The Missing Pieces: What Prevents Us from Becoming Our Authentic Selves?

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Writer's Note:

> *I am at a place in my life where I am coming to heads with who I am and where I am going, and being at Oxbow has been instrumental in finding and understanding new parts of myself to guide me in this process. I am a jumbled mess of emotions, contradictions and insecurities. Through my research I hoped to gain some clarity about what it means to be who you really are and information that would help ease my day-to-day life in my identity. I feel that I spend too much time sorting through messes in my head and disliking myself to really appreciate who and what is around me, and I wanted to understand why that is the case. This is the result of my exploration in my identity.*

Frida Kahlo lived her life surrounded by mirrors. Mirrors, from handheld to floor length, could be found in all areas of her home, even under the canopy of her bed. Whenever Kahlo felt insecure in her identity, she looked to her reflection for clarity. Frida's identity had many facets that she felt counteracted, and she expressed them in her works: European vs. Mexican, Nature vs. Culture, the loved woman vs. the rejected lover, debilitating pain vs. conventionalized beauty, past vs. present, health vs. illness, Diego (her lover) vs. herself. Frida would look in the mirror, letting her appearance act as a temporary fix for the conflicts between the dualities in her life (Chadwick 83). Frida's psychology can easily be looked at through the lens of Heinz Kohut's theory of Self Psychology. Kohut was an early 20th century psychologist, and his theory was formed around the idea of attaining a full sense of self, or in Kohut's terms, "healthy narcissism." To Kohut, this meant having internal solidarity and vitality, the ability to harness talents and work towards goals, and self-esteem that is reliable and durable in the face of negativity and allows for pride in personal success.

Kohut believed that we are all born with a core personality from which the self forms in the first few years of life, and where either healthy or unhealthy narcissism is to develop later on. Ideally, this self grows, matures and is flexible for the rest of our lives; however, if the beginning self is not nurtured properly by a parental figure in the developmental stages of life, then proper growth and maturity is prevented and a cohesive sense of self is nowhere to be found, leaving room for psychological issues, or in Kohut's terms, "unhealthy narcissism." In addition, during these developmental stages of life we attach parts of ourselves to certain objects, people and behaviors, which become our "self-objects." However, it is rare for these self-objects to stay consistent in our lives, so as they pass and fade, so do the certain behaviors and pieces of ourselves that we attached to them, resulting in insecurity. Subconsciously, we then spend a majority of our life nursing the resulting insecurity and searching for another "self-object" to replace the ones that were taken away. However, because we are no longer infants and because we cannot repeat or replicate the past, this is never possible, and a myriad of internal conflicts and insecurities fester as a result. In turn, we act with selfish intention and focus on ourselves more than those around us (Mitchell and Black 149-169). Kohut's self-psychology is very applicable to Kahlo's life; Frida's mother was inattentive and two nurses mostly raised Frida, which, one could infer, contributed greatly to her issues with identity. For Frida, the self-object she found later in life appeared to be Diego Rivera, her troublesome lover. Diego only fueled her internal conflicts with his abusive nature and unfaithfulness, yet she stayed with him because she essentially saw him as part of her (Chawick 88-91).

Kohut's theory presents one answer to a larger question: What prevents us from becoming our full authentic selves? It may be due to improper reflection and nurturing in our developmental stages, however something Kohut failed to acknowledge was the importance of cultural and historical context in the way identities are formed, as he focuses solely on the psychoanalytic pieces of the identity and self. Cultural and historical context is important to acknowledge when analyzing identity because the identity begins to form within the bounds of culture and history. We grow up with certain ideals and prejudices that come from history and are based on the society we live in, and these surrounding preconceived notions influence the way we grow up and the way our identity forms. For example, relating the theory back to Kahlo's life, what social and cultural barriers do women, specifically, face in forming a whole identity? What are the repercussions of these barriers play in the lives of women? Why is it important for women to gain a full sense of self? Kahlo had specific issues surrounding her role as a woman and as a lover, as an artist and as a individual subject to beauty standards. To answer the questions posed above, it is my understanding that one must depend somewhat on the individual's psychology, and somewhat on giving social and cultural context to the different facets of their identity.

In his beginnings in the early 1970's, Heinz Kohut considered all his work to be a simple elaboration on Freud's ego psychology. However, his ideas developed, even as he attempted to stay within the bounds of traditional psychoanalytic method, and he formed a new school of thought he dubbed Self Psychology. Parts of Sigmund Freud's ego psychology were the concepts of the narcissistic libido and the object libido, or the love of the self and the love of others, respectively. Freud believed these two to be inversely related: The greater one's self involvement, the less energy is available for attachment to others, and vice-versa. Kohut questioned this belief that there is an inverse relationship between the narcissistic libido (self love) and the object libido (love of others). He posed the vital questions: Are relationships with others worthwhile if pursued at the expense of loving one's self? Do good feelings about one's self not contribute to the richness and genuineness of our interactions with others? Kohut used Freud's ego psychology as a springboard in treating his psychoanalytic patients, filling in gaps as he went along. Empathy was key to Kohut's form of treatment. He labeled his psychoanalytic methods empathetic immersion and vicarious introspection—he believed that if the analysts put themselves in the patient's shoes and worked from that perspective, they would be better able to assist the patient in achieving normalcy. Freud defined normality by an ability to love and to work; Kohut defined normality by an ability to love and to work and the ability to feel joyful and proud of these capacities. Through practicing his psychoanalytic methods Kohut came to believe that there was a common flaw in all-psychological patients—a flaw in the way that they experienced themselves as selves. This spurred Kohut to again take a critical stance towards Freud's work, stating that under all Freudian ego conflicts were fundamental issues with self-organization, self-feeling and self-regard, and that aggression and impulsive actions were triggered by the disrupted self, not simply fundamental elements to humanity, which Freud believed. In this newly developed context, Kohut thought of the self within two frameworks: healthy narcissism and unhealthy narcissism. Healthy narcissism consisted of internal solidarity and vitality, the ability to harness talents and reach for goals, and self-esteem that is reliable in the face of disappointments and allows for pride and pleasure in successes. Unhealthy narcissism consisted of the absence of sustainable effort, self-esteem that alternated between disturbingly high and frighteningly low, and no steadying counterbalance to temper unrealistic goals or absorb frustration with defeat. Kohut saw a trend in unhealthy narcissists—there was a certain

sense of expansiveness and personal creativity that was missing in them that could be found in early childhood, but not in adulthood. He believed, by looking at childhood experiences, that a healthy self evolves within three kinds of self object experiences: self objects that respond and confirm the child's positive sense of self, and support the child's expansive states of mind; self objects that the child can look up to and respect; and self objects that, in their openness and similarity to the child, evoke a sense of essential likeness between the child and themselves. Eventually, Kohut even conceptualized self-objects and love-objects past Freud's bounds: Self-objects were representative of the ongoing human needs for attention, admiration, affirmation and connections with others whom we respect. In addition, Kohut stated self-objects (or what they represent, at least) were a fundamental part of ongoing maturation, not something we grow out of (Mitchell and Black 149-169). To summarize, Kohut believed a healthy self launched from ambition to work towards goals and the capacity to feel one's life as energized, creative and personally meaningful, and that the self was defined as "the core of the personal center of human initiative with its own motivational force aiming toward the realization of its own specific plan of action" (Kohut and Wolf 1978).

Erik Erikson came between Freud and Kohut in the grand scheme of ego psychologies. He, like Kohut at the start of his career, merely elaborated on Freud's already existing ego theory. Erikson added a dimension to the identity of the individual by putting the individual in historical and cultural context; he linked individual psychology to the world around us. Unlike Freud who, despite his theories on child development, almost exclusively worked with adults, Erikson loved and thrived while working with kids. He augmented his analytic research so he could work with children as often as possible, studying child development in many different cultural settings. Erikson believed that the self is molded by society and culture, and that childhood is a way culture preserves itself because the child would carry the culture forward in their identity. In contrast, Freud believed that childhood was a time where psycho-biological drives were expressed, and then brought under social and cultural control. Freud's framework for psychoanalytic research was solely that we are pushed by deeply rooted animalistic drives, but Erikson contextualized this and the framework became that we are pushed by these drives but also pulled by culture and history (Mitchell and Black 142-149). In this sense, Erikson was far ahead of his time; understanding cultural and social identities is key to modern understandings of the self.

Social institutions play a critical role in the way we define ourselves. The family is especially influential towards our identity. In western society women have a very prominent and defined place in the family; we are seen as primary caretakers, as nurturing mothers and housewives, and increasingly as working mothers (notice the term "working father" does not come into use nearly as often—women are seen as mothers no matter what role they take in the modern home). Because of these inherently maternal roles, women are overwhelmingly associated with altruistic qualities—compassion, support, concern for others, etc. These are all good qualities for any human to have, regardless of their gender. However, "studies and common sense suggest that personal 'altruism' in our culture often stems from guilt, fear and low self esteem rather than from freedom or self-love," (Bahdwar 26). While altruistic qualities of self may have positive connotation on paper, it is important to note where these qualities may be coming from, and why they are so often found in women rather than men. In addition, as with any quality, altruism can be seen in a negative light—as a sign of dependency or insecurity, rather than a sign of security and independence. However, in opposition, "a woman's being 'too dependent' on others is not simply a description of her psychology, but is an integral part of the

social structure to which women are relegated in our society, in which they are generally denied independence, and thus actually are dependent," (Blum 236). One could easily argue that dependence is not a personality trait, but rather a product of social and cultural surroundings and standards; this calls into question the extent to which a woman, or other oppressed individuals, can develop a whole self while still oppressed. In an ideal world, we would not need to question these facets of identity and female individuals could be altruistic and there would be no issue or discussion needed. The problem stems from a failure to see altruistic qualities (or other stereotypical qualities) as part of a woman rather than her entire identity (Blum 222-247). Society's way of thinking about women and our qualities as people (or rather, as inferiors) makes a severe impact on women achieving autonomy in our identities—whether or not we agree with the way we are represented in society, we still are exposed to it and inevitably internalize it, and unconsciously give the stereotype power as these traits come to surface. The issue is not that altruistic qualities are bad qualities to have, nor are any traditionally feminine qualities—the issue is that these qualities are pushed on to us at a young age and stifle our growth as individuals, limit our options for self growth and understanding, and contribute to a cycle of stereotypes and by extension a cycle of oppression. The issue is that internalized oppression is not an individual's personality trait; it is an epidemic preventing women from achieving autonomy and accessing our full authentic selves (Badhwar 21-28). None of this is to say that women are at fault by possessing and repossessing altruistic or traditionally feminine qualities—women are allowed, as any human, to express themselves in any way we would like, regardless of stereotypes. The issue is that "women are expected to be supportive and giving to their men and children, or to society… and to neglect their own selves or to deny their self development in the process. They are to live for others" (Blum 225). In order to adjust this problem, we need not adjust women but adjust our societal values as a whole—we need to understand that self-concern or autonomy and concern for others (or any other altruistic quality) are not mutually exclusive. A member of a California Women's Liberation group spoke of the group's purpose, stating: "There is no personal solution to being a woman in this society. We have realized that if we do not work to change society it will in the end destroy us," (Blum 243)

Having a complete sense of self is important especially for women and for other oppressed identities because it takes back a certain amount of power that has been previously stripped by society. The insecurity and confusion that societal standards produce for women cloud our identities until instability plagues every part of our lives—including our personal relationships. Studies show that a person who has no clear sense of herself and her own desires will not often have a clear sense of another's needs and desires, and will often be unable to differentiate between someone else's needs and desires and their own, producing a prime environment for unhealthy relationships to occur (Blum 232). In having an understanding of our own needs and desires, and in appreciating ourselves as full persons, we are then able to form better, healthier and more reciprocal relationships with others and the world around us. This seemed to be the goal of philosophers like Kohut and Erikson—to have a school of thought that facilitates this kind of understanding of the self. In order for us to accurately look at the self, we must use a combination of both Kohut and Erikson's ideas: We must acknowledge cultural and historical context, and understand the importance of self-love, and then we may begin to untangle the self. To quote Friedrich Nietzche, "One must learn to love oneself…with a wholesome and healthy love, so that one can bear to be with oneself and need not roam" (Mitchell and Black 139). We need not attach ourselves to self-objects, nor fall back on

identities provided by society, but simply love and understand ourselves. To feel comfortable and happy in your understanding of yourself is to allow yourself to experience life not as merely a distraction, but as living.

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