

'UNDERSTANDING ONE'S WORTH: A CORNERSTONE OF RECOVERY FROM EATING DISORDERS AND OTHER MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL ILLNESS'

Michael E. Berrett, PhD

There are few things more painful than feeling worthless or "not good enough," minute by minute, day by day, and year by year. I know because I have felt that way myself, much of the time during the first half of my 60 years. Additionally, I have provided counsel and treatment to many hundreds of individuals who have felt similar feelings over the past 30 years as a clinician. To those individuals, their beliefs went well beyond emotion. In fact, many of them felt that they knew "beyond any doubt" that they were as worthless as they felt. How painful it is to live in that place, and yet how wonderful it is that there is hope for every one of us – that we can improve our sense of self, even to the absolute knowledge that we are wonderful beyond anything that words can express. It is this gradual but growing understanding that can increase motivation to change. You, and I are worth the effort it takes to transcend illness and create a recovered life.

Why is it that we medical and mental health professionals dedicate our lives to helping those suffering from illness? There are many reasons, but key among them is the understanding that each individual we serve is worth everything we can do and so very much more. As Mother Theresa said, "I serve not because an individual is in need, but because they are holy."

It is my belief that our clients – those suffering – reach out for help for many reasons including these two primary ones: 1) They are feeling an intense and utter desperation that has brought them to their knees, and 2) Because deep down inside, beyond all self-doubt and self-contempt, and well beyond their negative and false perceptions of self- they too have a small sliver of a glimpse of their worth – that maybe they also are worth the efforts of themselves and others to make change, transcend illness, and receive the blessing of healing. That little sliver – that glimpse- is a small seed that can grow.

As individuals begin to take steps towards recovery, they find reasons to recover, and any reason is to be honored and remembered to strengthen the resolve towards recovery. Desperation, fear, love for others, passion, life's purpose, deep desires, and dreams are among common reasons to recover and to live. Eventually, on the pathway to recovery, individuals learn that in addition to all other worthy reasons – the truth that "I also am worth it," is a powerful force which helps move individuals towards better choices, more self-care, and hard work towards recovery.

Gaining a sense, an understanding, and even a sure knowledge of one's self worth is a process which is very gradual. As we are patient and consistently taking steps over time, it helps us not only to attain recovery, but also to maintain and retain it in the long haul. It wards against relapse, and protects and solidifies recovery in our lives.

The word recovery means "to bring back that which was lost." In that sense, when we are in recovery, we bring back our lost perceptions, perspectives, thoughts, feelings, relationships, and sense of self – both who we are, and who we can be. Similarly, when we recover our true sense of self and self-worth, we also recover that which was lost. I sincerely believe that each of us once, at an age very young, had some understanding of our worth. This can be seen in a young child racing around the house naked, escaping his or her parents for a few moments after a bath, or in the unguarded words of a child, who

says simply everything she feels to say, without hesitation. These are examples of the state of a child before they begin to lose sense of self, and sense of goodness. This is before we receive false messages from those around us which teach us that we are deficient, broken, not good enough, and not enough.

Luckily, while there are many losses in life, the “loss of a sense of self and worth” is one of those which can be recovered. The following are a few ideas and places to start in building again, a lofty, truthful, and positive sense of identity, and knowledge of one’s individual worth:

- 1) Be willing to be wrong about how worthless you think you are
- 2) Start with the openness that “maybe” I am not as bad or worthless as I think I am. “Realities can start with Maybes.”
- 3) Seek to see some of your identity and worth in the mirror of the faces of those who you know love you, care about you, know you well, and have your best interest in their heart. Start with admitting at least, that they see the good in you, even if you don’t understand what or how.
- 4) Seek to become your own mirror and witness of your beauty, your wonder, your magnificent worth, and your goodness
- 5) Learn to look for and notice the good things about you. The things you feel good about, the things you are proud of. Find them, tell the truth about them, document them in your journal, and read these journal entries often.
- 6) Treat yourself “as if” you are worth every-thing, until you know that you are worth everything. Treating yourself so will help those feelings and understandings grow.
- 7) Learn to leave behind the damaging external criterion for self- worth as sold in our modern Western Culture Marketplace. Cease to use Appearance and Approval as markers or evidence of self- worth
- 8) Learn to look for internal evidences of self- worth including: talents, gifts, hard work, effort, deepest desires, principles, character, love, engagement, and the intentions of one’s heart.
- 9) Learn to listen, understand, and then follow your own heart, and understand that it is linked to self- identity and self- worth
- 10) Set reasonable and modest goals, and then take small steps towards your goals. Keep your feet moving in the direction of the goal, not with lightning speed, but with consistency and persistence
- 11) Strive to live a life of congruence and integrity so that you can say to yourself “Not all things went my way today, but at least I strived to live the way I believe I need and want to live” (remember : perfection is unnecessary, while striving is required).
- 12) Learn to self- correct when you make a mistake, rather than becoming a harsh judge and jury. Learn to learn from mistakes, stand up, brush off, get clear on learnings, and try it again with your newly gained understanding.
- 13) Ponder the truth that we are the artistry of the Creator, “who hath made no junk,” but rather, a person of great beauty both inside and out
- 14) Remember that a sense of self- worth is both psychological and spiritual. Embrace your spirituality, honor your spiritual beliefs, and live with good will towards all including yourself.
- 15) Remember that love of self and of others is the most powerful healing force available. Take steps to ask for help, and to receive love in your life. Express your love for others without “holding back.”

Friends - Improving self- worth, self- esteem, self- image, body image, sense of self, sense of identity, self- understanding, and self- love – are lofty goals, but goals which are within the reach of us all. These states of true understanding come over time, as the result of processes of being willing to see, doing the

hard work of treating oneself well, giving what we have to give to others, and receiving the love and support others have for us as well. Let us all press forward on this pathway to being, knowing, and becoming - never to stop!

Sincerely,

Dr. B