



## **Still Haunted After All These Years: A Brief Primer on Psychopaths**

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# Introduction

Dear Reader,

A few years ago I published a book about narcissism. More recently, I promised a brief primer about *psychopaths*. I suppose the impulse to write about these two personality disorders is because modern psychology hasn't been very helpful in what it has disseminated about either. Yet in a masked, obscured way, psychopaths often dominate what passes for the news--and their veiled attacks upon the world's democracies.

Though psychopaths and narcissists may share traits in common — egocentricity, a sense of entitlement, the lack of empathy, being interpersonally exploitive — I'm quite used to encountering narcissism, *and much more frequently than the estimates provided by the American Psychiatric Association* (in the last two editions of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, editions IV and V).

But psychopaths are a different, more rarely encountered breed. Yet they punch *way above* their numerical ranking. There's something distinctively missing in their foundational makeup. The kind of socialized human restraints and accountability you'd expect *as a given* in another human being, just aren't there. It's as if they've undergone a moral root canal. There's something *healthy* humans feel that they don't. They hide this--behind a mask of normalcy. And it can be shocking when they're unmasked. And I *intend* to apply a now-needed "conscious shock."

Yet whenever a psychopath has entered my life, it's been unsettling. It can scare me, and keep me up at night. I become like the therapy clients I mentioned in my narcissism book's prologue — who were having anxiety-filled reactions in the wake of Trump's 2016 electoral victory — but they *weren't* freaking over his *narcissism*.

Though under-reported at the time, the *psychopathy* starting to emerge didn't escape the notice of Oxford University psychologist Kevin Dutton — though it wasn't able to be adequately identified by many others from the manual left to them by the American Psychiatric Association. For its manual, the *DSM*, had since 1980 totally eliminated sociopaths, and couldn't bring itself to even utter the term *psychopaths* — having replaced them both with its own self-created construct: "Antisocial Personality Disorder."

But as the election cycle of 2016 was drawing toward the homestretch, Dutton wanted to explore the extent to which those running for president resembled psychopaths. As reported in "[Of Psychopaths and Presidential Candidates,](#)" a "Mind" guest blog by

Claudia Wallis, published in *Scientific American*, Dutton compared Trump and Clinton, as well as each party's runner up (Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders) to 16 historical leaders in terms of their scores on the short form of the Psychopathic Personality Inventory, which measures individually and in composite, *eight central psychopathic traits*.

For the historical leaders — some going back over 2000 years — the form was completed by biographers or other scholars, and for contemporary candidates by a seasoned political reporter. In terms of the contemporary candidates, *Trump outpaced them all in the composite scoring of psychopathic traits*, just as he wound up outpacing them in the presidential election of 2016.

And for one of the traits, “Machiavellian Egocentricity,” (where narcissism can place a bit of a thumb on the scale) he was almost beyond compare, and bested only by Adolf Hitler, while outscoring near rivals Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, *and every other world leader over the past 2000 years*. (Since I'd expect a correlation between psychopaths and autocrats, I'd be curious to see how Trump fared, if competing with Vladimir Putin, North Korea's Kim Jong Un, Benjamin Netanyahu, and other autocratic leaders today).

Though in fairness to Trump's psychopathic attributes, in his *total score* when all eight traits were combined — and as close as psychopaths come to having a decathlon, its Olympic equivalent — Trump outdid even Hitler, though the gold medal here was carried away by Saddam Hussein. But it's possible the scoring was skewed ... Or as Trump might say, “RIGGED.” For Trump deserved a higher score than a 4th place finish.

He actually tied for the gold with Idi Amin in **CN** (Carefree Nonplanfulness: difficulty in planning ahead and considering the consequences of one's actions). This became evident in most of his foreign policy decisions, and quite evident in his handling of the COVID pandemic. And for **SI** (Stress Immunity: a lack of typical marked reactions to traumatic or otherwise stress-inducing events) only two historical world leaders scored higher.

Yet what truly skewed the composite results was the score given to Trump for Blame Externalization (**BE**: inability to take responsibility for one's actions, instead blaming others or rationalizing one's behavior). His score here seems artificially low — a mere 17 points, the same awarded to *George Washington*, a horrible conclusion.

But remember, Saddam led his nation for decades, while Trump hadn't been given equal time to show what he was made of. If scoring had been done later, and not before his presidency even began, the ways he blamed all but himself for his failures,

would have placed him at the *upper* reaches of Blame Externalization, thus bringing home the silver for psychopathy as a whole, rather than a lackluster 4th place finish.

(Just in the early months of the COVID pandemic, he lied about the lethality of the pandemic, and blamed his failure to respond to it on the Obama administration, the Chinese, the World Health Organization, the CDC, the Press, and states that have complained too much).

In his talking style, you'll notice the very things he blames others for, are actually things he manifests himself. (Which seems the unholy union of *paranoid projection* and *Blame Externalization*). While the *attributes* he claims for himself are truly preposterous, and only believable by those who've swallowed the Kool Aid. As recently as the third week of 2024, when interviewed on Fox, Trump declared: "*I'm the most honest man in the world.*" Really, you can't make this stuff up!

Trump *never* admits fault; to him that conveys *weakness*. Blame Externalization is actually a central feature, if not *the* central feature of his narrative. He's really off the charts here, and at least the equal of any psychopath in history, rather than equated with the lowly George Washington.

In the composite scores of the women — Elizabeth I, Margaret Thatcher, Hillary Clinton — all finished in the bottom half of the 20 contestants. My takeaway is, that though I'm a big fan of equal opportunity, most women simply can't compete with men when it comes to psychopathy. (Though in truth, none of the women came in last).

For bringing up the rear — as if competing in events for which neither had adequately trained — there was a tie between two men: Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi.

# Sociopath, Psychopath, Antisocial Personality Disorder

## --What's the *Difference* and Why Does This Matter?

Early in the movie *Jaws*, the beach town of Amity is being threatened by a killer shark. The 4th of July is approaching, and thus the town is facing a related threat, a financial one. For closing down the beaches would also threaten the town's economy, which is dependent on summer tourists. The mayor of Amity is facing the same "economy vs. public safety" choice as America's elected officials in a time of pandemic. (And like Trump, the mayor's priority is clearly the economy).

The town's citizens go to sea in a flotilla of sketchy looking boats pursuing the shark. Remarkably, a large one is caught and displayed. Now the mayor is even more convinced it's time to open up the beaches. But when a shark expert (played by Richard Dreyfus) appears on the scene, it becomes apparent that the shark *they really need to apprehend* is a different, more menacing species—a Great White...

I'd never seen such a collective wave of anxiety in my therapy clients, as what ensued in the first weeks of the Trump presidency. The media had largely portrayed Trump as a textbook exemplar of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder—though Tony Schwartz who'd ghost written Trump's book *The Art of the Deal* had also reflected Trump's herky-jerky attention span ("like a kindergartner who can't keep still") in terms suggestive of an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. *But were either of these disorders the thing my clients were sensing, and causing them to freak?*

When Mary L. Trump's blockbuster book was approaching its publication date, and prepublication passages were leaked to the press, one that caught my eye was a passage from the book where the author, who is also a clinical psychologist, tracked the toxicity in the Trump family back to the president's father, Fred Trump, who was portrayed as a "high functioning sociopath," who treated everybody, even his family, as pawns to be used. And if they couldn't be used, he excised them...

What the above three vignettes have in common is that a diagnosis is made in the face of a threat, a diagnosis that is partially correct—but not the truly chilling thing causing people to freak, which is still swimming at large...

On July 16, 2020 Mary L. Trump appears for her first televised interview on the Rachel Maddow show. Her book has just sold 950,000 copies *in the first day* it could be obtained—even more than John Bolton's book just a few weeks earlier, another "insider's" book-- that also had to overcome the legal attempt *to block its publication*.

Whistleblowers from the Trump administration, such as Bolton, had been giving us insiders' views into the Trump administration's ineptitude and corruption since its inception. What was different was that here the insider was a member of Trump's own family—who could thus link Trump's dysfunctionality back to its family roots.

Rachel asks Mary about a particular passage in the book. It had to do with Trump's penchant for lying. On p. 163, Donald is introducing Mary L. to Melania, his bride to be. And he's telling Melania that Mary used to be a drug addict. That was a lie, and when Trump's eyes met Mary's, it was apparent to her that both she and Donald knew that he was lying. Mary said she'd never been a drug user a day in her life. Yet Trump continued with the lie, even taking pleasure in it.

Mary saw Donald's lie in two related ways. First in the context of him having given Mary a job—like he had been “the savior” of someone once an addict. But the lie also seemed in service of a familiar Trump theme: a heroic overcoming of adversity; and against all odds (Say like him becoming a billionaire and even a president—after a history of 5 bankruptcies, and countless scandals that would have doomed other political figures). She also saw it as a kind of “power play.”

But I don't think Mary fully accounted for the *pleasure* that her uncle takes in lying, and thus, why he does it so *unrelentingly*. (That was better revealed an hour later on MSNBC, when Lawrence O'Donnell was interviewing Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Lance Dodes for his responses to some of the issues raised by Rachel Meadow the hour before—which we'll get to in a bit).

Rachel asks Mary why she thinks her uncle has responded so ineptly to the pandemic crisis. She answered: “The reason he's failing at it is because he's incapable of *succeeding* at it. It would require taking responsibility for it, which in his mind would require him admitting he'd made a mistake—which in his mind would be admitting weakness; which in my family was essentially associated with the death penalty—symbolically or otherwise.”

Mary also refers to “a learned helplessness in her family.” For going back to the impact of the family patriarch, Trump's father Fred, only two options seemed available. You're either helplessly a weak loser, or equally helplessly, left with the only other option being a winning victimizer. Yet by her own example, Mary L. Trump finally managed to find a third way that is neither. You can risk *speaking out*, though it places you at risk.

And when Rachel then asked Mary if she feared now for her safety, Mary said that she was well aware of the power her uncle had. And so, she's taken precautions (which

understandably, she chose not to mention). Yet putting her safety at risk is something she was now willing to do. (For as we faced the 2020 election, the stakes were too high *not* to).

And a problem Mary finds with her uncle—if not our country—is that our 45th president has been surrounded and enabled by people who don't correct, or risk challenging him. "Then he continues with impunity." And she's rightly--and keenly aware of him having become "the most dangerous man in the world." Yet for being a clinical psychologist, there's something in her understanding that doesn't quite hit the nail on the head. Is the toxicity of Trump and his family truly because of its *sociopathy*? Or is that capturing "the wrong fish?"



## Uncle Sociopath? Uncle Psychopath?

As talking heads appeared on television in response to the issues raised by Mary L. Trump's book, *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man*, some tried to nail down whether or not Trump's racism included his niece actually hearing her uncle—or the rest of the family—utter the n-word, or anti-Semitic equivalents. Though the answer here was “yes,” the deepest psychological reflections initially to emerge were provided by Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Lance Dodes.

His appearance on Lawrence O'Donnell's show *The Last Word* seemed analogous to the shark expert played by Richard Dreyfus appearing in the movie *Jaws*. And the diagnosis he was providing was distinctly different from a family breeding and enabling *sociopaths*. His diagnosis was also more pernicious than the grandiosity and lack of empathy found in *narcissism*.

Dodes found Trump's lying, and taking pleasure in it, as well from the suffering caused to others to be a form of sadism. And sadism he said “is one of the monstrous things about being a *psychopath*. It's enjoying being vindictive and destroying those you see as enemies. And *everybody* is seen as your enemy, unless they're worshipping you.”

In response to “the learned helplessness” that Mary L. Trump had portrayed as running deep in her family, Dodes said that from what she described, “Donald Trump's father was also a very cruel, racist, vindictive man, and probably a psychopath.”

“So growing up with such a person, you learn to be either a victim, or you learn to be a victimizer. And Donald Trump (unlike Trump's dead brother, Mary L. Trump's father) learned to be a victimizer. He followed in his father's footsteps, and became the same cruel, tyrannical, victimizing person that his father was. So it is a kind of a response to helplessness. If you have to be a victim or a victimizer, you become a victimizer, if you're that kind of person.”

O'Donnell also wanted Dodes to weigh in on Mary L. Trump's reporting that admitting a mistake in her family was admitting to weakness, which in her family was essentially punished with “the death penalty.”

Dodes replied: “There's a term in my profession—*soul murder*. You can destroy somebody, especially a young child, by humiliating them, disdain or abuse. That's how Trump is. That's how he treats everyone. In order to admit mistakes, you have to *care* about what you've done. But he doesn't care. The deaths of hundreds of thousands

Americans really doesn't matter to him. And so, if you don't care, there's even less reason to admit a mistake. For what difference does it make if it doesn't hurt you?"

In the interview with Rachel Maddow just the hour before, Mary L. Trump said she was willing to risk her own safety by writing the book, feeling that it was her responsibility. That, Dodes said, "is completely different from the rest of the family, a corrupt and deeply ill set of relationships. She's doing us all a service. But unfortunately, Donald Trump won't benefit from any insight, because he's incapable. But it helps us to at least have some insight where this terrible situation, this terrible person has come from."

Given all the above, I found something curious about Mary L. Trump's narrative, and the interpretive narrative *about it* from Dr. Dodes. Both trace the pathology of America's 45th president and his family back to Donald's father, Fred. Trump's niece, a clinical psychologist, diagnoses Fred as a *sociopath*. Dr. Dodes, a psychiatrist, diagnoses both Fred and Donald as *psychopaths*. Most American psychological professionals *wouldn't be able to tell you the difference*—or how each of these diagnostic constructs, though similar, can differ from *antisocial personality disorder*.

What's equally curious is that the official manual of American psychiatry—a doorstop of over 900 pages—has *nothing* to say about sociopaths. It's as if they no longer exist, an extinct species; or has grown to be an outdated term. And you'd have to sleuth through the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* with a magnifying glass while wearing a Sherlock Holmes hat to find any reference to *psychopathy*. If you blinked you could miss it. And the manual can't even bring itself to utter the word *psychopath*.

"Psychopathy" only shows up briefly, but not in the *prevailing* model of personality disorders, but only in a suggested "Alternative Model." There, there's a brief reference to *psychopathy*, or "primary psychopathy" which is viewed but as "a unique variant" of its own, self-created construct of *Antisocial Personality Disorder*.

But to even employ a psychopathy reference in your diagnosis, you'd now have to jump through several more hoops (6 out of 7 diagnostic criteria, rather than the 3 diagnostic criteria that are required in order to diagnose someone with ASPD. It's as if the *DSM* would prefer, and make it far easier to use their own brand. Because even after jumping through the further hoops, you'd still have to jump through one more, in order to make some mention psychopathy in your diagnosis. You'd have to find evidence of a twin set of traits—a lessened degree of *anxious withdrawal* on the one hand, and a heightened degree of *attention-seeking* on the other.

The above considerations left me with some questions. Has having an inadequate reference to sociopaths and psychopaths in American psychiatry's official diagnostic manual left American psychologists less able to recognize either? And has it left America more vulnerable to having one, or both, in its White House? And lastly: *How did this ever come to be?*

To find some answers, we'll have to don our own Sherlock Holmes hat. (Which I've already done). And we'll have to go back in time ...

## Psychopaths: The Mask of Sanity



One of the things that I feel the DSM-5 got *right*--though most laymen wouldn't know it--is its understanding that if a person suffers from one personality disorder, it's rarely the case that the person suffers from that personality disorder, *and that one alone*. In fact, two personality disorders (narcissism and psychopathy) as well as the trait of Machiavellianism--or manipulativeness--have been linked in what has been referred to as the "Dark Triad."

While elsewhere I've suggested *narcissism* as perhaps the oldest of recognized personality disorders, as Greek and Roman poets had given us the myth standing behind it--the myth of Narcissus and Echo, from which narcissism was first named. And these poets were musing about narcissism over 2000 years ago. But *psychopathy* is also one of the more established personality disorders. And though it's practically disappeared from the *DSM*, it too can claim some original basis. For in the clinical tradition of American psychology it might be seen as the *prototypic* personality disorder. For the term "psychopathy," 100 years ago (in Schneider's 1923 nomenclature) referred to *all* forms of personality disorder.

So, *what happened to psychopaths* in the current view of American psychiatry? How did psychopathy become replaced by another diagnostic construct in the American Psychiatric Association's official manual of mental disorders? The clues lead back to 1941—11 years before the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* will appear in print.

What appears in 1941 is another book. It's entitled *The Mask of Sanity*. Its author, Hervey M. Cleckley, is an American-born psychiatrist. His book is about to make him the seminal modern figure in understanding psychopathy. Cleckley portrays psychopaths as "outwardly a perfect mimic of a normally functioning person," able to mask or disguise their fundamental lack of personality structure, an internal *chaos* that results in purposeful destructive behavior, "often more self-destructive than destructive to others."

Cleckley derives a checklist of 21 psychopathic features (later reduced to 16). And when *DSM-1* appears in 1952, it includes a portion of these features, and links them to other contributors who are all pursuing a "sociopathic personality disturbance," one variation of which is the "antisocial reaction." Such persons were said to be "chronically anti-social."

In retrospect, what we can see already is a psychiatrist with a well-developed vision of psychopaths, and a new manual in search of what was to become an "antisocial personality disorder," though in hindsight, it wasn't to throw off its original construct of a sociopathic disorder for another 28 years.

When *DSM-2* appeared in 1968, “anti-social” was expanded, but this time, adhering closer to Cleckley’s checklist. In other words, now we had the world’s leading authority on *psychopaths* being used for an expanded version of a construct starting off as *sociopathy*, and now veering toward an *antisocial personality disorder*—using *Cleckley’s traits* for the expansion. This was a confusing problem. It was going to get worse. For even today, most psychotherapists couldn't tell you the difference between the three.

1980 was a significant marker in what I’m reflecting. Prior to *DSM-3’s* appearance in that year, the diagnosis of mental disorders was notoriously unreliable, and based on clinicians providing a narrative paragraph description of an allegedly prototypic case. No specific or explicit guidelines were provided as to which features were necessary to make the diagnosis, or how many to consider for it to be valid.

The further development of the “Antisocial” disorder had also reached a tipping point, for it finally threw its “sociopathic” construct overboard. And the further development of “Antisocial” was largely shaped and informed by L. Robins’s study of 524 persons who were last seen 30 years earlier, when Robins had worked at a child guidance clinic for juvenile delinquents; which was a study that she closely aligned with Cleckley’s conception of *psychopathy*.

Despite her intention of being closely allied with Cleckley (which might tell you how highly he was regarded by those toiling in what was ostensibly the same field) there were notable differences in her 19-item list. On the positive side, she eliminated at least one of Cleckley’s more questionable items: “going out of their way to make a failure of life;” while retaining a number of Cleckley’s key traits such as: *no guilt* and *pathological lying*. (As key *italicized* psychopathic traits enter this account, you might find it interesting to note those that seem to mirror Trump, Putin, or other autocrats suspected of psychopathy).

However, missing from Robins's list were equally key traits of psychopaths that Cleckley had already captured, notably: *no sense of shame, not accepting blame, inability to learn from experience, egocentricity, inadequate depth of feeling, and lacking in insight*. Robins also applied an indelicate brush stroke by suggesting that the *lack of guilt* was among the *least* of valid criteria.

Forgive the editorializing, but my takeaways here are already several. First, when you have a Michelangelo long at work at a definitive project, you don’t send a gal who last flicked her brush at the juvee hall 30 years prior, to come brush over the finishing touches on the Sistine Chapel. Next is my appreciation for Cleckley’s clinical vision; for if you just read the 8 italicized traits listed in the above 2 paragraphs, it’d give you a clearer portrait of say, Donald Trump for example, than what ASPD provided—and

that's *without* some of Cleckley's other psychopathic traits added to the mix. And with Robins on board now as a member of *DSM-3's* personality disorder work group, the group was once more trying to improve the prior group's stab at *an antisocial personality disorder...*

One consideration *DSM-3's* personality disorder work group had in mind was an important one—the previous lack of guidelines around criteria, and specifically, the requirements that should be necessary for each to be considered valid. But the way they went about it became limiting in its own right. For the criterion of *recklessness* that had been central to the construct of psychopathy became burdened and less useful by having to show “driving while intoxicated, or recurrent speeding.” (What if a psychopathic client doesn't own or drive a car?).

*Relationship infidelity* became predicated upon evidence of “two or more divorces and/or separations (whether legally married or not).” While the related trait of *promiscuity* required ten or more partners within a single year. (If you only had 9, sorry, you don't make the cut). Though by this accounting, the members of almost any rock band over the past decades would already have 2 strikes against them. Also in 1980, as the *DSM* was struggling to launch a personality disorder it could call its own, another significant figure came on the scene—the Canadian-born psychologist Robert D. Hare.

Hare had briefly worked as a prison psychologist in British Columbia, after getting his M.A. in 1960. In the ensuing 3 years while researching his PhD thesis, he encountered Cleckley's *The Mask of Sanity*. It was a pivotal encounter. For in Cleckley's pioneering book, Hare had found the field that was to be his life work, a field he was soon to lead...

But Hare found the other workers in the field to be few, and with the exception of Cleckley—whom he was to correspond with until Cleckley died in 1984—not having much to offer. Finally, frustrated with the lack of decent research or insight by others, Hare developed the first version of his own *Psychopathy Check List (PCL)*. In 1980—the same year that the *DSM* formally adopted ASPD—Hare released his *PCL* to a limited circulation.

It was based on and “wished to retain the essence of psychopathy embodied in Cleckley's work.” Hare worked from his mentor's 16-item list while noting, as had Robins earlier, that some of them were “vague,” requiring “a considerable degree of subjective interpretation.” And when a 22-item version of *PCL* (in 1986) was released, it was way more aligned with Cleckley than the *DSM-3*. For it included Cleckley's

*superficial charm, lack of remorse, egocentricity, and lack of emotional depth*—none of which were included in the *DSM-3*.

Plus Hare had eliminated a number of Cleckley's more questionable items: "Absence of delusions," "good intelligence," "fantastic behavior when drunk" (!) and "suicide rarely carried out." Though Hare's elimination of Cleckley's *impersonal sex life*, and *absence of nervousness* were two swings at psychopathy that failed to make better contact at the plate. Yet I found it interesting that the absence of nervousness (anxiety) that Hare had banished, was a feature of Cleckley that continues to live in the *DSM-5's* Alternate model: *lowered level of anxious withdrawal, combined with heightened attention seeking*.

But Hare's *PCL* was reflective of more than a mere regurgitation of the best of Cleckley, and a deletion of the more questionable. Hare's own clinical vision is astute; and it added: *proneness to boredom, parasitic lifestyle, poor probation risk, and previous diagnosis as a psychopath*. (Parenthetically, *proneness to boredom* also found a home in the *DSM-5's* Alternative model, which is supposed to be more "trait based." When I first encountered it there, it struck me as one of the more deeply observed of the traits in the *DSM's* portrayal of ASPD, like a really striking image in an otherwise unmemorable poem—though I had no idea at the time, of Hare as its source).

Successive editions of Hare's *PCL* became—like Hare himself, a go-to source for assessing cases involving psychopathy. He's been an advisor to the FBI, and consultant to various North American and British prison systems.

And since 1980 onward, the *DSM* construct (ASPD) and Hare's *PCL* and its subsequent *PCL-R* became somewhat like Ford and Ferrari—foils and competitors with each other.



## Reflections on the Controversy



The initial contentions between Cleckley and Hare’s construct of *psychopathy*, and the *DSM*’s construct of *antisocial personality disorder* seemed mostly about the former construct assessing *traits*, while the latter stressed *behavior*. And over which was more or less useful in prison and convict populations; and whether one was sacrificing validity for reliability, or the other way around.

In terms of the last mentioned, the members of the *DSM3-R*’s personality disorder work group seemed to appreciate the criticism that ASPD criteria might have been lacking in the validity vs. reliability debate. And therefore, new to the *DSM* criterion set was *lacks remorse*—which had been culled from Cleckley and Hare. Similarly, the addition of the Alternative Model in *DSM-5*, a model that was to be more “trait-specified,” seems to have arisen from having the *PCL* as its foil and competitor.

By the time *DSM-4* appeared in 1994, the *PCL* also had a new version, *PCL-R* (Hare, 1991). In the latter, Hare had deleted a behavior—drug and alcohol abuse—from his former checklist, while also broadening *irresponsibility* beyond the behavior of parenting. The above changes in the *PCL-R* were part of an emerging new shape in Hare’s conception of psychopathy; *one starting to form around 2 separate, broad factors*.

The first was a “selfish, callous, and remorseless use of others.” This wing of the *PCL-R* was favored in the psychopathy literature, and was said by Hare to involve the traits “fundamental to the construct of psychopathy.” While the second of Hare’s factorial “wings”—somewhat its junior partner—was a “chronically unstable lifestyle.” That is, traits that correspond to *social deviancy*.

These different wings help us to see a significant difference between Hare’s construct and the ASPD of the *DSM*. For by now, ASPD had evolved into *a construct built around social deviancy*. Of this, Hare said: “Research that uses a *DSM* diagnosis of ASPD taps the social deviance component of psychopathy but misses much of the personality component, whereas each component is measured by the *PCL-R*.”

Meanwhile, studies at the time that directly compared ASPD to the *PCL-R* within prison and forensic settings consistently reported Hare’s model to be more discerning. And it was also obtaining incremental validity over the ASPD in predicting criminal recidivism. Therefore, it became the intention of the authors of the *DSM-4* to shift the diagnosis more toward the *PCL-R*. Considered for edition 4 was thus an abbreviated version of Hare’s *PCL-R* consisting of 10 of Hare’s items. Though the consideration got scrapped, when field tests revealed that for purely clinical—vs. prison settings, the *PCL-R* lost some of its edge.

And though by now ASPD had a rich empirical history of its own, by the time the *DSM-5* was in the works, there had been considerably more research taking place concerning psychopathy than ASPD. It thus again appeared the intention of the personality disorder group of the *DSM* to shift the diagnosis of ASPD toward the perspective of Cleckley and Hare. This was explicitly evident in the proposal to change the name from “anti-social” to “antisocial/psychopathic.” But for other reasons, that proposal also got scrapped, and replaced by a hybrid proposal in which *no reference was made of PCL-R or Cleckley*.\*

For those who aren’t psychological professionals, I extend my apologies for spending the last pages taking you through these weeds. But part of what should be inescapable is the extent to which the personality disorder work group of the *DSM*, consistently, and practically since the inception of the *Manual*, had attempted to use the traits provided by two individuals—Cleckley and Hare—to augment the perceived lacks of

their own group-derived construct, ASPD. (And that this had largely been done in the shadows, un-noticed by the vast majority of psychological professionals).

My takeaways from the above history of these contending constructs are numerous and have had greater cultural implications than merely the rivalry between two schools of thought on the part of shrinks. And that's what I'd like to talk about next.

*\*Author's Note:* My reflections about the historical controversy between psychopathy and the *DSM's* construct of antisocial personality disorder are enormously in debt to an online article I chanced upon entitled "Psychopathy and the DSM." It was authored by Christina Crego and Thomas A. Widiger. Its 10 pages took me a night and a day, taking notes on the way, to plow through it, so dense was the terrain before I could see the forest for the trees. But it was worth the effort and more than I'd expected; both historical document, and a knowing form of psychological reportage.

**Are Sociopaths and Psychopaths Interchangeable?  
Tony Soprano Meets Donald Trump**



The unrecognized controversy between these dueling diagnostic constructs contributed to a widely experienced confusion on the part of lay people and psychological professionals alike. And had led lay people to use “psychopath” and “sociopath” interchangeably—only to have a psychological priesthood rap their knuckles with a ruler for not using the “correct” term (*antisocial personality disorder*)—a term that Big Tony at the shipyard has never gotten his head around. Though Big Tony knows damn well what a sociopath is. (“The dudes are ganged-up, and do bad shit to people, and don’t even feel bad about it”).

Yet even many psychologists continue to be confused in sorting out the following terms: *sociopath*, *psychopath*, *antisocial personality disorder*. Most just know that “sociopath” is no longer used. The clearest discernment may have been offered by Canadian-born psychologist Robert D. Hare—who for the past several decades has been recognized as the world’s leading authority on psychopaths. Hare didn’t dismiss the term *sociopath* as if it were merely an outdated label. He considered them as different, though, than *psychopaths*, in that the former were caused by growing up in an antisocial or criminal sub-culture, rather than from a fundamental lack of social emotion or moral reasoning (as is the case with *psychopaths*).

In other words, Tony Soprano is a *sociopath*, not a psychopath. So is Ray Donovan. For neither would exploit their own children, the way Ray Donovan’s father did. Ray’s dad I see both as a malignant narcissist, and as well as a psychopath. He’s more chaotic. And it’s all about *his* needs, chaotic needs that lead him to commit self-destructive acts, that also become destructive for his kids. And Ray is constantly trying to protect both his brothers and his kids from the destructivity he knows his father leaves in his wake.

Tony and Ray aren’t great role models for their kids, and in that way “irresponsible.” But Tony and Ray aren’t totally absent of traits with a redeeming humanity, though sometimes they’re obscured. Whenever his brothers face difficulties, for example, Ray stops whatever he’s doing, and speeds in his black sedan to fix things. Being a “fixer” is what he does, and he’s good at it. It’s a craft and a craftiness that goes back to having to fix things in a broken family with a psychopath for a father.

Tony and Ray grew up in families with criminal fathers, and as Hare told us, being shaped in such gangland environments is what creates sociopaths. But they’re not totally lacking in any accountability toward others. They feel family obligation and are capable of feeling guilt—*unlike* psychopaths—as well as failed responsibility, and remorse. They’re capable of speaking the truth, even crying, Tony’s actually in therapy. (Could anything in the last 3 sentences apply to Donald Trump?).

Squat Peter Clemenzo in the *Godfather* is at once a good family man, yet he's also a killer. That's just what you do, if you're in *this* "family." When Clemenzo oversees Paulie's murder in *his* black sedan by the side of the road, he's not only thinking of the responsibility he'd just carried out for his crime family, but his responsibility to his personal family, as he—now famously—says: *Leave the gun, take the cannoli.*

Back to Hare...While he didn't disregard *sociopathy*, neither did he disregard the *DSM* term "antisocial personality disorder" either. Though he did view it as separate from his construct of *psychopathy*, as the two constructs didn't list the same personality traits (though that to me, seems not entirely true, for the *DSM* did import some of Hare's and Cleckley's traits, while sensing the need for *more* of them throughout the years).

Actually, Hare thought the *DSM* construct of ASPD *would validly apply to many more people* than the disorder he and Cleckley had been profiling. And though there are no statistics for sociopaths—the *DSM* had thrown them all overboard in 1980—Hare's belief has been that *many more people* would be covered by *that* term than ASPD.

Another takeaway I'd offer is, that since sociopathy actually refers to the *largest* population of these similar but separate disorders, future editions of the *DSM* might return to its earliest roots in supporting and publishing research about sociopaths in forthcoming editions. This, rather than leaving its cupboard so bare, or turning a snobby nose at those who continue to use the term.

And though the term *psychopath* would truly only apply to the *smallest* population of the various diagnostic constructs being explored here, that population has had an impact upon the world far beyond its numbers. And so, it too should command its own full and rightful presence in a manual that purports to be American psychiatry's official manual of mental disorders.

**For when pathologies—whether personality disorders or viruses—fail to be adequately recognized, their destructivity can increase, until their full force catches us by surprise, and with consequences truly *disastrous*.**

In fact, our lack of recognition of psychopaths *has already* had a disastrous consequence. Which brings us back to Cleckley, psychopathy's seminal authority...



# The Destructivity of Psychopaths

## Sociopath, Psychopath, Antisocial Personality Disorder

### - *There Is* a Difference and Here's Why It Matters



Hervey M. Cleckley, the seminal modern authority on psychopaths, ended his thumbnail depiction of them by evoking their internal *chaos* “that results in purposeful destructive behavior, often more self-destructive than destructive to others.” But what he failed to evoke there, I’d like to add now. It’s this...

His book, *The Mask of Sanity*, was published in 1941, as an Austrian-born psychopath was unleashing a destructivity that would result in the deaths of tens of millions of people. Decades later, my country has also found itself with a chaos-driven psychopath at the seat of power. That too has resulted in the un-necessary deaths of many people.

As for my other takeaways, the first is the easiest to say, and should be obvious: The destructivity of psychopaths can also be *even more significantly perilous to others*, even globally so. Consider the Holocaust, or the genocidal, bombed-out areas of our world today. And the still-present threat of nuclear warfare. And the morally bankrupt "leaders" who might launch such a thing.

For this reason, just as our survival as a species would be aided by more understanding of climate change, and better planning for dealing with pandemics, we've similarly been in need of a better recognition of *psychopathy*.

Its inadequate presence in the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* is akin to having an inadequate test for the coronavirus. It was a failure of psychological vision that might have better warned us when a candidate for president in 2016, was not only a narcissist but a psychopath to boot. For like the pandemic, his psychopathy has infected the nation. And by election day of 2024, it could get even worse. He could begin to finish what he failed to do on January 6, 2021.

And so, if these don't feel like ordinary times, maybe it's because they're *not*. This may be when the bill comes due for our lack of discernment. A time to learn from grievous mistakes; and if we don't learn them now, our collective grief can't help but increase.

Now is the time when "all of us together" begin to suffer the limitations of what our planet can bare. Already the dying has begun—a *billion* animals burnt to death in a single Australian summer. American democracy attacked from within, just barely alive. *How bad does it need to get?* And who knows how many deaths the next pandemic will claim?

And so, if it's time to die, may as many as possible ... *die to what we have been*. May we suffer, and *rejoice* in the great death of the mystics, that is also the birth canal of what we could be. While the nation's 45th president claims to be making America great again, may many, as many as possible, learn from the limitations we are suffering now: the limitations of what can be achieved—or restored--without wisdom.

For though it can't help but sound apocryphal, ours may really be the epoch with *the greatest urgency for individual and collective transformation that the world has ever known*. And so, were they alive now, I imagine the Old Testament prophets blowing ram's horns, and wailing warnings to wake the people. Such is the spiritual, political, and ecological obliviousness of these times—against a backdrop of the urgent evolutionary shift our planet needs us to make.

In a secular age, and a time when psychopathic lies are told from on high, *we* must become those prophets now—the kind who speak uncomfortable truths. For as Dylan once sang—inspired by a biblical passage from Isaiah: *So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late*.



# A Psychopathic Checklist

Dear Reader,

Here's a psychopathic checklist. In an age of a diminishing attention span, I hope you'll forgive me for providing it only after what has preceded it. For I felt in this way you'd have a deeper awareness of why it's important--for such a comprehensive listing of the traits of psychopaths cannot be found in the *DSM*, nor can any mention of the historical contributions of Hervey M. Cleckley and Robert D. Hare. And I stand on their shoulders in providing this.

In fact, most of the traits below that have amplifications are taken from the twenty items reflected by The Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised. While others I provided seemed self-explanatory, requiring no further amplifications.

In the documentary TV series "Signs of a Psychopath," each episode begins with a statement that reads: "**For every psychopath ... there are signs.**" Here are 38 of them. This is a composite trait list. And so, not every psychopath will display each of these traits. But should you encounter someone who seems to embody several, you might consider this as a **warning sign**, and want to keep your distance--or see it as your civic responsibility to do everything in your power to keep a psychopath from *ever* attaining public office. For the destructivity that lurks behind their mask--and behind their own reckless, *lack* of responsibility--has no bounds.

- Grandiose Self-Worth** - they have an opinion on everything, they boast and brag about the things they have done, their skills and abilities. They have enormous egos, plenty of confidence and arrogance and consider themselves superior. One psychopath said that he preferred to hear himself talk, because what he said was more interesting than what other people had to say.
  
- Recklessness**
  
- Impulsivity** - many of their behaviors are not premeditated and seem to be unplanned. They seem unable to resist temptations and urges or to delay gratification. They may not consider the consequences and so they appear reckless, foolhardy and unpredictable.
  
- Irresponsibility** - they will repeatedly fail to honor commitments or obligations, in school, work, family or social situations. They fail to turn up, don't pay bills, fail to honor contracts etc.

- ❑ **Failure to accept accountability (Blame Externalization).** Though he already listed the trait of **Irresponsibility**, Hare's version of this trait is **Failure to Accept Responsibility For Own Actions**, of which he writes: it seems like it's never their fault or their responsibility. They have little or no sense of duty or conscientiousness and often deny their responsibility. And in denying, they will even try and manipulate others. (I felt that adding a term from the short form of the Psychopathic Personality Index--namely **Blame Externalization**--lent a nuance not quite captured by Hare. For in denying responsibility psychopaths don't only manipulate others, they actually externalize their own blame *onto* others. For Trump, this a go-to move. For example, after lying about the lethality of the Covid virus, and taking no responsibility for the increased death rates of Americans, he then blamed the lethality of the virus on the Obama administration, the Chinese, the World Health Organization, the CDC, states that complained too much, etc.
  
- ❑ **Sadistic tendency, can experience pleasure and a sense of power in inflicting pain**
  
- ❑ **Conduct Disorder likely by adolescence** - this corresponds to what Hare termed "**Early Behavior Problems**" ("often a history of antisocial behavior before age 13, including lying stealing, vandalism, bullying, truancy, sexual activity, fire-setting, substance abuse, and running away from home. And Hare notes that "cruelty to animals or children is particularly ominous." This is also cognate with another of Hare's traits-- **Juvenile Delinquency**-which he characterized as: behavioral difficulties between the ages of 13-18. Typically, behaviors that are crimes or are clearly manipulative, aggressive and callous.
  
- ❑ **Compulsive, Pathological Lying** - their ability to lie is stunning, even when they know there is a high probability of being caught. Lies can be cunning and sly or unscrupulously manipulative.
  
- ❑ **They rationalize what they're guilty of - or project it onto others**
  
- ❑ **Lack of remorse or guilt ("all id, no superego")** - Hare reflects this thus: despite their words they experience little emotion of concern for the pain and suffering of their victims. They are unfazed, dispassionate, coldhearted, and unemphatic. There is often a disdain for the victim, and they may even say the victims deserved it.

- ❑ **No Sense of Shame**
- ❑ **Proneness to Boredom** - Hare's version of this trait is listed as **Seek Stimulation or Prone to Boredom**, of which he says: they like to be doing new and different things, always looking for excitement and entertainment. They take risks in what they do as well as what they say. For example, cult leaders, in a subtle way, may explain to their victims how exactly they are manipulating them. They rarely engage in activities that they find boring or they don't finish the job.
- ❑ **Spur of the moment acts to relieve boredom**
- ❑ **Parasitic lifestyle with little "real work."** Hare's version of **Parasitic Lifestyle** reads: they will intentionally manipulate and exploit others for financial gain. This goes along with poor motivation and little self-discipline and no sense of responsibility in terms of earning their own living.
- ❑ **Few real friends (Though "birds of this feather, flock together")**
- ❑ **Is fundamentally fraudulent; exhibits conning, manipulative behavior-** they deceive, cheat, con, bilk, trick or defraud others for personal gain. (Hare separates this from **Pathological Lying** to the extent that the subject shows 'callous ruthlessness,' that is, a lack of concern or pity for the suffering and feelings of their victims).
- ❑ **Misrepresentation when relating events**
- ❑ **Cheats to achieve self-centered ends**
- ❑ **Can be a genius at "gaming the system"**
- ❑ **Lack of social conscience or moral reasoning**
- ❑ **Tests boundaries to see what they can get away with**
- ❑ **Commits multiple acts that could be subject to arrest** - Hare adds a nuance to this with his trait of **Criminal Versatility**, noting that “unlike other criminals who may specialize in one area they are often involved in diverse activities, taking great pride at getting away with crimes.”

- ❑ **Can be subject to multiple lawsuits**
- ❑ **Revocation of Condition of Release** - they may have had their probation revoked for technical reasons such as failing to appear, carelessness and so on.
- ❑ **Poor behavioral controls** - there may be sudden expressions of annoyance, irritability, aggressions and verbal abuse. There may be sudden outbursts of anger and temper and they may act hastily.
- ❑ **Promiscuous, impersonal sexual behavior** - Hare doesn't mention "impersonal," but says: They may have many brief encounters, many affairs while married, and may be indiscriminate in selecting partners (heterosexual and homosexual relationships) and even maintain several relationships at a time. There is often a history of attempting to coerce many people into sexual relationships and they take great pride in discussing their sexual conquests. (Hare lists as a separate trait one that seems cognate with this one. Namely: **Many Short-Term Marital Relationships**--inability to maintain a long-term relationship because they are inconsistent and unreliable.
- ❑ **Lack of Realistic, Long-Term Goals** - while they talk about big plans, they show an inability or persistent failure to execute long-term goals, they may drift from one place to another lacking any real direction in life.
- ❑ **Selfish, callous, misuse of others**
- ❑ **Egocentric entitlement, and lack of empathy**
- ❑ **Shallow affect or insight** - corresponds to Hare's SHALLOW AFFECT- emotional poverty or very shallow feelings, coldness towards others despite seeming very friendly
- ❑ **Seldom enters psychotherapy unless mandated by the legal system**
- ❑ **Failure to learn from experience; hence prone to prison recidivism**
- ❑ **Glibness/superficial charm**-smooth talking, verbally agile, a psychopath is rarely stuck for something to say. They are not the least bit shy. In fact, they are not afraid to say anything!
- ❑ **Avoidance of "weakness" or vulnerability**

- ❑ Often a victimizer, claiming to be a victim
- ❑ Lack of anxiety coupled with attention-seeking
- ❑ Unprincipled, self-destructive behavior (that is *also* destructive to others)
- ❑ Goes through life wearing a mask (beneath which lurks a lack of morality; at worst real evil)

## Postscript

Postscripts are clues, in fact a priori *evidence*—that something which *seemed* ended, hasn't really ended yet. And like a struck temple bell reverberating, it can be hard to determine *the precise ending of anything*. And with this said, the first weeks of 2024 found the world's news again dominated by the psychopathy of its autocrats.

Putin was intensifying his bombing of Ukraine, and had shifted to a full-on war economy, with 40% of Russia's revenues now devoted to decimating Ukraine. And for the first time in the war, Russia was now able to manufacture its own, more updated drones--versus creating them from the scrounged parts of consumer products. Plus Russia was now receiving weaponry provided by the autocracies in North Korea and Iran.

And while Ukraine was running out of armaments, the Republican-led House of Representatives was blocking the U.S. from sending any further military aid to Ukraine until and unless the Southern border of the U.S. was secured. Though the Republicans were still blocking legislation about *that* (for the unsecured Southern border gave them a grievance they could blame on Biden as the elections approached).

But this news had faded into the back part of the news cycle, while the front and center was claimed by two other autocrats--though each similarly destructive. For Netanyahu was now committing *his* acts of genocide on the civilians in Gaza. The bombed out rubble of the buildings in Gaza were visually indistinguishable from what Putin left behind in Aleppo, Syria and numerous towns in Ukraine.

While Trump—who'd come back from the dead since his insurrection three years prior—was now attacking American judges and the Department of Justice, as part of his attack on American democracy in general. And he seemed increasingly certain now to become his party's presidential candidate in November. And, as if the biproduct of America's political amnesia, Trump was actually doing well in the polls.

In fact, each of the three were heavily invested in the results of America's 2024 presidential election—and each for the same reason. Putin's aggression in Ukraine had become *a war of delay*, knowing that it would swing decisively in his favor with a Trump victory. For Trump had already stated that the war would end *on the first day of his presidency*. In other words, that he'd permanently stop all military aid to Ukraine, thus insuring a Russian victory.

And Trump is also involved in a strategy of delay--with his trial dates. For if he can hold them off long enough, winning the election could be the best way for him to ensure that he stays out of jail. And through his huckster "genius," Trump had even turned his unfolding criminal indictments into a fund-raising bonanza.

And as for Netanyahu, though Biden has been generously supportive of Israel, Netanyahu really needs and wants Trump more than he needs Biden so that he can continue his version of apartheid towards Palestinians and prosecute his war with little concern for the carnage of Gazans and their buildings and infrastructure.

For with Trump back in the White House, Netanyahu would be similarly unburdened by American values or strategic priorities. For Netanyahu knows that Trump doesn't really care about them either. The only uncertainty here seemed how long it would take --before Biden told Netanyahu "Stop these atrocities or no more munitions." For in truth, the continued bombing of Gaza had become the most destabilizing factor in the Middle East. And everyone not named Netanyahu seemed to know this.

These three autocrats are psychopathic in a multiplicity of ways: the extreme lack of empathy, the lack of guilt, shame, or remorse, the callous misuse of others. Each has tainted their country's standing in the world. For each, gaining or staying in power is their way of delaying accountability—if not *imprisonment*—Netanyahu for charges of corruption, Trump for his 91 indictments, Putin for his unrelenting war crimes.

All three are walking an anxious tight rope--with a time-crunch being a further factor. And even if some of their countrymen turn a blind eye, history will judge them each severely.

Collectively, such "leaders" present a test for our world, as if the world itself is on trial now--with the verdict uncertain--and all of us now teetering on some kind of perilous ledge. This is like a bad dream, or an implausibly scary movie. *Haven't we as a species evolved farther than this?* I guess not. And thus, we seem haunted by questions, questions that so many have yet to even ask:

*Will some form of true righteousness or justice prevail? How many of us will remain passively complicit--while blinded by the polarizing nature of "identity politics?"* And so, will it be the psychopathic "genius" for avoiding accountability, "gaming the system," and *continuing destructivity* that prevails? It's hard to say. And so, the drama builds...

For, as I write, no one knows the answers to these questions yet. That in itself seems an indictment of our collective level of moral discernment and psychospiritual development. And while 64 countries and nearly half the global population are facing

pivotal elections in 2024, the most pivotal of all is the presidential election in the United States. For as described by the *Economist*, it has the potential to unleash "the biggest danger to the world" in 2024: former President Trump securing a second term. Yet while the equivalent of an asteroid is hurtling toward us, many Americans aren't adequately mobilizing against such a catastrophe, and instead viewing the election as one with only two uninspiring choices. While the far better one should be more obvious than it is.

And so, with a fiercely polarized election looming, and so much at stake, the rest of 2024 could be a really bumpy ride--one that could take us ever closer to an increasingly dystopian world.

To some, the dire prospects we're facing *should be* a wake-up call. For the answers to these questions are no small matter. Rather, they seem components of an interconnected, echoing postscript that will shape our legacy—the kind of world we leave to our children—and our children's children...

\*

Having been a close follower of each day's news cycle--while writing so much about psychopaths--it can be hard not to grow a little endarkened oneself. It thus occurs to me that it's time, if not past time, for me to *shift* what the Toltec shamans term "the assemblage point." That is, to radically shift and refreshen my perception of the present moment, and really of life itself--which is what all spiritual practices intend.

And having now briefly done so, I realize that even if our world seems to be "going to Hell in a handbasket," we live in a multi-dimensional world, and *happiness, peace, and equanimity are always available*.

Yet when we turn on the Evening News, how often is *anyone* reporting *that*? The answer is hardly *anyone*, hardly *ever*. And that's because in an era of "identity politics" what gains viewers--whether on the left or the right--is *outrage*. It's our contentious outrage that so polarizes us. And robs us of peace--turning nearly half our countrymen into enemies. And I'm guilty of it too. It's just in the ether of our time.

Yet the ever-present availability of happiness and peace is really the truth. With the *possible* exception of psychopaths, we're all wired for the soul's more positive qualities. Our heart-minds are like smart televisions with hundreds of channels, and we can actually learn how to get our fingers on the channel guide. We can learn to shift the channel, flip the script. That's what spiritual practices intend. Yet no news anchor, either on CNN or Fox is even mentioning this. Nor are the evangelicals, for the most



part; they're still supporting the most unlike Christ candidate imaginable. Culturally, we're in danger of losing core values, including wisdom itself. When we turn on the TV, *where are the elders, true elders?* (And *not* those simply old--*that* we have).

Amidst the complexities of our age, what I'm saying is simple: That if you want peace, you can "tune" directly to it. For peace hasn't disappeared or gone elsewhere. It's ever an option. We're just so outraged it doesn't occur to us to access the opposite of our outrage. (And when our very identities *seem* threatened by "the other side," this prompts the cultic quest for a belligerent defender--*and the more belligerent the better*--how else to explain Netanyahu, Putin, or Trump). And so, our polarization increases. And at a time that a more unified will is needed in order to meet the urgencies that threaten us all, climate change for one--which is only going to get worse.

As an alternative, here's a simple, yet transformational practice adapted from *The Course in Miracles*: Spend a minute or two letting go of *everything else*, and with all of your awareness try to embody the following three words: WANT ONLY PEACE. As John and Yoko once sang in a previously polarized age: "Give Peace a Chance." (So, give this practice a try, and see where it takes you).

And it's also conceivably true that the best, and most empowering way to respond to the psychopathy in the world may be to embody its *opposite*. There's actually a Sufi teaching pointing to this. It goes: *Learn to behave from one who does not*.

For if psychopaths lie, and are devoid of empathy, there's nothing stopping us from upping our capacity to be more truthful and compassionate. If psychopaths lack "behavioral controls," we can learn to discipline, and train our own minds. In this way, once you decode their behavior, psychopaths can become teachers. *Hey, this unprincipled person is showing us how we should live!* So we should really listen to what they're saying--and then believe-- or do-- the opposite.

I'm not saying that we should all just sing Kumbaya, ignore psychopathic behavior, or not attempt to prosecute it. And we surely shouldn't vote for it! But there's something else we might recognize--that such people are not only bewildered, but actually living in a contentious realm of perpetual dissatisfaction. And eerily similar to the Asura Realm of Buddhist psychology...

\*

The inhabitants of the Asura Realm are actually quite advantaged, for they're said to have been born blessed with the comforts and pleasures nearing the Heavenly Realm. But they are unable to enjoy anything aside from a sense of triumph over others. So,

sometimes they're referred to as "the jealous," or "contending demigods." But even when the asuras are not fighting against the inhabitants of other realms, they fight against themselves.

They are said to move with "a single-mindedness and speed as they strive to outwit and outcompete each other." Their violence ensues from their penchant for what psychotherapists would term "paranoid projections." For they can't trust anyone. And that's because they imagine that everyone else is as aggressive, self-serving, and egotistically power-hungry as they are. And so, everyone else is seen as their enemy. And this leaves each asura isolated in their own fear-filled, combative world.

And importantly, asuras are much too busy fighting and struggling for territory to engage in spiritual practices. So, this is a realm where it's impossible to achieve liberation. They "can't get no satisfaction." They're the bearers of perpetual grievance. And like psychopaths, take no responsibility for their own discontent. The problem to them seems all those who oppose them. And they're everywhere!

Yet in Buddhist psychology, there's actually a specific kind of Buddha for each realm. And the green Buddha of the Asura Realm is depicted wearing armor and carrying a sword, as if you'd have to possess some clinical armor and other martial attributes, in attempting to speak the language of the asuras in an enlightened way.

But like repeat offenders in prison, this is a hard population to tame, let alone enlighten--imagine doing therapy, or giving spiritual guidance to Donald Trump or North Korea's Kim Jong Un! And the vast resources of the asuras are never used for the welfare of others. Instead, it is wasted on violence, and in their combative struggles with others.

But still, if even in such a realm there's a Buddha, there's at least some possibility that the resources of an asura *could* be used for self-discipline, and to maintain order and justice for everyone--that's what a *transformed* asura might be capable of. If only they could just manage to curb their envy, jealousy, and aggression, they might come to realize that participation in their compulsive struggles with others is fruitless and painful. They could then even begin to feel gratitude for all they have and come to trust that they needn't be constantly on guard. Then rebirth in the Heaven or Human Realms becomes possible. (And like Heaven and Hell, these realms aren't only reserved for the afterlife).

*But what's it like for us when we've entered this realm? And how might we work with the conditions we're encountering? To even consider this could be eye-opening, if a bit alien for an American exposed to the mythic imagery of another religious culture.*

I first heard, and remember the line, "endlessly we circle the six worlds" coming from my own voice, joined with others, as a young Zen student each early morning when chanting Hakuin's Song in Praise of Zazen.

This notion of there being six worlds, or six realms, kind of startled--and confronted me with the *vastness* of human consciousness being evoked by the chant. And as I became more aware of the teachings about these realms, I also appreciated the psychologically nuanced vision of each of the six realms.

And in terms of the Asura Realm, at times I've also felt confronted by my own Asura-like struggles, my own neurotic speed and compulsivity, and how it can take me over, leaving me less able to rest in my own peaceful, uncontentious depths.

For when we've transited into the realm of the Asuras, life seems tormenting and grim. Our own strength or weakness comes into play, and we find ourselves experiencing a kind of existential insecurity, where we feel no real support and must rely solely on our own resources in order to survive. Everywhere we look there's a battle needing to be waged. And what we're attempting to compete with seems omnipresent, as if the whole world is engaged in a zero-sum game of winners and losers. (And most with more social media followers than me!).

It's exhausting to compete like this. But to step off this hamster wheel would seem to mean that we've given up, and have become resigned to being a loser in life. And since that would feel so devastating, we continue to struggle. And to move through life with an aggressive speed, with little time to rest, or become more familiarized with our own deeper nature. And it seems that this is just the way the world is, and what it requires. So our anxiety and efforts to prevail "against all odds," seems entirely justified. But like Sisyphus, we're now engaged in an endlessly frustrating, uphill struggle.

We're badly in need of a green Buddha...Who might help us to better work with the hallucinatory conditions we're encountering.

\*

Back to what Western psychologists--or those who still use the term--call psychopaths...

Their corrupt, antisocial behavior leaves them perpetually in danger of being found out, unmasked, being sent to prison. They're on a perpetual hot seat, having to live

with great vigilance, controlling every narrative with deceitful propaganda, lest the truth come out.

If “the Truth will set you free,” these folks enjoy no real freedom. Psychically, they're already imprisoned by their own delusions, out of touch with reality--and not happy campers. And what our world is needing now is more people who are the *opposite* of this.

Rather than exploit others for our own selfish ends, we could be God's secret agents, agents of joy, and think of the ways we could bring happiness to others. (And by so doing, discover a secret that the self-absorbed don't know: That having *that* game plan *makes us happy too*).

And there's really no limit on how happy we can be, how generous, compassionate, how creative, how wise. The world isn't inherently one of scarcity where we all must **compete** for scant supplies. That's a very asura-like world view. They've actually inherited a lot—yet it seems there's never enough. But we can be the embodiment of what seems to be missing in the world. And if we're actually *embodying* it, then experientially, it's not missing at all.

*Okay, I hear myself say—or maybe it's the Green Buddha saying—enough with the writing already! No one appointed you to be a sleep-deprived Cassandra making dire warnings. You've been sprinting toward a finish line that doesn't exist. Time to be kind to yourself, and do what makes you happy. Shift the script. And while you're at it, change the clothes you've been wearing all week, then eat something good for lunch. And while the sky is darkening... go whack some golf balls before it's too late!*

January 23, 2024

**\* Author's Note:** Nine bows to Domyo for depictions of the Asura Realm. You can find him on the website [zenstudiespodcast.com](http://zenstudiespodcast.com)

