

Running Head: THE LORD OF THE SELF

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**Frodo, Gyges, and The Lord of the Self**

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## Frodo, Gyges, and The Lord of the Self

### *Introduction*

John Calvin stated that “We are, from our mother’s womb, mastercraftsman of idols.” For some reason, it seems as though we live a few steps away from real life and real love. We live under the guises of counterfeit fulfillment and freedom. We live out of small stories. We are idol-makers in need of a lord, though we far too readily accept an abridged version.

Throughout history, an incredible variety of objects, religions, persons, and places have been chosen as the locus of worship, the conduit of meaning. In a society whose social capital is rapidly diminishing (Putnam, 2000), whose economy is dependent upon self-interest, emptiness, and a desire for fulfillment (De Tocqueville, 1835/1969; Cushman, 1995), and whose political system understands the self as private property and a rights-bearer, it appears that the current lord of the self *is* the self. The local self of the West, emerging from Western philosophical history and society (and now psychological practice) is an “idolatrous self” (Ford, 1999). It is a self lived largely for itself.

Psychology often reflects and propagates this constricted definition of selfhood. It is conceptually, socially, and politically funded by the status quo, providing little prophetic challenge to the societal norms to which it bows (Cushman, 1995; Prilleltensky, 1994; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). Psychology has the potential of being either a collusive or prophetic practice. Psychology can be a society’s means of justifying and maintaining the status quo or it can bring about a voice of challenge and a vehicle of change. Psychology’s history attests to a commitment to the former.

Understanding our work as psychologists to be prophetic has become central to the project of faith “integration” (for me). This form of integration asks questions of goodness and

love and takes us beyond our stunted definitions. It concerns itself with infusing justice into our work as psychologists. Our psychological paradigms should be tools for change and revolution, not the means for maintaining the given order, particularly if the given order constricts the stories by which we live and merely perpetuates an idolatrous system that impedes our movement toward others and God.

In the first section of the paper, I suggest that in Western thought the self is often an idolatrous self that is fundamentally concerned with itself (Richardson, 2006; Ford, 1999; Levinas, 1969; Cushman, 1995). The ancient Greek myth of the Gyges' ring is used to illustrate this understanding of the self and how its relationship to others is conceived in the Western mind. In the second section of the paper, I consider the practical question of how to relate a theological concept of the person to a "secular" psychological practice by drawing upon a cultural narrative that still bears the mark of a kenotic or sacrificial depiction of the self. A character study of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* will illustrate this practice. In the final section of this paper, I explore how these latent themes in our culture and its narratives can be mined and translated into our therapeutic work so as to "re-story" (Olthuis, 2001) the lives of our clients and the misaligned stories of self propagated by our culture and our psychological practices. Ultimately, it is argued that as therapists we are called to become prophetic storytellers whose stories can connect with and bring life to our clients.

#### *The Status Quo: Modern Day Idolatry*

We can see around us this narrowing of focus onto the human person, both within society-at-large and within our psychological discourse (Hillman and Ventura, 1993). Self-help books, pre-occupation with individual adaptation and growth, emphasis upon fulfillment, and the "rights" of each person to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are all indicative of this

overarching emphasis within our culture. None of this is inherently problematic, but becomes so when it becomes the totality of how we describe our journeys and our stories.

Idolatry is the acceptance of a constricted story for devotion and reverence. It is a truncation of deity. And, with the self taking center stage, it often becomes an idolatrous entity (both in theory and lived experience). The self is the center of the universe, with the majority of persons living accordingly.

Though psychology did not create this propensity toward individualism, its guilt lies in the unreflecting nature by which it justifies this trajectory and provides technologies by which persons can maneuver, function, and “frictionlessly” survive inside of it (Burston and Frie, 2006, p. 4). It did not create the self as an idol, but it colludes with this idolatry. *The other, our neighbor, is no longer a part of our definition of the self.*

I have found the work of the Jewish philosophy Emmanuel Levinas to be particularly meaningful, both in his critique of this idolatrous self and his alternative constructions of the self that make space for justice and other-centeredness. Levinas (1994) understands Western identity to have formed a way of being that no longer allows a person to even experience any form of responsibility or calling that might have a bearing on oneself, threatening human relationship and justice.

When describing the Western self, Levinas (1969) uses the Greek myth of Gyges’ ring to illustrate our existence that is largely lived in “injustice and radical egoism” (p. 173). A full account of the Gyges myth is not possible here, but a brief summary is necessary. It is a myth of unknown origin wherein a shepherd from Lydia discovers a ring on a sarcophagus that gives him the power of invisibility. He can see and hear without being seen or heard. Ultimately, he uses this power to successfully take over the kingdom.

In the Gyges account, the invisibility produced by the ring, its pull toward power, and the immunity it affords in the presence of others are powerful illustrations of what Levinas' contends to be the configuration of the Western ego. The ring bearer constructs his or her own meaning and sees without being seen. This self is immune to others, unmoved and unaffected. It authors its own reality, detached from the responsibility to anything outside of itself.

If the myth of Gyges' ring illustrates the reigning paradigm in our culture, it is to this myth that we must respond.

*Redemptive Cultural Narratives: A Kenotic Self*

When I first read the *Lord of the Rings* series, I was struck both by its popularity and its counter-cultural message. Also, Tolkien's books almost appear to be a critique of the Gyges' ring, elaborating upon the ring's draw and destructiveness. Tolkien's tale seems to represent the ring as being an idol (creating idolatrous persons out of those who bear it). In addition, he exalts sacrifice and kenosis, as represented by the character of Sam. In Tolkien's account, narcissism is unmasked and self-emptying love is esteemed as heroic. This countercultural narrative speaks to our culture, rings true to many who watch it, and is an example of a conceptual vehicle through which we can prophetically "re-story" our surrounding culture and the myths of our psychological profession.

The temptation throughout the *Lord of the Rings* epic is to possess the ring. With the ring, one can see others and affect reality without being seen, called, or affected. It lured even the most pure of heart. The taste of the ring is addictive, it is mesmerizing and the more one partakes, the more one craves its effects. The ring provides a way of being that excludes others and coalesces power, possession, and control.

In this epic, the power of the ring was understood to be evil. The characters were lured by its power. Golem transformed into a murderous, split personality tortured by his obsession with the ring (“my precious”) after spending over 500 years with it. Bilbo Baggins has difficulty relinquishing the ring and yearns for it (obsessing over it). Frodo Baggins, in bearing the ring and wearing it on several occasions, becomes increasingly obsessed with it, feels powerless to it, and ultimately gives in to its call.

One of the primary heroes of the book is not the person of Frodo, but rather Sam, the sacrificial and persistent companion. Following Frodo in the worst of circumstances and bearing his burden, carrying him on his shoulders and protecting him, Sam’s desire for the ring is absent, or at least secondary to his love for Frodo. He is non-possessive. The ring is not an idol, instead the needs of Frodo sound most loudly in his consciousness and constitute his response, his selfhood, and his activity.

Sam represents an alternative version of selfhood—humility, kenosis, sacrifice, steadfastness, simplicity, vulnerability, and exposure. His consciousness does not shape and determine the surrounding realities, but rather is shaped and determined by Frodo’s needs (food, protection, etc.). He is an ethical self that the Western only knows iconically through depictions such as this. It is still alive in our culture, just muddled, defected into counterfeit versions, and marginalized as idealistic. This paper suggests that this is more truly the self to which psychology needs to subscribe and propagate, countering the narcissistic self of that dominates the Western ideological landscape.

#### *Therapy as Restorying: Therapists as Prophetic Storytellers*

Our work as psychologists is to help “re-story” the lives of our clients (Olthuis, 2001). Might this process involve helping clients beyond themselves, into a story that involves ethical

recognition of and relationship to their neighbors? As theologically-minded therapists our sensibilities should not be derived the cultural status quo—flagrant narcissism. Healing, wholeness, freedom, and identity must involve a re-orientation to others.

It is my belief, following some of the great Jewish thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that, “The love for God is to express itself in love for one’s neighbor” (Rosenzweig, 1972, p. 214). God is known through the Other. God is known in our relationships. Moving counter-culturally with a client into an increased responsibility for others is a movement toward God, a fissure in our Western, closed-off selves.

As prophetic storytellers, we help our clients recognize within their own stories both the glimmer of where love for others is fundamental and also where self-interest remains a constricting quality. As psychologists aiming to disrupt the status quo and speak prophetically into our psychological practices, we must find ways of utilizing redemptive stories within our culture to recondition and re-story the constructs of identity out of which we live and perceive.

### *Conclusion*

The question comes down to “who is the Lord of the Self?” I have argued that the current configuration of the self within Western society disposes it to become its own lord. We are all ring-bearers, and the lure of the ring is so commonplace as to be that background hum that we can no longer detect. Freedom and self-authorship are the central ideals of the Western self (Shuman and Meador, 2003). However, this notion of freedom, if it is the beginning and the end of our constructs, is merely a reflection of the status quo, an emergent property of a consumerist history. It is not rich, thick, or expansive enough to capture the freedom to which we believe God is calling us. It epitomizes our definition of idolatry.

The self and its freedoms are not a self-sufficiency and unencumbered being, but a journey toward love, a love centered on being responsible and commanded by something other than our miniscule stories. Love requires the unraveling of our self-focused, rights-based existence.

Knowing God's love means loving one's neighbor. Freedom, selfhood, and love begin in love for one's neighbor. Cohen (2003) writes that "goodness is found- concretely lived- in moral kindness and just institutions" (p. 147). Integration, for me, is helping my clients toward "moral kindness" and assisting psychology in the process of becoming a socially-reforming, "just institution." We desire goodness for our clients, and the deepest and richest story from which to live. As prophetic storytellers, we help to transform society from its relational, moral, and spiritual anemia to a goodness that allows God to pass through.

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