

Self-Esteem: A Great Human Need

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It is an honor to be one of the participants of the Campus Education Week and to join all of you and the distinguished faculty who are participating here. I am at once humbled and challenged in trying to speak of a great human need, self-esteem. I refer to what we think of ourselves, how we relate to what others think of us and the value of what we accomplish. Shakespeare in *Othello* said, "I have never found a man that knew how to love himself" (Act 1, scene 3).

The consequences of falling in love with oneself generally continue as an extended romance. This is what Thomas Carlyle, the famous Scottish writer referred to as "the sixth insatiable sense." And the English author Browning said self-esteem is "an itch for the praise of fools." The self-esteem that I speak of today is something different. It is not blind, arrogant, vain self-love, but self-respecting, unconceited, honest self-esteem. It is born of inner peace and strength.

Last month I went to get my driver's license renewed. I stood in the lines and looked at the eye charts. Then I waited with everyone else for the picture-taking process. In the picture on my license this time, my eyes are open! It was appalling to see the lack of self-esteem in so many who came to this public office. In the

name of comfort and informality, many were immodestly dressed and others unkempt. I wondered why they would present themselves in public so poorly. In their manner of speech and their dress they had greatly shortchanged themselves. "Speech," it has been said, "is a mirror of the soul: as a man speaks so is he" (Publilius Syrus, Maxim 1073).

Self-esteem goes to the very heart of our personal growth and accomplishment. Self-esteem is the glue that holds together our self-reliance, our self-control, our self-approval or disapproval, and keeps all self-defense mechanisms secure. It is a protection against excessive self-deception, self-distrust, self-reproach, and plain old-fashion selfishness.

After a lifetime of observing, I have found the greatest respect is owed not necessarily to the rich, or the famous, but to the quiet, unsung, unknown heroes whose true identity, like the unknown soldier's, is known only to God. The unsung often have little of status, but much of worth.

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When I was growing up in the Cottonwood area of Salt Lake County; it was the rural part of the valley. One of the men who had the greatest dignity and commanded the greatest respect was an old Scandinavian brother who, after walking a couple of miles, traveled by streetcar to work at the Salt Lake City Cemetery and back every day. His work was to water and mow the grass, tend the flowers, and dig the graves. He said little because he did not speak English well, but he was always where he should be, doing what he should do in a most dignified and exemplary way. He had no problems with ego, or with faith, for while he dug graves for a living, his work was to serve God. He was a man of little status, but of great worth.

Not far away from his humble home was where the more affluent people of our community lived. Many of the well-to-do were fine, honorable people; but some of them who had much status had little of worth.

When the Savior called his disciples, he was not looking for men and women of status, property, or fame. He was looking for those of worth and potential. They were an interesting group, those early disciples: the fishermen, the tax gatherer, and the others. On one occasion, after some of the apostles were beaten, they went “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41).

Worth has little to do with age. It has everything to do with service. The Lord has made it clear that worthiness is built upon service, not just to family and friends, but also to strangers and even to enemies. The great prophet Isaiah gave an eternal warning when he said:

Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near, saith the Lord; and I will heal him.

But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt.

There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.
[Isaiah 57:19-21]

From Milton’s *Paradise Lost* comes this truth: “Ofttimes nothing profits more than self-esteem grounded on just and right well managed” (Book 8, line 571).

1. Keep Your Free Agency.

May I suggest six essentials to keep a healthy self-esteem. The first key is to keep your free agency. To keep your free agency, you must not surrender self-control, nor yield to habits that bind, to addiction that enslaves, and to conduct that destroys. To keep our free agency we must avoid the deadly traps and pitfalls from which there may be no escape. Some, having been ensnared, spend the best years of their lives trying to escape, and so exhaust themselves in the process that in the end they find themselves freed from the addiction but spent, burned out, with their nerves shot and their brains forever dulled.

In Proverbs we read: “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls” (Proverbs 25:28). To completely enjoy our free agency, it is necessary to follow the counsel of the 119th Psalm: “I have refrained my feet from every evil” (Psalm 119:101). As parents, we should follow the counsel of Alma. Teach them (our children) “to withstand every temptation of the devil” (Alma 37:33) and “bridle all your passions” (Alma 38:12).

2. Cultivate Humility.

The second key to an adequate self-esteem is humility. In speaking of humility I do not refer to the “breast beating,” “sackcloth and ashes” kind of humility. I refer to the humility that comes with inner strength and peace. It is the humility that can accept and live with one’s own warts without cosmetics to hide them. It is important to learn to live with our incorrigible physical and mental defects without comment and without explanation.

A few years ago I became acquainted with a delightful and wonderful new friend. He is

charming, outgoing, and well groomed. He is a successful businessman. His spirituality shines through his countenance. He was completely honest in our business relationship. After many contacts and several months, I noticed a slight limp in his walk which had not been obvious before. That led to a closer observation. It was surprising that when I looked past the gracious smile, I noticed that my friend was slightly hunchbacked, with a somewhat misshapen spine. These physical defects were so well hidden by natural goodness, warmth, and great charm that they were as nothing in the total man. My friend accepts his physical defects with humility and strength and completely compensates for them with his natural personality.

There is another dimension of humility that must be mentioned—that of being teachable. The prophet Samuel counsels, “Now therefore stand still, that I may reason with you” (1 Samuel 12:7). Proverbs reminds us that “Whoso loveth instruction loveth knowledge” (Proverbs 12:1). Any married man should be humble enough to learn from his wife. We have had a great example of this in the life of President Nathan Eldon Tanner. When Sister Sarah Tanner married President Tanner, he was a schoolteacher, not long from the farm in Alberta, Canada. Instead of bridleing at receiving a suggestion from his wife, President Tanner had the humility and the strength to listen to her.

3. Be Honest.

The third key to self-esteem is honesty. Honesty begins in being true to one’s own self.

Some years ago I sat as a spectator in a heartrending courtroom drama concerning the custody of some children. I don’t know anything that is more heartrending than a custody battle for children. The contention was that the natural mother was not a good housekeeper, which was intended to add fuel to the claim that she was an unfit mother. A caseworker had testified that

when she visited the family home it was in a shambles and that the kitchen was dirty.

The natural mother seeking to keep custody of her children was called to the stand. A middle-aged, heavy, physically unattractive lady came forward, took the oath, and sat in the witness stand. The attorney for the father, who had remarried and wanted custody of the children, followed up relentlessly on the testimony already provided by the caseworker. His questions to the beleaguered mother were penetrating.

“Isn’t it a fact,” he asked, “that your house was as dirty as a pigpen the day the caseworker came?” What drama! How could the mother answer in her own best interest and protect her custody of the children? What should she say? There was electricity in the air!

She hesitated for a tense moment, and then she responded, calmly, with complete self-assurance: “Yes, my house certainly was a mess that day.”

Her honesty obviously surprised even the judge, for he leaned over the bench and asked, “What do you mean, ‘that day?’ ”

“Well, your honor” she replied, “earlier that morning when the caseworker came I had been bottling peaches. I had peeled, cooked, and bottled two bushels of peaches. I had not finished cleaning up the mess when the caseworker came. My sink was still sticky from the syrup that had spilled over that I was trying to pour into the bottles before they were sealed. My house certainly was a mess that day. I try to be a good housekeeper, but with three children, I can’t possibly keep it straight all the time.”

Her frankness and candor were absolutely disarming and devastating to the opposition. When she finished, everyone in the courtroom knew the judge would rule in her favor. As she arose and stepped down from the witness stand, she had the bearing and the self-assurance of a queen.

Being true to one’s own self is the essence of honesty and a keystone of self-esteem.

4. Love Work.

The fourth key to self-esteem is the love of work. The most gifted athlete at our university excelled at every sport. He played football and ran the hurdles—in fact, he held the conference record in the low hurdles. Our coach, Ike Armstrong, required that the sprinters run once a week with the quarter milers for three hundred yards to increase the stamina of the sprinters and increase the speed of the quarter-milers. My friend—the great athlete—would lead all of the runners for about 275 yards, but as soon as the first quarter miler passed him he would quit and wouldn't even finish. His natural talent and ability was such that he never had to extend himself to excel. He married, but the marriage failed. He went on into professional football and was something of a star until he got into the drug scene and died from the debilitating effects of drugs and alcohol. Others with much less talent have achieved far more.

In my experience there are very few people who are of true genius. There are many who are gifted, but most of the world's work and great things come from ordinary people with a talent which they develop. An ordinary, garden-variety talent can be nurtured and nourished into a great gift through hard work. Some of the artisans of China spend years making one exquisite object of art of unbelievable grace and beauty.

Some time ago we went to hear the New York Symphony in concert in Salt Lake City. The music was exceptional. The teamwork of each gifted musician blended to make a superb orchestral sound. Each of the group possesses great talent. Not everyone, however, has a talent for the arts, such as painting, sculpture, or music. Some may have a great gift to make others feel important, happy, and special. This gift should also be developed and strengthened.

The spiritual gifts likewise can be refined and enlarged by attentive application to righteous living, to prayer, to study of the scriptures, and to obedience. George Lucas has said,

"It doesn't matter what people say about me, or what I say; what matters is what I accomplish." What we accomplish helps our self-esteem. Frequently we hear, "The work I do is unimportant," or "I'm just this or that." Every job that has to be done is important; no matter how minimal it seems, someone has to do it.

During the flood in Utah this summer, more than a million sandbags had to be filled, tied, and put into place. The former head of one of the biggest companies in Utah wanted to be helpful in his neighborhood. Some of the work was being directed by the bishop, and the bishop asked him to find the tie strings and tie sandbags. He found tie strings in many places, some of them on the ground, and he went around picking up the strings from the ground. It was an emergency. Someone had to do it.

5. Love Others and Self.

The fifth key to building self-esteem is the ability to love. The commandment given by the Savior was to love others and yourself. Am I secure enough in my love of myself to laugh at myself, to admit my mistakes, to graciously accept a compliment? Am I secure in my love of others to smile and say hello to a perfect stranger?

Years ago in seminary our class was taught:

*I have to live with myself, and so
I want to be fit for myself to know.
I want to go out with my head erect.
I want to demand all men's respect.
I never can hide myself from me;
I see what others may never see.
I can never fool myself, and so,
Whatever happens, I want to be
Self-respecting and conscience free!*

6. Love God.

The sixth and most essential key to self-esteem is the love of God. Mosiah reminds us, "How knoweth a man the master whom he has not served?" (Mosiah 5:13). In Paul's epistle to

Titus he reminds us that there are many who “profess that they know God; but in the works they deny him” (Titus 1:16).

There is a key given to us: “And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us” (1 John 3:24). We can know that we know God, “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:3–4).

There are many whose self-esteem has been devastated by the loss of loved ones, by divorce, by other personal misfortunes. Some carry an extra burden of guilt from grievous sins. Transgression is extremely devastating to self-esteem. After transgression usually comes rationalization and often lying. This is what makes justice so violent to the offending.

Fortunately we have the great principle of repentance whereby sins “as scarlet” can become “as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). I am grateful for this principle and pray none will hesitate to find the peace that comes from repentance. It is important to remember and never forget that all of us, male and female, were created in the image of God and created by God. Mankind is the noblest of all creations.

“What is man” asked the psalmist,

*that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man,
that thou visitest him?*

*For thou hast made him a little lower than
the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and
honour.*

*Thou madest him to have dominion over the
works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under
his feet. [Psalms 8:4–6]*

Frequently in my ministry, as I have been setting apart a stake Relief Society president or a stake Primary president, ordaining a bishop or a stake patriarch, or setting apart a stake president or a mission president, the distinct impression has come to me that the person on whose head I have laid hands was foreordained to that calling. The prophet Jeremiah had this assurance come to him from the Lord,

*Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and
before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified
thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.
[Jeremiah 1:5]*

Not all of us are called to leadership in the kingdom. Yet is there a greater work than that of teacher, father, mother? So it is that nobody is nobody. The seeds of divinity are in all of us. There will come a day when we will have to account to God for what we have done with that portion of divinity which is within each of us.

I testify that God loves each of us, warts and all. I testify that he knows each of our names. I testify that each of us has a potential in this life and beyond the grave that exceeds our fondest dreams. I testify through the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we are engaged in His holy work. I invoke the blessings of heaven upon all, and pray that we may come to know who we truly are, the sons and daughters of God. In the sacred name of Jesus Christ. Amen.