

Self-Esteem

Dear BZ:

Those are good and important questions about self-esteem. It's a lot like confidence. Although there's something about the term "self-esteem" that's more clinical, as if it comes out of psychotherapies. Right? Like, educators might say that poor children who grow up without parental guidance or involvement in their educations lack "self-esteem." They'd say that before they'd say they lack "confidence." Perhaps confidence is an offshoot of self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to your general state of well-being, the way you think about yourself.

It's a good subject for us to look at because, in the arts, value, as we have discussed, is like a yo-yo. You can't base your self-esteem on how well your work is selling or on how well it's received. We live in business; we live in commerce. It's the air we breathe.

But let's take commerce out of it. What if you did a painting just for your family and unveiled it at a family holiday? There might be one person or two people who would "get" what you are doing. Others might see it as "weird" or simply "artistic" (whatever that means). The nineteenth-century Russian playwright Anton Chekhov's great play *The Seagull* captures this perfectly in one of the opening scenes. A young man, Kostya, is putting on a play. It's an innovative play. (It isn't ever clear whether it's a good play.) He casts a girl whom

he loves in the play. She seems distracted. He presents the play for his mother, a famous actress, who is visiting the country estate where he lives with his aging uncle. His mother is accompanied by her lover, who is a famous writer. Everything goes wrong. It's a catastrophe, and he is beside himself. A family friend, Dr. Dorn, approaches him when all the audience has left and says, "I liked your play." What he meant was—he understood what Kostya was trying to do.

Robert Brustein, critic and former head of the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, said to me once that we all need a Dr. Dorn. If you unveiled a painting at a family gathering, and a cousin or a brother got more attention for doing a backflip at that very moment, or if something went awry—if a relative mocked your work, or people went on to chat about mundane things—you could end up feeling pretty bad. And who knows? Years later, that might be considered a great painting. (To this day certain people call my work "*skits*"!)

So self-esteem is that which gives us a feeling of well-being, a feeling that everything's going to be all right—that we can determine our own course and that we can travel that course. It's not that we travel the course alone, but we need the feeling of agency—that if everything were to fall apart, we could find a way to put things back together again. And hopefully we'd never get to that, because we would have watched out for hazards.

Part of self-esteem is resourcefulness. I am always amazed to learn stories of people who have built businesses, and they've collapsed and they've built new ones. The stories of immigrant cultures are full of resourcefulness. But if someone lacked self-esteem, he or she would not be resourceful.

The Slanted Door Restaurant in San Francisco became well-known very quickly. I once called 411 to get the phone number. The operator said, "Oh, that's a great place." On another occasion, coming home from the airport, I was going directly there, and the cabdriver said, "I take a lot of people there." Word of mouth was building an audience for this place. It was run by a Vietnamese family. Because they had found a way to present traditional food in a kind of hip atmosphere, I was intrigued by them. I began to talk to the owner and learned his story over time. He and his family had been what was known as "boat people." They'd made their way to the United States, and with basically nothing, managed to start a clothing business. It made money but then failed. They then started the restaurant, which is a huge success in San Francisco—a major part of the culture of the city. Whenever I hear such stories, I have one big unanswered question—what gives people the basic solid foundation to know that they can "do" it?

Maybe that's not the question. Some people seem to be able to organize themselves around big ideas, and others cannot. This has to do with self-esteem. Self-esteem for creative people is important inasmuch as it is a part of what helps you organize yourself and others around an idea, so that it can come to fruition. Ideas are a dime a dozen; to make them real takes consistent, persistent application of energy toward that idea. Self-esteem is a foundation. And yet, there are many successful people who would seem to have low self-esteem. If you have a healthy amount of self-esteem, it is one more tool needed to help you do things that are ambitious and sometimes difficult.

When I was a girl, the old ladies in my church would drone out a song that went:

On Christ the solid

Rock I stand.

All other ground is sinking sand.

And the verses go on to spell out how you can't count on friends or other earthly matters to get you through, but Christ will. Sometimes they would stomp and clap a little when they sang this song—and the way it echoed inside of the church with its wooden floors and stone walls gave me the feeling of the very solid rock they were describing. I chose that song as one of the songs to be sung at my mother's funeral.

An American psychotherapist or psychiatrist would tell you that self-esteem is built by your parents, by your upbringing, by experiences in your childhood. I don't think that this conclusion exists in every culture. Some cultures are more spiritual than ours. Some cultures have ways of creating that feeling of well-being—and for some people it is spiritual. In acting school, I found that Transcendental Meditation, as well as prayer, helped me get through hard times. Meditation and prayer also caused me to shut everything down (twice a day) and learn more about my own resourcefulness. Our acting conservatory had a meditation room. And it was also down the hill from a large cathedral. Without the meditation room and the cathedral I would have probably been on sinking sand.

Experiences from the outside, and the way you integrate yourself with the outside, can lead you to gain a more confident stride. One thing is for sure: Self-esteem cannot really be built from the outside. You begin to see the real evidence that you can, in fact, affect the things around you. These experiences ultimately integrate themselves inside—if that foundation is there. Self-esteem does not come from surrounding

yourself with people and things that seem to increase your value. Real self-esteem is an integration of an inner value with things in the world around you.

It's about your worth. Your self-worth. And as we have discussed throughout our correspondence, you—and only you—can ultimately put the price tag on that. Your tag reveals not only how you value yourself, but how imaginative and original you are about valuing others. In my experience, happier people are people who have not only a high price tag on themselves, but a high price tag on the people around them—and the tags don't necessarily have to do with market value. They have to do with all the sense that adds up to human value.

Be strong, be new, be you.

Anna