

A STORY OF OUR TIME

A Psycho-Spiritual Interpretation of the Prodigal Son

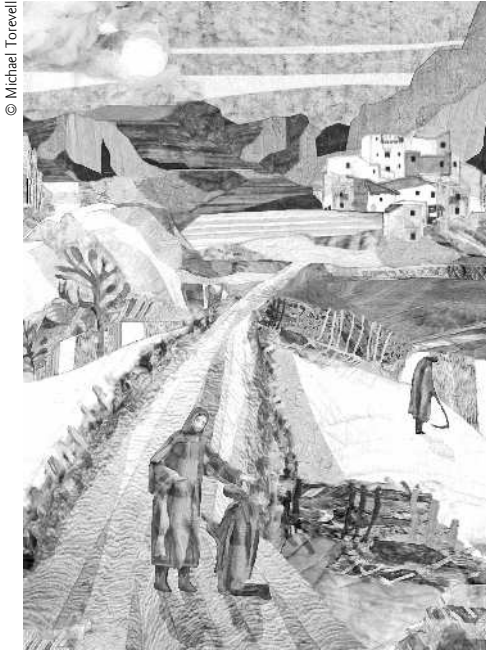
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THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON was originally directed towards a Jewish audience separated from us by 2,000 years. What, then, can it teach Christians living today? This is a personal interpretation of the story that tries also to remain faithful to what Jesus intended. I will consider its content as a literary work with a plot, characters and, importantly, an interior psycho-spiritual meaning still being played out now. Essentially, it is a story about the human need for relationships and the hope of healing the damaging consequences when relationships become strained and break down.

The main characters are two sons and their father, who is the central character. The plot concerns their experience of strain and separation in their relationships, and reveals the deep desire of the father to heal these conflicting elements and restore unity. I will focus on the character of the Prodigal Son, then and now, in relation to the experience of two interior psycho-spiritual movements. One is the movement of 'flight' from the father to a 'distant country', marked by envy and hatred, and the other is that of returning home to the father, marked by humility and gratitude.¹ I will focus upon how these two movements play out in human relationships today, especially within families, and their impact upon human health and well-being.

The psycho-spiritual movement of the Prodigal's flight represents the development of toxic systems of relationships whose spiritual root-cause is diabolical. Returning home to the father represents a process of deliverance and healing from the evil and damaging consequences

¹ See Max Picard. *The Flight from God*, translated by Marianne Kuschnitsky and J. M. Cameron (South Bend: St Augustine's, 2015), 7. Reflecting on the rise of secular culture marked by narcissism, Picard writes, 'In the world of faith, all conflict, all wavering—to flee or not to flee—was within man: it is now carried over into the dynamic of the Flight outside him. The Flight has made itself independent. It is as though it had never dwelt within man. It has now come to be something with its own structure and laws.'



The Prodigal Son, by Michael Torevell, 2019

of these relationships. Yet the movement of flight itself always carries the hope of repentance, and of turning back by taking ownership of complicity in the causes and maintenance of toxic relationships. Paradoxically, this applies equally to victims or scapegoats taking ownership of their state and condition, as Jesus did, in order to be delivered and healed. Each relies upon God's providential grace and mercy.

Consciously or unconsciously, the two movements of flight and return signify the experience of frustration and the threat of complete failure, and conversely a real progress in the pursuit of happiness. The elder brother goes

through both simultaneously. He remains with his father, yet also becomes subject to envy when he sees his father celebrating his younger brother's return. Progress is always threatened by natural and malign spiritual forces set on frustrating and stopping travel back to the father's house.

The Fall of Humanity

Secular society today is increasingly disconnected from the religious beliefs of the parable's original audience, who saw God as inseparably interwoven into every aspect of daily life. Reflected in my understanding of the diabolical spiritual source and origin of the toxic passions of envy and hatred, the religious beliefs of the parable's original audience related back to the book of Genesis. In it, God is the source and origin of the life and health of the whole of creation. The human person is its apex, vividly portrayed in the story of Adam and Eve living in perfect harmony with God in the garden. Critically, God's centrality is displaced by their disobedience—destined to be played out in the flight from the father of every subsequent prodigal.

Envy was introduced into human relationships when Satan deceived Adam and Eve into disobeying God:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' ... the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God' (Genesis 3: 1–5)

Through lies, Satan instigated the first act of joint disobedience, followed by mutual efforts to avoid blame. When God asked Adam, 'Where are you?', inviting him to confess his wrongdoing and seek forgiveness, he blamed Eve: 'she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate' (Genesis 3: 12). Eve said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate' (Genesis 3: 13). Satan's envy and hatred have now begun playing out in human relationships, with devastating consequences. This will flower in the rise of narcissism and come to bear fruit outside the Garden of Eden in the seven deadly sins.

Satan, the diabolical spiritual father of the passion of envy, through envy reduced human life to one marked by sweat and toil, culminating in death. Correspondingly, the Prodigal Son's flight from the father is propelled by envy of the 'dissolute living' apparently enjoyed by those living in a 'distant country' (Luke 15: 13). This envy moves the Prodigal Son to wound his father's heart by rejecting his love and hospitality, and setting off alone down a road that will end with living and eating among swine.

Despite the fall of Adam and Eve, Jewish tradition placed hope in God's covenant to re-establish God's sovereign rule, and deliver humanity from the evil that had inflicted a mortal spiritual wound on each person's relationship with God. This hope became focused on the Temple at Jerusalem, seen as the dwelling place of God and a microcosm of heaven and earth.² Allied to this, there was hope also in the coming of the Messiah. He would heal sickness and restore the integrity of the human person before God.

This hope was realised for Christians in the incarnation, resurrection and ascension into heaven of Jesus, the new Adam and new Living Temple, first fruit of a new creation in whom God re-established his rule. Jesus' humanity became the source of every prodigal's return home to the father. The flight from the father would therefore represent the wilful frustration of God's covenantal plan fulfilled in Jesus.

² See James T. Turner Jr, 'Temple Theology, Holistic Eschatology, and the *Imago Dei*: An Analytic Prolegomenon', *TheoLogica*, 2/1 (2018), 95–114.

The Fall of the Angels

The Church Fathers retained the focus of the parable's original Jewish audience on the account in Genesis of humanity's fall from grace. This account was also central to their understanding of the role and mission of the angels in creation. The flight from the Father plays out here once again in a diabolical spirit of refusal to accept the dignity of the human person, destined to be further elevated in Jesus.

Drawing heavily on Genesis, Irenaeus writes that, before the creation of humanity, God had brought into being 'great creations'.³ Among these were the angels, one of whom was an archangel entrusted with maintaining and governing the earth, with other angels under his authority. However, seeing that God had created man in his image, this archangel,

... became envious of him and began to murmur. He brought about the ruin of man and made him a sinner by inducing him to violate the commandment of God with full malice This angel, since he had followed his own inclinations in revolting and abandoning God, was called Satan in the Hebrew language, the same angel whom we call the devil.⁴

When Michael asked Satan to follow his example and pay homage to Adam, Satan refused to defer to someone whom he regarded as lower than himself. Satan's refusal was compounded by seeing the prospect of the Father's only Son becoming incarnate as a human person, raising the status of humanity even further above that of the angels. Satan became even more envious:

Thus, the sin of the angels was that they were jealous of man. A whole theological tradition will retain this idea in the form of a refusal on the part of Lucifer to accept the future prospect of an Incarnation of the Word.⁵

The prospect of the human person enjoying superior divine qualities by being perfectly embodied in the Person of Jesus Christ pushed diabolical envy into hatred. Jesus saw Satan's envy turn to hatred of the human

³ Irenaeus, *A Discourse in Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 11, quoted in Jean Daniélou, *The Angels and Their Mission According to the Fathers of the Church*, translated by David Heimann (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 2009), 50.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Discourse in Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 16, quoted in Daniélou, *Angels and Their Mission*, 51.

⁵ Daniélou, *Angels and Their Mission*, 52.

person, and his fall to earth: 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning' (Luke 10:18).

The Word becoming flesh was now the primary target of Satan's envy and hatred. Satan, as the 'ruler of this world' (John 16:11), is reflected in these words of Jesus to his disciples, 'If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you' (John 15:18). Satan's diabolical ill will towards humanity would eventually find its primary target when, through Judas (Luke 22:3; John 13:27), it instigated Jesus' death on the cross. This was the culmination of Satan's envy and hatred of the human person. The cross would become both the most significant symbol of the diabolical passions of envy and hatred and the sign that they have been decisively overcome, offering real hope of deliverance and healing from the toxic relationships that they create. Jesus, the victim and scapegoat, was established as the only way back to the father.⁶ The Prodigal's flight from the father was now, therefore, also a flight from the shadow of the cross. It became a refusal to accept humanity's elevation, in Jesus, to his true home in the highest heavens. Jesus' ascension into heaven made it possible for humanity fully to return home to the father's house.

The Lost Sheep

The envy of the fallen angels caused man to be expelled from paradise, his true home, and snatched away from the company of those in heaven. The Fathers say that this explained the angels' joy upon seeing Jesus ascend into heaven and reinstate humanity in their midst.⁷ This joy and celebration of the angels is expressed by the early Fathers using other biblical images as well. Most notable is that of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12–13; Luke 15:4–7), with strong allusions to the parable of the Prodigal Son. The parallels are clear. The good shepherd abandons the 99 sheep—who are the angels. He sets out in search of the one lost sheep—humanity, which has strayed far from the father and the company of heaven: 'When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices' (Luke 15:5), and goes home.

Gregory of Nyssa mingles the image of the Lost Sheep with that of the Prodigal Son. Likewise, representing humanity, he 'strayed far from the father's hearth',⁸ and upon his return the father said to his servants, who were the angelic hosts: 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—

⁶ John 14:6: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'.

⁷ See Daniélou, *Angels and Their Mission*, chapter 4, 'The Angels of the Ascension'.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eumoniüs*, 4.3, quoted in Daniélou, *Angels and Their Mission*, 55.

and put it on him And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' (Luke 15:22–24). Despite Jesus' offer of eternal life in heaven with the angels, humanity remained free to continue 'straying far from the father's hearth' and living in a 'distant country', inspired by the devil's unrepentant envy and hatred.

Pathological Narcissism

Despite today being largely hidden from view, these diabolical passions are still playing out in human relationships, and their the toxic effects are certainly not hidden. They may be seen in the Prodigal's flight from the father taking a decidedly narcissistic turn. Having identified the diabolical spiritual father of narcissism, this is no surprise. Its association with the devil finds support in Paul, when he writes about, 'the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient' (Ephesians 2:2). Jesus says of Satan in John's Gospel: 'there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.' This is a characteristic of narcissists; accordingly today's narcissists might warrant Jesus' rebuke: 'You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires' (John 8:44).

Hidden beneath the secular façade of material comfort and self-reliance, Satanic envy and hatred are flowering in his spiritually narcissistic children. Especially within families, this diabolical spiritual root cause of narcissism is the dark, wilful, unrepentant, underlying psycho-spiritual cause of toxic systems of relationships. This is evident in John Paul II's description of the world as:

... the theatre of a never-ending battle being waged for our dignity and identity as free, spiritual beings There are those who reject the light of life, preferring 'the fruitless works of darkness' (Ephesians 5:11) The paradox of the Christian message is this: Christ—the Head—has already conquered sin and death. Christ in his Body—the pilgrim People of God—continually suffers the onslaught of the Evil One and all the evil which sinful humanity is capable of.⁹

Some recovery and application of the tradition of Christian spiritual warfare seems inescapable, if the Prodigal Son is to embark upon returning home to the father.

⁹ John Paul II, homily, eighth World Youth Day, 15 August 1993.

Irrespective of whether one believes that the devil is the spiritual father of narcissism, the worrying prospect of its rise throughout the West is widely recognised. Among others, Christopher Lasch has argued that US culture has experienced the cultural normalisation of pathological narcissism.¹⁰

Narcissistic Personality Disorder and Spiritual Evil

Modern psychology states that Narcissistic Personality Disorder is indicated if five or more of nine criteria are present.¹¹ Four of these clearly reflect the Judaeo-Christian view of the devil. The first is feelings of grandiosity and superiority, with the demand for that superiority to be recognised. The second is interpersonal exploitativeness and using others to achieve one's own ends. The third is lack of empathy: being unable or unwilling to identify with, acknowledge or accept the feelings, needs and choices of others. Fourth is constant envy of others and seeking to hurt or destroy the objects or persons that are envied.

These psychological criteria resonate with the picture I have painted of a devil whose core passion is envy, turning to hatred at the prospect of the incarnation. The writer Sam Vaknin, who has been diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, has some insightful comments about the experience of pathological envy: 'It is misery and humiliation and impotent rage and a tortuous, slippery path to nowhere. The effort to break the padded walls of this self-visited cell often leads to attacks on the perceived source of frustration.'¹² And the psychiatrist Scott Peck explicitly links pathological narcissism to evil. In *People of the Lie* he writes: 'It would, I believe, be quite appropriate to classify evil people as constituting a specific variant of the narcissistic personality disorder'. Encounters described in his book forced him to ask the question as to whether there was such a thing as an evil spirit or devil. He concluded, '... obscure though it might be, I do believe there is some relationship between Satanic activity and human evil'.¹³

¹⁰ See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation*, rev. edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); see also Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Atria, 2010); Anne Mann, *The Life of I Updated Edition: The New Culture of Narcissism* (Melbourne: Melbourne U, 2015).

¹¹ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

¹² Sam Vaknin, *Malignant Self-Love: Narcissism Revisited* (Prague: Narcissus, 2005), 53.

¹³ Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (London: Arrow, 1990), 145, 211.

This linkage of spiritual evil with human evil is central to my understanding of the psycho-spiritual movement of the flight of the Prodigal today; a purely psycho-social view fails to offer insight into the role of spiritual evil. Central to the parable is the identification of spiritual evil and its remedy in the Prodigal's movement back to the father's house.

The Prodigal Son and Mimetic Theory

The significance of the psycho-spiritual dynamic of the Prodigal is also reflected in disciplines other than psychology. The influential mimetic theory of the philosopher René Girard is a prime example. Drawing inspiration from great literary masters such as Dostoevsky, Shakespeare and Proust, Girard proposed a social theory arguing that desire is both *mimetic* and *triangular*. By this he meant that we rarely desire objects straightforwardly; rather, we desire them because others desire them. As we *imitate* another's desire, we establish a *triangulation* between self, other, and object. In his flight from the father, the Prodigal Son may be viewed as expressing the imitation of another's desire. Here, though, the effect is compounded because the other's desire is that of the devil, rooted in envy and hatred of the human person. The devil's desire and passions become central in establishing the relationship between the self (Prodigal), the other (devil), and the object (the distant country and its enticements).

The combination of these relationships propels the flight of the Prodigal from the father today along a narcissistic spectrum producing broken systems of relationships and their scapegoats. Conversely, the psycho-spiritual movement of returning home is propelled by the father's desire to be reconciled and restore unity. This is realised in Jesus' humanity through grace. Importantly, this movement in response to the father's desire for the Prodigal to return home offers the most effective antidote to the rising tide of narcissism produced by the flight from God.

Girard maintained that desiring what others desire inevitably leads to rivalry and violence, and to what he called the scapegoating mechanism. This described how those in power offload culpability and blame on to a third party—the scapegoat—whose sacrifice and elimination help to discharge tension and maintain unity. Jesus' crucifixion is the most significant example illustrating the scapegoating mechanism. However with Jesus, unlike many victims, the diabolical spiritual desire of the other becomes fully exposed and stripped of power. This naming

or exposing and incapacitating of spiritual evil is critically important today to deliver and heal its many victims.

Consciously or unconsciously, direct participation in the spiritual power of the desire of the other by willing followers continues. This is central to understanding the psycho-spiritual dynamic still propelling Prodigal sons and daughters down two opposite and opposing paths. The flight from the father remains rooted in the spiritual power of the devil's desire to create dysfunctional relationships. Choosing to return home, conversely, is rooted in the supernatural spiritual power of the father's desire to deliver them from evil and erase its effects upon human health and well-being.



Satan Descends upon Earth, by Gustave Doré, 1866

Girard's work reflects the reality and consequences of these two psycho-spiritual movements as they are experienced today. He held up the gospels as mirrors that reveal a humanity that is broken, along with a new reality in Christ that is not. Importantly, this new reality is resolutely on the side of the victim or scapegoat, and not of those in power who create victims. Therefore, unsurprisingly, Jesus' death does not bring about the envisaged reconciliation of the whole community; it does not have a cathartic effect. Instead it creates two camps—those who were for Jesus and those who were against Jesus. Girard says the explanation of this is the resurrection!¹⁴ These two camps forever represent the two opposite and opposing psycho-spiritual movements of the Prodigal Son.

Drawing on two books by Scott Peck with the apt titles, *The Road Less Travelled* and *People of the Lie*, I have reflected the division between these two movements and two camps here. The first camp represents the Prodigal returning home to the father down a *road less travelled*.

¹⁴ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 2.

The other camp represents their ‘flight’ from the father, today becoming increasingly narcissistic. In the first book, written in the 1960s—the era of *I’m OK, You’re OK*—he courageously argues that life is difficult, and that personal growth is a complex and an arduous lifelong task that most people attempt to avoid.¹⁵ In *People of the Lie*, he describes those set against engaging in this arduous work who, he argued, were not merely ill but manifestly evil.

Spiritual Needs

The insights that I have drawn from the Prodigal Son choosing two different paths in his relationship to his father remain relevant to us today. His narcissistic flight from the father, marked by the devil’s envy and hatred of the human person, ends in isolation, living and eating among swine. By contrast, his choice to return home and restore his relationship with his father is marked by humility, gratitude and joy. I have shown the psycho-spiritual movement of flight to shed much light on how toxic systems of relationships are created, especially within families, linked to their impact on the health and well-being of victims and perpetrators alike.

However, this psycho-spiritual understanding of broken relationships remains largely hidden from view. This is reflected in a landmark study led by Vincent Felitti linking childhood adversity with detrimental health outcomes across a lifetime. It found that ‘health behaviors and lifestyle factors’ were the leading determinant of the health and social well-being of the nation, and that ‘potentially damaging childhood experiences ... should be recognized as the basic causes of morbidity and mortality in adult life’.¹⁶ However, this still remains largely unrecognised within health and social care, as does the link between adverse childhood experiences and spiritual and human evil.

In 2014 Dr Harold Koenig spoke of, ‘the failure of the grand experiment of separating religion from medicine about 200 years ago’ and of the importance for health professionals of identifying and addressing the ‘spiritual needs’ of patients.¹⁷ Attempting to meet these spiritual needs,

¹⁵ Compare Thomas A. Harris, *I’m OK, You’re OK* (London: Arrow, 1995 [1967]).

¹⁶ Vincent Felitti and others, ‘Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study’, *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 14/4 (1998), 245–258; and see Nadine Harris. *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity* (Boston, Ma: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 31.

¹⁷ Harold Koenig, keynote speech, European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health, University of Malta, 22 May 2014. Koenig is considered one of the world’s experts on medicine and religion. See <https://ecrsh.eu/mm/ECRSH14ConferenceFolder.pdf>.

which this psycho-spiritual interpretation of the Prodigal Son parable aims to do, will help to redress these problems within healthcare.¹⁸ This means being freed from any problem of a spiritual nature or cause and healed of the damage to human health and well-being resulting from it. A growing body of evidence shows that addressing spiritual needs within the therapeutic process helps to heal the damage to human health and well-being which finds its source and origin in them.¹⁹

I have argued that the parable of the Prodigal Son, his flight from the father and his decision to return home, represent a psycho-spiritual story of our time that desperately needs telling. The application of the insights that I draw from it offers to help growing numbers of victims of the evils of narcissism who are trapped within the damaged and broken systems of relationships it creates. Given that spiritual factors are linked to the causes of much sickness and disease, the future of healthcare in the community needs to take account of them in order to deliver care that is truly centred on the whole person.

Brendan Cook worked in mental health before embarking on a course of studies culminating in a PhD at Liverpool Hope University. With the support of his wife Jacqueline, who is a nurse, he has since been interested in applying insights from his studies within healthcare. This has led to seeing great benefits both personally and professionally from taking 'spiritual needs' seriously. Both remain involved in efforts to establish this dimension of whole-person-centred care more widely.

¹⁸ Spiritual needs' assessment should form part of a truly whole-person-centred care plan within healthcare, but in practice in the United Kingdom there is widespread ignorance about how to implement this dimension of care fully. It aims to link the core beliefs and values which motivate a patient's life and behaviour to their health and well-being outcomes.

¹⁹ See Harold Koenig, Dana King and Verna B. Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 2nd edn (Oxford: OUP, 2012).