

**Valley Pastoral Counseling Center, Inc.**

# **OUTREACH**

**Fall 2016**

**Providing Spiritually Sensitive Psychotherapy to the Shenandoah Valley Since 1980**

**300 Chestnut Ave - Waynesboro, VA 22980    540-943-8722    [www.valleypastoral.org](http://www.valleypastoral.org)**

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## **A Call to Arms- for Empathy**

By Emilie S. Thomas, MA LMFT

A few years ago I had the opportunity to travel to Sedona, Arizona for vacation. Sedona is a heartbreakingly beautiful place known for its high red desert rocks and mesas, lovely canyons, and intensely blue skies. When you are there, you cannot help feeling closer to God simply because of the wonder of Creation all around you. Having climbed high up on those red rocks and settled by myself at one point, I took advantage of the quiet and peace to

pray. I remember asking God what people truly needed to heal to make a real and lasting difference in our troubled world. Almost instantly, the word “narcissism” came to me.

Far be it from me to question such a clear answer to a prayerful question, but I found the word an almost funny choice, because we therapists have been discussing the unpleasant consequences of the rising narcissism in our culture for several years now. Yet as I reflected further, the truth of such a simple answer seemed more and more impactful. After all, narcissism is defined in very general terms as a pervasive personality pattern of superficiality, grandiosity, self-absorption, inability to connect to others in deep and meaningful ways, and lack of empathy for others. People with pathologically narcissistic traits tend to be charming or glib (often the life of the party), exploitative and manipulative in their relationships, arrogant yet easily wounded, preoccupied with image and appearances, attention and admiration seeking, and unable to accept criticism or blame. Most importantly, they cannot put themselves in other people’s shoes and understand or care how another might feel about the narcissist’s bad behavior, so to varying degrees they are likely to do whatever they feel they need to accomplish their aims, no matter the pain they cause.

While narcissistic traits in themselves are not evil- we all need to tend to ourselves to a reasonable degree- upon reflection we can see how easily evil rises out of such desire for power and admiration and lack of empathy. Have we not already seen the terrible consequences when severe narcissists are accommodated and their values are emulated? We live in a culture that worships celebrities for their looks and their attention-getting behavior. This has given rise to a great many people who will do just about anything to feel famous and important, even for a few minutes, and even if it results in violence. The news is full of stories about politicians who will do anything for power and prestige and about corporate leaders who have no problem stealing from others to maintain a desired lifestyle. We use social media as a way to connect, but that connection is based mostly on sound bytes and quick comments, not meaningful communication. We have all heard of the horrendous possibilities that social media affords to predators who can pretend to be anyone, anywhere. Superficial conversation and charm pave the way for those predators to do great harm before anyone even realizes their intent.

Scary, isn’t it? While it may be tempting to isolate ourselves in a bid for self-protection or to travel through the world in a perpetually guarded state, I believe the real answer in dealing with our predicament is to exercise with all our might our blessed gift to empathize. Cultivating our ability and willingness to walk in someone else’s shoes becomes a small light in the darkness of self-promotion and absorption. Exercising empathy is more than an act of kindness; it is a way of thinking and being in the world that connects us to the heart of others as we seek to feel and relate to what they feel in the moment. It softens us but strengthens us as well, for as we empathize with others we start to feel our shared humanity, as opposed to the alienation and defensiveness towards people that narcissism causes us to feel. As that connection grows, so does the light we shine. That light can then combine with others’ lights who dare to keep their hearts open. What if we all made an attempt to reach out and stay open to others with empathy, especially when feeling angry or scared about our differences? What kind of spiritual light would that produce? It would be a light that would connect us to each other and bring out the best in each of us-allowing us to truly know the words of Christ (Matthew 25:40) “Whatever you do to your brothers and sisters, you do also to me”. May these frightening times be an opportunity not to hide and hate, but to live out those words with all our hearts.

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## **Coping with the Holidays**

By Melissa Hansen M.S. LPC

As I write this article, the weather has barely turned cool and hardly any leaves have fallen. But a few short weeks from now, when our newsletter is published, minds will be turning to two of the busiest months of the year

and the inevitable feelings about the holiday season will arise in our chests. For some of us, November and December are beautiful, joy-filled, intense, and exciting months. Others of us dread them for they bring remarkable grief, frustration, angst, or all of these feelings. For those who have experienced significant loss in their lives, the holidays are a season of repeated reminders of the loss. The loss may be someone passing away or loss due to divorce or another kind of broken or estranged relationship, or a combination of many losses.

Even for most people who look forward to and enjoy the holidays, it is still quite stressful. For everyone else it is both stressful and full of emotion, and for some, this season feels unbearable. If you feel it is unbearable, please seek professional help.

If one searches the internet for information about how to cope with the holidays, many sites pop up (see below are some you may find helpful). And many of them tell you the same sorts of things:

*Pace yourself with holiday activities*

*Take care of your body (exercise, make healthy food choices)*

*Seek out support – don't isolate especially if you feel lonely*

*Create a budget and stick to it*

*Give your time in service to others*

*Try to find things to enjoy about the moment in which you find yourself*

*Practice gratitude*

*Limit time with toxic or unhealthy people*

Call a professional if you are having trouble coping

If you want more resources and ideas then check out this site:

[http://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/healthy\\_living/hic\\_Stress\\_Management\\_and\\_Emotional\\_Health/hic\\_Managing\\_Holiday\\_Stress](http://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/healthy_living/hic_Stress_Management_and_Emotional_Health/hic_Managing_Holiday_Stress)

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## **Veterans and Counseling**

By Michael McAndrew M.A. Intern

As graduate counseling student and a veteran of both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation New Dawn, I must recognize my own relative privilege within the veteran's community. I was an enlisted person in the Navy; frankly speaking, not many enlisted people have the opportunity to go to graduate school, much less a highly competitive counseling program. It is my responsibility to use my privilege to help war veterans return home from their respective journeys; perhaps if Odysseus had a good counselor it would not have taken him ten years to reach the shores of Ithaca following the Trojan War.

Upon reintegration to civil society, many U.S. veterans face a country that may not understand their service, or fully appreciate the extent to which they have sacrificed. Only about one half of one percent of the U.S. population has served as active duty military following the events of 9/11. It is our duty as counselors to help them acclimate to a world that is not the same as the one they left four, six, eight, ten, or even twenty or more years ago, and meet and embrace a new reality, and find their truth.

Veterans can often feel marginalized by the mental health system. Although the Veteran's Administration exists, a bureaucratic backlog may discourage many vets from seeking the help they need. Civilian mental health resources may oftentimes not be much better. A 2014 Rand Corporation study titled, "Ready To Serve" found that just thirteen percent of surveyed civilian providers met all the criteria to be considered culturally competent or sensitive to clients who are veterans. As a veteran, I understand this context intimately (as it is my own) and encourage others in the profession to do so as well.

As counselors, particularly for a diverse, multicultural population like U.S. veterans, we cannot limit our actions to the clinic alone. Veterans need interventions on their behalf not just in their local communities, but on the national level as well. It comes down to a basic issue of social justice; that we, as Americans, must ensure that these men and women who have served us in our country's time of war do not go without either competent mental

health care, or the economic and social opportunities that will see them thrive outside the clinic. I believe it is the responsibility of all counselors, both graduate students and those who have been in practice for decades, to adapt to the challenge that caring for our nation's veterans has presented to the mental health community in a multicultural, sensitive way.

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**Welcome Michael!**

By Melissa Hansen M.S. LPC

It is with great pleasure (although perhaps a little late) that we welcome Mr. Michael McAndrew as our counseling intern beginning September 2016. He is currently working toward completing his Master of Arts in Counseling and a Master of Arts in Conflict Transformation through EMU and plans to graduate in May of 2017.

McAndrew joins us with experience in the United States Navy as well as in the mental and behavioral health field. His credentials are impressive for someone in training as a pastoral psychotherapist. He is a National Board of Certified Counselors Military Scholar and has certificates in Restorative Justice as well as Strategies for Trauma Awareness, Level I and II. He is the winner of the 2013 Arts in Peacebuilding Scholarship; *The Silent Witness*. He was a graduate assistant at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. He interned at the Department of the Interior as a Veterans Initiative Intern, and is currently a Program Evaluator for Veterans programs at a small Philadelphia-based nonprofit.

Last year Mr. McAndrew interned at RMH primarily leading psychoeducational groups in the Partial Hospitalization Program and Life Recovery Program for adults recovering from addiction and other long term mental illnesses.

Mr. McAndrew is also in psychoanalytic training at the Clinical College of Colorado and recently published a paper titled "Psychoanalysis, Veterans and the Real: Or on War and Enunciation" that will be coming out later this fall.

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COUNSELING CENTER**  
300 CHESTNUT AVENUE  
Waynesboro, VA 22980

**Blog Added to our Website!**

At VPCC we recognize the need for ease of access to our information for our potential clients. So, as of May 2016, VPCC is the proud owner of a blog! You can check it out at <http://valleypastoral.org>. If you are interested in article, news, research, or need a break at work, then take a peek. We'll be updating it monthly with new and intriguing ideas.

## **Note to Pastors**

**We are requesting that Pastors in the area provide VPCC with an email address so that we may supply an electronic copy of our newsletter to them. Electronic copies are easily distributed to your congregations through your distribution list. Please send your email address to [pastoral@ntelos.net](mailto:pastoral@ntelos.net).**

## **IT IS OKAY TO SEEK HELP!**

**It is easy to schedule an appointment with us. Please contact Stephanie Sterling at (540) 932-9722 and give your name and number. Ms. Sterling or one of our Associates will return your call and discuss scheduling an appointment. You will be warmly welcomed with care, compassion and understanding. For general information please call (540) 943-8722.**

### **Great News!**

VPCC has been designated as a Category 1 Pastoral Care Specialist Training Center by the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. The training program has been designed for those who have theological training and who desire to provide care to individuals of various religious traditions. Training and supervision is provided by the Associates at VPCC. For information about the program or to schedule an interview please contact Emilie Thomas LMFT at (540) 932-1476.