

Born to Win

Self-Esteem or Self-Respect?

by Ronald L. Dart

I had no idea! Did you know there is a National Association for Self-Esteem? I'm not sure where that idea came from. They feature "the leading thinkers in the area of self-esteem and human potential".

Now, I suspect that the self-esteem movement... (I think anything that creates a "national association" might be termed a movement.) I think the self-esteem movement has its supporters and its detractors as nearly *any* movement will have. It will have some practitioners who are sound, and some who are off the wall, and some who give the movement a bad name. Now, I'm not sure at all what camp the National Association falls in, but their website was... well... interesting. What started me thinking about this was an article by Cheryl Wetzstein that appeared not long ago in *The Washington Times*. (She's quoting San Diego State University Psychology Professor Jean Twenge.) She said:

Americans born after 1970 — including the so-called Generation X and Millennial Generation — have become "an army of little narcissists," says Mrs. Twenge, who explains her views in her new book, "Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled and More Miserable Than Ever Before."

Cheryl Wetzstein - An Army of Narcissists?

End of quote. Now, I'm no expert, but that analysis matches to a "T" what I see in young people these days. Now, of course, what I think I see is only what I see. Can this be backed up somewhere? Well, she goes on to say:

Among Americans who lived through the Great Depression and two world wars, between 1 percent and 2 percent experienced a major depressive episode in their lifetime, says Mrs. Twenge, who bases her book on decades of generational data. Suicide was more common among middle-aged people, not young people.

Cheryl Wetzstein - An Army of Narcissists?

Now how have things changed? Well...

Today, the lifetime rate for major depression is between 15 percent and 20 percent [*That's 10 times greater.*], an increase too large to be explained by improved case reporting, she says. Suicide is the third-leading cause of death for people ages 15 to 24, while rates have dropped for the middle-aged.

Why should Generation Me feel so much anxiety and pain when it has grown up in relative peace and technological and economic expansion?

Cheryl Wetzstein - An Army of Narcissists?

Boy, now *there* is a question. When you consider the kind of world they have lived in compared to the kind of world their grandfather lived in...good grief, why should *they* feel anxiety and pain? Well, she says:

A big part of the answer is the constant focus on the self, Mrs. Twenge says. “[W]hen we are fiercely independent and self-sufficient, our disappointments loom large because we have nothing else to focus on.”

Cheryl Wetzstein - An Army of Narcissists?

So, yeah, it can be backed up. Something has indeed gone seriously wrong. The constant focus on the self is a formula for disaster in the end, but not everyone sees it that way. And that’s where the National Association for Self-Esteem enters the picture. Still quoting from Cheryl Wetzstein:

Despite its critics, self-esteem training and character education “are both alive and kicking,” says Sharon Fountain, president of the National Association for Self-Esteem (NASE).

NASE defines self-esteem as “the experience of being capable of meeting life’s challenges and being worthy of happiness,” she says.

Cheryl Wetzstein - An Army of Narcissists?

My goodness. What do you mean “*worthy* of happiness”? Aren’t these things things that we deserve *regardless* of how we come into the world or who we are? She goes on:

Personal competence grows out of self-awareness, accurate self-assessment and self-confidence, which is linked to self-esteem, she says. “If we are prepared to deal with the world in context, with responsibility and accountability, then not only does it improve the quality of our lives, it adds to the world.”

Cheryl Wetzstein - An Army of Narcissists?

So says Sharon Fountain, president of the National Association for Self-Esteem.

Now, I don’t find a lot to disagree with there. Accurate self-assessment, responsibility, accountability, probably does improve the quality of our lives; and it probably does add to the world. But I went up on their website to see what they’re all about. On their website, the National Association for Self-Esteem had a self-test. You can work your way down the page. (Of course, what’s funny is they have their questions on the left and they have the thing you ought to know about it on the right; so it’s not exactly a...it’s sort of self-scoring, I suppose).

Well, I walked through that self-test, and what I found was a curious combination of ordinary common sense and psycho-babble. And then at the bottom of this test there was a little picture with a caption.

The caption was “What matters most is how you see yourself.” And the picture was a tabby cat looking into a mirror and seeing a *lion* looking back at him.

Now, you can’t throw that picture into the mix and argue that you are all about accurate self-assessment. One of the things we’re running into today, and one of the reasons why young people are having so much trouble, is that they are being taught that they are *just fine* when, in fact, they’re not. And they know it. Now, you follow that little picture of the tabby cat looking into the mirror and seeing a lion...you follow that and you can get *eaten alive*, figuratively (maybe even literally). Then they had this section on the website:

Boost Your Self-Esteem by taking these 3 steps

Part 2

1. Use affirmations to boost your self-esteem. On the back of a business card or small index card, write out a statement such as “I like and accept myself just the way I am”, “I am the master of my destiny”, “I am somebody, I love myself, I believe in myself”. Carry the card with you. Repeat the statement several times during the day, especially at night before going to bed and after getting up in the morning. Whenever you say the affirmation, allow yourself to experience positive feelings about your statement.

National Association for Self-Esteem - “Self-Esteem Booster”

I don’t know. I can visualize some poor guy sitting in a restaurant, pulling a card out of his pocket, and mouthing to himself, “I am somebody. I love myself. I believe in myself. I like and accept myself just the way I am.”

Now, if you ever need a good example of psycho-babble, the website of the National Association for Self-Esteem has some *great* illustrations. There is something truly pathetic about a person who has to write out self-affirmations on a card, carry it around with him, and repeat it several times a day. You know, the book of Proverbs says this:

Proverbs 25

AKJV

²⁷ It is not good to eat much honey: so for men to search their own glory is not glory.

Seems to me that writing all these affirmations on a business card and stopping to read them over coffee is a path to frustration and to failure, and even to losing the pride or the satisfaction you have from the things you’ve done. “I like and accept myself just the way I am” spells *an end* to personal growth. Because personal growth comes from a certain dissatisfaction with what you are, where you are, and a desire to be somewhere else or be something else—to be *more* than what you are today. You’ve got to have *some* level of dissatisfaction or you’re not *going* anywhere. And, of course, there’s the card that says, “I am somebody.” Well, duh. But while you’re doing all this, where’s your focus? It’s on *yourself*. And if you’re lying to yourself, you can only hide that for so long. Then there’s the one that says, “I love myself.” Well, what’s so special about that; it’s no big deal for a man to love himself. What is a *very* big deal is for a man to love someone else and be loved in return. There’s no greater affirmation in life than love; and the love of self, in the absence of the love of another, will take you nowhere.

The second of the three steps offered on the website is not so bad. It says this:

2. Associate with positive, supportive people. When you are surrounded by negative people who constantly put you and your ideas down, your self-esteem is lowered. *[Well, now there's a surprise.]* On the other hand, when you are accepted and encouraged, you feel better about yourself in the best possible environment to raise your self-esteem.

National Association for Self-Esteem - "Self-Esteem Booster"

Well, yeah. I go back to Proverbs again—chapter 13, verse 18:

Proverbs 13

NKJV

¹⁸ Poverty and shame *will come* to him who disdains correction,
But he who regards a rebuke will be honored.

Now, that's not the same as being around with somebody that puts you down. It's talking about someone who's wanting you to be more, one who's wanting to correct you where you have made a mistake that will be harmful to yourself and others. The person who disdains that is going to poverty and shame.

Proverbs 13

NKJV

¹⁹ A desire accomplished is sweet to the soul,
But *it is* an abomination to fools to depart from evil.

²⁰ He who walks with wise *men* will be wise,
But the companion of fools will be destroyed.

You see, what he is saying here is that being accepted and encouraged does not always mean *approval*. When someone cares enough about you to offer correction, that is a positive declaration of worth. Disdain that, and you're on the road to poverty and shame. "A desire accomplished", the proverb says, "is sweet to the soul", and it's worth *infinitely* more than positive self-talk. It's something that's been *done*. Don't just sit there talking to yourself; go out there and accomplish something.

One of the greatest destroyers of a sense of accomplishment is a collection of unfinished projects. You know, I'm sorry that I discovered that so late in life. I read somewhere that one of the greatest time wasters in life was unfinished projects. And when I read that, I sort of sat back in my chair, stared off into space, and realized *how many* unfinished projects I had lying around. It was that idea, when I finally came to it, that lead directly to finishing my first two books. Want to feel better? Grab hold of one of your unfinished projects and *finish it*. It's a wonderful feeling when it happens.

The third step on the road to self-esteem (according to the National Association for Self-Esteem) was nearly as pathetic as the first. Here it is:

3. Make a list of your past successes. This doesn't necessarily have to consist of monumental accomplishments. It can include your "minor victories" like learning to skate, graduating from high school, college, receiving an award or promotion etc. Read this list often. While reviewing it, close your eyes and recreate the feelings of satisfaction and joy you experienced when you first attained each success.

National Association for Self-Esteem - "Self-Esteem Booster"

I'll bet whoever wrote this has that recording of the song *Feelings* on their iPod somewhere. You know, there's something about the idea of a person having to sit down and make yet *another* list so he can *feel* better... Well, it just boggles the mind. There are people who feel that that really does work. I'll tell you what will work: Accomplish yet another desire. Do something. Learn a skill. You've been sitting around... "Oh, it would sure be good if... I'd just love to learn to fly."

Well, go take flying lessons. You won't have to go very far. Go to the nearest airport. You'll find somebody out there that, for a couple of dollars (I'm sorry, more than that) will teach you how to fly. Do something. Learn a skill. But don't start any new projects without the determination to *finish* it.

I'll tell you, if you want to make a list, here's one: Sit down and make a list of all your unfinished projects. Examine the list and see which one of them has the greatest value and the greatest potential, and then go to work and *finish* that project. It will feel a whole lot better than remembering when you learned to skate. (I learned to skate so long ago, I don't have any clue what it felt like, except that I do associate pain with the learning process.) Returning to Ms. Wetzstein's article:

Healthy self-esteem is not egotism, arrogance, conceit, narcissism or a sense of superiority — those characteristics are “pseudo-self-esteem,” former NASE President Robert Reasoner says in an article.

Good self-esteem programs are grounded in reality and promote self-worth and competence, he says.

Cheryl Wetzstein - An Army of Narcissists?

Oh, well then they don't involve a tabby cat looking in a mirror and seeing a *lion* looking back, do they?

Nathaniel Branden, a pioneer in the field of self-esteem psychology, argues that self-esteem is far more than just feeling good about yourself. “It is confidence in the efficacy of our mind, in our ability to think,” he writes. It is also “confidence in our ability to learn, to make appropriate choices and decisions, and respond effectively to change.”

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Hey now, that's really sensible. And how do you gain real confidence? You gain it by accomplishment. You gain it by winning. It isn't just a question of creating feelings.

So what is really wrong with all this? I'll tell you, it occurred to me as I managed to read through several items on it, it is *godless*. There's no God in it, anywhere. And, therefore, it is *loveless*. You see, you can't really *love* yourself. The very expression “self-love” is meaningless. Love requires an object outside of the self upon which the love can be focused. Love is defined as:

a strong affection [...]: warm attachment [...]: attraction based on sexual desire [...]: a beloved person.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary - “Love”

And listen to this one: “unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for others”. (And tacked on the end of this is one that kind of says something of its own. It says love is “a score of zero” in tennis.) The best answer to low self-esteem is the love of others. Paul wrote his letter to the Philippiian church, and in the second chapter he said this:

Philippians 2

AKJV

² Fulfill you my joy, that you be like minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.

³ Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

⁴ Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

You know, it takes a special person, I suppose, to take *joy* in the accomplishments of somebody else. But it’s entirely possible. And when you look around you at people you know—at home, in your family, in church, people who have done some things that are really important—and you know these people, why not take joy in those things? If you care for the people, if you love them, you can. Like Narcissus, too many people spend far too much time looking at *themselves*—obsessed with self. And, you know, that really is the road to misery. Returning to the article:

Mrs. Twenge’s view of Generation Me is also too pessimistic for some.

“The overwhelming body of national data confirm that today’s collegians and teens are doing quite well on the whole,” says William Strauss, co-author of “Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation,” a book about American youth born between 1982 and 2002. Mr. Strauss and his co-author, Neil Howe, say this generation will become a powerhouse “can-do” generation known for civic activities, moral courage and leadership.

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Well, that’s encouraging. They go on to say that...

Youth volunteering is up, while rates of crime, youth victimization, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, even youth suicide are all down, Mr. Strauss says. *[We have a small conflict of stats there, but someone will have to look that up.]* As for Mrs. Twenge’s assertion that today’s youth are “more miserable than ever before,” he says, “We see no evidence of that.”

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Oh? Well how about this? Today, the lifetime rate for major depression is 15–20%; “an increase too large to be explained by improved case reporting.” It’s *ten times* what it was a couple of generations back. “Suicide is the third-leading cause of death for people ages 15–24”, while rates have gone down for middle-aged. What do you mean there’s “no evidence” that today’s youth are more miserable than ever before?

Mr. Strauss says Marine Corps Gen. James Jones has it right when he says, “‘We’re seeing a huge cultural shift away from the word ‘I’ to the word ‘we,’ in this new generation ... and that’s to be celebrated.’”

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Yes, it is; if that’s what’s really going on. But then the Marine Corps has always been about “we” instead of “me”.

Now you know, the Bible suggests a totally different way to look at all of this—a totally different way to walk. When Paul sat down and wrote his letter to the Romans, he came to this idea in the 12th chapter. He said:

Romans 12

KJ2000

¹ I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

The person who has come to this is no longer living for himself, and therefore he doesn’t have that source of misery creeping up into his life. He is living *for God*. He has presented this body of his as a living sacrifice.

Romans 12

AKJV

² And be not conformed to this world: but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Not what makes you *feel* good, not what gives you *feelings* that you like, but what’s *right in God’s eyes*. *That* can give you a feeling—a feeling of satisfaction in knowing that you know God, and that he knows you, and that he cares about you. And that gets awfully close to love, doesn’t it? Paul says:

Romans 12

AKJV

³ For I say, through the grace given to me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God has dealt to every man the measure of faith.

Now here’s where the rub comes in on the self-esteem movement: There *are* practitioners of self-esteem who don’t go down that route. They encourage people to think wonderful things about themselves when there is absolutely no basis for it at all. But on the other hand, there is a responsible wing of the self-esteem movement that goes the other direction, and says you have to take joy in accomplishment—in things that *really have* been done. You don’t think more highly of yourself than you ought to think. That doesn’t mean you can’t set high goals for yourself.

Jesus offers this parable:

Luke 18

AKJV

¹⁰ Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

Now, the Pharisee had good self-esteem. He...

Luke 18

AKJV

¹¹ [...] stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank you, that I am not as other men are, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

¹² I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

Here's a guy...I don't know if he pulled out a card to read this off of, but here's a guy who had his own list of the things that he *did right* and the things that he *was not*, and he engaged in *self-affirmation*. The poor Publican, standing way off,...

Luke 18

AKJV

¹³ [...] would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven, but smote on his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

¹⁴ [Then Jesus said,] I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted.

You see, in the *end* of all this, the honest confession of the weakness and of the failures of the Publican—and casting himself upon God, asking God for mercy, for forgiveness—this made all the difference. And some idea of making lists to read to yourself in the hope of *feeling* better is simply not going to get you there. The reason *so many* are miserable while the self-esteem movement swirls around about them is that there is something down deep inside of us that *knows better*.

Now, we can hush that little voice, but it is still the voice of knowledge. Lying to yourself about what you see in the mirror is *a road to insanity*. It's the man who *honestly* confesses to God who he is, what he is, and all of his failures—even with tears flowing down his face; the man who has the knowledge of *forgiveness* from God, and of the love of God toward him in spite of *all* of his failures, and *all* of his mistakes, and the things he has done wrong; the man who goes to God and says, “Be merciful to me; I am a sinner, I am a failure.”; and knowing that the love of God will rescue him...now *that* can make you feel better and can quiet that little voice down inside that tells you that you are lying. Because now you're not; you're telling the truth.

The apostle Paul wrote a lot about these things. He wrote to the Galatians and said:

Galatians 6

AKJV

² Bear you one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

³ For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

And when you think about it, the man who goes to God and says, “God I am *nothing*. Make something of me”, can walk out of there determined to do better and with the wind of God behind his back. Way back in the Book of Proverbs, we have this little verse:

Proverbs 26

KJ2000

¹² See a man wise in his own eyes? there is more hope of a fool than of him.

You see, you've got to stop lying to yourself; and then you can stop lying to God. It makes all the difference in the world.

Toward the end of the Bible, really the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation, there are seven times in this section where God (through his Son, Jesus Christ and to the apostle John) tells us how we should look at these things. In chapter two, verse ten, He says this:

Revelation 2

AKJV

¹⁰ Fear none of those things which you shall suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried; and you shall have tribulation ten days: be you faithful to death, and I will give you a crown of life.

And he closes with this:

Revelation 2

AKJV

¹¹ He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit said to the churches; He that overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death.

The man who overcomes is a *winner*. And that's why I call this program *Born To Win*.

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