“I’m Like, That’s Crazy”

by Mark Zaslav (August 2016)

Figures of speech capture current trends in popular thought and culture. They offer a linguistic snapshot of our times, and the ideas (or lack thereof) that pervade it. Increasingly, this snapshot is a selfie.

Use of “I’m like” (or “I’m all”) may have originated with Valley Girl talk in the 1980’s but it has now infected (or is that inflected?) general discourse. Rather than utter a sentence such as: “I angrily told him to stop,” our modern interlocutor might say “I was like, stop!” One could argue that the anger is deducible in the more cryptic second version, but what about more ambiguous expositions such as, “I was like, where has the time gone?” Is the point that the person was suddenly struck with a sense of time passage suspended during a period of absorption in an activity? Was this indeed a sudden realization, or could it have been more gradual? Strangely, this way of speaking doesn’t actually tell us what it was like to be that “I.”

Similarly, the newly promiscuous use of the catch phrase “crazy” or “that’s crazy” puts the focus on the response of the perceiver rather than an analysis of what is being reacted to. The blanket phrase “that’s crazy” merely conveys: “I am having some sort of reaction to something.” It might be surprise, a sense of irony, a coincidence, the unexpected, something counterintuitive, or literal insanity. The specific, external issue to which one is reacting

recedes. Uttering, “that’s crazy” has thus shifted the discussion back to you noticing something largely unelaborated.

The unifying point in the above styles of locution is emphasis on a compelling underlining of the person’s feeling states rather than what he or she is reacting to. There is no distinction made between fantasy and reality, actions and feelings. As we become lazier in our descriptions, we resort increasingly to vague reports that reference our own mental states at the expense of careful analysis of alternative viewpoints or the reactions of others. This tendency to self-absorption is reminiscent of the narcissistic worldview that we see in chidlren.

A popular stereotype about a culture of increasing narcissism is the idea that we should be surrounded by people blithely and happily displaying an inflated sense of self-regard. Reinforced by participation trophies and overindulgent parenting, the reasoning goes, our fellow citizens believe they are entitled to endless gratification, accordingly manifesting inflated self-esteem. These should be people feeling good about themselves. But there is another side to narcissism; narcissism often emerges in concert with intolerance to the experience of feeling shame.

When feeling shame, we experience a global, painful sense of being bad, deficient or inadequate. We all experience a sense of shame when we fail to meet expectations, behave badly, or are reminded of our shortcomings. For people very vulnerable to shame however, almost any human encounter, mistake, misfortune, thought, or memory can give rise to an implosion of self-esteem including fantasies of not existing or not even deserving to exist. The narcissistic personality style is thus an edifice standing on shaky ground; the desperate need to deflect, neutralize or deny shameful awareness severely limits the ability to cope effectively with the unavoidably humbling realities of life. While some narcissists may appear oblivious to dissent, fortified with self-confidence, there is generally a corresponding, less visible hypersensitivity to a sense of grievance and victimization.

One example of the darker side of narcissistic entitlement is the “victimhood culture” increasingly seen on college campuses, in which the focus on feeling slighted or offended has seemingly taken on epic proportions. The “safe space” movement has even borrowed some of the legitimate language of trauma psychology

of “triggers” and traumatic injury to apply to the mere exposure to ideas (or their proponents) with which they disagree. Ironically, rather than promoting a comforting buoying of grandiose self-esteem, the leaders of these movements actually encourage the readiness to experience and report grievance.

In her book *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, Dr. Jean Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University, has documented the increasing level of narcissism rampant in our culture. She laments, “In fact, narcissism causes almost all of the things that Americans hoped high self-esteem would prevent, including aggression, materialism, lack of caring for others, and shallow values.”

Constant connection to social media via smartphones provides the narcissistically prone a stream of potential approval and recognition. This scattering of attention to disembodied sources of feedback reinforces a steady turning inward. Buffeted by images, music and snippets of information, there is a sense of reacting to a world both mysterious and inevitably disappointing. Consequently, the salient remaining narrative available for communication becomes a vague awareness of a series of emotional states. As “authentic” personal emotional reactions are idealized at the expense of careful inquiry or analysis, we risk succumbing to greater intolerance of our fellow human beings. To put it in modern parlance, “that’s crazy!”

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