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SELF-IMAGE DEVELOPMENT
James D. MacArthur, Ph.D.*

How can I feel good about myself? All of us struggle with this question from time to time, and having an appropriate answer for it is critical. As commonly as this question is asked, wrong answers are given. One wrong answer is to feel good about yourself you must earn it or prove your worth. Consider why earning or proving worth is fundamentally an incorrect position to take. Air and water are essential to our good physical health. Do we make those around us earn their right to possess them? Do we demand that they prove they are worthy recipients of those essential life-sustaining items? No. Just as surely as lack of water and air leads to physical disability and finally to death, so does lack of feelings of personal worth and self-esteem lead to emotional disability and finally to emotional death. People should not have to earn the right to feel loved, nor should they have to earn the right to prove their worthiness to feel good about themselves. Give it to them free. They should not be required to buy conditional worth from anyone. The following reference in Luke sheds some light on earned worth.

For ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them.
And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same.
And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again.
But love ye your enemies and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be children of the Highest: for He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.


Each individual innately possesses self-worth because he or she is an eternal individual: a son or daughter of God. We did not come to this world feeling a need to earn it, or prove it. We brought it with us. We have always possessed it and as the spiritual offspring of God we have infinite value. This cannot be taken from us. Our perception of it may be altered but it is not lost. The endless aspect of God's love is evident in the words of Lehi,

But behold, the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love.

2 Nephi 1:15

One of our mortal objectives is to understand our true eternal identity and then to be true to it. A healthy self-image is based on this clear view of ourselves as eternal individuals. High self-esteem then comes through making out thoughts, feelings and behaviors congruent with this true and accurate self-image.

SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The main issue in accurate self-perception lies in our understanding of the key work "identity." There is a permanent identity available to all of us that lies within our ability to clearly understand our divine, eternal relationship with God as his literal offspring. We must obtain and maintain a clear view of our most basic eternal identity. That is the key. As Lorenzo Snow has said,

We are the offspring of God, born with the same faculties and powers as He possesses, capable of enlargement through experience that we are now passing through in our second estate.

MS 56:772 (Dec. 3, 1894)

Elsewhere President Snow avowed,

We are the offspring of God begotten by Him in the spirit world, where we partook of His nature as children here partake of the likeness of their parents. Our trials and sufferings give us experience, and establish within us principles of Godliness.

Eternal identity = worth is an equation of unconditional worth. Eternal identity has no variation in it and so our worth, if based upon it, is stable and firm. Simply put, our eternal nature as His spirit children must be revealed to us. We must deeply understand and feel it in the core of our being.

Sadly, some individuals are almost completely immersed in the things of this earth. They cannot or will not go beyond what is perceivable by their physical senses. They learn to define their personal worth through a series of conditional worth equations such as: Performance = worth

If I can run faster, jump higher, be the president, be a bishop, be the top baptizer, be the best homemaker, be the best parent, raise successful children, earn a lofty income, have children, get married, stay married, make my spouse happy, make my children happy, then I am worthwhile and can enjoy high self-esteem. See how conditional that is? Who can, or even wants to, keep that up all the time? And when I fail to do so, what happens to my self-esteem? It plummets.

Appearance = worth

If I am tall, handsome, beautiful, slim, look nice all the time, am complimented on my physical appearance a lot, win a beauty contest, am a flashy cheerleader, then I am worthwhile and can enjoy high self-esteem. See how conditional that is? Youthful beauty passes away with time. Slimness is often difficult to maintain. Then what? Self-esteem plummets.

Position = worth

If I am president of the quorum, president (or at least V.P.) of my company, Kiwanis president-elect, chosen by my neighbors as head of our neighborhood literary club, bishop, high counselor, stake president (even though we all know it isn't where you serve, but how), supreme head of a family, full-professor, then I am worthwhile and can enjoy high self-esteem. See how conditional that is? When I am released as bishop, what

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happens to my worth? Suppose my family members reject my parental leadership, then what? My self-worth plummets because my worth is tied to conditional items. $$$, Possessions = worth

If I have lots of material wealth, then I am worthwhile and can enjoy high self-esteem. If I lose my fortune then...?

Marriage = worth

If I am married then I am worthwhile and can enjoy high self-esteem. If I am not...?

Staying married = worth

If I remain married then I am worthwhile and can enjoy high self-esteem. But with divorce, my self-esteem almost automatically disappears.

If I do not outperform and come out on top, if I am not physically attractive, if I cannot please everyone, if I do not hold some type of lofty position, if I do not marry or if I fail to remain married, or if I am not a successful parent (like everyone else) then I am not worthwhile and will not allow myself to enjoy even a moderately high level of self-esteem.

You see, conditions are set and self-esteem is improperly based. There is no sense of personal value and worth that is not earned, proven or somehow bought. It is no wonder that so much low self-esteem abounds. Who can always meet the necessary conditions for feeling good about oneself? Who wants to? That is a battle we are forcing ourselves to fight every day and no one can keep it up. Eventually we fail to meet the conditions for feeling worthwhile and good about ourselves. Then we sink, get depressed and angry. “I wish there were no conditions,” we mutter. “I would give anything to be of personal worth and value just like I am. No one will let me. I won’t let me either!”

It is generally not known that even Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer suffered at the merciless hands of conditional worth. Remember how the other reindeer rejected him due to his “odd” nose? But after Santa’s intervention “then all the reindeer loved him...” (conditional acceptance). Not many are aware of the fact that following that great Christmas Eve experience, Rudolph was again left to suffer in his lowly red-nosed state. It is said he has been in psychotherapy for over twenty years now!

Think about this. You are worthwhile just like you are. Yet you may be a sinner bound for hell. If so, you will most certainly lose many blessings as they are conditional. You may also lose your ability to progress and obtain new spiritual heights. Progress is also earned. But worth is not earned. It must be free. Basic to Satan’s plan is that we should accept a counterfeit identity, a world self, in place of our real spirit self identity, and that we should measure our worth in worldly ways such as ability to perform, physical appearance, social approval, etc. Soon, we begin to believe that these things are ourselves, our real selves. We must remember that we have worth and are personally valuable simply because we are children of God, human beings, shining spirit selves with a marvelous body and a right to grow and become. Worth is programmed into each of us before we are born. We did not come to this world to get self-worth, we brought it with us. What we do with what we are does affect our receipt of blessings and influences personal progress but it does not affect worth. As Sterling Ellsworth once said,

> “There are more dimensions to our being than are apparent to us with our presently available physical senses. We come as volunteers, eager to succeed, eager to experience, eager to learn what earth life has to teach us. And although our memory of our pre-earth life is taken from us that we may act and be acted upon, fairly, without restriction, yet our identity as powerful, successful, and ethereally beautiful spirit sons and daughters of divine parents is not changed at all. This identity always remains. It is ours, and it is always there, always available, whether we are aware of it or not. It is the real me, the deep down inside soul that so many people are struggling to uncover and to know. It is the real self. It is the sacred individual essence that is particularly our own anywhere and everywhere no matter who or what we are in our mortality. It is the foundation upon which our lives here upon earth were meant to be built.”

*Getting to Know the Real You,* p. 2

The spirit self is able. It has wonderful qualities. It is lovable and capable. It is interesting, exciting and thrilling. It is attractive and powerful. It is intelligent, precious, noble, and sensitively aware. It is genuine and exceedingly beautiful. Why is it that so many of us do not see that real self, that eternal self, when we contemplate who and what we are? It is because we have suffered at the hands of contrary treatment. Some begin to ask, “Then why am I like I am?” You have learned to be contrary to your true identity. That isn’t really you. That which you have learned to be which is incongruent with your eternal, real self, can be unlearned as well. We experience withdrawal, anger, dominance, overprotection, humiliation and other forms of negative treatment. How does the spirit self within respond to such foreign experiences? It is a massive affront, an awesome violation of our basic inner, spiritual nature to experience such treatment. We experience it as children and as adults. If experienced in sufficient quantity, this negative treatment begins to communicate a lie to us. The lie we are beginning to believe is that there is something fundamentally wrong with us. That is a lie if we consider it in light of our true, eternal identity. Can we calmly bear such self-perception? No. The beautiful inside self will not tolerate such deception. It rebels at the thought of being told it is unworthy, unlovable, incapable and lacks value.

But as mortals, our vision is limited. We cannot directly recall our pristine beginnings, our noble heritage and our own personal holiness and sacredness. So, with our mortal shortsightedness when we are low we go in search of improved feelings of worthiness and personal value. We often are willing to bargain with the world around us. It offers many bargains. Bargains are conditional means by which we may feel better. Bargains are found in performing to earn the worth you feel you do not have. These take the form of a Little League who nervously stands at the plate, knowing he has two strikes on him and a parent in the stands with high expectations. He feels if he does not somehow magically end up safe on first base he may be devalued as a person. It is the housewife who feels tension and anxiety
mounting as the time nears for her husband to arrive home to a cluttered house and fighting children. He will want to know why she can’t do better, and as a result she may feel devalued as a person. It is the executive who is passed over for the third time on a promotion. How will he tell his wife who expects him to succeed? She will give him that look that devalues him as a person. And so, the pressured little leaguer, the anxious housewife and the fallen executive all sit down at the bargaining table to renegotiate their sense of worth and personal value. They don’t like it. No one likes it. It should not be that way. We all wear costumes. The little leaguer wears his uniform and as the ball sails over the fence he needs to be a super-ballplayer more and more. His false sense of identity and worth depend on it. There is a feeling of desperation as he stands at the plate. The bat and ball meet; his worth is once again temporarily assured. If he fails, he stands naked and ashamed at the plate. Mrs. Miller is as tied to the condition of her home, the behavior of her children and the acceptance of her husband as the young ballplayer to his performance at the plate. Mr. Anderson will always be looking to the next step on the ladder nervously because he knows if it is not to be his he must negotiate again and again for some sense of personal value. But, why is it that we cannot remember that under the Little League uniform, the apron, and the business suit, dwells a remarkable being, full of eternal nobility. That being did not come to this mortal world feeling a need to prove its worth. It has an identity, a sense of personal pride and strength that is not of this world. That is who and what we really are. The value of that person is non-negotiable and firm. If we can see ourselves from that perspective, our knees will tremble less at the plate, our anxiety will not so dramatically increase as we hear our husband pull into the driveway, nor will there always be a lump in our throat at every promotion for we will not allow these things to be the key to our sense of worth. We will know that question is settled. We can then put our emotional energy into problem-solving rather than constantly renegotiating our sense of worth every time something goes wrong.

We have described true, eternal identity as the basis for a healthy self-image. We have described unconditional worth as being based on eternal identity. We all possess it by eternal inheritance, and no one should be made to earn it or prove it. We have described conditional worth as being based in tying our worth to our ability to perform, on our appearance, or position or a host of other conditions. We see that self-esteem is a daily, even hourly battle to win that which really belongs to us by divine heritage.

So, how do we get it back and maintain it if we feel we have lost such a vision?

First, it is vital that these concepts of eternal identity and unconditional worth be studied carefully and that they be well understood. Refer to readings at the end of this article that will assist in this effort. You can’t use it to help you or anyone else if you don’t understand it fully.

Second, one of the greatest defeaters of false, counterfeit identities to which we cling (like the baseball uniform, the apron and the business suit) is known as real love supplies. Real love supplies are recognizable because they have no conditions.

There is no third possibility: love is either conditional or unconditional. Either I attach conditions to my love for you or I do not. To the extent that I do attach such conditions, I do not really love you. I am only offering an exchange, not a gift. And true love is and must always be a free gift.

The gift of my love means this: I want to share with you whatever I have that is good. You did not win a contest or prove yourself worthy of this gift. It is not a question of deserving my love.

John Powell, Unconditional Love, p. 65

Unconditional love corresponds to one of the deepest longings, not only of the child, but of every human being; on the other hand, to be loved because of one’s merit, because one deserves it, always leaves doubt. There is always a fear that love could disappear. Furthermore, deserved love easily leaves a bitter feeling that one is not loved for oneself, that one is loved only because one pleases.

Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving, p. 35

All of us came into this world with a love bucket brim full of real love supplies. They were not conditional love supplies. In other words, they were freely given to us. We did not earn them. Therefore, if that is our pre-mortal model then let us attempt to follow it here. There is no power greater than real love that feeds the spirit self and strengthens it. The spirit thrived on it pre-mortally and will thrive on it here. Now we begin to see each other without our costumes, our counterfeit identities, that we use to earn love. We begin to relate to the beautiful spirit self inside. We begin to trust it. We, therefore, do not make the little leaguer hit the ball to feel loved nor the housewife perform according to expectation to feel loved nor the executive earn his promotion to feel loved. The bat on the ball, the spic and span home with model children and the promotion may serve to be love substitutes. They are so desperately needed by these individuals because they experience few real, unearned love supplies coming in. So, they substitute these items to help them feel better about themselves. If real love supplies are adequately and freely received, one will not try to earn them or prove they are worthy of them. Now, the young boy may stand at the plate and desire to put the bat on the ball for the right reason, which is to attempt to be excellent so as to be true to his real, inside spiritual identity. Likewise the housewife and the executive will attempt to do well for the right reason, to be true to their noble, real identity. There is less likelihood that any of the three will attempt to do what they do for the wrong reason, which is to do it to prove their worth. They do not need to do so! Their sense of identity and innate personal value is confirmed by the receipt of real love supplies free from God. Interestingly, they can also be given to ourselves from ourselves. But what if we feel they are not coming in?

IDEAS ON RECEIVING REAL LOVE SUPPLIES FROM OTHERS

1. Identify some individuals in your life who truly care for and about you. They just accept you. They see past
your faults and your negative aspects. You know that they can be reached when love supplies are needed to provide temporary strength. The spirit self inside thrived on the unconditional love of God in the pre-mortal world and it thrives on such love now. Know where to get it from specific individuals.

2. Identify your favorite love supply or love supplies. You, like anyone else, have certain ways in which love is most powerfully felt by you. It may be reassurance, being listened to, being with someone, talking, being hugged or held in a non-sexual way, etc. You should know your favorite love supplies and the favorite love supplies of those in your family and other close, intimate friends. If feasible, sit down in a family home evening or a friendly group and share with your loved ones how it is that you feel most loved so that they will know how to lift you when you are down.

**IDEAS ON RECEIVING LOVE SUPPLIES FROM YOURSELF**

1. Meditate and pray. Spend some self-time alone. Take a piece of paper and list 40-50 character traits of your real spirit self. These would be positive traits in yourself that just seem to be part of you. Examples are honesty, trustworthiness, faith, sensitivity, dependability, diligence, etc. Spend a few minutes each day pondering over a few of these. Give yourself credit for having such character traits. Just by taking time to do this you areprizing and valuing yourself. That is a real love supply from you to you.

2. Once you have identified some of these most notable character traits of your spirit self, devise a plan daily or several times a week to use one or more of them. If you feel your most prominent spiritual trait is sensitivity, then spend a few minutes planning a specific way to use that trait to bless the life of someone you know. You will experience a love supply to yourself by doing this and the receiver of your actions will experience a real love supply from you two.

3. Catch the negative. Almost daily we receive challenges and/or negative input from various sources. What do we do to be congruent with our true identity? We make a conscious choice to enter into productive problem-solving rather than to engage in self-degradation. Each time we make that conscious choice, it is a love supply to ourselves. We do it because we care about ourselves.

**IDEAS ON RECEIVING LOVE SUPPLIES FROM GOD**

God’s love for his children is unconditional. You do not have to earn it. (Luke 6:32-35). However, we often place a lid on our love bucket, and we do not receive love supplies from God. We choose to place the lid there because we feel unworthy of God’s love. We often think that even if He did love us it would be because He is so good and not because we are good. In order to keep the line open we need to engage ourselves in activities that allow us to more fully experience his love such as prayer, scripture study, temple attendance, fasting, service to others, genealogy, etc. We need to be on our knees exhibiting our great desire to know Him and to feel his great love for us.

Besides real love supplies, another great defeater of false, counterfeit identities is conscious choices. Even when real love supplies may be low we may simply tell ourselves, “I choose to be true to my real identity. I know who and what I really am.” We may be tempted to make a poor choice or decision because we are feeling low about ourselves. At that very moment, we stop. We recall who we truly are and how much we desire to be true to that accurate image of ourselves. We then make a choice to be congruent with it. For example, you are tempted to be angry with a family member. You stop and remind yourself who you are and who they are. Ask yourself, “What can I now do to both deal with this situation as well as be true to the noble, sacred identity both of us share?” The answer will come and you can act on it. It is exhilarating. The following diagram illustrates the process of making conscious choices that allow you to make your thoughts, feelings and behaviors congruent with your eternal identity.

**CONSCIOUS CHOICES**

1. **SITUATION OCCURS**

   X **CHOICE IS MADE**

   (to be true to real or negative self)

   - **R.S.** Implementation of plan that keeps you congruent with real self.
   - **N.S.** Esteem for self is a by-product of making choices that allow you to be true to your divine, eternal identity.

2. **Focus is the key.** Is your focal point your real self so that ultimately behavior matches true identity? Or is the focal point the limited, inaccurate perception of the negative self with its powerful need to prove or earn worth?

   The following is an exchange between a therapist and client illustrating the use of the choice diagram above. (This particular interaction occurred after the client had been in therapy for over two months.)

   **Client:** Well, my youngest and last sister is getting married. They dropped the news on us yesterday.

   **Therapist:** You sound delighted!

   **Client:** Yeah, really delighted. Another testimonial of what a loser I am.

   **Therapist:** Tell me about that.
Client: Eight children, all married but one -- guess who? Me. Really makes you feel great you know. 
Therapist: Tough huh?
Client: Tough and very painful. My worth in wrapped up in whether or not I am desirable -- marriageable is a better word for it.
Therapist: Are you ready to just accept that?
Client: Oh, I don’t know. I left the house last night and just went for a walk to think it over. I thought about what you and I talked about -- about my worth being tied to someone else’s perception of me and that I needed to focus on what I really am deep down inside and that I need to make my own decisions about what I am worth based on truth rather than fiction. It helped some but I am obviously bugged about it now, aren’t I? That is okay isn’t it?
Therapist: You sure are. Do you know what to do? Need some help?
Client: O.K. I am feeling sorry for myself. I feel cheated. That is okay isn’t it?
Therapist: Is it?
Client: I think so, but leaving it there is no good. I have to decide what I am going to do to be true to what I really am. Then I can solve my problem.
Therapist: Good, go ahead.
Client: My mistake is that I have really come to believe I am only worthwhile when and if I get married. I am worthwhile anyway, aren’t I? I keep putting conditions on being O.K. I will never let myself be O.K. unless I meet all the conditions.
Therapist: What are you basing your worth on now?
Client: Being married.
Therapist: What is your next step going to be -- you know how to work this one out. Do it!
Client: I do know. Sometimes I get so many kicks out of feeling sorry for myself I just keep it up even though I know that it all goes nowhere. You know, it really is a neat, peaceful feeling to get out of that marriage and worth set up. You are telling me I’m just O.K. -- that’s it-- right?
Therapist: You’ve got it. But you can’t quit there. That is only the foundation for quitting your constant series of efforts to prove your worth. Once you accept your own fundamental worth then you can put your emotional energy into solving the problem at hand. See what I mean?
Client: Sure do. Let’s get at the problem then. What do you think is keeping me unmarried?

In summary, this brief excerpt only illustrates a part of the process. The major effort in improving self-esteem through use of the eternal identity perspective, is to help individuals take day-to-day negative inputs, like a younger sister announcing her upcoming marriage to a much older sister, and guide them into developing self-insight that reveals the conditional worth equations that are functioning in their lives in an effort to prove their own personal value to themselves and others. Once they learn to talk themselves through the futility of such an effort, they can turn their emotional energy to actually solving the problem at hand. In this case, our interview segment ends with the client asking the question, “What do you think is keeping me unmarried?” She is able to look at that question honestly now. As long as her feelings of personal worth are tied to the question of marriage, she will never want to face it openly. Now she can.

The therapist shows unconditional acceptance of the client, which includes both tenderness and firmness at times, and teaches the client how to make conscious choices to be true to eternal identity.

SPECIAL HELPS FOR DEVELOPING SELF-WORTH IN CHILDREN

To enhance the possibility that a child will feel good about himself, he needs to experience some unconditional lovability and have an opportunity to express his own personal capability (both are major traits of his inner spirit self-nature and must be maintained for a sense of self-worth to exist). Destruction of feelings of lovability comes most powerfully through consistently experiencing humiliation and neglect. Feelings of capability are damaged most by being dominated and overprotected. Give your child real unconditional love supplies. Find out his favorite love supply (the thing he perceives as communicating love to him from you most clearly). It could be just spending time with him, or playing with him, or listening to him or reassuring him. If he experiences real love on an unconditional basis, he will most likely give himself a lovable label.

Also, creatively help each child select an area (or several, perhaps, but at least one) of competence where he can really excel and do them well. Help him to realize that he really can do things and do them well. He will most likely give himself a capable label and generalize his capability to other areas of his life.

Once he has accepted lovable and capable labels, he will more fully sense his innate, profound personal worth. That is what he wants and deserves as a result of his divine nature.

The essence of a healthy and accurate self-perception is that it is a by-product of deeply perceiving our true identity. So often our understanding of our Godly nature is poorly developed. Even if it is understood, we fail to know how to proceed to internalize such vital
concepts into our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. In the experience of this writer, there is a deep longing among God's children to capture once again that precious and noble self-definition with which we entered this mortal world. To the extent that we are able to do that, we find ourselves standing on a firm foundation that allows us to negotiate even the most treacherous of life's challenges to our self-esteem.

FURTHER READINGS OF INTEREST IN AREA OF SELF-IMAGE DEVELOPMENT