluribus unum.* Out of many, one. Yet just as educators and communities can’t agree on common values, nor can they agree on civic duties. “Some educators may see patriotism as a strong sense of loyalty to one’s country and its leaders, while others may emphasize the democratic principles of questioning and criticizing authority, including the role of civil disobedience in shaping U.S. society” (Perry 6). The temptation to present a picture-perfect United States also sets students up for a shocker when they have experiences outside the US that make them aware of our failures, and they realize that not all citizens of other countries think we’re as great as we think we are. William Damon, director of the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University has been quoted as saying, “‘It is a necessary part of character education to teach about the mistakes that have been made and the problems that persist.’ Rather than presenting society as perfect, it is far more useful to a child’s character formation to emphasize that no one is perfect but one can always try to do better” (Perry 6). In a survey of 1,000 US adults performed in 2002, 85% agreed that “Working for the common good, even when it runs counter to one’s immediate self-interests” was an important part of patriotism (Perry 6). If this is so, as educators we know that teaching at least this aspect of civic duty is coherent with the opinions of the majority of parents and other adults in the community.

California’s State Board of Education recognized this hesitation and confusion amongst teachers when it came to discussing moral and religious issues in the classroom. As far back as 2002, the state published the *Handbook on the Rights and Responsibilities*...
of School Personnel and Students in the Areas of Providing Moral, Civic, and Ethical Education, Teaching About Religion, Promoting Responsible Attitudes and Behaviors, and Preventing and Responding to Hate Violence (Perry 11). The fact that they produced such a document demonstrates their acknowledgment that morals, civics, ethics, and religion all have a place in our classrooms, and, with proper application, are also recognized as promoters of peace.

However, waiting for the state or federal laws to initiate bringing morality back to the classroom mean that change is too little, too late.

This revolving door of proposing new education theories, adding state and federal legislation, adopting new instructional programs, and throwing out programs has become a way of life in education … The end result has been an exhausting amount of time, money and energy spent on implementing all of the supposed solutions. (Mason and Brackman 61)

In addition, this constant change of programming creates moral confusion of expectations between adults and children. We have no choice but to pull ourselves out of the mire of this ever-shifting and demanding revolving door of different quick-fix solutions if we are to preserve our sanity as educators and not let cultural narcissism cause our burnout.

Although bringing Christianity back into public schools may not be a viable solution, there is no reason why we as educators can’t bring the morality and ethics taught by our forefathers into the classroom.

The Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that the First Amendment requires of state governments not just neutrality among religions but also neutrality between religion and irreligion. The current strategy of obeying the law by avoiding religion may well be violating the Constitution, by indoctrinating students into a secular view of the world. (Prothero 130)

In an increasingly self-centered secular world, what we are teaching by saying nothing at all is that the behaviors and values students observe in the mass media are okay. Robert
Hanvey, in an early petition to schools for educating a more globally ethical student population, challenged schools to take a stand against pop-culture as transmitted and reinforced by the media.

The schools, after all, are also carriers of the national culture. But the schools must stake out a niche that balances and corrects the media. … At the very least every young person should have experiences in school which demonstrate in a lasting fashion that (1) there are substrata to the visible event and (2) culture affects the perception of human affairs. Thus educated, the person's reactions to reports in the media should be, minimally, “There may be more there than meets the eye,” and “Other eyes might see it differently.” Those are truisms but the schools can put flesh on them. (Hanvey 4)

In addition, not all students, as educators are thoroughly aware, have parents who will impose any sort of pro-social values on their children. Often parents and families are just as enveloped in the narcissistic cultural wave of materialism and showmanship that they see on TV as their children. But a teacher who is willing to swim against that tide may influence a student, and changing the thinking of a few students at a time may someday shift this tide of cultural narcissism as a whole.

Those who study education and enter its ranks are usually familiar with the phrase in loco parentis. Loosely translated, this Latin phrase means “in the absence of the parent” and was meant to provide a framework for caring for children in the school system. Today, in some cases, this phrase could be more appropriately changed to mean, “in replacement of the parent” or even, “in spite of the parent” (Mason and Brackman 42).

We may be setting ourselves up for a fight against narcissistic parents or home cultures, but done with grace we just might win.

Since the inception of free education for all in colonial America, schools have been centers for delivering and instilling in our students a system of cultural values that would produce a great country. Over time, these virtues have been shunned from schools in exchange for more radical approaches to moral development, or, in an effort to bring
them back, have become extracurricular character education programs taught on the sidelines. Once the basis on which all other subjects were centered, morality and ethics have been pushed out of the classroom and left in the hands of outside influences. In an effort to cater more and more to the will and desires of the individual, we are losing sight of the collective whole and common good that was the foundation of our nation.

4.2. Narcissism in the Classroom

Narcissism manifests itself in the classroom every day in our interactions with students, parents, and fellow faculty members. While volumes have been written on the impact of this cultural narcissism, here we will focus instead on how to deal with narcissistic personality types when we do encounter them, and what we as educators can do to combat this cultural trend. In order to start a nation-wide movement against cultural narcissism, we must be sure that it stays out of our schools and is not encouraged or accepted in our classrooms. For this to happen, the issue must be addressed at all levels, by all faculty, every day. There are many ways to be proactive about controlling narcissism in our classrooms, and the following suggestions are by no means an exhaustive list.

First and foremost, don’t let it get to you. As a beginning teacher, every time a student or parent was unhappy with me, rude, apathetic, or failing my class, I blamed myself, and thought that perhaps my expectations for students were completely unrealistic. Then I found actual research supporting what I’d been struggling with all these years. Mason and Brackman, in *Educating Today’s Overindulged Youth*, set out to
discover why the burnout rate was so high among teachers, and what might be done about it. The number one complaint of teachers they discovered? Lack of respect.

An ever increasing lack of respect by the students, their parents, and society at large is on the rise … As respect for the profession [of teaching] steadily decreases, we set out to examine how students and parents justify second-guessing and questioning the expertise of school personnel on a regular basis. Our examination continually led to the central characteristics and personality traits of narcissism, and, resoundingly, numerous facets of the American lifestyle were found to reflect these traits. (Mason and Brackman x)

In time, I’ve learned that when it comes to dealing with narcissistic personalities, it’s best to agree to disagree and not take conflicts to heart. Sometimes, when confronting narcissistic students and parents, we simply must end the conflict. The narcissistic personality feeds off manipulating others, and one’s willingness to engage in that battle only exacerbates the problem. “If the educator becomes angry and ‘acts out,’ that educator has simply validated the narcissist’s negative opinion of that individual as a professional, and the narcissist continues to believe he is right” (Mason and Brackman 64). While it’s easy to hold grudges against such parents and students, it’s also important to remember that people are able to learn new behavior (otherwise we’d be out of a job), and start each day with the belief that they are indeed learning new behaviors. Don’t let the narcissistic personality types defeat your pursuit of the career you chose, embrace it as one more way you can make a difference in the world.

Hand-in-hand with the prior concept is the idea of placing as much responsibility as possible on the students and parents. Narcissistic parents will advocate for their child to a fault, expecting faculty and administration to cater to the needs of their child above and beyond any other. This often means many meetings about a student’s performance in the classroom. The essential part of the outcome of these meetings is that the student and
parent walk out of the meeting with a task list that they can perform that will teach responsibility. Of course this is important in teaching self-reliance for students, but it also helps dissuade the narcissistic parent. Instead of emerging from a meeting with a laundry list of checks and balances for the teacher to perform, the student and parent walk out with that list instead. “It is increasingly necessary to give the parents tasks for progress, and to give the student tasks that the parent is responsible for overseeing” (Mason and Brackman 68). The school staff needs to be prepared with an intervention plan that does not require extra work on the part of teachers. It is not unheard of for the outcome of such meetings simply being to assign more tasks to teachers that are simply not beneficial to either party in the long run, such as emailing the parent every time a homework assignment is late or incomplete, or notifying the parent when there is a test coming up.

In some ways, the technology we now have available is fueling the narcissistic parent. Narcissistic parents “believe it is their duty to control day-to-day happenings in a child’s school day … they depend excessively on technology or other means for knowing their child’s homework and grades” (Mason and Brackman 37). At any given moment, a parent of any of my students can go online and see all the assignments that I have given so far that year, and can see exactly how their child has performed on each assignment and exam. In addition, we send home eight printed progress reports a year. In contrast, my parents and I only knew my grades at the end of each semester when a report card was mailed home. I understood that grading was beyond my control, but that if I worked hard and did my best I didn’t have to worry about grades. These days a student is so in tune with the weight of each assignment that they often turn passing a class into a numbers game, to the hundredth of a percent. They can watch what a zero does to their
overall grade, and if it only drops a few percentage points, they will likely choose not to do the assignment. This overdependence on technology is detrimental in many ways.

However, that being said I don’t believe this technology is anything that is going to go away for a long time, therefore we need to use it to our advantage. If a parent does want that level of control, we must keep our grade books up-to-date online and give them the tools to monitor grades themselves. In some ways, the open interface grade books have saved teachers’ time; the parent instantly knows when an assignment is delinquent without teacher intervention. Another solution for heading off the helicopter parent is to have the class syllabus, assignments and plans online. “This solution provides an opportunity for the staff member to say, ‘I have all my plans on the Web, and here is the Web address. Feel free to check it at any time to get all the information you need’” (Mason and Brackman 69). This puts the responsibility back on the student and parent, without putting the teacher in a position of forgetting to notify the parent of something, potentially a spark for conflict.

Above all, we should focus on student learning, teaching students how to take charge of their own learning, and fostering classroom community. Of course, this is all easier said than done, but it is important for students to be aware that they are not the only student in the classroom, and that part of our responsibility as educators is to ensure the learning of ALL students. One of the primary ways is to simply focus more on subject matter, and let self-esteem develop itself. Students who work hard and behave well will be rewarded and acknowledged for their work naturally, there is no need for forced self-esteem boosters built into the curriculum or the school day.

Feelings of competence and the self-esteem associated with them are enhanced in children when their parents provide an optimum mixture of
acceptance, affection, rational limits and controls, and high expectations. In a similar way, teachers are likely to engender positive feelings when they provide such a combination of acceptance, limits, and meaningful and realistic expectations concerning behavior and effort (Katz).

So much focus on the self in an effort to foster self-esteem takes away from what the child is truly in school to learn, which is subject matter and learning to function as a member of society. Twenge and Campbell put it this way:

We’re not saying that children need to be told they’re not special or are losers — just drop the whole issue. If you want a child to be physically fit, you don’t make him sing songs about how muscular he is. You have him get lots of exercise … Beyond learning itself, the focus should be on developing a love for learning, a sense of efficacy (if I work hard, I can master a topic), the ability to get along with others, and a high level of self-discipline and emotional resilience in the face of setbacks. (295)

To me, this sums up the true skills that a student should master in school beyond subject matter. The characteristics above also come about by realizing that one is not the center of the universe, nor are one’s needs of primary concern for everyone around him or her.

During the self-esteem movement, a perpetual “Are you happy?” approach was evident. Teachers were (and still are) criticized if school was “boring or hard.” A systematic approach must allow students to realize that society does not revolve around their happiness or concerns, and students need to see the “larger picture.” (Mason and Brackman 70)

Some may interpret this to mean that teachers should not bother with creating interesting lessons, engaging the student, or differentiation. However, this is certainly not the case.

The issue is that we have moved to the complete opposite end of the spectrum.

“Instructional methodologies often play to the student demands to be entertained, to be at the center of attention, and to be immediately gratified” (Bednar 27). To counter this
trend, we need to choose our activities wisely and eliminate those that encourage narcissism.5

As early as 1979, this extreme focus on the self in the classroom was evident, as was the harm it was causing to actual academic achievement. “The overall slippage of academic achievement throughout American education since the 1960s derives largely from the lack of self-discipline, from self-absorption, from a sense of entitlement, and from self-gratification, all part of the culture of narcissism (Lasch 1979)” (Bednar 27). It is imperative that students “realize that no person (adult or child) ever truly learned anything without effort. In fact, it should be stated that the true measure of a person’s education lies not in what they were taught, but rather in what they learned by their own accord” (Mason and Brackman 70). We need to retrain our students to understand that hard work is inevitable, and going to be a part of their lives for a long time.

Part of the narcissistic parent and child mindset is that the child is so unique as an individual that exceptions should be made to every rule, and that all the child’s teachers need to cater to his or her unique individual needs. While there are legitimate conditions that require modification of the curriculum for a child, more often than not there are students and parents who misinterpret “desires” and “preferences” as “needs.” Your preference for a seat by the window does not mean I need to change my seating chart today. Of course a student who does qualify as special needs should be accommodated in

5 An example of a common activity that has been touted to enhance self-esteem is the Show and Tell custom. “It is not clear, however, whether this common feature of early childhood programs (sometimes referred to as “bring and brag”) does as much to enhance self-esteem as it does to encourage children to be unduly concerned about the impressions they make on others, and to engage in one-upmanship” (Katz). While it does have merit in giving children practice in public speaking, we must be sure that when narcissistic behaviors surface during such an activity, they are addressed and quelled.
the classroom to the best of our ability. Whether the reasons for accommodation or modification are bio-psychological or due to an unstable home life,

these reasons are potential legitimate influences on behavior, but each is also an issue that may affect a child indefinitely. Therefore, the focus of conversation should address how these items affect the child’s learning and what coping skills the parent and child should practice in regard to his education. (Mason and Brackman 70)

In other words, this is going to be a life-long condition. The school years are the time to learn the coping mechanisms needed so that students are successful in the future. In the work world, neither their environment nor their peers will change to meet their needs, therefore they must be able to adjust themselves to the expectations of others. This brings to mind a friend’s brother who is in his early twenties and is partially deaf. Despite his handicap, he works as a cashier at a large supermarket. He has learned to cope by wearing a hearing aid, and also learning how to mentally tune out background noise and pay extra attention to what the customer is saying. Because his disability is not overtly apparent, the customer would never suspect his difficulty with the situation. He has learned well the necessary coping strategies to be successful in his job, knowing that those around him will not likely be aware enough of his disability to adjust their behavior accordingly.

In addition to teaching independence and coping skills, fostering classroom community and cooperation, not competition, is also important. Children will naturally observe differences between themselves and their peers. Part of the process of defining who we are is determining who we are not. As educators, therefore, we need to focus on what makes us similar, not what makes us different. “Not only does teaching uniqueness have the potential to increase aggression, but it emphasizes relatively trivial differences”
(Twenge and Campbell 287). Activities that focus on how special and unique each child is must be replaced by activities that help children define themselves as part of a community. “The classroom is an effective teaching arena to illustrate that the sum is more important than the parts, and students are individually part of the class just as citizens are part of society” (Mason and Brackman 71). Essentially, we need to do away with self-esteem and “I am special” activities for the peace of our classrooms and the health of our students.

It’s important to remember that it’s usually not low self-esteem that causes a kid to become a bully. Much more often, it’s narcissism: narcissistic kids fight when insulted, not the low self-esteem kids (who are likely to do nothing). Teaching kids how special they are makes things worse, not better. (Twenge and Campbell 289)

Along with toning down the “I am special” messages, we should be realistic and provide “real-world” facts when students are dreaming about their futures. “Allowing children to ‘dream’ is important, but if their dreams are unrealistic, failure is inevitable” (Mason and Brackman 78). A child who dreams of becoming a doctor needs to know just how much work that career path entails, and honestly evaluate whether they have the drive and the skill to follow that dream. It is false hope and false expectation for a child to believe that they can be whatever they want to be simply because they want it. It also discounts all professionals when we have a generation that thinks they could all be astronauts if they simply wanted to do that when they grew up.

Twenge and Campbell’s book The Narcissism Epidemic also points out a cultural parallel to the shift that took place in education over the last forty years. Public Service Announcements have shifted their focus from civic and educational goals to focusing almost solely on the big, bad, scary parts of life and the fluff. These announcements have
begun to paint a scary picture for all kids, whether they are accurate for that particular child or not.

American history, grammar and science have been dropped for PSAs on scary stuff like child abuse, depression, prejudice, and teen drug use, plus more positive stuff like expressing creativity and having high self-esteem … These PSAs paint a worldview for kids that goes something like this: the world is filled with really scary things; be tolerant, be creative, express yourself, and admire yourself. To cure the narcissism epidemic, it would be better to dial back on the fear and expressing yourself, and add back the grammar, math, science, history and civics lessons. We might even toss in spots on the virtues of self-control and saving your money. (Twenge and Campbell 291)

Likewise, we should be doing this in the classroom. These big issues are covered in certain courses in the curriculum (like Health class), why make our kids focus all day on things that may or may not affect them?

Given the awards systems already in motion in most schools, returning to a practice of truly honoring only exceptional behavior will be one of the most difficult shifts. When I first started at the high school where I currently work, I was surprised at how many students told me they had made honor roll. Then, I saw the honor roll posted and realized it had “Honors,” “High Honors,” and “Highest Honors.” Several of those on the “Honors” list I knew had earned C’s in my class, which made me wonder what the cut-off was, and how those who truly worked hard for straight A’s felt that those with a C average could also call themselves “honor students.” “Pretty good” has suddenly become honorable. As Mason and Brackman declare, “A conscious effort must be put forth to return to truly honoring exceptional behavior, not what is expected of every student” (73).

An offshoot of the self-esteem movement, grade inflation has also become a problem. “Excessive praise has been built into our education system. Although 20%
fewer students in 2006 (versus 1976) did 15 or more hours of homework a week, twice as many reported earning an A average in high school. In other words, students are now getting better grades for doing less work” (Twenge and Campbell 83). If children’s self-esteem is tied to the numbers they bring home on the report card, it seems a simple solution to raise the numbers a little. “‘Grade inflation is just [another] adaptation of Lake Wobegon to everyday life. Everyone is ‘above average’” (Collins). Where a C used to connote average performance in a subject, a B has become the new average.

Students have also come to equate their grade with their worth or their effort, and disconnect it with what it truly represents, which is subject matter knowledge and classroom performance.

A survey of college students published in 2008 confirmed these perceptions. Two-thirds of students believed their professor should give them special consideration if they explained they were trying hard (apparently missing the point that grades are given for performance, not just for trying). One-third believed they deserved at least a B just for attending class. And – perhaps most incredible – one-third thought they should be able to reschedule their final exam if it interfered with their vacation plans. (Twenge and Campbell 232)

As a solution to this narcissistic mindset, we must ensure that our grading systems reflect the student’s ability to perform in said subject at any given time. While work ethic and attitude are important, more often than not they will manifest in positive classroom performance. Grade inflation can create a situation for students to fail in the future, possibly when the stakes are higher.

As a companion to grade inflation, the increase in extrinsic motivators is detrimental to student development over the long haul. “Educators must resist the urge to add to the ever-growing grocery list of extrinsic motivation. Instead, they need to frequently reinforce the idea to students to do their best simply for the pride in knowing a
job was done well with no tangible rewards provided” (Mason and Brackman 74). In a culture of narcissism, where getting something for nothing and immediate gratification are of utmost importance, this is a very difficult idea to uphold. Nevertheless, we are doing our students a disservice if we continue on the current path. Studies consistently show that

Students who inherently take pride in their work consistently perform better during school years and beyond. They also are more likely to persevere through long-term projects and goals without looking for immediate feedback or reward for every productive move … Frankly, programming students to work only for reward is cruel, as most students never encounter a similar working environment beyond their school days. (Mason and Brackman 74)

Another manifestation of narcissism in the classroom is a marked increase in cheating and plagiarism in secondary school and higher education. “In a survey administered by Rutgers Management Education Center in New Jersey, ninety percent of all high school students admit to homework cheating, with nearly sixty-seven percent admitting to more serious cheating” (Mason and Brackman 48). There is a new mindset that the end is more important than the means, and if the child has “the right answer,” by any method, that should count. In fact, among my students I believe it in commonly held that everyone’s homework is and should be publicly available. I seldom see a student say, “No, do it yourself,” when asked for an assignment by a peer. When a student misses class, they go straight to a companion’s workbook and start copying the answers straight out of it, errors and all (which of course is obvious to the teacher). “Getting the work done” is more important than learning the material, especially when each assignment or worksheet is equivalent to a zero in the grade book. It’s more about “making up zeros” than learning. “Research” has turned into finding something on the Internet, and
copying/pasting it into the appropriate text box, with or without reading it first. Of course, as a teacher this approach gives me a good laugh, but the fact that students still think by the tenth grade that they are going to get away with it makes me wonder just how much they have been getting away with it in the past.

Narcissistic parents often condone this behavior, reasoning that the final grade is all that matters, because that will determine whether their child gets into a “good college.” But how will their children continue to do well in college if they cheated their way through high school? Continued cheating. “A 2002 survey found that 80% of students at Texas A&M University admitted to cheating; a 2007 poll of students at 12 different colleges found that 67% admitted to cheating” (Twenge and Campbell 206). If cheating our way to the top is becoming the norm, our workforce and our society are slowly being corroded from the inside out.

Even more disturbing than the cheating is the shift in attitude that accompanies it. A large study of high school students in 2008 revealed that two-thirds had cheated academically, and one-third had stolen something from a store. Frighteningly, “93% said they were satisfied with their personal ethics—a classically narcissistic disconnect between reality and self-concept” (Twenge and Campbell 206). Likewise, “a 2004 study of 25,000 high school students found that 67% of boys and 52% of girls agreed that ‘in the real world, successful people do what they have to do to win, even if others consider it cheating’” (Twenge and Campbell 206). Perhaps the process of allowing children to decide their own value-set and determine the morality of an act without adult influence is finally coming to a head after two or more generations. How much of this type of thinking and the behavior that accompanies it can society absorb before it collapses?
As educators, it is our responsibility to put an end to these behaviors, and hopefully to the narcissism that feeds it. “Many educators have told students to ‘get your education so you can get a great job, make lots of money, and get lots of stuff!’ … While this does indeed motivate many students, consider the shallow message being sent” (Mason and Brackman 74). In an attempt to motivate, we are doing children a disservice by sending this message. Stopping at “get your education so you can get a job you really enjoy!” seems much more reasonable, if not as appealing to the narcissistic student immersed in a materialistic culture.

Perhaps more frightening than promoting materialism is the promotion of drinking, drug use, and sex by parents and teachers alike.

Today [navigating the teen years] is made even more difficult by the array of self-gratifying options our culture offers teens: drugs, alcohol, antisocial behavior, sex, and dangerous acting out. These types of behavior, projected out by celebrities with whom teens have formed intense parasocial relationships, are often accepted by adults who see them as “just what teens do”. (Pinsky and Young 188)

Sadly, our society has accepted the notion that teenage behavior has to include these things. It doesn’t. Even if it is “what you did” in high school, think about how much better life could have been if someone had not accepted this behavior as normal when you were young. If it’s what you still do, perhaps you shouldn’t be a teacher. Teens are capable of so much more, why should we put ideas that are harmful to their well-being in their heads, and then accept them as “just what teens do”? To put this in perspective, think about the number of pro-drinking, drug and sex messages they are bombarded with throughout the day, then think about how many people actively model for them a better way. “As parents, we must monitor such behaviors [drinking, drug use, bullying, sex] constantly, and remain aware not just of how dangerous they are, but of the many teen-
directed cultural messages that tend to encourage them” (Pinsky and Young 206). Too many parents leave it up to the world to teach their teens about these issues, as educators we must exert our opinions over the opinions of their peers and not remain silent. It’s our responsibility.

Being a teacher is a large responsibility as a role model. Part of the problem, of course, is that not all teachers are on board with combatting narcissism. “As a citizen of American culture, school personnel are bound to possess at least a small amount of these self-absorbed tendencies … After all, the population of future teachers is taken from the very me-generation culture entering the professional ranks” (Mason and Brackman 65). This being said, it must also be said that those who wish to be teachers should also be aware that the nature of their job entails much more than dissemination of information. “The very nature of education should be altruistic, and in that vein, serving others is just part of the job description” (Mason and Brackman 65). As Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar go on to explain,

it is critical that teachers themselves reflect behavior that fosters their students’ moral systems. For example, teachers should exhibit prosocial behavior in their interaction with each student and in their relationships to all other teachers and staff members – behavior that emphasizes caring, kindness, sharing, helpfulness, and cooperation. In particular, teachers should reflect Wilson’s moral sentiments (sympathy, fairness, duty, and self-control) for here, too, students are observant. (87)

Just like character education programs in isolation are not a productive approach to the problem, a teacher who talks the talk but doesn’t walk the walk is equally ineffective. When a teacher constantly gripes about her low pay and refuses to stay a minute past three to help a student, she of course sends a message about work ethic that is going to confuse the student to whom she just assigned two hours of homework.
Of course difficulties abound when trying to put such a touchy subject on the table before educators, talking openly about narcissism and its manifestations is also a proactive way to combat this epidemic. Getting teachers and administrators to admit to ways they may be a part of the issue and motivating them to change their ways could be the biggest hurdle. Remembering to focus on the best for the whole and student achievement, and reminding them that in the long run, interventions should save them work in the long run, may help answer the “what’s in it for me” question. Also, getting students and teachers to understand that the whole is a sum of its parts is necessary. Students and parents often blame teachers for failure in the classroom. Faculty members often blame administration for the failings of a school. But this system is a vicious cycle. It must be stressed to all within a school that poor performance is a reflection of all: students, teachers and administration, but that without a mentality of willingness to work together to strengthen the whole, improvement is seldom made. The effects of individuals work together to affect change interdependently. “[T]he school must become a community of virtue in which responsibility, hard work, honesty, and kindness are modeled, taught, expected, celebrated, and continually practiced” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 88).

While combating cultural narcissism can seem daunting as education professionals, it is not a lost cause or something we should give up on. It simply means that part of our duty as teachers is to ingrain students with a way of thinking that rebels against narcissism. In the remainder of this thesis, I will discuss how service-learning as a methodology can be used in the classroom as a positive and proactive step toward quelling cultural narcissism.
5. Cultural Narcissism Meets its Match? Volunteer Work

So far we’ve established a growing national trend in America toward a culture of narcissism. We realize that we’re becoming increasingly self-centered, rude, egotistical and self-focused. We’ve talked about what adds to this culture of narcissism, in our homes, our schools and our communities.

We’ve also discussed the role of American education in the shaping of our moral fabric, and the changes that have taken place over the last two and a half centuries. We have acknowledged the duty of schools to educate the citizens of America as productive and engaged members of a democratic society. We also have recognized that not all families or parents are equipped to raise their children to be empathetic members of a democracy, especially if one or more generations have already gone down the road of following the narcissistic ideology. Even if they haven’t, a neutral stance is not enough to counter the increasing permeation of the minds of children and adolescents by the media.

We’ve also established that independently applied character-education programs in schools, while not necessarily a bad idea, aren’t enough to truly affect a mind that is bombarded with narcissistic messages several times an hour. Likewise, self-esteem-boosting as the primary goal of educational trends in the last 20 years hasn’t helped either. Instead, it’s helped create the narcissistic monster by focusing increasingly on the self and one’s own feelings. “Feelings cannot be learned from direct instruction. Furthermore, constant messages about how wonderful one is may raise doubts about the credibility of the message and the messenger” (Katz). All of the messages about how unique and special each child is have actually been doing our children a disservice.
In order to produce true change, a student’s affect must be altered. “Solving the problem of narcissism requires ‘a complete shift in our perspective, a shift … described as ‘a radically different context for making choices’” (Phipps). In other words, the student must experience an inner change that will shift perspective from the self to others, from oneself as the center of one’s own universe, to oneself simply one part in a great universe, and spark an emotional response that will affect future choices.

5.1. Volunteer Work in a Narcissistic Culture

All of the research sources about cultural narcissism essentially agree that participating in service work is often the first step in dethroning the narcissist.

The single most important recommendation on this list is to be of service. Simple, selfless acts of kindness and responsibility are an invaluable path toward engaging more constructively with the world around you … The smallest acts – helping a stranger in need, or taking the time to really listen to someone else’s problems, with no expectation of praise in return – will make you see the world a bit differently. (Pinsky and Young 247)

In theory, service or volunteer work requires getting out of one’s comfort zone and looking out for someone else’s self-interest. These experiences thereby produce empathy and humility, by exposing the participant to a larger view of the world than previously held.

Service or volunteer work, it is argued, in an effort to put other’s needs above our own, necessarily requires humility. If we are truly striving to be of service, we loose our sense of self and importance, and instead focus on what we can do for the other person. “When we strive to serve, our ability to be humble, and to tolerate humility in the presence of others, becomes the primary task. That experience can help you find the great joy and reward of merely helping a fellow human being” (Pinsky and Young 248).
Humility requires knowing one’s own capacity and abilities well, and this requires receiving accurate feedback from others. Inflated positive feedback from teachers and parents creates a distorted view of one’s importance and abilities. In a service situation, where people aren’t focused on boosting others’ self esteem and instead are focused on accomplishing a goal or making a difference, children are more likely to receive accurate feedback about themselves.

True humility is a strength: the ability to see or evaluate yourself accurately and without defensiveness … humble people are often surrounded by friends and family who support them and allow them to see themselves accurately. Sometimes this support comes through religion, as many religions emphasize humility. Overall, humble people are more connected to others. When you don’t concentrate on pumping up the self, it is easier to relate to other people and the wider world. (Twenge and Campbell 283)

Being aware of one’s shortfalls and areas needing improvement is just as important, if not more, than knowing one’s skills and specialness. While we’ve become accustomed to rewarding children often for doing little, seldom do we show actual appreciation for a job well done, or kindness and caring. True appreciation, sometimes a result of truly serving others, benefits children far more than meaningless rewards and awards. “A larger body of evidence indicates that children benefit from positive feedback. However, praise and rewards are not the only types of positive feedback. Another kind is appreciation, by which is meant positive feedback related directly to the content of the child’s interest and effort” (Katz). Children shouldn’t be rewarded “just for being you,” but for demonstrating selflessness through actual effort.

Students in the United States also seem to have a very limited view of what it means to be a citizen.
They have little sense of history, especially of various social movements that have been so important in serving as a catalyst for important policy change on behalf of those at the margins of American society. And they generally think of politics merely in terms of the vote and cannot conceive of a more expansive vision of what it might mean to be a citizen. (Rimmerman 72)

Drilling into students’ heads that it’s important to vote does a democracy no good if they approach the polls like a multiple choice test with no wrong answers. Perhaps they vote, but they either vote for their personal best interest, or just pick something so they can say they voted. I’ve had many students report to me that this is their approach to voting because they’ve been taught it’s important to vote and be heard, whether or not they actually know what the issues are. Likewise, self-centered voting with no consideration of what would benefit the greater good is also detrimental to the function of a democracy.

Student participation in volunteer work has been shown to result in higher scores on tests of citizenship skills. Specifically, in a test of citizenship education performed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1998, students who did volunteer work scored higher than those who did not in citizenship skills. The test measured content knowledge of American democratic principles, knowledge of public issues and ability to use content knowledge to describe and evaluate them, and civic dispositions considered necessary for upholding a democratic government, including “the assumption of certain personal, political, civic and economic responsibilities as well as respect for individual human worth and human dignity.” “Twelfth-grade test-takers who did volunteer work, either through school or on their own, had a considerably higher tendency to score at or above ‘proficient’ than did peers who did no volunteer work” (Perry 5). Perhaps their newfound empathy, as well as a raised awareness of societal
issues larger than their own desires, awakens in teenagers an interest to learn about democracy’s goal of creating a more just society.

Longitudinal work done by Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer and Snyder (1998) has shown that after engaging in volunteer work, high school students reflect upon and adjust their priorities for the future. The same study found that young people have higher intrinsic motivation for work and a lower individualistic focus on their careers after participating in service activities. (Growing to Greatness 67)

Volunteer work, therefore, seems to be making up for a lack of citizenship education in the classroom.

Volunteer or service work has also been credited as an avenue through which to broaden a child’s horizons. In a society where it is easy to raise children or young adults to think that they are the center of the universe and the center of the lives of everyone around them, it is important that they understand their smallness in a greater world. This is essential to dethroning the narcissist and can be experienced by serving others.

It can also provide a simple awareness that the world doesn’t actually revolve around you. The basic element is faith: Faith that the sun will come up in the morning, that the laws of physics will continue to function as we have always known them, and, most important for the narcissist, that people can be trusted, and that the world can be a good and safe place. (Pinsky and Young 241)

Through serving, we come to regard others as more like us, and on the same team, rather than others to be feared and guarded against.

5.2. The Downside of Volunteerism

So how is it, that in a nation where volunteer work is becoming more and more common, that we not only persist in, but actually increase, our narcissistic attitudes? The problem is in a mixed approach to volunteer work. Volunteerism, surprisingly enough,
has been on the rise for about two decades, alongside cultural narcissism. One motivator is praise. The narcissist is a far cry from the altruist, but in seeing the praise or rewards that volunteers or philanthropists garner, he or she may be eager to get a piece of the pie.

One could take the position that in today’s American society, “activism is the new narcissism,” and this can indeed be the case if students are simply volunteering to build resumes, garner media attention, or compete for awards … This “look-at-me” approach to philanthropy is self-absorbed, attention-seeking and self-serving. (Mason and Brackman 71)

Volunteering, therefore, is not without its downfalls, and certainly not necessarily the perfect cure for narcissism.

I can attest to this trend in volunteerism as a means to gain accolades or recognition. As the Key Club advisor at our high school, every year our numbers surge in the fall with new juniors and seniors. Students are pretty upfront in telling me that they only joined because their guidance counselor told them it looks good on a college application.⁶ Needless to say, it is the four or five freshmen that join that compose the core of our club. They are also the ones who stay committed all four years and become officers. The roster may show twenty-one students, but only the same six can be counted on to participate. Statistics support this trend, as studies show that “charitable giving has decreased in recent years. In the ‘70s, 46% of high school seniors had contributed to one or more charities, but by 2006 only 33% had. So not all kinds of helping are increasing: only the most visible, and those that look good on an application” (Twenge and Campbell 251).

⁶ For only $10, a student will become an “official member,” and be entered into a national database of Key Clubbers at the beginning of the school year. The truth is, there is only a monetary requirement to join, not an actual service requirement, as they can always claim they are too busy to participate in any of the organized activities. Of course, they certainly won’t be asking me for a letter of recommendation knowing that they have simply joined to beat the system.
What explanation is there then for the fact that volunteerism has been on the rise since the 1990s? It is required. “More schools began requiring service in the 1990s, exactly when high school students started to report doing more volunteer service” (Twenge and Campbell 250). Of course these things correlate, and the surveys don’t often specify whether it was school-mandated service that the student participated in, or whether students truly performed the service of their own accord.

Many schools across the nation impose a community service mandate as a requirement for earning a high-school diploma. The theory behind encouraging people to serve at a local soup kitchen is good, but when such a task is only done because it is required, the true meaning of service is lost. (Mason and Brackman 49)

With mandatory service, students approach their service work as one more thing to check off the list, and most likely won’t get any more out of it than a short foray into another world. Mandating volunteer work in schools has also been criticized for simply being an avenue for faculty involved in organizations and special interest groups to push their own agenda. “Mandatory voluntarism runs the risk of degrading the virtue of service itself, while politicizing the school curriculum and recruiting impressionable youths for causes dear to the hearts of graying activists” (Evans 306). Deciding what is a worthy cause to serve can certainly vary from one faculty member to another, and dissention on whether or not students should be pressured into caring about the same causes as their teachers is controversial.

Other critics believe that inundating our schools with required service will take it away from the altruistic nature of volunteer work.

Are not young people likely to begin to view voluntarism through the same lens as a required lab report, a history paper, or laps around the track? Service projects required by schools as a condition of graduation
Although volunteer work seems to be high among teens, it could be for all the wrong reasons, either a graduation requirement, or an admirable outlet for their narcissism, an avenue through which to gain more reward. Capital University in Michigan is currently conducting an “Empathy Experiment,” in an effort to answer the questions about whether empathy can be taught at all, and, if so, whether that empathy affects broader social change. Just because service or volunteer work is required by an institution doesn’t mean that all who engage in the service will suddenly become more empathetic to others. Nevertheless, for those who have the desire to become more empathetic people, seeing these behaviors modeled by others acts as a catalyst for change.

However, because the narcissist also finds reward as a result of performing service work, it is hard to distinguish between a truly empathetic person and an impostor.

In fact, statistics show that volunteerism itself is high among teenagers, and the media frequently provides coverage of young people involved in Habitat for Humanity or church-related mission trips. In other words, altruistic, people-serving adolescents do exist in our society. Having said that, we have experienced an equally growing trend of students seeking attention or reward for volunteerism. This trend perpetuates the narcissistic idea of doing something for others only when some personal reward is gained. (Mason and Brackman 49)

The motivation for most volunteer work, it could be argued, is actually narcissistic in nature. When reflecting upon a flyer that posed the question “Why should I care about service leadership?” spotted at Colorado College, a small liberal arts school, Twenge and Campbell rightly criticized the apparent narcissism behind the five points listed. All the

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7 “The general consensus among empathy scholars is that the answer is yes and yes – but only under specific circumstances … it is unrealistic to expect students to become more empathetic if they aren’t actually committed to the idea. In other words, they have to have the desire to change” (Grasgreen).
reasons listed were about developing skills and experience useful for careers for the person performing the service. “There was no mention of the people who need help or the value inherent in helping them. And that makes sense given the narcissistic culture – if you want to recruit volunteers, focus on what’s in it for them” (251).

The media, labeled purveyor of the cultural narcissism epidemic, can also be faulted for the increase in volunteerism as well. As much as the news channels love a feel-good story about students serving their communities, it is precisely this coverage that creates the distortion between the relatively trivial problem solved by the service work and the importance of the volunteer.

Educators should avoid the urge to overly involve the media or the press … Volunteerism is an arena that requires students to do the right thing simply because it is the right thing to do. If students receive fame, glory or accolades for helping others, the emphasis and distraction of the extrinsic motivators may lead to future actions that are less altruistic and more narcissistic in nature. (Mason and Brackman 72)

Another way in which volunteerism can coexist with narcissism is based on the foundation of self-esteem education that most of our youth have had. “Criteria for self-esteem frequently employed in American self-concept research include physical appearance, physical ability, achievement, peer acceptance, and a variety of personal traits” (Katz). This means that in order to evaluate our own worth, what we essentially are doing is comparing ourselves against those around us. In the world of service work, this often means that serving a population deemed lesser than ourselves (the poor, illiterate, homeless, etc.) boosts our self-esteem. Hence so many youth, having participated in volunteer work, report feeling better about themselves.

If children are taught to base their self-appraisals on favorable comparisons of themselves with others, then the identification of inferior others, whether individuals or groups, may become endemic to society.
When the two tendencies — to base self-esteem on characteristics that are present at birth and to elevate one’s self-appraisal by identifying others who are inferior on any given criterion — occur together in a society, conditions develop which are likely to support prejudice and oppression. (Katz)

As the nation of the United States, we are continuously comparing ourselves against the performance of other nations, eternally fearful of losing our place as “number one,” even if it means denying the truth. Self-esteem based on feeling better than someone else is often an unintended outcome of volunteer work.

Unless facilitated with great care and consciousness, “service” can unwittingly become an exercise in patronization … The crux of the problem revolves around the issue of power. If I “do for” you, “serve” you, “give to” you — that creates a connection in which I have the resources, the abilities, the power, and you are on the receiving end. It can be — while benign in intent — ironically disempowering of the receiver, granting further power to the giver. (Butin 176)

An illustration of this mentality can be found in one of the prevailing arguments surrounding illegal immigration. Considering ourselves “above” manual labor and other hard work is not uncommon, especially among teenagers. As Twenge and Campbell points out, this avoidance of hard work during the teenage years actually is robbing them of the experiences that instill humility and respect for others. “Traditionally, everyone does lousy jobs when he or she is young. This was seen as an opportunity to learn humility and character … Such work would teach young people a sense of connection to those who make careers of these jobs, rather than a vague sense of superiority over them”

8 “Some on the pro-illegal immigration side argue that “illegal immigrants do jobs that Americans are unwilling to do.” There is something really disturbing about this statement; it implies that certain jobs are beneath Americans, that Americans don’t want to get their hands dirty or their backs sore doing the work that keeps the country running, so they have to import people whom they consider beneath them to do it. This is one of the twists of logic of the narcissism epidemic: apparently, being lazy and unwilling to work makes Americans better than the people who are willing to work” (Twenge and Campbell 242).
(Twenge and Campbell 242). Teenagers feel somehow that it is their birthright as citizens of the United States to bypass these types of jobs, and instead be instantly a professional, whether or not they have the education or ability to do the job.

This us/them mentality is common amongst volunteers with a narcissistic value set. It seems the key is in changing what we base our self-worth on as a culture.

For Westerners, independent self-esteem is achieved by actualizing one’s own attributes, having one’s accomplishments validated by others, and being able to compare oneself to others favorably. In Asian and other non-Western cultures, self-esteem is related to self-restraint, modesty and connectedness with others. (Katz)

For those peoples that haven’t fallen into the trap of cultural narcissism, volunteer work and community involvement do indeed produce feelings of self-worth, based on the fact that they find helping others to be a reason for existence, rather than a comparison point to ensure they aren’t at the bottom of the social pyramid. Katz notes that this is the norm in other societies more so than America, at least currently. For Americans, however, our superiority is based primarily on what we are not, rather than on what we have actually accomplished. Changing the criteria on which we base our definition of self-esteem is the key. “If, on the other hand, the criteria [for positive self-esteem] address personal attributes that are susceptible to individual effort and intention, such as contributing to one’s community, then all citizens have the potential to achieve feelings of self-worth, self-respect and dignity” (Katz).

In conclusion, the key to volunteer work being an antidote to narcissism is ensuring that the motives behind it are truly altruistic, and that we are striving to be of service in a real way that actually benefits others more than ourselves. The side benefits of increased humility and empathy and a greater awareness of the world are simply and
only what we should take away from the experience. If the result of our service is greater media coverage, more time in the spotlight, a required duty, or accolades from our friends and family, then the value of our service has been lost.

6. Service-Learning Defined

So how do we, as educators, begin to counteract this wave of narcissism in a way that is proactive, pro-social, and academically rigorous? How do we take the good produced by students participating in volunteer work, touted to be anti-narcissistic in some ways, and make it truly academic? How do we ensure that it resonates with students and produces the change desired, rather than reinforcing stereotypes? The answer seems to lie in the methodology termed service-learning. Having faced struggles and mixed reviews in educational circles since the 1990s, the argument and the evidence for service-learning is becoming more widespread, as is the need to reform education for a more just, empathetic and civic-minded society.

The most cohesive definition of service-learning is from the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse:

Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills and knowledge content. (Butin 127)

This definition is explicit in naming one of the primary purposes of service-learning as being change. It is this effort toward marked change that makes it stand out from other character education programs, other types of experiential education, and stand-alone volunteer work. The primary purpose of service-learning is to initiate change,
making it a prime candidate for countering cultural narcissism. Nevertheless, it goes well beyond just changing individuals. “More specifically, it integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, encourage lifelong civic engagement, and strengthen communities for the common good” (“Service-learning”).

Although this seems like a tall order for an educational methodology, statements from a variety of sources abound in support service-learning’s potential as an antidote to narcissism. “The academic service-learning experience, with its built-in reciprocal nature, also provides a way to move students out of their natural young adult narcissism toward a sense of self in the service of others” (Manring 8). More than just an avenue for broadening horizons, service-learning requires students to develop a thorough knowledge of the issues surrounding the service, as well as reflect on what they have learned about the issues and about themselves, through participation in the project and the course.

True Community Service Learning means helping students make the connections between the subject material they are studying and issues in the larger world. It means tying CSL directly to the curriculum frameworks in each subject area. It means engaging students in action and reflection on important community, social, political and environmental issues. (Evans 296)

What sets service-learning apart from required volunteer work on the side of the usual curriculum is that the two are interconnected. “Academic service-learning, illustrated by student community service integrated into an academic course, utilizes the service experience as a course ‘text’ for both academic learning and civic learning” (Michigan 10). When the service is the basis for the course, it results in a course that is hands-on, lends itself well to differentiation, and works well for the active learner. The Education Commission of the States defines service learning as “a teaching method that
combines service to the community with classroom curriculum. It is a hands-on approach to mastering subject material while fostering civic responsibility” (Perry 13).

Service-learning also brings alive the belief of our ancestors that it is the responsibility of schools to help shape the moral fabric of the United States.

Service-learning is both a program type and a philosophy of education. As a program type, service-learning includes myriad ways that students can perform meaningful service to their communities and to society while engaging in some form of reflection of study that is related to the service. As a philosophy of education, service-learning reflects the belief that education must be linked to social responsibility and that the most effective learning is active and connected to experience in some meaningful way. (Hellbrandt and Varona 49)

The purpose of service-learning, therefore, is not the same as project-based education, where the project as the ultimate outcome is the vehicle through which skills are taught. Service-learning, on the other hand, is not just to engage the learner, but to create a more just society, one of the overarching goals of early American education. “The overall goal of integrating CSL into the curriculum must be to foster the development of a socially conscious and socially responsible citizenry, i.e., to help students develop a personal investment in the well-being of others and of the planet” (Evans 297). In an effort to produce a more civic-minded student, service-learning encourages getting outside the traditional confines of the classroom.

The second kind of experience needed to effectively educate students for civic responsibility goes beyond the classroom. It provides opportunities for them to apply what they learn and encourages them to participate in their community. This means giving students the opportunity to (amongst other things) participate in service-learning projects; many studies indicate that these experiences increase students’ civic-mindedness. (Perry 10)

Service-learning differs from volunteerism as well in that in a service-learning situation all the program participants are perceived to be on the same level, and learning
takes place on both sides. As Manring points out, “The emphasis on equal benefits received by both the student and the client and tight connection to course learning objectives make academic service-learning different from volunteerism, internships, co-op experiences, co-curricular service, and field experiences” (3). In addition, by placing high emphasis on the reflective part of the process, service-learning helps the student reach a stage of metacognition, the ability to think about thinking processes, and increased emotional intelligence, the ability to step back and analyze feelings and action, rather than simply acting upon impulse. These are skills that need to be fostered in all students, regardless of future career choice.

In service-learning, the readings and lectures in the classroom component of the course are shaped around the service work or population being served, so that the student is better able to understand the people they are working with.

On the community side the student provides some meaningful service (work) that meets a need or goal, that is defined by a community (or some of its members). On the campus side: the service provided by the student flows from and into course objectives, is integrated into the course by means of assignments that requires some form of reflection on the service in light of course objectives, and the assignment is assessed and evaluated accordingly. (“Spanish and Service-learning” 1)

Without this intentional design of creating understanding through careful selection of course materials, we run the risk of inculcating stereotypes instead of producing empathy.\(^9\) In this way service-learning stands even further apart from volunteerism.

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\(^9\) “Service, without a connection to theory or facts (e.g., on poverty, the cause of human rights abuses, or the structure of social service bureaucracies), simply tends to reinforce prejudice and the gap between the students and the ‘other.’ Service-learning, when done properly, weds academic rigor with real civic engagement” (Butin 128).
6.1. Service-Learning in the Disciplines

Part of the beauty of service-learning is that it is a methodology that can be adapted to fit many subjects; however, it is not appropriate for all. “Academic service-learning is not appropriate for all courses. Community service should only be integrated into a course if it will enhance the academic learning in the course, and that simply is not always possible” (Michigan 26). It is ideal, however, for use in the Social Studies amongst other subjects, due to its ability to tackle some of the harder issues of society in a more up-front, hands-on manner.

With its emphasis on social phenomena, social dynamics, and the individual’s place within the social fabric, the social studies has a rich potential for developing a student’s self-understanding and social cognition. Likewise, the social studies provide opportunities to raise questions of moral judgment in historical and social contexts and, concomitantly, to engage students in refining their moral judgment. (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 116)

How we teach social studies can make or break the civic education of our students, and, as has been shown, service-learning holds great potential for not only raising awareness about social issues, but merging our book knowledge with our real world skills.

In a similar fashion and within the social studies curriculum, geography has the potential to be engaging and realistic, engaging the moral sentiments, or mundane and ordinary, memorization of maps. Geography, an often over-looked or minimized subject in school, is a prime avenue for character education, and needs to be stressed in every social studies curriculum. “If a teacher or curriculum supervisor had to choose just one social studies course to emphasize the moral sentiments and to reveal the potentially pejorative effects of cultural narcissism, it most probably should be geography” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 125). Understanding the cultural differences between the Dominican
Republic and Haiti, for example, relies upon understanding the history, language and the geography of the two countries. Likewise, in understanding the economy of the desert of northern Mexico, we must understand the role the United States plays as the controller of waters upriver. “Geography touches on a wide range of cultural issues which are the subject of moral concern, from poverty, hunger and disease to pollution, organic farming and other ‘green’ topics, and on debates about how such problems might be addressed” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 126).

Service-learning can also take our over-exposure to technology, one of the major culprits of the spread of narcissism, and use it for the good of others. When service learning needs to take place over long distances, it can clearly benefit from technology. A letter exchange program, through hand-written letters, email or social networking sites, can be used to introduce the student to an “adolescent contemporary” that is part of the culture studied. This type of exchange has the ability to “assist with student cultural ‘de-centering’ (Piaget) and to foster, once more, greater social cognition and self-understanding (Damon)” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 139). Social networking sites, often considered a vice and the narcissist’s playground, can become avenues to connect with people in worlds other than our own. As some argue, “users of social media do it because they care about the notion of ‘us’ and want to be part of something bigger than themselves” (Carvin). Nevertheless, face-to-face relationships are preferred in a service-learning program, as they produce a different type of empathy and understanding than is possible through superficial online relationships.

In addition to the above fields, faculty members at Holy Cross College assert that “service learning can be an introduction to teaching, business, law, psychology,
sociology, science, even art.” This Christian college has a service-learning requirement for all students, although students can fulfill this requirement within the courses required for their major. One of the most revered courses falls in the course requirements for business majors. “According to the head of the Holy Cross Business Major, Tom Burczycki, ‘Every successful business person knows that true service, which is putting the wants and needs of the customer ahead of your own, is the fundamental key to success’” (Holy Cross).

Burczycki recognizes the need for interpersonal skills in a successful business career, as they are truly necessary in any career. More and more, as our culture of narcissism grows, educators are realizing that “personal and interpersonal skills are essential to success and cannot be substituted with cognitive intelligence or technical skills” (Manring 3). Despite the years of book learning that students may have, if they don’t have the interpersonal skills necessary to get along in the workplace, they will seldom experience success.

Here in Maine, the University of Maine at Machias has a service-learning requirement. From their website page justifying the requirement of service-learning, the rationale is precisely what has been discussed in this paper:

As a public institution of higher education, UMM has a responsibility to prepare students not only for their future careers, but also for their obligations as citizens in their communities and in the world. In addition to fostering students’ intellectual development, UMM is also dedicated to the idea that students should develop ethically and socially, becoming responsible citizens. (“Statement of Purpose”)

They have decided that a service-learning requirement, regardless of the student’s major, is essential to producing well-rounded, responsible citizens.
The truth is, service-learning lends itself well to many majors and subjects, precisely because as a methodology it teaches skills necessary in any career field. In fact, the American Association for Higher Education has published a series on Service-Learning in the Disciplines, beginning in the late 1990s. This series includes books written specifically for the disciplines of Biology, Communication Studies, Engineering, Political Science, Psychology, Medical Education, Nursing, Spanish, Composition (Writing), Accounting, Philosophy, Teacher Education, Sociology, Peace Studies, Environmental Studies, Management, Women’s Studies, History, Planning and Architecture, Lodging, Foodservice and Tourism, and Religious Studies. The list of disciplines that are appropriate vehicles for service-learning, as one can see, is quite extensive.

6.2. Service-Learning and World Languages

Connected to both social studies and geography, world language education also holds great potential for service-learning programs. Seeing a need for learning language and having a real-life context in which to apply the language are common struggles for language programs. Service-learning, therefore, can provide the necessary avenue to help learners recognize that language takes place in sociocultural context in which language acquires and conveys meaning among individuals and communities. Meaningful language study and training then requires that learners participate in these processes by interacting with community members, participating in their pursuits, and learning with them instead of about them. (Hellbrandt and Varona 1)

Through service-learning we can move from a superficial perception of culture (holidays and foods), to real relationships in which students learn about the true values and social norms embedded in a culture.
The use of service-learning as a methodology is especially suited to the Spanish language classroom for several reasons. The national standards for foreign language teaching, according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) are listed as follows: Communication (Communicate in Languages Other Than English), Cultures (Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures), Connections (Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information), Comparisons (Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture), and Communities (Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home & Around the World) (“National Standards”). It is around these standards that most state learning standards, including the Maine Learning Results, are designed. Service-Learning is a methodology which helps the learner attain all of these goals, making the foreign language classroom an ideal discipline in which to employ it.

The first standard, Communication, naturally requires interaction with others to fulfill. While this can be satisfactorily attained within the classroom walls through interaction with the teacher and other students, it is more beneficial for the student to employ these skills outside the classroom. This opportunity can be made available through service-learning. The fulfillment of this standard, Communication, when achieved through service-learning, overlaps with the standard Communities, as this standard requires using the language beyond the classroom. Whether it is through direct service or through letter-writing or online communities, the two-way learning that takes place through service-learning provides a much richer forum for the Communication and Communities standards. In addition, the interactive nature of this type of learning creates
an unending cycle of questions and further learning, which lends to the creation of life-
long learners, one of the overarching goals of education.

In a linguistic and cross-cultural setting, this spiral of learning occurs naturally as students develop relationships in a given community. The desire for deeper and more effective communication with community members naturally provokes students to ask linguistic and cultural questions, seek answers, and apply newly acquired knowledge in a legitimate and tangible context. (Hellebrandt and Varona 16).

Among my own students, I find that when there is direct interaction with a member of a community that is Spanish speaking, students come to me with many questions and increased curiosity about the culture or simply language questions, so that they can better use their knowledge the next time they are in a similar situation. From students who work in grocery stores and interact with Spanish-speaking customers, to a student who tutors a middle-school student who recently immigrated from Cuba, to students who recently went on a family vacation to Mexico, any experience that makes the language use “real” for them, contextualized and meaningful, leads to increased interest in the classroom.

Service-learning provides a similar effect for most students involved, in that it creates a situation where classroom knowledge can be applied, leading to a cycle of questioning, application, and further questioning.

The second “C” of the standards, Culture, is one that is often confused and simplified in the Spanish-language classroom. One author appropriately describes “one of the traditional ways of teaching bits and pieces of cultures as the 4-F Approach (fiestas, folk dances, festivals and food)” (Hellebrandt and Varona 2). The downfall of this approach to teaching culture is that without more in-depth understanding of cultures and the forces behind them, we could actually be promoting ethnocentrism. “Knowledge about another culture … lacks the personal in-depth experience students gain only from
personal immersion into that culture, experience they need to protect against ethnocentrism” (Hellebrandt and Varona 2). This superficial experience of culture is precisely what service-learning strives to combat. Service-learning goes beyond the 4-F approach and instead tries to help the student attain a higher level of cultural awareness. According to Robert Hanvey in his 1976 publication “An Attainable Global Perspective,” he lists four levels of cultural awareness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>awareness of superficial or very visible cultural traits: stereotypes</td>
<td>tourism, textbooks, National Geographic</td>
<td>unbelievable, i.e. exotic, bizarre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one’s own</td>
<td>cultural conflict situations</td>
<td>unbelievable, i.e. frustrating, irrational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one’s own</td>
<td>intellectual analysis</td>
<td>believable, cognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider</td>
<td>cultural immersion living the culture</td>
<td>believable because of subjective familiarity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Hanvey’s Four Levels of Cultural Awareness

These levels have been cited by many professors of service-learning in foreign language, as it is argued that service-learning affords a higher level of cultural understanding. Rather than aiming for a level I understanding of culture, we as language teachers should be aiming for a level III awareness, especially with students who have taken more than one year of a foreign language. While this level would be ideal for all students, it is probably unrealistic for the level one language student, as this is likely their first experience with a culture unlike their own. However, by not presenting upper-level language students with opportunities and experiences that encourage higher cultural awareness, such as service-learning, students are not likely to ever reach this deeper
understanding of culture, with or without cultural immersion. Compartmentalized teaching of culture through the 4-F method limits the cultural growth of our students; service-learning helps push them to a higher level, facilitating future success when immersed in the target community.

This also leads us to the “C” Connections, which states, “Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures,” and Comparisons, and its goal that “Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.” It is natural for students to compare and contrast their own culture with that of whichever culture they are studying. Service-Learning stresses the understanding of differences by helping students reach beyond the level I or II understanding of culture that Hanvey described. The background investigation, targeted readings and reflection aspects of service-learning create the avenue through which the student can confront the “cultural conflict situations” and resulting frustration that Hanvey describes, and convert it into the “intellectual analysis” described in level three. For example, the post-trip reflection writing of one of my students describes her observation of the importance of inter-human relationships in the Dominican Republic, and contrasts her perception with that of people in the US. When asked what she misses about the host country, she wrote:

I miss the people. I also miss the sense of community, the respect people have for one another, and the appreciation that everyone has for one another. I feel as if many things go unappreciated here in the US; this being not just material possessions, but people as well. The people grasp the sense of everybody doing things for the whole community, not just themselves. (Wadsworth)
Even students not participating in a service trip outside their own country can draw more than superficial conclusions about the differences between cultures after participation in a service-learning course. The final reflection work of one of my students articulated the following new understanding of the people of Central American countries after letter exchanges.

Because we also have done a bit of study on the shaky political backgrounds of these countries I thought that perhaps their cultures might still be embedded with violent tendencies. However, after studying more and reading letters from kids in Nicaragua, it’s clear that the people there are very kind hearted, loving, and very very hospitable.

Because part of the coursework included exploring the ramifications of civil war in Central America and the complexities of poverty, she could have walked away with a belief that all citizens of the area would be like those portrayed in movies. However, by establishing contemporary peer relationships with residents of the country, she learned to see past the movie’s portrayal.

Another student wrote:

I used to imagine them as just barren wastelands, but now I realize they have their own ways of going about everyday things (like transportation and school and such). I’ve learned that their perception of America is different than ours, and vice-versa. The thing that led to the change in thinking is the fact that we were actually in contact from people in these areas. It’s hard to understand something when you’re only taught it. Being in contact with these kids greatly increased the scope of my understanding.

If one of the primary goals of foreign language learning is to gain a deeper understanding of culture beyond fiestas, folk dances, festivals and food, then it seems service-learning is the obvious choice to educate more thoroughly about the background of a culture, as well as provide an opportunity for personal relationships between the student and members of the target culture.
The opportunity to put to use in context what is learned in the classroom also increases the student’s desire to perform well. Some students become acutely aware of how their pronunciation affects the ability for those they are working with to comprehend them. Spanish teachers are accustomed to trying to interpret poorly spoken Spanish on the part of their students, and unconsciously accommodate for expected errors. However, in the field, this is not the case. As one service-learning student commented:

... la diferencia entre estudiar español en una sala de clase y estudiar español en un ambiente donde nadie comprende inglés. Las personas con quienes yo trabajo no pueden comprenderme si no hablo correctamente. [... the difference between studying Spanish in a classroom and studying Spanish in an environment where no one understands English. The people with whom I work can’t understand me if I don’t speak correctly. Translation mine.] (Spanish 7)

These students, working in a medical situation, found a new appreciation for the mechanics of the language, as they realized that grammar is not just the bane of language learning, but actually of primary importance. Having a context in which to use their acquired language, they had a newfound desire to fine tune their own skills. “A few made the leap from viewing grammar as a necessary evil in academics to experiencing the connection between standard grammar, syntax, and lexicon and life-saving communication” (Spanish 8). Among my own students, through their letter exchanges with children in Nicaragua, Paraguay and Chile, they have learned about the importance of proper spelling, grammar and punctuation. Letters from 12-year-old native speakers are littered with errors, and learning to interpret the common mistakes (run-on sentences, common misspellings such as b/v and ll/y switches, slang terms) is half the battle. They not only learn about the child and the country and cultural information, but how to interpret and translate an authentic work, not a passage in a textbook, as well as how
important their own mechanics are in communication. This is good practice for the future if they are in a real-world situation in which they are serving others or working with Spanish-speaking students.

The final description of the “C” Communities, states “Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.” The interest in further learning exhibited by students that take part in a service-learning program are evident.

Many students began asking for additional information and immersion, whether through audiovisual resources, concerts, talks, plays and worship – all ways of participating or preparing to participate in Spanish-speaking communities. Without exception, each student manifested increased interest in the Spanish language and almost anything connected to it. (Spanish 9).

What more could a teacher ask for, but to instill in his or her students the desire to take the subject matter to the next level?

Overall, service-learning as a methodology offers many advantages to the foreign language teacher over a traditional curriculum.

Those institutions that have taken the initiative to help their students acquire communicative competence in a second language through applying service-learning as a methodology have experienced remarkable success, not only in their students’ acquisition of the language but also in their motivation for language learning and change in attitude toward native speakers of the language. (Hellebrandt and Varona 9).

The Spanish or foreign language classroom is one of several ideal disciplines in which to employ service-learning. As H. Nostrand established as early as 1966, “No matter how technically dexterous a student’s training in the foreign language, if he avoids contact with native speakers of that language and if he lacks respect for their world view, of what value is his training? Where can it be put to use? What educational breadth has it
inspired?” (qtd. in Hellebrandt and Varona 11). Instilling in students the desire to continue to learn a language, as well as creating competency in all aspects of the language, makes service-learning an ideal methodology for the foreign language classroom.

7. Cultural Narcissism Meets its Match: Service-Learning

So how do we, as educators, effect a long-term change over a student’s affect and values set from which they base their decisions? How do we dethrone the narcissist? Interestingly enough, service-learning in many ways parallels the steps for curing the narcissistic personality, as outlined by Karin Swann in her article about cultural narcissism and the boomer generation in particular, entitled *Busting Boomeritis and the Role of Compassion: A Psychological Perspective*.

7.1. The Cure: A Kick in the Pants

First and foremost, Swann asserts that healing requires “an existential kick in the pants with the humbling effect that sets in motion a ‘choice’ by boomers to see beyond themselves to the larger call of evolution” (Swann). Baby-boomers, according to Swann, were the original generation of narcissists. Service-learning can provide this ‘kick in the pants’ to the current generation, as it is often the first time that students have had to reach beyond their comfort zone and venture into a less protected environment, one where everyone surrounding them is *not* there simply to build up their self-esteem and protect them. “Generally speaking, people don’t change without some sort of spiritual awareness, life-altering experience, or systematic approach to changing their mindset” (Pinsky and
Young 240). While service-learning can’t promise to provide the first two as they are subject to individual response, it will certainly be a “systematic approach to changing their mindset”, and we can only hope that the other two are a byproduct. It may encourage shy students who may not otherwise put themselves on the line to go out of their self-esteem protecting comfort zone and realize that the experience is not so bad. As one student wrote in his or her journal of a service-learning course:

As I sit and reflect upon my experience in this class, only one metaphor comes to mind... I AM A CANDLE. I am burning bright with inspiration. But it was not always this way. At the beginning of the year, I was a lump of wax, inside my glass shell, not exactly sure how to go about getting lit. Sure, I had all the things necessary for the lighting; I had desire which was my wick, and I had the wax to keep it going. All I needed was the spark. [This] class was it: Education is not the filling of a pail; it is the lighting of a fire (W. B. Yeats). (12/97) (Hutchinson)

As the author comments about this student’s reflection, “I think this student's entry expresses an experience common to many students. Many are interested in service; however, they need the opportunity to enter this community ‘zone of proximal development.’ They need a spark” (Hutchinson).

Participation in a service-learning program often requires students to perform skills in an unfamiliar environment, outside the safety of the classroom. When skills are on display for someone other than the teacher, the stakes are higher. “[Children] are more likely to achieve real self-esteem from experiences that provide meaningful challenge and opportunities for real effort” (Katz). It is this experience that fosters true self-esteem, rather than the inflated false self-esteem that is the result of never allowing failure. “Allowing them to face realistic challenges, being supportive (without rescuing them) when they struggle, and letting them get used to the dance of effort and frustration, are all critical to your child’s developing self-esteem” (Pinsky and Young 233). Service-learning
puts children in a situation where they will have to negotiate these failures and frustrations for themselves.

Getting out of one’s comfort zone also makes us realize our own vulnerability. While it is easy to feel in control of our own little world, opening ourselves up to situations where we are not in control makes us realize how our lives really do hang in the balance.

One reason that academic service-learning works so well as a vehicle for emotional intelligence development may be that the context (nonprofit social service agencies) moves students out of their comfort zone. Exposure to clients whose life circumstances were more difficult and challenging than those of our students seemed to awaken for some students a sense of appreciation for what they had, as well as a kind of awareness of vulnerability (‘But for fate, there walk I’), that life can be hard and do hard things to people. (Manring 8)

It is easy for us to judge others from inside our own little bubble, but walking into their bubble forces us to contemplate that we are not so far removed. “Service learning, then, shares with study abroad or other experiences in foreign countries, the outcome that students become more accepting” (Spanish 8).

Becoming more aware of others by stepping outside of our comfort zones, therefore, is step one in curing narcissism.

Service learning should force students out of their comfort zones culturally, economically, and socially. It should involve hands-on experience working with others from the community, should challenge students to revisit their prejudices and stereotypes about the “other,” and should be able to connect what students learn from theory with reality. (Butin 128)

Going beyond this comfort zone is parallel to what Vygotsky termed the zone of proximal development, or the range of tasks that provide optimal cognitive growth. As educators, our daily task is to push students into this zone, so that their range of independent tasks is
forever expanding. “A child’s zone of proximal development includes learning and problem-solving abilities that are just beginning to develop in that child – abilities that are in an immature, ‘embryonic’ form” (Ormrod 45). It is of utmost importance that we do not allow students to remain in this “immature, ‘embryonic’” stage, therefore pushing beyond the comfort zone is essential. Leading a student through a service-learning experience should push them into a new range of tasks and independent behavior. However, the initial “kick in the pants” isn’t the entire key to the cure, but simply the starting point.

7.2. Relationships

The second key to curing narcissism, according to Swann, is the assertion that “healing requires the help of others; it is necessarily intersubjective (i.e., it does not happen from anything we figure out on our own)” (Swann). Service-learning provides this through the relationships it creates through ongoing service. While isolated volunteer opportunities may provide a quick glimpse into another world, it is only through ongoing relationships that a person will learn to empathize and truly understand another’s life. Without the shared experience and support of others, personal epiphanies seldom occur. “Integrating a stabilized way of being free(er) from narcissism simply does not happen outside the context of shared experience and this deepening authentic relationship to our past” (Swann). Figuring out who we have been and why, and more importantly who we want to be, is contingent upon forming relationships with other people.

Service-learning, once again, forces students to forge relationships with real people, people other than their peers, superficial internet relationships and parasocial
celebrity relationships. According to Dr. Drew Pinsky, psychologist of celebrities, “the antidote to this [narcissism] is stable, emotionally meaningful human relations” (Pinsky and Young 238), precisely the type of relationships that service-learning strives to create. In a world where we can easily fill up our time with meaningless modes of diversion, such as Facebook games like Farmville and Fishville, concentrating on our own lives and our “me” time, we miss the primary reason for living: Relationships. “Our lives should draw their meaning, and their greatest joys, from our interactions with others, but it’s too easy in society today to focus too much of our energies on our own personal needs and to place only limited value on our personal relationships” (Pinsky and Young 243).

Through service-learning, students not only form stronger peer relationships, but there is also opportunity to form peer relationships with peers unlike themselves, and adult/child relationships through supervisors and other participants in a mixed-age community project. “Students frequently point out, in their journals and in class discussion, that what is most interesting about service is the social aspect, working with other people … It is direct service, not indirect service, that is most gratifying” (Rimmerman 14). Working directly with others and learning that they have much in common with people once considered different than themselves is key to curing narcissism. “When we see ourselves as connected to others, egotism dissipates. This is great news: there is a potential cure for narcissistic aggression as we can teach children how similar they are to one another” (Twenge and Campbell 286).

In addition to the peer relationship, students who participated in service-learning programs reported forming another kind of relationship, the adult-student mentoring relationship. This type of relationship building proved especially valuable to students in
low-income neighborhoods, where the ratio of children to adults is disproportionate, resulting in more peer relationships and fewer adult mentoring relationships.

When asked specifically about their service experiences, more than one-quarter of the respondents reported meeting adults through their service experiences to whom they could turn for help … This matters because adults with knowledge about connections in the mainstream can help young people navigate the system. *(Growing to Greatness 69)*

These students not only benefitted from participating in the service project itself, but also in that they formed on-going relationships with other people in their community.

“Without these mentoring relationships, youths may not receive the emotional support and guidance they need to successfully transition into adult roles” *(Growing to Greatness 74)*.

In addition to the peer and adult relationships formed, volunteer work requires that all participants learn to work well with one another. When people have a shortage of relationships outside the immediate family in their lives, it is easy for them to believe that they are easy to get along with. However, when working in a group of unfamiliar people, students face more challenges.

*Project work provides children with ample opportunity for real discussion, decision making, choices, cooperation, initiative, joint effort, negotiation, compromise, and evaluation of the outcomes of their own efforts. In this way, children’s self-esteem can be based on their contribution to the work of the group, and to the quality of the group’s effort and its results. (Katz)*

While Dewey’s bottom-up method of teaching morality leaves room for improvement, he was correct in endorsing the use of cooperative learning groups.

*He believed that children must experience cooperation in the classroom if they are to live cooperatively in society and to practice democratic living. These cooperative classroom experiences should not only reinforce rationale problem-solving skills, but they should engender in students empathy and respect for various points of view. (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 13)*
Because empathy is seen as such an important factor in civility and understanding in personal as well as international relations, a direct empathy instruction initiative has been initiated by the European Union in Ireland as a way to promote peace between Northern and Southern Ireland, a region of historic unrest. This three-year project targets Irish children. As an advocate of the project, Goodman states, “The educated young people are the people who are going to be changing policies in the future. We better be sure that they’re empathetic” (qtd. in Grasgreen).

The ability to work together produced by service-learning has been noted even in business schools. Susan L. Manring, Ph.D. at Elon University in North Carolina, in her dissertation *Using academic service-learning in a business school curriculum to foster development of emotional intelligence* stresses the need for more service-learning in fields like business due to the relational training students receive that is not available in the typical business curriculum. The ability to relate to others, and thereby become good business managers, relies in high emotional intelligence, fostered through service-learning.

The two primary dimensions of emotional intelligence are personal competence and social competence. Personal competence includes *self-awareness* of one’s own emotions and emotional tendencies; *self-regulation*, or the ability to express and manage one’s emotions, especially disruptive emotions and impulses; and *self-motivation*, the ability to pursue goals with energy and persistence. Social competence includes *empathy*, the ability to understand and react sensitively to the emotions that others are feeling; and *social skills*, the ability to build rapport with others, manage relationships and networks, build and lead teams (Goleman, 1998; Weisinger, 1998). Both of these dimensions come into play with academic service-learning, academic service-learning provides a real-life context for stimulating students’ emotional intelligence. (Manring 3)
Emotional intelligence, therefore, is essential to success in business and other careers, as well as helping students see themselves as productive members of society.

Service-learning, therefore, isn’t just an avenue to create relationships, but through them teach relational skills, and foster empathy, an emotion known to counter narcissism. Says Brother Chris of Holy Cross College, “Service learning provides a living laboratory for all the real world skills we want to teach, especially compassion for our fellow man” (“Why a College”). Once students have been given the initial push to participate in service learning, the relationships they form create the conduit for curing narcissism.

The opportunity for real change, particularly in how you experience yourself in relation to others, comes from spending time with people who aren’t deeply familiar to you, and who are therefore more challenging to connect with. When I meet people who have made major changes in their behavior and sense of self, they often tell me that their willingness to change developed after spending a significant amount of time with someone new and different. Rather than repeatedly experiencing themselves as they always had, these people literally allowed themselves to be seen through a new pair of eyes. (Pinsky and Young 244)

Pushing students out of their comfort zone, these new relationships create change. As a service-learning participant commented: “I think about things differently now. This isn’t about me, it is about other people” (Growing to Greatness 70). It is that caring for other people and having that care reciprocated that Freud agrees is essential for halting narcissistic tendencies. According to Freud’s theory, “to care for someone is to convert ego-libido into object-libido by giving some self-love to another person, which leaves less ego-libido available for primary narcissism and protecting and nurturing the self” (“History of Narcissism”). Caring and reciprocal relationships, which can be fostered through service-learning, necessarily rob us of the self-focus of our narcissistic nature.
7.3. Reflection

In her psychological cure for narcissism, Swann also insists that self-reflection and accurate analysis of oneself are essential. “One of the important lessons at this stage of development and healing (from narcissism) is that here we just begin to learn and internalize processes of self-reflection and self-deconstruction, which we will ideally apply over a lifetime” (Swann). Reflection, one of the most important parts of the service-learning methodology, is intended to do just that. Once again, John Dewey’s name comes up, in that he did advocate for reflection as an integral part of education. Glenn Hutchinson, in his description of a service-learning course he taught in English, stresses the importance of reflection to his students:

The course began with a chapter from John Dewey, ‘Experience and Thinking.’ Although this text presented some difficulty for students at first, it set a tone and framework for our course in its focus on reflection. Using Dewey's chapter, we examined different approaches to education and Dewey's criticism of education that lacked reflection: "To fill our heads, like a scrapbook, with this and that item as a finished and one-for thing, is not to think ... To consider the bearing of the occurrence upon what may be, but is not yet, is to think" (Albert 145). Then we made a connection between Dewey's call for reflection and our upcoming semester of fieldwork and reflective journal, thereby raising the expectation that every student needed to be an active learner and a co-investigator. (Hutchinson)

Reflection is one part of the service-learning process that makes it stand apart from simply performing volunteer work. Students who participate in volunteer work may or may not make the connections that will result in deeper change, but service-learning reflection leads students toward that change.

Learning requires more than experience, and so one cannot assume that student involvement in the community automatically yields learning. Harvesting academic and/or civic learning from a community service experience requires purposeful and intentional efforts. This harvesting process is often referred to as “reflection.” (Michigan 10)
The reflection process often consists of journaling or writing about experiences during the service work. Reflection also challenges the student to apply knowledge acquired through readings and lectures specifically chosen to accompany the service work. Michael Dobkowski, in his service-learning course about the Holocaust, asks students to do “extensive introspective writing that aims to help them find their own voices and to recognize how they might use their voices as a force for change and progress” (Rimmerman 66). Reflection work puts into practice the emotional intelligence skills previously discussed, encouraging students to analyze their own thoughts, emotions, stereotypes and prejudices.

Careful reflection, less a personal therapy and more nuanced by texts, lectures, and discussion, can provide a context where students will realize they belong to a bigger human circle, and their own humanity and their awareness of themselves and others can become more expansive as well. (Rimmerman 26)

The nature of service-learning is distinct from a regular classroom course in that the topics covered often are of a nature that is difficult to grasp, or multifaceted and complex, such as poverty.

Embedding structured reflection into the course, in multiple ways and at multiple times, was necessary to allow students to move to a level of analysis that engaged, rather than avoided, the messiness of studying childhood poverty. Through structured reflection, students began to understand their own responsibilities and to begin to grapple with their own obligation to take action. (Rimmerman 148)

In understanding their obligation and opportunity to take action, written reflection also helps students take a positive step toward a future of continued service. “In providing students the opportunity to interact with the world through a guided hands-on experience, and then to reflect upon it, we are encouraging them to become agents of change, ready to meet the challenges of an increasingly complex world” (Butin 189). Producing a written
reflection as part of a service-learning course is essential, as a statement in writing carries more weight than a passing comment of “yeah, I should do that again sometime.” “A written reflection encourages students to evaluate their impact on others and their future potential for further service opportunities” (Mason and Brackman 71). Reflection, therefore, creates the catalyst for internal change by solidifying and analyzing the process taking place. Reflection helps the student challenge prior notions and prejudices, which will be discussed more thoroughly in a later section.

7.4. The Teacher as Guide

Swann also uses a model of therapy involving a psychologist in her cure for narcissism, one which is paralleled in the teacher-student relationship of service-learning.

Good therapy provides a container and the right support from a fellow traveler in finding and facing the existing wounds and seeing beyond them; good therapy helps us learn humility through living toward our strengths through our weaknesses; it helps us learn how to take responsibility for meeting our own needs—discovering them through the pain of their not being met—which is a necessary prerequisite to “caring beyond ourselves.” (Swann)

Service-learning, therefore, stands above isolated volunteer work again in that it provides a fellow traveler in the journey, one with more experience that can help the student make sense of their experience.

Part of the teacher’s responsibility as guide in this journey is to choose supporting materials that will enlighten the student about the topics or issues that the class is tackling.

It would be naïve to believe that service-learning is a panacea and that it can solve any course predicament by itself. Service-learning must be integrated with the texts, discussions, and assignments conducted in class. On its own, it might be perceived as merely a charitable task that assuages
consciences and may or may not raise students’ awareness of the real world. (Hellbrandt and Varona 129)

It is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that the classroom work is supportive of the service-learning goals, and not simply extraneous time-filler. Bringing in outside information to explain what they are experiencing is essential to progress. We have well established that research shows a correlation between media children are exposed to and their resulting behavior, that exposure to violence in the media begets violence. Why not go so against the grain of narcissism so prevalent in our culture and choose literature and movies that illustrate just the opposite? “The role of reading in the formation of ideas and character is a factor recognized implicitly in pedagogy. It is implicit in moralist literature of all times … It would be cynical to say that only violence inspires action but not the literary experience of altruism” (Hellbrandt and Varona 104). Most children’s ideas of what they want to be when they grow up depend upon the literature, television and role models they were exposed to at an early age. I consider it no small coincidence that one of my primary television role models as a child was María from Sesame Street and I ended up becoming a Spanish teacher. There is a school of thought that we should put in the classroom what entertains today’s student, and cater to their interests, which often focuses on messages received by mass media. But given the influence the literature and movies has on young minds, it’s more important to let school be an opportunity for exposure to altruistic sources students might never be exposed to otherwise.

In addition, we shouldn’t sell ourselves short as teachers. We became teachers for a reason; we mustn’t loose sight of that reason. “However jaded we may become, most of us became teachers because we wanted to play our part in mending the world” (Rimmerman 62). Although the following quote actually pertains to parents, as we’ve
established by *in loco parentis*, oftentimes teachers are or should be more influential in students’ lives than a child’s parents. “Lead by example. Teach your children to value relationships as well as accomplishments. Share moral, spiritual and emotional values, and talk about how you believe they contribute to health and happiness,” (Pinsky and Young 230). As teachers, we *should* feel entitled to be role models in our students’ lives, especially if we are examples of a life lived against the tide of narcissism. Teaching is inherently a relational work, and realizing the potential of this relationship is paramount.

Teaching will necessarily involve us personally, exposing who we are and what we do and why we choose to do it … it is often forgotten that the very term *professor* denotes something worth declaring and considering by those who hear it. It is not about imposing one’s views, but about professing and pointing, as Martin Buber suggested, in the direction of the idea being explored. (Rimmerman 64)

The teacher ultimately chooses the direction of the student at least in the classroom; we must use this influence as a way to guide them *away* from narcissism.

In addition to the teacher, authority figures in the service situation and guest speakers brought into the classroom can serve as additional guides in the journey. Role models that lead a life far from our narcissistic cultural norms can help students see that buying into cultural narcissism *isn’t* the only option.

Guest speakers give real, immediate examples of service, leadership, and citizenship. As students engage in conversation with these speakers, they enter Vygotsky's “zone of proximal development” by discussing and acting upon problems they see in their communities. (Hutchinson)

The relationships established during service-learning are essential to thwarting narcissism. One of the most important of these is the teacher as they act as a guide during the service learning experience, pointing the student in a new direction. “Asking students
to engage in the world is the first step, and accompanying them upon their return is the necessary second” (Rimmerman 148).

7.5. Naming the Problem

Another part of the process of curing cultural narcissism, according to Swann, lies in naming the problem, although she warns this is really only the beginning.

The insidious thing about narcissism is that we recovering narcissists can be acutely aware — intellectually — of our condition, while all the while it is the water in which we swim … Certainly we need that jolt of self-recognition to shift us from our indulgence and delusion into the necessary depression and self-questioning that begin the process of transformation. But we should be cautious not to presume that this will happen overnight with a new and improved perspective or a heart busted open in prayer. Seeing boomeritis [narcissism among the boomer generation] as the problem — naming it, seeing it in ourselves — is just the very beginning of our journey into the future. (Swann)

We cannot expect an easy recovery, although talking openly about our cultural narcissism is an important part of the process of curing narcissism. Once again, service-learning can provide the opportunity to talk about our own narcissism, as well as our preconceived notions and prejudices stemming from our narcissism. The service experience, as well as the reflection and class discussion processes can produce volatile reactions as we attempt to dethrone our inner narcissist. But this is a good thing.

According to Alan Schore, a UCLA expert in neuropsychoanalysis and expert on the origins of personality disorders, such a change involves an integration of psychology and biology, of the mental and the physical. This, Schore says, can lead to a “paradigm shift” in the way we recognize conditions like narcissism in ourselves. “The essential thing seems to be that the patient not only see their narcissism, and talk about it,” he said, “but also that they have a physical experience of the emotion that underlies it – rage, shame, sadness, whatever it is.” (Pinsky and Young 240)
Hand in hand with this notion that an emotional response is required for healing is Swann’s assertion that “the transformation of narcissism is a slow process even under the most enlightened conditions,” and should ideally be reserved for “senior students, believing that the ultimate healing, integration, and transformation of narcissism are best received by those who already have enough awareness of their fixations to afford their letting go” (Swann). In the context of service-learning, this denial of narcissistic tendencies can be found in students who are not mature enough to engage in the process of serving, or who actively resist the teachings of the course. Teachers of a service-learning course in Santa Clara University in California made the following comment about their students: “We assumed a level of maturity and independent thinking that was only present in about 25 percent of the SCU class participants … Community members interpreted the students’ lackluster behavior as disinterest, and so the cycle perpetuated itself” (Hellbrandt and Varona 158). Although the students had enrolled in a service-learning course, they may not have understood that participating in the course would require leadership skills, preferring instead the traditional lecture/note taking backseat approach to education.

However, student resistance isn’t only confined to apathy. Student resistance can be sparked by situations of racial or class divide tension, especially if there is a tendency to use service-learning as a way for white students to be immersed in a community of color, or privileged students to be immersed in poverty.

For white students, service-learning often places them in an unfamiliar borderland that proves very threatening to the unearned advantages associated with being white. White students respond to this new knowledge with a range of emotions including guilt, anger, avoidance and confusion, which are often manifested as resistance … Never before confronted with their own unearned advantages, we find white students
resisting the critical and personal reflection necessary to produce new knowledge and awareness. (Butin 9)

There will be students who will respond in hostile and disruptive manners to the concepts presented in class. They will often try to create a situation of mutiny by arguing with the teacher on every issue, trying to win support from their classmates. They will do and say anything to uphold their prior belief system. For example, a typical response as written by one student in a class evaluation is the following: “You should never be forced to change your values. I would not recommend this class unless all you want to talk about are poor people” (Butin 14). Another student commented

My main objection [to the class] came from the fact that the service seemed political in nature, more specifically, servant of a particular agenda … which I resented. I wish this class would focus more on service and what really happens in the real world and not try to make all people look like victims when it is mostly their own faults. (Butin 15)

Being made aware of what has been termed their “critical whiteness” and the privilege associated with race and class will of course put many students on the defensive. “This is very tough work that often puts students into conflict with their families and peers. Instructors sharing their own journeys (and mistakes) help students appreciate that this is life-long work and cannot be easily resolved” (Butin 20).

Nevertheless, the resistors of change often need to experience the service work the most, and while they may seem on the surface to be totally rejecting any new ideology, we never know if one day enough forces will urge them in that new direction that there is a long-term change. Service learning is not a fix-it strategy for narcissistic kids, but rather a point on the journey where some may thereby choose to take the road less traveled. Although many others will not, they are at least now aware of its existence.
In service-learning, as a response to this resistance and hand-in-hand with the relationship building aspects of the course, we must be sure to teach what makes us all similar as humans, instead of focusing on what is different.

Multiculturalism, as it is taught in the United States, is dangerous for a democratic, multi-ethnic society because it encourages people “to think of themselves not as individuals, but primarily in terms of their membership in groups.” By focusing on differences instead of commonalities, Shanker said, “this kind of education does not increase tolerance; on the contrary, it feeds racial and ethnic tensions and erodes civil society, which requires a sense of the common good, a recognition that we are all members of the human race.” (Perry 9)

The increased focus on different cultural groups is a criticism of the “multicultural education” approach. Not that we should ignore these differences, simply that we need to establish that the more important focus is our similarities.

Service-learning once again lends itself well to breaking down these barriers, as it provides a forum for discussing the prejudice received, and the emotional distance that can be difficult to overcome, especially on initiation of the project. This is especially prevalent when white, middle-class college students are serving students of color. “There is a widespread assumption around race and class regarding who serves, who gets served, and who gets seen as productive, contributing citizens in society” (Butin 39). It can also manifest in interesting ways when students of color are involved on the service end of the project, as is demonstrated in this class reflection dialogue about the response the participants receive from community members:

David (among the 30% White students taking the course): I never experienced anything negative. I have heard things like — wow, that’s cool. You’re a credit to your age and stuff like that.
Lisa (White student): Yes, service-learning is everywhere now and it looks good on the resume. And if I say I am doing community service then people think — wow, she is a really good person or something like that. Nothing bad or negative.
John: Only if you are White. If you are a minority, they think you are doing it to cut down on jail time. People think I was involved with the police. Community service has a bad reputation among people if you are African American…

Mira: Yep. One woman actually asked me — what did you do, honey? You seem so nice. And I was like — what do you mean? And she said — aren’t you here because the judge told you?... (Butin 33)

Because so many projects unintentionally do operate on lines of color when working in populations dealing with poverty, one would imagine that students of color have an advantage in bridging the gap between participant and subject. Nevertheless, this isn’t always the case, as is demonstrated by the observations of this minority, first-generation college student participating in a service-learning program:

Somewhere along the way I had bought into the notion that these kids (poor, brown and/or urban youths) were somehow “wrong” and needed me as the now educated college student to raise them up … There was a distance between myself and these kids I so desperately wanted to help and that distance was created by the very fact that I thought they needed help. (Butin 69)

As previously discussed, one of the dangers of volunteerism is the notion of hierarchy, that the participant is “better than” the person being served. Service-learning is by no means immune to this same issue. “This is arguably a flaw of service-learning: it encourages the separation of people into a binary and assumes that one side needs to be lifted up by a more capable other” (Butin 69). Upon introducing a service-learning situation, we must be extra-cautious in how we introduce the population we will be working with.

When a student enters in a service learning situation, the first thing she often learns is the ‘plight’ of those she will help: their poorness, darkness, or less-than satisfactory academic achievements. Difference is emphasized, for the intended purpose of ‘preparing’ the serving students for what they might encounter. What this really does is set them up to “judge” those they might help. (Butin 70)
Nevertheless, what the reflection and classroom discussion aspects of service learning provide is the proper conduit through which to potentially unseat these prejudices and barriers. Bringing our narcissism and our tendencies to esteem ourselves against others into the limelight is an important part in the journey toward the cure.

7.6. Patience and Compassion

Nevertheless, as we are beginning to tackle this problem, one that is both cultural and psychological, Swann asserts that the process of enlightening our generation on cultural narcissism should give us reason to believe in a more promising future.

Its emergence as an affliction presents us with a complex yet promising moment in the evolution of consciousness … It presents us with the opportunity to begin healing and transforming from generations, centuries, epochs, of narcissism. If we meet the work of our evolution with the right vigor, care, and patience, it can ideally humble our egos, and the social and political convictions they propagate, in ways that will have very important significance for our (and the planet’s) future. (Swann)

In any program for addiction recovery, recognizing the problem is always the first step in overcoming it. As educators, once we have recognized the problem it is up to us to do everything in our power to eradicate the narcissism epidemic.

Service-learning, a methodology that has stood the test of time although still not widely used, has shown promise in dethroning the narcissist. A participant in a service-learning project through Azusa Pacific University who participated in a program in Zacatecas, Mexico: “I think even if you just look at the concept of service-learning, you’re doing a service and when you do a service, it just changes your whole attitude. I think you become a lot more humble. You’re there to contribute something or to participate” (Hellbrandt and Varona 18). Serving others fosters humility and empathy for
others. It also fosters compassion for oneself, necessary for long-term transformation.\textsuperscript{10}

People with self-compassion have no problem admitting faults and striving to correct them. They are not defensive about who they are in an effort to protect the ego; rather they are honest and open to change.

The academic service learning experience, with its built-in reciprocal nature, also provides a way to move students out of their natural young adult narcissism toward a sense of self in the service of others. While more research is needed, these forces - a preview of vulnerability, along with increased awareness of different people in different life circumstances, and a glimpse of an “other-centered” self-definition, coupled with faculty-facilitated self-reflective processes, would seem to be key in helping to foster increased emotionally intelligent skills and behavior among students. (Manring 8)

In addition, service-learning increases civic and community engagement of our youth, a primary interest of the founders of American education, and essential skill for a fruitful democratic government.

Interest in civic participation and actual activism are stimulated by the unity of one’s sense of self and one’s morality, the sense of connectedness to others, and the sense of meaning that one derives from contributing to something larger than oneself. Prosocial action and service promote all these elements. (Evans 298)

Engaging our youth in the proactive formation of their own communities is essential for many reasons which will be detailed in the next section. Let it be said, however, that the impressionable age of our youth will pass by, whether or not we use our schools as agents of change. We must decide whether the issue of increasing cultural narcissism and the

\textsuperscript{10}“Compassion for yourself isn’t about admiring or esteeming the self or making excuses for shoddy behavior—it means being kind to yourself while accurately facing reality … People who practice compassion for themselves experience less anger, fewer uncontrollable thoughts about themselves, less self-consciousness, more positive emotions, more happiness and more constructive responses to criticism. It also predicts curiosity, wisdom, the motivation to master academic tasks, and a growth in compassion for others” (Twenge and Campbell 283).
consequences that will result are worth our investment as teachers. Ignoring the problem, Swann asserts, will result in “the kind of divide between the past and the present that perpetuates the evolution of unconsciousness into the future.” Do we really want our youth stumbling around in a fog of cultural narcissism, unconsciously affecting the future of our United States?

8. Adolescence: Time to Make or Break the Narcissist

There are, in fact, two specific times in a person’s life when the tendencies toward narcissism are highest: Toddlerhood and adolescence. Since toddlerhood is generally out of our control in public education, we are left with adolescence as the primary period during which narcissistic tendencies may become deep-seated. Nipping narcissism in the adolescent bud, therefore, is essential to its demise. As Pinsky and Young explain:

The prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain involved in empathy, emotional control, impulse restraint, and rational thinking – is shut down for remodeling between the ages of twelve and twenty … Once the development of the prefrontal cortex is completed and comes online, the irrational, moody teenager becomes a young adult with a developed regulatory system, who expresses emotions appropriately, shows an ability to control primitive impulses, and has a capacity for empathy. For teens, as toddlers, it’s critical that the self-gratifying impulses of the amygdala are frustrated, so that they may develop appropriate self-control and independent function. If traumatic experiences (with sex, substance, family or peers) undermine this development, the teen can emerge from this developmental period with the wiring of his prefrontal cortex awry, locked in a form of secondary (that is, late-developing) narcissism. (187)

So while the capacity for emotional intelligence and feelings such as empathy will naturally develop over time, without the proper guidance through this time period of adolescence, the child runs the risk of being forever stuck in a mindset of teenage narcissism. If we allow the influences on the minds of our youth to be sex-saturated
media, encouraging risky behavior, substance abuse, peers who are in the same
narcissistic phase, and family members who may never have emerged from this stage
themselves, or are simply blind to the amount of influence the other three may have on
their teenager, then we are guaranteeing that the teen will emerge from this
developmental period with a narcissistic, self-centered personality.

Adolescence also marks the arrival of Piaget’s stage of Formal Operational
Thinking, a part of which is formal operational egocentrism (Ormrod 39). Formal
operational egocentrism

permits the teenager to plumb to the depths of her own thinking, which
also leads to heightened degrees of self-consciousness and self-
centeredness … This explains why so many adolescents feel that if
something is important in their own universe, everyone must perceive this
event or fact with equal attention and seriousness. (Ryan, Sweeder and
Bednar 48)

As Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar go on to explain, this self-consciousness, sometimes
called the imaginary audience, clarifies why teenagers are so concerned about physical
appearance. They use, as an example, that a teenager might not want to go to the corner
mailbox for fear of being seen wearing out-of-style sneakers. “Teenagers perceive
themselves as being on stage and that everyone is as much concerned about and aware of
their physical appearance as they are” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 48).

As doctors Pinsky and Young point out in The Mirror Effect: How Celebrity
Narcissism is Seducing America, it is this emergence of formal operational thinking that
also pushes teenagers toward admiration of celebrities and celebrity lifestyles. “Teens,
tweens, and young adults are biologically, environmentally, and culturally predisposed to
desire what celebrity promises: wealth, special privileges, and unlimited attention”
(Pinsky and Young 182). This is dually dangerous because it not only causes them to
idolize celebrities and their narcissistic lifestyle above role models in their own community, but it may leave them thinking that behavior exhibited by celebrities is commendable, not yet comprehending the consequences of such behavior. “The average adolescent, who may enjoy feelings of invincibility, while lacking the higher reasoning function of the prefrontal cortex, will be helpless to protect himself from the very real fallout of emulating his idols’ risky behavior” (Pinsky and Young 228). Their eagerness to engage in drinking, drugs and sex, even though they’ve been taught the consequences in the classroom, illustrates this feeling of invincibility.

This isn’t to say, however, that we need to protect our children from all adversity. Trying and failing is a natural part of life, and insulating them from this process is actually doing them a disservice. In the past, the adage “that which does not kill me makes me stronger” was professed as appropriate childhood encouragement. That philosophy fosters the development of perseverance, empathy, compassion, and sympathy for others experiencing some plight of their own … On the contrary, protecting children from conflict and disappointment sets them up for painful awakenings in future years. (Mason and Brackman 39)

If our youth don’t experience failures when they do still have a safety net to turn to, one that will help them process these experiences, they may make drastic and fatal choices in the future when faced with adversity.

According to noted psychologist Eric Erikson, adolescence is also a time of identity formation, called the identity vs. role confusion period, in which the adolescent strives to form a unified identity, where the public self and the private self coexist peacefully. “It appears that adolescents need a period of time to explore various options for themselves, in terms of both possible careers and ideological belief systems, before they can achieve a true sense of their adult identity” (Ormrod 87). While Erikson
believed that most people reach this defined identity by the end of adolescence, more recent studies show that “even by the high school years, only a small minority of students have begun to think seriously about the eventual role they will play in society and identify some lifelong goals” (Ormrod 87). Those of us who work with high schoolers can attest that by the end of high school, most students have very little idea of what to do next. Even if they’ve enrolled in college, they have yet to identify what career path to study and why. If this identity vs. role confusion stage is most prevalent during adolescence, then it is of course a crucial time to be exposing our adolescents to career options and ideologies that go against the narcissistic grain. Once again, by not giving them the options of altruistic ideologies and career options to explore, we are limiting their possible identity to their immediate adult community and whatever they happen to see in the media.

In this quest for self-identification, peer and parental influences both weigh in on the adolescent’s newfound identity. Here, it has been noted that “exposure to an expanding collection of people and social experiences helps the adolescent understand and appreciate her own beliefs, values and preferences,” which, needless to say, requires time on the part of teachers and adult mentors in the child’s life. But it is through these relationships that “such adults help adolescents ask the right questions, explain contradictions within answers, and in general make sense of the young person’s past and present experiences” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 51). When an adolescent is robbed of having mature mentors, for whatever reason, or rejects them in exchange for peer influence, this results in identity confusion. This is the young adult who can be easily
swayed by peer groups, and are “easy targets for the present-oriented, self-lifeplans of cultural narcissism” (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 52).

One reason that adolescents do often reject adult mentors is based on another facet of adolescent egocentrism: the personal fable. “Teenagers often believe themselves to be completely unlike anyone else. For instance, they often think that their own feelings are completely unique—that those around them have never experienced such emotions. Hence, they may insist that no one else, least of all parents and teachers, can possibly know how they feel” (Ormrod 87). Adolescents with this mentality are prone to, once again, turning to their peers, celebrities, pop culture and the images portrayed by the media as their source of role models and people they can identify with, often through the parasocial relationships mentioned earlier.

If Lasch is correct about the power and pervasiveness of cultural narcissism, then these forces could easily shift the balance of energy in normal narcissistic adolescent behavior to more enduring, debilitating forms of narcissism. In being submerged in the narcissistic belief systems and self-lifeplans of contemporary magazines, movies, media, music, advertising, and related forms of pop culture, adolescents become vulnerable to the alluring façade and promises of the narcissistic lifestyle. (Ryan, Sweeder and Bednar 50)

By allowing the majority of the influences in our adolescents’ lives to be mass media and pop culture, we are in fact aiding and abetting egocentrism, identity confusion and more deeply ingrained, enduring narcissism.

Adolescence, we can conclude, is the last chance to derail the tendency toward developing long-term narcissism. Signs that our youth are already headed in the wrong direction abound, creating societal problems for youth and adults alike, but the truth is, it doesn’t have to be this way.
American students are indeed capable of altruistic initiatives (and often more willing than many adults). Many students simply need the coinciding educational value of such endeavors if behavior is to be shaped and formed. But if students are not exposed to altruistic concepts, given the necessary coping skills for adversity, and allowed to practice those skills, the narcissistic, self-absorbed, consumer-driven culture in which we indulge may expand and the costs continue to rise. (Mason and Brackman 50)

By not presenting adolescents with alternative and more important issues to occupy their minds, they may naturally fall into the trap of narcissism. Nevertheless, those who are presented with alternatives are capable of escaping the pattern of self-centeredness that too often surrounds the young adult. As quoted in Twenge and Young, one girl, raised by missionary parents in Africa, put it well when she explained how her childhood affected her choice of joining or rebelling against the cultural norms of adolescents:

Her encounters with AIDS and death in Africa were, she says, ‘a perfect antidote to all of the bullshit of high school pettiness, clothes, college applications, parties, drinking, sex and gossip. Having something that was profound and spiritual – without preaching or dogma – was a perfect outlet. Those other things were silly. This was REAL. (Twenge and Campbell 255)

Moving the adolescents’ focus off of themselves is vital to superseding the development of narcissism, and quotes like the one above show us it is possible, despite the developmental tendencies that accompany adolescents.

In the end, it can be expected that all adolescents exhibit a certain amount of narcissism simply due to the stage of development that they are in. The development of formal operational thinking, as well as the quest for identity thrust the twelve- to twenty-year-old into the spotlight of their own life, leaving little room for the empathy and other benevolent qualities we would like them to exhibit. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that
they aren’t forever confined to the narcissistic worldview, we must provide them with mentors and experiences that will cultivate the development of a unified, moral being. Thus, it is precisely because of the naturally self-absorbed, egocentric state of the adolescent that we must use every given opportunity we have to discourage narcissism.

9. Conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here?

Citizens of the United States have always considered “The Pursuit of Happiness” to be an inalienable right in life, and it is perhaps the most oft-cited clause of the Declaration of Independence. It could be argued that this declared right is actually at the core of our trend toward cultural narcissism; doing what “makes us happy” is considered justified simply on the basis of producing happiness, and that alone is our inalienable right. In our narcissistic culture, this happiness is defined as satisfying our own primal desires. The lyrics of the 2009 hit rap song by Kid Cudi, entitled “Pursuit of Happiness” may shed some light on pop culture’s view of this pursuit:

Crush a bit, little bit, roll it up, take a hit
Feelin’ lit feelin’ light, 2 am summer night.
I don't care, hand on the wheel, drivin’ drunk, I'm doin’ my thang
Rollin the Midwest side and out livin’ my life gettin’ out dreams
People told me slow my roll I'm screaming out f*** that
Imma do just what I want lookin’ ahead no turnin’ back
if I fall, if I die, know I lived it till the fullest
if I fall, if I die, know I lived and missed some bullets
I'm on the pursuit of happiness and I know everything that shine ain't always gonna be gold
I'll be fine once I get it, I'll be good.

Likewise, according to Steven P. Lee in his essay titled Service-Learning in an Ethics Course, when he surveyed his own students he found that “students tend to view happiness as subjective, as a matter of satisfying the current desires one happens to have”
(Rimmerman 13). When our youth mirror pop-culture, a subjective definition of happiness prevails.

The Aristotelian definition of happiness, on the other hand, is an objective one, in which happiness is defined as engaging in rational activity, including the activity of practical reason. This is a critical account of happiness, one which has implications about how one ought to behave. On Aristotle’s objective account, in contrast with a subjective account, people may not know whether they are happy and may be mistaken about what will make them happy. Some actual desires are not in one’s self-interest to fulfill, and satisfying them does not lead to happiness. (Rimmerman 14)

The Aristotelian view of happiness also contends that moral and selfless behavior, while not always seemingly in our own selfish interest, can make us better moral beings and in turn lead to our happiness. Our forefathers who penned these words about the pursuit of happiness most likely held a notion of happiness more like that of Aristotle than of Kid Cudi. While the pursuit of happiness is one Americans shouldn’t give up entirely, I believe that the spread of the cultural narcissism epidemic lies in the fact that our definition of happiness has shifted over the past 200 years from one of objectivity to subjectivity.

In some ways, the narcissist himself is exactly who is beginning to realize that our subjective view of happiness doesn’t work out over the long run. While narcissists may be able to maintain their image for years, eventually most of them crash and burn, or at least begin to recognize feelings of emptiness.

An unhappy narcissist generally believes that his main problem is that other people don’t treat him as well as he deserves. When you think you're the greatest—and when other people mostly defer to you—why would you want to change? “Narcissists are either dragged in by someone who is having trouble with them—a spouse or relative—or they show up because of feelings of emptiness,” says Rhodewalt. “Why, they wonder, if they're
so accomplished and wonderful, does life seem so empty?” When you've built a life on falsehoods, it’s hard to grapple with questions that everyone faces, like the meaning of life. The needle's stuck on “I'm wonderful,” and your personality doesn't allow you to grow—to change your behavior or attitudes in response to life's challenges. (“A Field Guide”)

Nevertheless, the same article states that we are not in a hopeless situation, and that narcissism can be deconstructed. If narcissism can be fostered, it can also be treated. But redefining happiness in our culture is essential. As educators, we are historically and morally responsible for the work of promoting pro-social democratic ideals, and this redefinition of happiness and thwarting cultural narcissism go hand in hand.

Service-learning can help us do that.

We are living in a time when adults are suspicious of our youth and have very low opinions of them. Similarly, as declining civic participation among young adults shows, young people feel alienated and disaffected from our social and political community and often withdraw from participating in this arena. Service learning provides a bridge between young people and their community, giving young people a sense of hope, an experience of community, and a belief in their own personal effectiveness. In addition, service learning helps members of the community understand the contribution students can make to community improvement and brings them in direct contact with students and the instructional program of the school. (Evans 301)

Service-learning, as I’ve argued in this thesis, stands as a proven methodology for dethroning the narcissist and producing internal long-term change.

Service-learning appears ideally situated to make an impact in the classroom and the world. Combining theory with practice, classrooms with communities, the cognitive with the affective, service-learning seemingly breaches the bifurcation of lofty academics with the lived reality of everyday life. (Butin vii)

By providing a place for real-life application of classroom studies, service-learning has the potential to engage the hard-to-reach student. Likewise, it has been shown to provide
adolescents a place in which to grow toward an industrious, dynamic identity of self, at a
time when they are most in need of this support.11

Nevertheless, service-learning is not an easy fix-it program for curing cultural
narcissism. For starters, it can be a messy process. Service-learning “takes foresight,
time, organizational capabilities, creativity, networking skills, tolerance for ambiguity,
willingness to cede control of classroom learning, and an acceptance of long-term rather
than immediate increments of progress” (Butin viii). In many ways it also “challenges our
static notions of teaching and learning, decenters our claim to the labels of ‘students’ and
‘teachers,’ and exposes and explores the linkages between power, knowledge and
identity” (Butin 2). In addition, because of the lack of rote memorization and other
generally “testable” skills taught in a service-learning program, it may seem like we are
making little actual academic progress with our students. Aside from our own frustration
with this, administrators may also question our goals or what we intend to accomplish in
a service-learning program. “It is a practice that might not be rewarded by traditional
tenure and promotion guidelines, that questions (either implicitly or explicitly)
colleagues’ pedagogical practices, and that has the potential to turn out badly in a very
public and glaring way” (Butin ix). As teachers, we have to let go of a certain amount of
control in the classroom and of the students to engage in service-learning. We certainly
can’t maintain our own narcissistic egos in the face of student resistance and other
challenges that service-learning presents.

11 “There is also growing evidence of the positive relationship between resiliency and
service-learning in at- and high-risk students. Sagor (1997) points out that the key
experiences that lead to resiliency include those practices that provide a sense of
competence, belonging, usefulness, and potency. Service learning provides those
conditions” (Evans 298).
In addition, an immense amount of patience for the process is required to successfully execute a service-learning program, and we must not be discouraged by a lack of visible results, especially of the affective type. An analogy in the book *The Cathedral Within* by Bill Shore struck me as the inherent truth when trying to shift any sort of cultural tide. The truth is, we may or may not ever see concrete fruits of our labor. But this isn’t what’s important. First, Shore equates working for social justice and choosing work in the non-profit sector as cathedral building. Anyone who has ever stood in a great cathedral, whether it is in Florence or Barcelona or Guadalajara, knows its incomprehensible nature. How on earth did a structure like this come together? These days we’re used to a new building being finished in 6 months. Cathedrals, on the other hand, took generations to construct. “The vast majority of those who worked on this (and every other) cathedral did so knowing they would not live to see the final, finished achievement. This didn’t diminish their dedication or craftsmanship” (Shore 14).

Cathedral building, he asserts, is an exercise in faith and dedication to something bigger than oneself. In the same way, we as teachers are building a cathedral of society every day. We know we will never see the final product, but we must approach each day with the belief that we are indeed working toward something great, beyond our comprehension. (Of course, Shore doesn’t mention that most cathedrals were built by tyrannical leaders and slave labor, but we’ll save that metaphor for another day.) Nevertheless, the idea we need to take away from this lesson is that patience and persistence are the essential ingredients for cultural change.

This patience is true for teachers as well as students, and patience itself goes against our culture of narcissism. “The idea that changing ourselves also takes practice is
not as accepted. The culture of self-admiration tells us to love ourselves unconditionally just as we are. This is unfortunate, because most personal change takes practice and time – and we won’t always reach our goals” (Twenge and Campbell 285). We must keep in mind as well that for every five kids we try to reach, only two may show a visible response. But these two matter, and in their time they will effect further change down the line. If we hadn’t tried, we would have reached none at all. Apathy of course produces frustrations, but we never truly know what’s going on upstairs in a student’s brain. “No matter how hard we try, indifference persists, prejudice remains, and ignorance endures. Education’s gains take place slowly and imperceptively” (Rimmerman 63).

Through service-learning, both students and teachers will be made aware that change takes time, but its pursuit is not in vain. A student who participated in a service-learning program at Holy Cross college made the following observation through her project teaching non-violence relational skills to inner-city 6-8 year-olds.

I hate to admit it, but at first I didn’t enjoy going there. It was hard for me to tell if I was getting through to the kids or making a difference. However, now that I have been doing it for a while, I find they are learning new, non-violent ways to relate to each other. I have learned about the problems these children face in their lives, to be more patient with young people, and to remember that change takes time. (“Why does a college”)

Persistence, patience and faith are fundamental in the journey.

Perhaps one of the most over-used quotes about service that appeared repeatedly during my research was the following, by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve.” While I’m sure he spoke volumes on service, it doesn’t surprise me that this one sound bite would be chosen by our generation to promote service, as it highlights personal greatness as an outcome of
service. Nevertheless, Dr. King was also aware of the persistence and faith required when we try to build great temples and work toward something larger than ourselves. This understanding is evident in one of his last sermons, delivered on March 3, 1968, about a month before he died.

Dr. King read what he described as “not one of the most familiar passages” from the Old Testament. The “overlooked” passage from the eighth chapter of First King reads: “And it was in the heart of David my father to build an house of the name of the Lord God of Israel. And the Lord said unto David my father, ‘Whereas it was in thine heart to build an house unto my name, thou didst well that it was within thine heart.’” … King went on to catalog leaders from Gandhi to Woodrow Wilson to the apostle Paul, all of whom had not lived to see the fulfillment of their dreams. Slowly but powerfully, he built to this conclusion: “So many of us in life start out building temples: temples of character, temples of justice, temples of peace. And so often we don’t finish them … Well, that is the story of life. And the thing that makes me happy is that I can hear a voice crying through the vista of time saying, ‘It may not come today or it may not come tomorrow, but it is well that it is within thine heart. It’s well that you are trying. You may not see it. The dream may not be fulfilled, but it’s just good that you have a desire to bring it into reality. It’s well that it’s in thine heart.’” (Shore 29-30)

Dr. King’s definition of happiness, I would imagine, was more in line with that of our founding fathers and Aristotle than Kid Cudi. The question we must ask ourselves as educators is whether we are willing to put aside our own egos, look within our hearts, and pursue the true happiness that Dr. King speaks about, whether or not we ever see it come to fruition. “Are we willing to be that bighearted? Are we willing to be obligated to a perspective on human life that is so significant that it renders irrelevant the petty concerns of the narcissist’s playground?” (Phipps). Cultural narcissism has the advantage in that it has already saturated our media, infiltrating our homes, schools, and minds of our youth at all hours of the day. But if we believe this is not right, it is up to us to not remain silent, even if it is counter-cultural. “It is important that we put into action things that we claim
to profess as our ‘philosophy.’ Too often this philosophy ends up to be quite shallow in terms of how we practice it on a daily basis” (Hellbrandt and Varona 184). It is our democratic duty as educators to restore proper meaning to the phrase “the pursuit of happiness” and counter cultural narcissism. Through the methodology of rigorous service-learning and modeling altruistic behaviors, our classrooms can become a pivotal point in the fight against cultural narcissism.
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Gretchen Jordan was born in Omaha, Nebraska on March 31, 1977. She was raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Dallas, Texas, and Denver, Colorado, where she graduated from Arapahoe High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1995. She attended the University of Colorado at Boulder and graduated in 1999 with a Bachelor’s degree in Mass Communication and Journalism and a concentration in Spanish. As part of her undergraduate program, she studied abroad in Guadalajara, Mexico. She then moved to Maine, met her husband, and pursued a career teaching high school Spanish. She entered the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program at The University of Maine in the spring of 2008.

After completing her degree, Gretchen hopes to continue to teach Spanish, including Service-Learning, and volunteer in the missions field in the Dominican Republic through her church, creating opportunities for young people to experience the joy of serving others. She has traveled throughout Mexico and Europe, as well as Guatemala, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. Gretchen is a candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in Liberal Studies from The University of Maine in May 2011.