Conventional wisdom declares that “you cannot love anyone until you love yourself.”

Based on this maxim, the transmission of love follows a sensible pattern: when people are loved, they learn to love themselves and thereby are liberated to love others. Love can become the legacy of generations.

The notion seems to be in harmony with the ancient command to “love thy neighbor as thyself”; in fact, in recent decades, self-esteem has moved from an American movement to a human mandate.

But there is a fly in the ointment. Self-love is a teeming bog. Many people—even many remarkable people—do not seem to be able to love themselves very readily. We read regularly in the media—and meet in our personal lives—many prominent and successful people who “are still working on their self-esteem.” If we were quite honest, many of us would concede that we have some abilities but do not feel especially remarkable. Despite unrelenting effort, we have not talked ourselves into a wholehearted love of self.

Krauthammer, an insightful social commentator, underscores the problem as he wryly observes that “the reigning cliché of the day is that in order to love others one must first learn to love oneself. This formulation . . . is a license for unremitting self-indulgence, because the quest for self-love is endless” (p.76). The dilemma is evident: If we cannot succeed at self-love, and if self-love is prerequisite to loving others, we can never get around to loving others.

A growing chorus of psychologists, educators, and philosophers is suggesting that, rather than loving ourselves in preparation for loving others, there is a better way to become a mensch, a decent and responsible human being. Self-love, rather than a path toward goodness, may really be a side trip.
There are good reasons to throw over the effort at self-love. The reasons come not only from research but also from traditional wisdom and good sense. One of the most surprising reasons found in research to turn from self-esteem comes from a major project to promote self-esteem. A group of scholars in California convinced policymakers that a major push to promote self-esteem would have a general and positive effect on the state. “When people feel better about themselves, they will work harder, behave better, and cooperate more” went the logic.

Fortunately, the project gathered data, and the bleak conclusion was that “the news most consistently reported, however, is that the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant or absent” (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989, p.15). The discerning reader will recognize the metamessage: The self-esteem project was a bust. Self-esteem does not predict good behavior any better than it predicts bad behavior.

Other scholars have raised philosophical concerns about self-esteem. Dorothy Cudaback (1992, p.3), a sensible California scholar, suggests that “promoting self-esteem may undermine positive change, ... reduce concern for social relationships, [and] deflect us from pursuing goals more likely to promote social responsibility.”

Lillian Katz, past president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, warns (1993) that “many practices advocated in pursuit of [high self esteem] may inadvertently develop narcissism through excessive preoccupation with oneself.” She observes that many classrooms are so involved in promoting self-celebration that children may not realize the major objectives of education including the celebration of learning and the cultivation of teamwork.

My own concern with the self-esteem movement became clear some years ago when I heard a high school principal recommend that we give all students—regardless of their performance—high grades. “With good grades they will feel better about themselves. As a result they will be motivated to work harder.” My experience does not support that conclusion. When high school students can get as many A’s while playing at the lake as they can by studying at the library, the only occupants of the library will be those who don’t know how to swim.

In fact, Susan Harter’s summary of research on self-esteem (1983) suggests that many schools have put the cart before the horse. She found that raising children’s self-esteem in order to get them to perform better in school was ineffective, and that just the reverse was true. When children are productive, they feel better about themselves. This is a vital point. Purposeful activity and contribution must come before satisfaction. We must lose ourselves if we are to find ourselves.

Thus, the art of teaching is to move students to real achievement. That requires sensitive structuring of expectations. The task that may perfectly challenge one student will overwhelm one classmate and bore another. That optimal state that psychologist Csikszentmihalyi calls flow comes when “a person’s skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable” (1997, p.30).

Absorption in learning and contributing may ultimately be more satisfying than self-love. Bushman and Baumeister (1998) show (counter to most people’s expectation) that it is not people with low self-regard who are prone to violence but rather it is those with an inflated sense of self. In a separate work, Baumeister (1991) show the dev-
astating effects of the growing focus on self for the meaning that people draw from life. When the basis of meaning is the self, then meaning is threatened by aging or ill-health. Our meaning depends on our permanence, if self-esteem is the end state for which we seek.

In addition, according to Baumeister (1991), the fundamental definition of morality has been inverted by the emphasis on self and self-esteem.

For centuries . . . each individual made his or her major life choices between the conflicting demands of self-interest and morality. . . . Virtue meant conquering the various forms of self-interest, including greed, lust, laziness, and cowardice. . . . Vice, in contrast, meant putting the impulses and desires of the self first and acting on them even when such actions ran counter to the community’s needs, wants, and values. The hero exerted and suffered for others, and in the process the hero helped the community. The villain indulged his or her own selfish appetites at the expense of others. . . . [But] in the 20th century . . . morality has become allied with self-interest. It is not simply that people have the right to do what is best for themselves; rather, it has become an almost sacred obligation to do so. The modern message is that what is right and good and valuable to do in life is to focus on yourself, . . . Once it was a virtue to

place the best interests of others ahead of your own. Now, instead, there is an increasingly moral imperative to do the opposite (p. 113).

Further, because of the focus on self, many people feel that they have not only the right but even the obligation to get out of an unsatisfying marriage. “If my needs are not being met, I must get out.”

The emphasis on self is part of a larger social movement. Triandis (1995) observes that the traditional inclination toward collective or communal attitudes and behaviors has been reversed in Western societies as we tilt dangerously toward individualism. Some of the fruits of this social change include loneliness, conflict, violence, alienation, narcissism, divorce, competitiveness, anxiety, frustration, discrimination, and family tension. No one would argue that we need more of these outcomes in Western societies. It is not a stiff drink of self-regard that most of us need; it is a strong dose of concern and connection for causes beyond ourselves.

A thoughtful reader might be puzzled by challenges to self-esteem. “Hasn’t research for several decades shown that self-esteem has very positive effects on people?” Not exactly. While it may be true that, on average, productive, happy people have higher self-esteem, it seems likely in light of recent evidence that happy, productive people spend less time in self-hate. There is no good evidence that inflating self-esteem makes success more likely.

The arguments for self-esteem can be further tested using a case study approach. Each of us can name our heroes and examine their lives for evidence of high or low self-esteem. When I do that I find a result that challenges the self-esteem dogma. One of my heroes is Abraham Lincoln. Based on what I know of him, he had low self-esteem. But he is...
my heroes because of his commitment to courage, compassion, and humor. Self-esteem is apparently not essential for noble behavior.

My most personal hero is my wife. When we first married almost thirty years ago, I worried that she did not have adequate self-regard. As the years have passed, her attitude about herself has not changed much; she still prefers not to talk about herself. She prefers, instead, to comfort the lonely and encourage the hopeless. What has changed in the decades since we married is my attitude, as I have observed Nancy’s countless acts of kindness and goodness. I recognize Nancy as the finest person I have ever known personally. I am trying to overcome my self-regard and become more like Nancy.

My most enduring hero is Jesus of Nazareth. Based on conventional measures of self-esteem, Jesus would not fare well. He would not allow himself to be called good but deferred all praise to his Father (Matthew 19:16-17). Further, “Jesus . . . said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do” (John 5:19; see also John 8:28 and John 14:10). Jesus simply took no credit for anything. If he had completed a conventional measure of self-esteem, his modern counselor would be ready to commit him to a self-esteem camp.

Jesus equated righteousness with humility and wickedness with self-promotion. The Pharisee whom Jesus used as a model of the unregenerate had great self-esteem (provide reference). In stark contrast, the pitiful publican knew that he was sinful—and he knew that his only hope was trusting God (provide reference).

In traditional thinking, humility, selflessness, modesty, and cooperation were prized. That is very different from the popular doctrine of the self-esteem movement.

What should our attitude toward ourselves be? Based on his study of history’s healthiest people, Abraham Maslow observes that they “can take the frailties and sins, weaknesses, and evils of human nature in the same unquestioning spirit with which one accepts the characteristics of nature. One does not complain about water because it is wet” (1954, pp.155-156). This is very different from self-celebration; it is a matter-of-factness that is closer to self-acceptance. In fact, consider whether the great people you admire are not characterized by a surprising and refreshing self-forgetfulness. Perhaps self-celebration and self-hate are both self-absorption. The healthiest people are those who think least about themselves. They consider themselves no more interesting or deserving than any other soul. They accept their gifts as mandates to be used in service. They consider their flaws to be limitations to be managed and balanced in cooperation with others who have different gifts.

The idea that we should love our neighbors as ourselves may suggest a greater need to be mindful of others rather than a renewed effort at self-appreciation; Most of us are already more than adequately self-mindful. The challenge to lose ourselves drags us from self-absorption to service.

The ideal path for self-development may be quite different from the dated recommendations of pop psychologists. Maybe each person must be connected to the love of God in order to be able to love effectively. As we experience that remarkable redemptiveness (granted in spite of our imperfections), we become able to love others and act for their well-being (in spite of their imperfections). We do not need to love or to hate ourselves. We need to recognize our dependence upon God.

Any attack on self-esteem makes people uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. One of them
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is the assumption that the positive and encouraging behaviors that were assumed to build self-esteem might be jettisoned. If our central objective is no longer to cultivate self-love, can we be less careful about kindness, support and love? The answer is a resounding “No.” We should not be one whit less positive but we can be more clear about our objective and more wise in our efforts. The objective is not to teach people to love themselves but to be filled with appreciation, purpose, and love.

Some parents strive to build self-assurance in children by praising them. There is an exquisite irony here. Carol Dweck (see Dweck 1999) has repeatedly demonstrated that when children are praised as good or smart, their motivation, performance, and persistence suffer. Apparently the expectation makes children anxious. They become less likely to try difficult tasks because of fear of failure.

In contrast, when children are appreciated for their effort, their motivation improves. They know they can reliably produce effort even if they cannot reliably produce masterpieces. For that reason it is better to say, “I enjoy the way you express yourself.” than it is to say, “You are such a good writer.” It is better to focus on the process of expression and production than to evaluate the person. Apparently, humans should be encouraged but not evaluated or labeled.

There are many other traditions in family life that can encourage competition and rivalry or appreciation and cooperation. In one tradition, family members might gather weekly to discuss a certain principle or virtue. Family members could nominate themselves as models of that virtue. A recognition or reward could be given to the one who seems to best exemplify that virtue. Such a tradition seems to encourage virtuous action.

Contrast that with a second tradition. Family members gather weekly—perhaps at dinner after church—and are invited to describe their best experience of the day or week. Each shares an experience that has been a blessing. As family members listen to each best experience, they look for the talents and joys in each person’s experience.

The two traditions may be very similar in function and purpose, but they are very different in their outcomes. The first encourages competition between family members, leading to the conclusion, “Any time someone does well, it lessens the chance that I will win the reward.” While it is possible to offer a reward to everyone who meets some standard, such a practice suggests that the real rewards are all material. A child can become focused on rewards rather than on rightness and inner satisfaction.

The second tradition encourages family members to identify and enjoy the customized ways that each person experiences joy. It encourages us to enjoy each person’s gifts and uniqueness. The first tradition encourages self-promotion. The second acknowledges the wonderful way that gifts can be combined in a community of caring.

For most of us there were a
handful of people who changed the course of our lives. For me it was family members such as parents and grandparents as well as educators such as Rhea Bailey, Ray Gilbert, and Phil Ellis. The people who change our lives are people who take an interest in us, are kind to us, and are excited about the adventures of life. We should be sure that every child spends a substantial amount of time with people who enjoy him or her—and who enjoy life.

As children start to discover their talents, we can encourage them: “It seems like God has given you a gift to express yourself in your pictures. I wonder how you will use that talent to bless people?” God does not give us talents so that we can win contests but so we can win contests but so we can bless.

For all of us, our greatest claim to merit is our Heritage. We are, each and all of us, children of God. When we understand that, we are more inclined to treat each other with humble tenderness and respect. We teach children about their great heritage. We celebrate the great gift of life. Like God, we do not wink at sin and error but, like God, we act to draw children toward ever-better ways.

Our sins and weaknesses do not have to lead us to despair. Fortunately we have a God who is fully prepared to rescue us from our fallen state. We do not depend on our own talent or goodness to rescue and perfect us. We depend on Him.

The problem with self-esteem is that it gets us stuck crocheting doilies while the great meals of life go uncooked. The feasts of life are productive labor, loving relationships, and continuing growth. Self-forgetfulness is better preparation for these joys than self-love is.

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References


