

## The Shame of Icarus

A One day Workshop for Psychotherapists, Counsellors and Trainees

In Greek mythology, Icarus is the son of the master craftsman Daedalus. The story tells of Icarus' attempt to escape from Crete by means of wings that his father constructed from feathers and wax. The father, Daedalus has fashioned two pairs of wings out of wax and feathers for himself and his son. Daedalus tries his wings first, but before taking off from the island, warned his son not to fly too close to the sun but to follow his path of flight. Icarus soars in exuberance through the sky and in the process came too close to the sun, which melts the wax. Icarus keeps flapping his wings but soon realises that the melting wax has made the feathers fall from his wings. Icarus thus falls into the sea, to his death and is mourned by his surviving father, whose prudence had left his wings undamaged.

The myth of Icarus is generally presented as a cautionary tale against hubris or teaching the consequences of overweening ambition, grandiosity and omnipotence. The message is clear: Icarus is depicted as impious, foolhardy and deserving of his death. A hard lesson for a young man who, after all, is only doing what young men do.

Possibly the most crucially challenging psychological transition faced by the child and adolescent is that of narcissistic mortification – that of coming to terms with the death of omnipotence, grandiosity and the illusions of selfhood founded on a primary narcissism. The common failure of this transitional challenge – either because the child holds to the illusion in the face of a hostile environment or as a result of a sudden and brutalising loss (as was experienced by Icarus) lies at the root of many of the presentations to be found in the therapy room. This workshop will examine this crucial life transition in some detail and present the possibility of a third, alternative, process leading to a healthy narcissistic mortification. A transition which presents the possibility of a mature adult selfhood based upon a gentle and compassionate guiding through this painful rite of passage.

The workshop was inspired partly by the painting of Icarus by Herbert James Draper: *'The Lament Of Icarus'*(1898) which might be seen as Icarus being comforted in his demise, rather than chastised. It is this possibility of a comforting grieving, compassion and indulgence which this workshop will introduce as a more functional response to narcissistic mortification.

John Waterston is a Body Psychotherapist with a private practice in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk and also has extensive experience working with various groups in the Balkan countries, since 1995. He has worked in the field for 20 years and has a wide ranging knowledge and experience of multiple modes of psychotherapy, both humanistic and psychodynamic.

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