

# How to Survive Rampant and Malignant Narcissism, Death, and Destruction

By

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After I left Christianity in my early twenties, a consequence of having studied philosophy in college, I turned to psychology to gain insight about myself and the world. This occurred after visiting a Unitarian church for the first time and hearing its guest speaker, Phil Smith, a retired Unitarian minister turned Jungian psychotherapist. Although most of what he said went over my head, something within me stirred as he spoke of the soul as a living, crucial, and present reality in our lives that must be attended to. Christianity treats the soul as something that must be saved in this life but only becomes relevant after we're dead. But I soon learned "soul" comes from the Greek word ψυχή (psyche) the root of *psychology*. Psychology is the *study of the soul*. So, studying psychology seemed the best way to redirect my religious yearnings. Years later, my dissertation, for which I earned my Doctor of Ministry, was entitled, "Pathway and Pathology: What Psychologists Say about Religion."

For more than a decade this course of study was about "figuring myself out" and focused heavily on the collected works of Carl Gustav Jung, the psychologist Phil Smith referred to in his sermon at the Unitarian church. Jung's psychoanalytical psychology is all about delving deeply into the unconscious realm, both the personal and collective unconscious, to learn about oneself and humanity by exploring our myths, images, and archetypes. But, in the end, this period of deep self-reflection didn't rid me of my hangups but helped me better accept who I am, to think less about myself, and to live a more meaningful and productive life that adds to the betterment of the world. So this period of breathing in, of "getting into myself," ended. It was time to breathe out, to live my life—warts and all—and to help make a positive difference in the lives of others.

That's about when I discovered social psychologist Erich Fromm who, more than any other thinker, has shaped my thoughts about myself, humanity, and our world. To be clear, I have not pursued this interest as a psychologist or therapist, but as a philosopher seeking greater truth and understanding, and as a deeply religious person concerned for the wellbeing of my soul and other souls. Nor am I the first Unitarian minister to take an interest in Fromm. My own Unitarian mentor, Rev. Dr. Douglas Gallagher wrote his dissertation on Fromm. And one of Fromm's best friends was the renowned Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams, who translated Fromm's book *The Dogma of Christ* into English. During one of their late-night discussions, Adams asked, "Erich, what makes you tick?" Fromm responded, "Jim, I think I know the answer to that question. It's the Biblical prophets—they saw the meaning of history in the demand for justice."<sup>1</sup> It is this concern for the health and welfare of the individual, humanity, and human society that attracts me to Fromm. As a social psychologist, however, he doesn't want to fix us but to enable us to fix ourselves by helping us better understand the unconscious forces that drive us, so that we can use them productively.

Fromm, who was Jewish, left Germany in 1934, less than a year after Hitler came into power, having seen the proverbial "writing on the wall." After coming to the US, he wrote numerous books,

most of which deal with the social and psychological causes of authoritarianism and how we ought to best respond to it. His first book, *Escape from Freedom*, published in 1941, suggests that given the choice between freedom and belonging most people choose belonging, even if it means succumbing to the beliefs, desires, and control of others. One of his later books, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, published in 1973, concludes with lengthy sections on Adolph Hitler and his SS commander Heinrich Himmler. So, you can see, Fromm continued working to understand the psychological and social forces that have given rise to some of the most oppressive and destructive conditions in human history, including the Holocaust, to show us how to prevent them from happening in the future.

Yet here we are today, living at a time when authoritarianism is again on the rise. According to the Global State of Democracy Institute, democracy has increasingly weakened each year since 2016. Given the election of Donald Trump and the subsequent breakdown of the separation of powers in the world's oldest and once greatest democracy, I'm guessing this trend isn't going to end anytime soon. But why? Why would so many people who are free choose tyranny instead? This is where Fromm's insights are extraordinarily cogent. The entire thesis of *Escape from Freedom*, originally titled *Fear of Freedom*, is that human psychology is defined by our fundamental and conflicting need for both freedom and belonging. To fully belong among our family, friends, and society, we must sometimes compromise, conceal, and contain ourselves, which means we are not wholly free to express ourselves. To fully express ourselves freely means we risk rejection—finding ourselves excluded from the very groups whose acceptance we crave.

Most of us think we prefer freedom, but history suggests people are far more willing to relinquish their freedom, and to take freedom away from others, to gain social security, standing, and belonging. Yet, Fromm says, "Freedom is the condition for the full growth of a person, for [one's] mental health and [one's] well-being; its absence cripples man and is unhealthy."<sup>2</sup> Still, we often choose leaders who have, as Fromm further explains, "All too frequently used the slogan that they are leading their people in the battle for freedom, when in reality their aim has been to enslave them."<sup>3</sup> But such deception is usually obvious and too many of us eagerly accept the ruse so that we don't have to admit our own cowardice in the face of genuine freedom.

The most common means of reconciling these conflicting needs, albeit unhealthy and destructive, is what Fromm calls sadomasochism, a relationship based on one person or group dominating another person or group that willingly submits—the sadist controls, the masochist submits. Together, they form an authoritarian relationship. "Both the sadist and the masochist need another being to 'complete' them, as it were," says Fromm. "The sadist makes another being an extension of himself; the masochist makes himself the extension of another being. Both seek a symbiotic relationship because neither has his center in himself. While it appears that the sadist is free of his victim, he needs the victim in a perverse way."<sup>4</sup>

I'm reminded here of Trump who frequently refers to his rallies as "love fests,"<sup>5</sup> during which he often rambles his unprepared, unfiltered, stream of consciousness before crowds of adoring followers who applaud his every word. Trump even refers to his January 6, 2021, rally, during which he encouraged devotees to storm the nation's capital, as a "day of love."<sup>6</sup> We must all learn to

love ourselves to be happy and healthy minded, but not to the exclusion or detriment of others. But to the sadist all love must be directed back to oneself, which makes the authoritarian feel connected to others, but only inasmuch as it is a “lovefest” of oneself. Yet a key point not to be missed is that those on the masochistic side of the equation are not victims but willing participants in this extremely unhealthy and unproductive way of resolving this fundamental conflict between freedom and belonging. Together, sadists and masochists form an authoritarian relationship in which the will and ideas of the leader must never be questioned.

We saw this just this past week after Trump’s claim that bombing Iran had “obliterated” its nuclear capabilities came into question. Even without sound evidence to the contrary, his underlings, like Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, began attacking the media for contradicting the President. We saw the same thing during the campaign when Trump claimed, without evidence, that Haitian immigrants were eating people’s pets in Springfield, Ohio. Even after admitting it was untrue, his running mate, J.D. Vance, defended the claim, saying, “If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that’s what I’m going to do,”<sup>7</sup> and off with the head of anyone who tells us the Emperor has not clothes! This, however, is just the sort of behavior that might eventually become this Administration’s undoing. Fromm says, “The half insane leader is often the most successful one until his lack of objective judgment, his rage reactions and consequence of any setback, his need to keep up the image of omnipotence may provoke him to make mistakes which lead to his destruction.”<sup>8</sup>

Although controversial, many psychologists have publicly labeled Trump a *malignant narcissist*<sup>9</sup>, a condition based on Fromm’s discussion of what he terms “malignant forms” of narcissism and necrophilia that contribute to a “syndrome of decay” that he says, “Represents the quintessence of evil; it is at the same time the most severe pathology and the root of the most vicious destructiveness and inhumanity.”<sup>10</sup> Although the ethics of publicly diagnosing an individual have been called into question, the claim is out there, and it is now something we must consider. In the book, *Rocket Man: Nuclear Madness and the Mind of Donald Trump*, psychologist John Gartner writes, “Trump suffers from malignant narcissism, a diagnosis [that is] far more toxic and dangerous than mere narcissistic personality disorder because it combines narcissism with three other severely pathological components: paranoia, sociopathy, and sadism ... the closest thing psychiatry has to describing a true human monster.”<sup>11</sup>

That’s pretty harsh, and I haven’t cited the worst of it. But whether it is right for mental health experts to publicly diagnose an individual, even if compelled to warn us about such a figure, or whether or not they are right in their diagnosis, that there is something terribly wrong with this man should be obvious to almost everyone. This means the situation we’re in isn’t about one person, but about why so many people, so many good, intelligent, ordinary people, have chosen to overlook such serious concerns and put such a flawed figure into power? It’s not about Trump, as much as he would love it to be, it’s about us—the society that created the conditions for someone like him to rise to power.

In his 1955 book, *The Sane Society*, Fromm writes, “This book deals, not with individual pathology, but with the *pathology of normalcy*, particularly with the pathology of contemporary western

society.”<sup>12</sup> As a whole, that is, our society is not well because we have normalized insane behavior and thinking. We presume, slim as it might be, that the majority of roughly “350 million Americans can’t be wrong.” But, no matter how many believe and behave alike, they are wrong because they have widely come to accept what Fromm calls “tendencies which are directed *against* life, which form the nucleus of severe mental illness, and which can be said to be the essence of true evil.”<sup>13</sup> He calls this the necrophilous orientation, “*the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical. It is the passion to tear apart living structures.*”<sup>14</sup>

In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fromm outlines three types of social systems, ranked from least to most life-affirming. The most destructive is the **necrophilous** orientation, characterized by a fascination with death, control, and mechanical order—embodied, for example, in Nazi Germany, where destruction and domination were ends in themselves. Slightly less destructive is the **authoritarian** system, marked by submission to power, rigid hierarchies, and the suppression of individual freedom; Soviet Communism under Stalin is given as a prime example. The least destructive—and most hopeful—is the **revolutionary-humanistic** orientation, which values life, growth, creativity, and the unfolding of human potential. Fromm points to certain utopian socialist movements and aspects of democratic humanism as imperfect but inspiring examples. Each of these systems not only reflects their political structures but the psychological character of the people within them—showing how the way we structure society is deeply tied to who we are and who we choose to become as individuals.

When it comes to the two orientations, the life-affirming and death-seeking, Fromm frequently points out that we are not necessarily “ruled by one or the other of the syndromes,” and that “the average person is a blend of both.”<sup>15</sup> And since society is a reflection of who we are as a people, it, too, is a blend of both. The question before those of us in the US at this moment is which is the most dominant? Is ours a revolutionary-humanistic, authoritarian, or, worst of all, a necrophilous society?

I think most of us would agree that ours is not a society primarily based on the promotion of life, growth, creativity, independence, human welfare, progress, and happiness, along with other life affirming qualities, and, therefore, does not have a revolutionary-humanistic orientation, which leaves us with either the authoritarian or necrophilous options. As noted, we have in recent months gravitated toward authoritarian leadership but, considering what’s been happening in the US for decades, I must conclude ours, like many, is a necrophilous society.

During World War II, the US invented and deployed the atomic bomb and has since engaged in the mass proliferation of nuclear weapons. It has engaged in unnecessary and unjust wars in Vietnam and Iraq, under false pretenses. It has greatly contributed to, yet done little to address climate change, and has often prevented others from addressing what may be the worst existential threat to life in human history. Donald Trump is currently withdrawing funding for green energy programs and other environmental endeavors; while advocating for an increased use of oil and coal, energy sources made from death itself. His necrophilia is so malignant that he even signed an executive order forbidding the federal government from purchasing paper instead of plastic

straws, just because they are a little better for the environment. Last year, the Governor of Florida signed a law that makes lab grown (cultivated) meat illegal in his state—meat that doesn't require the death and suffering of animals. We are amidst the 6<sup>th</sup> period of mass extinction on our planet, yet the United States lacks the will to do anything meaningful about it and often seeks to prevent others from doing so, while itself intentionally working to exacerbate the problem.

As a society, the education of children in the US is also of low priority, if not resented, as kids must attend underfunded and outdated school buildings, and their teachers attend to overcrowded classes. Meanwhile, the exorbitant costs of higher education have become an obstacle for some young adults and a modern form of indentured servitude for others. We have consistently refused to establish a humane healthcare system that adequately provides for all citizens. We refuse to remove military style guns from our streets even though they are being used to kill us, including our children, in our schools, campuses, workplaces, concerts, churches, shopping malls, grocery stores, homes, and a mounting list of other places (including fireman attending to brush fires, as the latest example).

Today, we have allowed our authoritarian President to convince many of us that the worst and most dangerous problem we face is immigrants, mostly those from Latin America, whether they are here legally or not, whether they are students, workers, or even toddlers and infants, and now, whether or not they are American citizens in some cases. We are permitting masked men to pull them off our streets without cause, deport them without due process, and incarcerate them in inhumane conditions and foreign prisons. All of this, even after we had already witnessed Trump order the separation of thousands of children from their parents, imprison them in cages where they were made to sleep on cold hard floors with nothing more than an aluminum blanket. To this day, some of them have not been reunited with their families.

Yet this overinflated concern is miniscule compared to the impacts of far more serious issues, like the growing housing crisis. Today millions of Americans can no longer afford to pay rent or mortgages, and millions of workers can't afford to live in the communities they serve. There is a growing number of homeless people living and sleeping on the streets of every community in the country, from our smallest towns to our biggest cities. Some communities, like ours here in Spokane, are solely focusing on the symptoms, trying to figure out where to let them sleep, if anywhere, yet do little to solve the housing shortage at the root of this inhuman crisis. But even those who do have homes must worry if they're next. The housing demand is causing property values to rapidly rise, which means property taxes are skyrocketing, threatening to price longtime homeowners out of their homes, especially those on fixed incomes. Today, "Almost 30 percent of American adults are 'house poor'—spending 30 percent or more of their income on housing,"<sup>16</sup> a nightmare that makes obtaining a "dream house" out of the question for more Americans than ever; but when it comes to Mexicans crossing the border to take your jobs and eat your pets, don't worry, our government's got you covered.

Even our failing infrastructure is a sign of the decay caused by necrophilia, as is the persistent unwillingness to invest in this country's future. Currently, the US government is working only at preventing programs, change, and progress, not creating, transforming, and moving forward,

which require a biophilous, life affirming, orientation. And that's the good news. That's how we survive the malignant narcissism and necrophilia indicative of this age, by nurturing our innate love of life, which is stronger than the appeal of death and destruction. Fromm says, "Love of life is so much a biologically given quality in [mankind] that one should assume that, aside from a small minority, it can always come to the fore."<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere he says that the life instinct is our "primary" tendency. The death instinct only develops when we lack certain conditions, like, "Warm, affectionate contact with others during infancy; freedom, and the absence of threats; teaching—by example rather than by preaching—of the principles conducive to inner harmony and strength; guidance in the "Art of Living"; stimulating influence of and response to others; a way of life that is genuinely interesting."<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, he says, "As long as most of man's energy is taken up by the defense of his life against attacks, or to ward off starvation, love of life must be stunted, and necrophilia fostered," which means, "Another important social condition for the development of biophilia lies in the abolition of injustice."<sup>19</sup>

As Unitarians, a liberal religion rooted in a biophilous orientation, this makes our work a little easier, because we are required only to fulfill our basic instinct toward life, which includes all these qualities I've mentioned—care, creativity, freedom, respect, purpose, progress, meaning, and justice. Ours is a religion precisely because it is devoted to this "life-furthering syndrome." Yet, it is a syndrome that's also fundamental to all religions and is, again, the primary instinct in all people, so long as it is not thwarted. "Great as are the differences between Taoism, Buddhism, prophetic Judaism, and the Christianity of the gospels," Fromm says, "these religions [have] one common goal: to arrive at the experience of oneness, not by regressing to animal existence but by becoming fully human—oneness with man, oneness between man and nature, and oneness between man and other men."<sup>20</sup> In fact, he says, the purpose of all these religions can be summarized in one sentence; "*It is the goal of man to overcome one's narcissism.*"<sup>21</sup>

Today, there is tremendous social and psychological pressures—like fear, mistrust, and anger—that bring out some of the worst necrophilous tendencies in us, leading to authoritarianism, groupthink, hostility, and injustice. So we must, firstly, quiet these tendencies without ourselves by nurturing our innate love of life, then work to nurture the same instinct that is primary in all people, so that we can work together to heal instead of hurting our planet, to prosper together instead of impoverishing one another, to build together instead of bombing one another, to create together instead of destroying what we all need, and to love one another instead of fearing and hating each other. All of this seems overwhelming, yet everyone who is alive knows this is true for it is the truth of life itself, the urge to live, to grow, to create, to unite, and to live in harmony with the whole of life. Life wants to live, and the living think little about death or the afterlife. Life is our present reality, not something, as far we know, that will last forever. It's happening right now, and we nurture and sustain it, as I discovered many years ago, by leaning to care for our soul, for the souls of others, for the soul of our nation, and for the soul of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence J. Friedman and Anke M. Schreiber, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), chap. 8, n. 2.

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<sup>2</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, CT, 1973, p. 225.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>5</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/trump-harris-lovefest-rally-puerto-rico-6e079e7894a7e1db5dd4be76cccb452a>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/29/nx-s1-5159868/2024-election-trump-harris-capitol-riot>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/15/nx-s1-5113140/vance-false-claims-haitian-migrants-pets>

<sup>8</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, NY, 1964, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-george-conway-anti-psychopath-election-b2634614.html>

<sup>10</sup> Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> John Gartner, “DEFCON 2: Nuclear Risk Is Rising as Donald Trump Goes Downhill,” in *Rocket Man: Nuclear Madness and the Mind of Donald Trump*, ed. John Gartner, Steven Buser, and Leonard Cruz (Asheville, NC: Chiron Publications, 2018), p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> From, *The Heart of Man*, *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, *ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>16</sup> Klein, Ezra; Thompson, Derek. *Abundance* (p. 23). Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 398.

<sup>18</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, *ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>21</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, *ibid.*, p. 88.