Confronting the Myth of Self-Esteem: Twelve Keys to Finding Peace Ester Rasband

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Reviewed by Wendy L. Watson

If a good book is one that challenges dearly held beliefs and invites deep reflection, then *Confronting the Myth of Self-Esteem* is a good book. One may initially wonder what a wife, mother, and educator with a degree in English and postgraduate work in ancient Near Eastern studies is doing writing an anti-self-esteem book. But it doesn’t take long for the author to establish herself as one who has thought deeply about the myth of self-esteem as she draws from her own experiences, which include extensive missionary service.

Ester Rasband is indeed a woman with a mission, and she tenaciously undertakes her self-appointed mission—which at times seems less like confronting and more like combating. Her missionary zeal is palpable as she chisels and whacks away at society’s fruitless pursuit of self-esteem and presents keys to assist the reader to turn away from self-help and others-help in the futile quest for self-esteem and to turn to the Lord for divine confidence and peace. Somewhat ironically, her twelve recommendations are presented in a self-help manner.

As a therapist and professor who took a private oath about twenty-five years ago never to give a talk on “self-esteem” that was not anchored in our relationship with the Savior, I was positively attracted to many ideas in this book, especially to many of the distinctions presented in its twelve keys to finding peace. Those distinctions include the distinction between self-esteem and confidence; self-help versus divine help; the belief of “I am loveable and capable” versus “I am loved and grateful”; feeling great about ourselves versus showing “our humility to our Father in Heaven, so that we can feel great about him” (17); believing “I am important” versus “I am important to the Lord”; the anxiety that accompanies a search for self-esteem versus the peace that accompanies a humble total commitment to the Lord; loving versus admiring; acknowledging good things about ourselves versus being humbly grateful to God for the good things about ourselves; self-worth versus our worth to God.

As powerfully useful as some of Rasband’s ideas are, and as much as her ideas have helpfully perturbed my thinking, deep reflection—months of it induced by writing this review—has caused me to suggest caution in five areas.

Concern 1: Grand sweeping statements may work against the credibility of the book and the ability of readers to fully engage its useful ideas. For
example, some readers may question the statement “We tell ourselves that we are splendid just the way we are” (17). In over thirty years of clinical practice with individuals, couples, and families seeking peace and confidence, I have not met anyone who said (overtly or covertly), “We are splendid just the way we are.”

Concern 2: The foundational idea that the key to peace and confidence is abasement—which she supports by one pivotal scripture (D&C 101:42)—does not seem to fit with the teachings and practices of modern prophets and Apostles. Consider President Hinckley’s signature greetings to the Church, which consistently include commendations about how good—even great—the Saints are. Former Apostle George Q. Cannon encouraged those who were feeling worthless with the following words:

> We humble people, we who feel ourselves sometimes so worthless, so good-for-nothing, we are not so worthless as we think. . . . We may be insignificant and contemptible in our own eyes and in the eyes of others, but the truth remains that we are the children of God and that He has actually given His angels . . . charge concerning us, and they watch over us and have us in their keeping.¹

And Elder Neal A. Maxwell counsels, “We cannot build up the kingdom if we are tearing ourselves down”²; “self-contempt is of Satan; there is none of it in heaven”³; “since self-esteem controls ultimately our ability to love God, to love others, and to love life, nothing is more central than our need to build justifiable self-esteem.”⁴

Concern 3: Any presentation style that involves an abundance of declarative statements may well give a book an authoritarian tone but may impede the acceptance of truths, as often does a mother’s demand for us to stop what we’ve been doing. Rasband acknowledges that she uses this style, which she admits in chapter 14 (a must-read that modulates and clarifies the previous 120 pages) results in inducing fear in one of her friends because of Rasband’s “badgering with anti-self-esteem rhetoric” (121).

Instead of declarative statements offered as axioms or self-evident truths, many times the reader needs a thicker, fuller, richer description or explanation. For example, in response to the statement “We misread the still, small voice” (18), the reader asks, “What do we misread it as saying, or as what?” and her description of “striving for pride” (18) seems to come out of the blue—a conceptual leap that the reader is asked to make without sufficient building and bridging. At times this style can lead to an outcome well beyond the author’s intent. In her attack on the world’s idea that “each has the right to receive love in the way that we recognize it and accept it” (60), Rasband invites us to consider that others may offer love to us in ways that don’t mean love to us. She draws a distinction between “rights versus
responsibilities” (61), embracing “responsibilities” and eschewing “rights.” However, one does not have to think very long to see that there may be times when it is would be “irresponsible” not to declare one’s “rights,” especially in light of Rasband’s statement, “How valuable it would be to our mental health to examine the ways that others give love to us instead of the ways we are willing to accept it” (61). Imagine the devastation for a survivor of childhood abuse reading such a statement.

Concern 4: With the best of intent, Rasband may inadvertently feed exactly the situation she so desires to starve, i.e., self-focus. Through this book’s anti-self-focus, anti-self-consciousness comments, the reader is actually invited to focus on him- or herself—at least for a period of time—and becomes increasingly self-conscious (if only to check to see if one has been unwittingly too self-conscious or has invited others to be self-conscious through offering the wrong kind of compliments and commendations).

One wonders if an attempt to understand and live Rasband’s pro-abasement stance might not backfire just as C. S. Lewis’s Screwtape suggests to Wormwood:

All the abjection and self-hatred . . . may even do us [the devils] good if they keep the man concerned with himself, and above all, if self-contempt can be made the starting point for contempt of other selves, and thus for gloom, cynicism, and cruelty. . . . Thousands of humans have been brought to think that humility means pretty women trying to believe that they are ugly and clever men trying to believe they are fools. And since what they are trying to believe may in some cases, be manifest nonsense, they cannot succeed in believing it, and . . . their minds endlessly revolv[e] on themselves in an effort to achieve the impossible.5

Concern 5: When the reader learns that the author discovered/uncovered these ideas through personal revelation, one is left in quite an untenable situation. How does one comment on ideas distilled through another’s personal revelation?

Perhaps the best answer to that question is to follow the author more in example than in logic. Rasband is clearly a courageous woman who cares deeply about assisting her readers to rid themselves of what she believes works against their needs for peace and confidence—“not peace made simple, but peace made possible—not peace without pain but peace that overcomes pain” (9). All counselors would hope to achieve that same end. My recommendation is that readers of Confronting the Myth of Self-Esteem emulate this author’s process to seek their own personal revelation on which ideas in this book could make a difference to the peace and confidence they seek.
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