



Intro ([00:02](#)):

You're listening to the Faith & Work Podcast, where we explore what it means to be a follower of Christ in the workplace.

Dustin Moody ([00:17](#)):

Hello, and thanks for listening to the Faith & Work Podcast. I'm Dustin Moody, Director of Communications at Denver Institute for Faith & Work. And I'll be joined today by Brian Gray, our COO and Director of the 5280 Fellowship, and Joanna Meyer, Director of Events & Sponsorships. In a unique turn of events that we're all having to navigate, this is the first podcast we had to record completely remotely while we all self-quarantine around Denver.

Dustin Moody ([00:40](#)):

Our guest today is Chuck DeGroat. Chuck is Professor of Pastoral Care and Christian spirituality at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. And he's the Senior Fellow at Newbigin House of Studies in San Francisco. Chuck has served as pastor at churches in Orlando and San Francisco, and he founded two church-based counseling centers. Chuck maybe a familiar voice to some of you because he joined us in Denver in late 2018 as the keynote speaker at our church and ministry leader conference. He was also a previous podcast guest.

Dustin Moody ([01:09](#)):

He's the author of the *Toughest People to Love* and *Wholeheartedness* as well as his latest book, which we'll talk more about on today's episode called, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community From Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*. Chuck, thanks again for joining us back on the Faith & Work Podcast. It's good to have you back. And the last time we talked to you, we were talking about *Wholeheartedness*. And I'm wondering if you can kind of walk us from that publication, what led you to write *Wholeheartedness* to what led you to focus on narcissism in the church?

Chuck DeGroat ([01:40](#)):

Yeah. This book is almost like the flip side of *Wholeheartedness*, and I've often said that wholeheartedness is the antidote to narcissism. But I wrote that in a season that I was coming out of, which was exceptionally busy, I was overwhelmed and I felt scattered. And it was a vision of wholeness and health and flourish. This has really emerged out of really 20+ years of pastoral work and clinical work. My experience of narcissism really began in marriage counseling with Christians. And then it sort of extended to pastoral life.

Chuck DeGroat ([02:19](#)):

I began doing church planting assessments almost 15 years ago now and more general pastoral assessments. And started seeing the trend that most of the ministry leaders I found were in what we call the cluster B part of the personality disorder list in the DSM-5. That's where you find narcissism. And so this really came out of two decades of work, and a few pastor friends saying to me, it would be great to have one resource to go to that sort of encapsulates an understanding of narcissistic leadership and systems.

Dustin Moody ([02:56](#)):

So over those 20 years, was there a change that precipitated in the book or was it just the progression of seeing this over and over again?

Chuck DeGroat ([03:05](#)):

Yeah. I don't know. I think that there were changes even in how narcissism shows up in the church now. And we can talk more about that. One term that I use in there that I sort of created was fauxnerability, F-A-U-X. Fauxnerability. Maybe that's a conversation for later. But I think it was more around pastors coming to me, churches coming to me, organizations coming to me more generally, saying, I need a resource. We need a resource that really puts everything ... We got a little bit of this here, a little spiritual abuse here, a little bad leadership here. But we need like one resource that encapsulates it or summarizes it all.

Brian Gray ([03:45](#)):

I'm thinking about this idea of narcissistic leaders, they're in the church in a marketplace. And what's interesting is some of the warning signs you mentioned about leaders seem like they can both the positive or helpful aspects in some measures, and they can also be really harmful. And I'm wondering if so, are there some aspects of narcissism that might feature or that might appear to be really helpful or productive or good? And then from those of us on the outside, how can we tell the difference between those aspects that are healthy and helpful versus diagnoseable? Even though we wouldn't do such a thing?

Chuck DeGroat ([04:22](#)):

That's really helpful, Brian, because I tried to spell out a spectrum in the book, a spectrum of narcissism. I didn't develop this. This comes from the psychologist Theodore Millon, and a personality assessment that I use, a pathology assessment that I use, where he talks about styles, types and disorder. And it's really problematic when you escalate up to disorder. But I literally just got off the phone with a church planter and pastor who did this assessment and has narcissistic traits but isn't narcissistic personality disorder. And in many ways, very, very healthy leader. But a visionary, charismatic on stage.

Chuck DeGroat ([05:04](#)):

Quite well aware of his inner motivations, quite well aware of his needs for affection and approval. And so, there it is, that's kind of the caricature package, the grandiose personality on stage. And yet a really fairly healthy pastor who's done the inner work. So, yeah, we can see positive aspects of it. And in fact, we maybe like to see a little bit of narcissism in entrepreneurial leaders like that, or visionary leaders or people who are on stage. That might be controversial to say, but if it comes in the whole package of health, that's significant.

Joanna Meyer ([05:42](#)):

I'm curious more about the roots of narcissism, because in the book, you talk about some connections between shame and narcissism. Here's a quote from your writing. You said, "Same is fundamentally about inner disconnection arising from our childhoods that leads to relational disconnection in the present." Can you tell us a little bit about how some of the shames from our past can lead to narcissism.

Chuck DeGroat ([06:04](#)):

Yeah. So when I get into this work with an individual, we inevitably get to stories, maybe a story or a few stories of being bullied, being shamed, maybe being abandoned, maybe being neglected. And if they're really open to doing the work, and I'd say that people who are diagnosably narcissistic personality disorder are generally pretty resistant to the work. But people who are on the spectrum, if they go there, there is usually a deluge of tears at some point, as they remember that moment or those moments where that actually that process of becoming hidden began. The process of putting up the self-protective walls.

Chuck DeGroat ([06:46](#)):

And of course, they didn't wake up one day thinking I'm going to put up walls and become arrogant. It just sort of happened suddenly as they realize it's way too scary ... I feel way too vulnerable in this big, bad, scary world being the person I am now. So I need to find a mask to wear that will allow me to cope. So it really begins at an early age. I didn't describe that really well. I can say more about it if you want me to. And then it just sort of evolved to become the only mask that they know now at 35, 40, 45 years old.

Dustin Moody ([07:22](#)):

Chuck, let's talk a little bit more about the narcissistic pastor. And I know you want to kind of broaden the discussion to narcissistic leaders in general. I'm guessing some of the traits may be similar, but the damage may look different. So I want to pull a couple of warning signs or hallmarks from the book that you talk about. And then my question after this is, why is this a concern for the church and how big of a problem is it? So you mentioned that the narcissistic pastor, the pastor suppose spiritual authority is often cited or invoked within his right to decide.

Dustin Moody ([07:51](#)):

The narcissistic pastor sees others as an extension of his own ego and is unable to respond with curiosity, empathy or compassion in part because he has none for himself. The narcissistic pastor is unable to trust anyone, they feign connection in order to woo followers, yet they are always on the watch for disloyalty. When they find it, they punish it severely. I'm guessing some of these traits resonate with many of our listeners, unfortunately, either from the church or from organizations they've worked in. You've talked about seeing this over the past 20 years. Tell me about why this is a concern for you and why we need to be addressing it now.

Chuck DeGroat ([08:27](#)):

Yeah. So there aren't great numbers on the prevalence of narcissism. There aren't really numbers at all. And that's a sad thing. One of my hopes is that maybe out of this, there might be some curiosity about that. I did notice that early on, as I mentioned earlier, that as someone who is trained, both with a master of divinity and a mental health counseling degree, I started seeing it in pastors and in church planters. And I was in a denomination back then that was aggressively church planting. And over and over and over again, I'd see them pick these young guys that could raise money and seem to come in the perfect package. T

Chuck DeGroat ([09:08](#)):

hey weren't asking the questions that I thought they needed to be asking about character, for instance, or health, a healthy marriage, they were simply sort of blessing them. Wow, this is exactly what we're looking for. This leadership style, this inspirational vision, this capacity, productivity, whatever it would

be. Now, just to kind of come full circle, now that I've been doing the work for the last 10 or 15 years of assessment, I've consistently seen 60 to 70% of the pastors who I do assessments for show up in the cluster B set of personality disorders.

Chuck DeGroat ([09:44](#)):

And that's where you find narcissism, histrionic personality, borderline personality, antisocial personality and turbulent personality. Consistently see that. And so that's a problem. I'm not going to go publish a data-driven research study off of that. But I have a colleague who says something really interesting. He says, in a world of people who don't like public speaking, now where the numbers are something like over 90% of people don't like public speaking, here's someone who not only enjoys public speaking, but enjoys speaking on behalf of God to say, this is the Lord. Right?

Brian Gray ([10:26](#)):

Yeah. That is a funny way that I have never thought of it or heard it phrased. But Chuck, what I did hear from you a second ago is there is a relationship between narcissistic people and even some systems. You make that move in the book from narcissist leaders to systems. Talk a little bit about the type of systems that foster or harbor narcissistic leaders. My guess is that as people are listening, they can think about their workplace, particular industries that might be given are prone to this. Talk about that leader to system difference.

Chuck DeGroat ([10:57](#)):

Yeah. There are particular kinds of systems that are forward-thinking and entrepreneurial and aggressive in their leadership approaches and their trajectories of growth. And you often see the signs of this with comparison and competition. We're better, we're more special, we've got the best product. We see this in the church among church planters and in denominations that aggressively plant, tends to attract the entrepreneurial, aggressive kind of leader upfront kind of leader. But we see this in systems too.

Chuck DeGroat ([11:30](#)):

I tell a story in there about a large Christian organization. It was really more of a kind of social community organization for relief. But a large organization that my friend took a job at. And within two weeks, he said, Chuck, this organization is utterly narcissistic. All it talks about is how great it is, how much better it is than any other system or organization doing this out there. But all now with kingdom language. We support our resources better, we serve more people. And he said, this is absolutely unhealthy. There's no sign of humility. This is embedded in an organization that would call itself a Christian organization, but was utterly narcissistic.

Joanna Meyer ([12:13](#)):

I'd love to broaden the conversation and talk a little bit about marketplace or organizational leadership, because most of our listeners probably are working in companies with CEOs or with nonprofits that have executive directors. What do you think narcissistic leadership looks like in that context?

Chuck DeGroat ([12:30](#)):

Yeah. Well, so it's a great question. And we see a lot of the same features. I've got my book in front of me, so I'm just going to look at it for a second. But listen and just see if you can see the connection here.



They need to be to the center of decision making. They're impatient with others. They delegate but without giving people authority to make decisions. So they kind of micromanage. They're entitled. Whenever they hire staff that are more talented or smarter than they are, they feel threatened.

Chuck DeGroat ([13:00](#)):

They need to be the best and the brightest in the room. They tend to be inconsistent and impulsive. They praise and withdraw. They intimidate others. And they kind of manifest a kind of fake vulnerability like they're empathizing, but they're not really empathizing. That is not limited to Christian ministry. That's not limited to pastors. So that intimidating, bullying inconsistent, always needs to be praised kind of leader can show up in the marketplace or in the church interchangeably.

Brian Gray ([13:30](#)):

That reminds me so much of this guy who's the COO at Denver Institute for Faith & Works.

Chuck DeGroat ([13:34](#)):

That's brilliant.

Joanna Meyer ([13:39](#)):

I have a question for someone that's listening that may not be an executive level leader, but is working in an organization that has narcissistic tendencies. How do you survive if you're like a middle manager or lower down on the totem pole? Like, what does it look like to survive in that context?

Chuck DeGroat ([13:55](#)):

Well, these can be really oppressive systems, right? Because all the energy of the narcissistic leader is toward himself or toward herself. And so you will feel missed or lost or misunderstood or used and just generally empty in this system. And the difficult thing is that oftentimes you might go up the chain, you might say, hey, to your manager, hey, if he were different, this could be a little bit better. Or you might decide even to have a conversation with the narcissistic leader, but if they are diagnoseable, narcissistic, they're incapable of empathy, listening, and they'll make it about you.

Chuck DeGroat ([14:30](#)):

I talked about gaslighting in there, you're always complaining. Why can't you just ... We pay you well here, you've got benefits. I don't understand why you always need to complain. They're capable of listening to you. And so my counsel is always to step back and do your own work first. I think that if you're embedded in a system like this, and you're wondering, what do I do, get with someone who cares, get with someone who understands narcissism, a counselor, a spiritual director, a coach, a mentor who can really care for you, so that you can get to a place of evaluating, what do I need right now?

Chuck DeGroat ([15:05](#)):

Do I need to step away? If I am going to have a conversation, what will that look like? What would be safe to do and what might be unwise to do? And so I often caution people to take it very slowly because you're ... When you move toward a narcissistic leader, you're moving into a very dangerous position, and your reputation can be threatened, a whole career can be threatened. It's quite dangerous.

Dustin Moody ([15:31](#)):

Chuck, I'm wondering if we can talk about that, that work a little bit more. Because as I was reading through the book, it actually felt like a warning for a lot of us, if not all of us. Because it seems like there are narcissistic traits that could show up for anyone. But somewhere on the spectrum, like you mentioned. And you wrote, "Unless we become conscious of our unconscious, the ignored shadow and all it contains rules our lives, stifles freedom and emerges destructively in our relationships with others."

Dustin Moody ([15:58](#)):

So what is this work of addressing narcissism require of us individually? And then I'd love to talk a little bit more about what it takes to recognize it and address it in a leader, whether that's a church leader, organizational leader, anything like that? But for those of us, where should we start to examine this more closely?

Chuck DeGroat ([16:15](#)):

So I'll just exercise a little bit of narcissistic privilege right now and say Wholeheartedness, in a previous podcast, I think gets into that. How do we pay attention to acknowledge, become aware of our shadow side? There's parts of us that maybe tend to rule the day even for some of us. I talk about in the book the faces of narcissism. And some of us wake up one day, not even realizing that this is the only face that we show the world, the achiever, the intellectual, the perfectionist, the judger.

Chuck DeGroat ([16:49](#)):

And so that's the first piece of it, is becoming curious about your story, your life, your pain, your shame, as we talked about a little bit earlier. And then the second part is how do we do that with a narcissistic leader? How do they engage healing? Is that right, Dustin?

Dustin Moody ([17:06](#)):

Yeah.

Chuck DeGroat ([17:08](#)):

Well, I don't find very many diagnoseable narcissistic leaders curious or humble enough to engage this. Now, there are some, I mean, I've had two phone calls today with leaders who engage me to ask, I think I might have narcissistic tendencies. Will you do a little evaluation with me to see? And I love that. And my response is, whether they're in the marketplace or ministry or everything in between, my response to them is, just the act of curiosity and humility tells me something really significant.

Chuck DeGroat ([17:42](#)):

I'll give you two quick examples. When I do a psychological assessment and they spike on the narcissistic spectrum and I share that with them, kindly, as kindly as I can, I get one of two reactions. One is, thank you for sharing that. I suspected that and I was curious, I was anxious about this phone call, and I want to know, how do I grow? The second is, I knew it. You psychologist, you're always trying to find the problem. You don't recognize a good leader when you see one. Now, which of those people do I think is more healthy? It's the first one. So it depends on their sense of curiosity and humility.

Jeff Haanen ([18:20](#)):

Hi, this is Jeff Haanen, the Founder of Denver Institute for Faith & Work. Thanks for listening to the Faith & Work Podcast and for letting me interrupt to share a request with you. I want to ask you to consider



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Jeff Haanen ([18:42](#)):

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Jeff Haanen ([19:08](#)):

You can give by visiting [difw.org/donate](http://difw.org/donate) or by visiting the show notes page from this episode. Whether it be \$50 a month or \$25 a month or a gift of any amount, we are grateful for your support. Again, you can visit [difw.org/donate](http://difw.org/donate), or you can give by checking out this episode's show notes. Thanks again for your generosity towards God people and the mission of Denver Institute. And now back to the Faith & Work Podcast.

Dustin Moody ([19:41](#)):

So Chuck, I'm listening to the way you're talking about narcissism in leaders or in systems and I can't help but think, this sounds a little bit American, at least if not exclusively, but distinctly American. We've got this hyper individualism, this historical sense of manifesting destiny. Is this a particularly Western or a particularly even subset of that American feature? Or is it very universal?

Chuck DeGroat ([20:11](#)):

Yeah, maybe a little bit of both. I mean, I think it goes back to Genesis 3, some version of this is has been around for a long time. I do think that there are systems like we were talking about that are better containers than others for narcissism. I think this wonderful American experiment that we're living in, is a pretty good container for it too. Christopher Lasch, wrote a really important work years ago where he talked about ... He basically said, "We swim in the waters of narcissism in our American individualistic culture." And there's something in built.

Chuck DeGroat ([20:49](#)):

We compete against one another and that's a value at one level, but there is sort of a culture of comparison and competition embedded in ... It's strange to value this and also see how it results in us sort of fiercely competing against one another. Then we discovered that political campaigns like mottos like America First, I'm not trying to dig on a particular political leader here. But I mean, that emerges out of this American experiment, us first. I think it's pretty uniquely American.

Joanna Meyer ([21:25](#)):

I'm curious, globally, the world citizens are moving through the COVID-19, the Coronavirus epidemic, and it's a question, a social question of saying, will I value others before myself and that tendency to look out for our own interests? And its inference to one of our guiding principles, this idea of serving others sacrificially. What do you think it looks like as a Christian to be living sacrificially in an other centered way, in a moment that the society at large is wrestling with narcissism versus service?

Chuck DeGroat ([21:59](#)):

Yeah. See, I think our churches can fall into that that kind of America first or us first mentality too. Take care of yourself. Take care of your own. One of the things I noticed in the last two weeks was that a lot of pastors were scrambling. Now, it's easy for me to talk about pastors because I was one, but now I'm kind of like up in the booth like a sports commentator talking about pastors. [inaudible 00:22:23]. I noticed that a lot of the energy was around, what are we going to do to get church up on Sunday, to make church go live on Sunday?

Chuck DeGroat ([22:32](#)):

The immediate question, and this is just completely anecdotal. This is my own observation. I could be way off on this. But there wasn't as much. I did not see as much of a sense of what is our community need right now? That seems to me to be significant. And here we are. We find ourselves in a country where, again, as we're talking about, we surprise individualism. So then that is sort of translated into, what's best for my church? Versus, maybe I ought to convene a call with the local pastors here and see how we can come together.

Chuck DeGroat ([23:06](#)):

Rather than sending, as I heard last week, a senior pastor sent out his female associate pastor to buy all the audio and visual equipment, so that they can put on the show on Sunday morning, because he didn't want to go out and put his kids in danger. Here's a little bit of narcissism for you. He didn't want to put his kids in danger by going out and buying the equipment. She was a mother of two young kids herself, though. But all the energy was around how do we create the show on Sunday morning versus how do we serve our community?

Dustin Moody ([23:39](#)):

Before we wrap up, Chuck, I've got about one last question and you kind of speak to it there, and Joanna mentioned it as well, just the sense of narcissistic societies. And you touched on this earlier, but I'm curious, less from a data standpoint and more from just your work and your intuition. Do you get the sense that narcissism is growing or are we just done recognizing it? It's a term that has entered the vernacular. We hear it talked about a lot more than we used to, I think, or at least anecdotally. It's applied to leaders, it's a label given divisively. Are we just waking up to a problem that's already been there or is this something that's getting worse?

Chuck DeGroat ([24:16](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. And I wish I had a better answer for you. Because I go back and forth myself. I do see it from generation to generation morph. And so I say in the book, I've got students who are millennials, and they're always tagged with the narcissistic mantra, the caricature. And yet, I see in them a passion to serve their communities and a real heart for justice in others in my generation, frankly, that I don't see. So I think that's above my paygrade, Dustin. I'm not smart enough to really know that.

Chuck DeGroat ([24:49](#)):

What I can say is that I've lived long enough to see it morphing from generation to generation to generation. And I'm under no illusion that even the greatest generation was radically selfless. I think that as long as there's sin and brokenness in the world, we're always asking, what's in it for me? And so that's



something that's been around since, again, Genesis 3. That'll be around long after my book or a global pandemic. That's the water we swim in, even though it looks different from generation to generation.

Dustin Moody ([25:20](#)):

Yeah. Well, Chuck, thanks for joining us. We always like to wrap up by asking what's one thing you'd like listeners to do? So I'll give you a minute and start with Brian and Joanna. So for our staff team, Brian, let's start with you. Based on our discussion today, what's one thing you'd like listeners to do or consider?

Brian Gray ([25:38](#)):

As I was listening to Chuck earlier, I heard narcissism isn't a 0 to 10 scale, in my own words, so that I can be 0. It's a 1 to 10. I'm somewhere on there. In so I loved the idea of becoming conscious of our unconsciousness or being curious about ourselves. So for me personally, it would be considering taking just another careful look at my own motivations in leadership and influence. And then I would encourage that in our listeners as well, just to become curious about your own shadow side. And that's the thing that you can most be responsible to.

Joanna Meyer ([26:12](#)):

Yeah. I definitely echo what Brian was saying. Also, I would say, as a caution for folks that are in church settings, is to just be very aware of your church leadership. And I want to be careful about that. Because I don't want to imply that you'd be sitting in the pew thinking, my pastor is a narcissist or something like that. But just a sense of awareness. I feel like I've experienced church scenarios and watch friends get very hurt or they might have loved the momentum or the sense of show that God built up around a really charismatic pastoral leader and ended up hurting them in the long run.

Joanna Meyer ([26:45](#)):

And so just cluing into things that might make you uneasy or just watching so that you can respond in a healthy way or potentially get out of a situation that isn't healthy before you get put through the meat grinder, that may result from being around a narcissistic leader.

Dustin Moody ([27:02](#)):

Chuck, I think one of the things that I appreciated that I would encourage people to do is a little more of that self-assessment and reaching out to someone, either a counselor or a therapist, or even a friend who can kind of say, how are you seeing me show up in these places? And the book provides some great opportunities to kind of examine some of those things. So I'm curious, Chuck, for you, what's one takeaway, besides people buying the book, which we'll link to from our show notes. What's the next step for our listeners?

Chuck DeGroat ([27:26](#)):

Yeah. The next step is to write an Amazon review of the book saying this is the best [inaudible 00:27:30]. Everything off of what you just said, Dustin, I think the question how do you experience me is a really powerful one, for a marketplace leader, for a ministry leader. The last two places where I've served, in my conversations with people I'd be leading, I've given them permission to come to me with their answer to that question, how do you experience me? It's always very interesting because they'll say, but



you're a therapist. You don't do things that will hurt people. And I'll say, "Well, let me tell you a couple of the things that I do that generally hurt people."

Chuck DeGroat ([28:05](#)):

Now in the context that I'm in right now, I had a courageous student last fall come to me and say, "Remember when you asked that question?" Kind of timidly, he says, "Remember when you asked that question? Well, I've been experiencing you, again, is kind of distant. And I remember you said, I have permission to come to you. And I just noticed that I tried to get your attention a couple of times in and around the campus and I can't. You seemed really busy and checked out." And there it was once again. And so then we can have a conversation. And I can say, "Tell me more about how that hurt you, and what you need. And on we go toward health, I hope." But that question, how do you experience me?

Dustin Moody ([28:43](#)):

Chuck, thanks for joining us today. How can people find out more about your work?

Joanna Meyer ([28:48](#)):

Yeah. So thanks for that. The website is [chuckdegroat.net](http://chuckdegroat.net). I'm on Twitter, @chuckdegroat, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and I've got an Amazon Author Page too with all my books.

Dustin Moody ([29:02](#)):

Thanks again for joining us, Chuck.

Joanna Meyer ([29:04](#)):

Thank you.

Dustin Moody ([29:05](#)):

Thanks for being with us.

Outro ([29:10](#)):

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