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# HOW COULD HE HAVE DONE THAT?

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### How Could He Have Done That?

*We lost everything to that son of a bitch!  
Now we're going to have to close our doors.  
We're a charity, for God's sake. He knew  
that! And we're not the only ones that he  
scammed. Everyone recommended him. When  
we met he seemed so friendly and considerate.  
I'm still in a state of disbelief.*

She sat back in her chair as people muttered words of consolation. I felt her rage and frustration, her desire for justice, and her growing realization that nothing could be done in time to save her organization. Every month, nearly 20 people crowd in to this small Manhattan living room to discuss Biblical texts. This month we were discussing the creation of light and darkness, and the class leader asked us to share a personal experience with darkness. That's when the Director of a Jewish charity told us about her tragic experience with Bernie Madoff.

*"That was the darkest moment of my life;"  
she said, "when I heard that he was arrested,  
and that all our money was gone. He must be  
some kind of psychopath! How could he have  
done this?"*

How could he have done this? How can a seemingly respectable and affable human being consciously mislead, lie, manipulate, and steal from so many—including charities, nonprofit organizations, and people who considered themselves his friends—for so long, knowing that he would eventually leave

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them flat broke? The answer will no doubt emerge as investigators, psychologists, and litigators pursue the case, but it is clear that Madoff manipulated and used others for his own needs, unconcerned that he was ruining people who trusted him, and unable to recognize that others, like himself, also have needs. Madoff, it appears, is a world-class narcissist.

Narcissism can be defined as

*A pattern of traits and behaviors that signify infatuation and obsession with one's self to the exclusion of all others and the egotistic and ruthless pursuit of one's gratification, dominance, and ambition.*

Because the only person who is real to the narcissist is himself, he cannot feel what others are feeling and expects others to conform to his needs. As the light bulb joke tells us

*How many narcissists does it take to change a light bulb? Just one—but he has to wait for the whole world to revolve around him.*

The most telling feature of narcissism is the lack of empathy because empathy occurs when you experience events and emotions the way that another person experiences them—when you put yourself in another's shoes—something a narcissist cannot do. Empathy is different than sympathy or compassion, which are self-referential. When I am sympathetic or compassionate, I ask myself, "What would I feel like

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in your situation?” When I am empathic, I want to know and feel what the experience is like for *you*; I step out of myself and allow your thoughts and emotions to enter my awareness. Empathy is not a mental construct, an object of self-investigation, or a moral choice. Instead, it is a living experience of another’s consciousness, which can be quite different than your own. Although this might sound, at first, almost magical, (how can we experience someone else’s inner life?) empathy is an innate human ability. According to many developmental psychologists, empathy is a natural state that first appears early in life, when the child first realizes the reality of other people and learns to sense their emotional states. Why, then, is everyone not empathetic? The development of empathy can be stalled or stopped if the child is discouraged from feeling or showing emotions; is taught that other people are untrustworthy and are to be avoided; or if the parents are distant, severely critical, and dismissive of views that differ from their own. The child might then enter adulthood living in a defensive, self-referential bubble, afraid of getting lost in the emotions of others, or incapable of recognizing that other people feel differently. (What will we find in exploring Madoff’s past? I wonder.) Developing empathy requires the courage to drop these defenses, the conscious intention to listen carefully to another, to look for nonverbal cues, and to patiently practice.

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The good news is that we crave empathy because in those moments we feel closer to our true nature, which is unity and connection. Perhaps this is one of the core functions and appeal of much art, literature, and movies. When we are moved by an artist's vision, cry at the pain of a movie character, or are touched by a love story, we enter the emotions of another. We are not engaged in real empathy, though, because we are removed from the object of our empathy, and no interaction is possible. This experience is cathartic and is a good training ground, but real empathy can happen only in relationship between real people. When we are in the presence of others and feel their thoughts and feelings, we are propelled to take beneficial action for their benefit. Paradoxically, practicing empathy is the best thing that we can do for ourselves, fostering personal growth by allowing us to expand beyond our own personal limitations, and begin to dissolve the barriers that keep us isolated from others. Empathy helps us to be better parents, more loving spouses, more attentive friends, and more effective at our jobs. I even recently discovered a new approach to business marketing called "Empathy Selling" that teaches sales professionals how to develop empathy to increase sales and customer satisfaction. (We must remember, of course, that true empathy is not manipulative; it is not a "business tool.")

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One of my favorite movies has a moving example of the power of empathy. Titled *13 Conversations About One Thing*, this is a little-known movie that features five concurrent stories about people searching for happiness. One of the stories follows a young cleaning woman who, in spite of her financial struggles and low status as a maid, is always upbeat and optimistic. She falls in love with a client whose apartment she cleans. While carrying one of his shirts to the dry cleaner, it slips out her hands, and as she runs into the street to catch it, she is hit by a car. The driver leaves her for dead on the sidewalk, where she is later found, barely alive. Facing months of painful recovery, she maintains a positive attitude. "This must have happened for a good reason," she tells herself. When she is well enough to walk, she returns to her client's apartment, clean shirt in hand. He greets her brusquely, though, is barely concerned about her accident, and then accuses her of stealing his watch (which she had carefully placed in a drawer). This last injury is too much for her, and she descends into a deep depression, now convinced that her earlier attitude was a naïve delusion. Finally, one day she decides that life is not worth living and considers stepping into oncoming traffic. Looking across the street, she makes eye contact with one person out of the crowd. "People are so selfish...and predictable," she thinks. Then, unexpectedly, the man smiles at her—a warm, loving smile. "It was as

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if he were reading my mind,” she later tells a friend. “He looked at me and smiled, and suddenly the spell was broken.” Her sense of optimism returned, and she regained her belief in humanity’s basic goodness. The man moved on, never knowing that his one small empathetic act saved a woman’s life.

This seems like an extreme example. But maybe not.... Perhaps invisible dramas such as this occur every day, and our awareness of the emotions and thoughts of others does profoundly change lives. With the call of personal ambition, the inclination to self-involvement, and the pull of narcissism, though, empathy can take a back seat, especially in a culture that often focuses so heavily on the individual’s desires: beauty, fame, wealth, prestige. Empathy counters this narcissistic inclination. Developing empathy is a lifelong pursuit that requires the conscious commitment to care about others, with the knowledge that the boundaries that seem to separate us are not as solid as we might think. As the great child psychologist Haim Ginott wrote

*It takes time and wisdom to realize that the personal parallels the universal and what pains one man pains mankind.*

Wishing you and your family a New Year filled with health, prosperity, and peace,

Alan