



THE VALUE OF SELF-ESTEEM

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It is a privilege to be with all of you young adults and your leaders this evening as we are seated in the newly renovated and beloved Tabernacle, along with those of you who are gathered in stake centers near and far who are viewing these proceedings by means of satellite transmission. I think I'm more comfortable than you are. I remember when I used to sit in those seats, and when the Tabernacle was remodeled they weren't made any softer. We are delighted to see you all, you wonderful young men and women, and we are grateful for you and appreciate the fact that you want to go forward and do what is right and accomplish the things which the Lord would have you accomplish in your lives. You young ladies seem to know what you are doing and what you want to do, and the young men are learning what they ought to do. I would like to say one thing to the young men: don't take too much counsel from your fears. Now think about that.

I'm grateful to have Sister Faust here with me. When we decided to get married I told her that I needed her help and that I needed to get more schooling and would appreciate her support, and I can honestly say that she gave that support and much, much more and made it possible for me to do some of the things that I've done in my life. I guess I should say to you that marriage involves having a helpmeet, and Sister Faust has been very much my best helpmeet.

Tonight I would like to talk about self-esteem—what we think of ourselves, how we relate to what others think of us, and the value of what we accomplish.

An unknown Englishman of early days offered this prayer: "O God, help me to hold a high opinion of myself." "That," said President Harold B. Lee of the Englishman's plea, "should be the prayer of every soul; not an abnormally developed self-esteem that becomes haughtiness, conceit, or arrogance, but a righteous self-respect that might be defined as 'belief in one's own worth, worth to God, and worth to man.'"¹

Indeed, the self-esteem that I speak of this evening is not blind, arrogant, vain, self-love but rather a

self-esteem that is self-respecting, honest, and without conceit. It is born of inner peace and strength.

Self-esteem goes to the very heart of our personal growth and accomplishment. It 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-fashioned selfishness.

The Worth of the Unsung

In my long life I have observed that 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, is known only to God. The unsung often have little of *status*, but much of *worth*.

Example of the Unsung

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 be doing in a most dignified, exemplary way. He had no problems with ego or with faith, for while he dug graves for a living, he felt his work was to serve God. He was a man of little status but of great worth.

Worth and Potential of Christ's Disciples

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. After they were called to be Apostles, they did not become

puffed up or think they were superior. On one occasion, after some of them were beaten, they went on their way “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 enemies. From Milton’s *Paradise Lost* comes this truth:

*Oft-times nothing profits more
Then self-esteem, grounded on just and right
Well manag’d.*²

Six Keys for Healthy Self-Esteem

First: Keep Your Agency

I would like to suggest six essential keys to keep a healthy self-esteem. The first key is to keep your agency. This means that we must not surrender self-control nor yield to habits that bind, to addiction that enslaves, nor to conduct that destroys. To keep our 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 life trying to escape and so exhaust themselves in the process that in the end, even though they ultimately find themselves freed from the addiction, they are spent, burned out, their nerves shot, and their brains dulled forever.

How much better off we would be and how much more complete our agency, if we were able to say with the Psalmist: “I have refrained my feet from every evil way” (Psalm 119:101).

Second: Humility

The second key to an adequate self-esteem is humility. I do not mean the breast-beating, sackcloth-and-ashes kind of humility. I mean the humility that comes with inner strength and peace. It is the humility that allows us to accept and live with our own warts, without cosmetics to hide them. It is important to learn to live with our uncorrectable physical and mental defects without complaint or explanation. Some months ago I had a back operation, and I’ve never been the same since, and I may never be. But the first time I spoke over in the Conference Center with a little pulpit like this, one of our granddaughters said, “Oh, Grandpa, you looked so comfortable up there; I just wanted to come up and crawl on your lap.”

Some years ago I became acquainted with a delightful and wonderful new friend. He is a successful businessman—charming, outgoing, and well groomed. His spirituality shines through his countenance. A few months later I noticed a slight limp in his walk which had not been obvious before. That led to a closer observation. 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 the 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).

Third: Honesty

The third key to self-esteem is honesty. Honesty begins with 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. 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 witness stand. A middle-aged, heavy, physically unattractive lady came forward, took the oath, and sat in the witness stand. The attorney for the father (this father 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, and 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 was absolutely disarming and devastating to the opposition. When she finished speaking, 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.

Fourth: Love of Work

The fourth key to self-esteem is the love of work. The most gifted athlete at our university excelled in 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 300 yards to increase the stamina of the sprinters and increase the speed of the quarter-milers. My friend—this 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. While there are those who are gifted, most of the world's work and some of the greatest contributions come from ordinary people with a talent which they have developed. 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 just one exquisite object of art of unbelievable grace and beauty. We do not all have a talent for the arts, such as painting, sculpture, or music. There are many gifts that are not showcased. Some may have a natural gift to make others feel important, happy, and special. Such a gift should be developed and strengthened.

Spiritual gifts, likewise, can be refined and enlarged by attentive application to righteous living, to prayer, to study of the scriptures, and to obedience. A line attributed to George Lucas suggests, "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. Sometimes we may think, "The work I do is unimportant," or "I'm only this or that." Every job that has to be done is important, no matter how minimal it seems; someone has to do it.

Fifth: Ability to Love

The fifth key to building self-esteem is the ability to love. The commandment given by the Savior was to love others and yourself.³ Am I secure enough in my love of myself to laugh at myself, to admit 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 deserve all men's respect;
.....
I never can hide myself from me,
I see what others may never see,
.....
I never can fool myself—and so,
Whatever happens, I want to be
Self-respecting and conscience free.⁴*

Sixth: Love of God

The sixth and most essential key to self-esteem is the love of God. King Benjamin 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 works they deny him" (Titus 1:16).

The Apostle John gives us a valuable key: “And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us” (1 John 3:24).

John makes an important point about obedience when he states: “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 so devastated by the loss of loved ones, by divorce, or by other personal misfortunes. Some carry an extra burden of guilt from grievous sins. Transgression is so devastating to self-esteem. After transgression so often comes rationalization and even lying. This is what makes justice so violent to the offender.

Fortunately we have the great principle of repentance whereby sins that are “as scarlet” can become “white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). I am grateful for this principle and pray no one 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” (Psalm 8:4–6).

Frequently in my ministry as I have set apart a stake president or a mission president, the distinct impression has come to me that the person upon whose head I have laid my 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).

All of us are not called to leadership in the kingdom. Yet is there a greater work than that of being a

teacher, father, mother? So it is that nobody is a nobody. The seeds of divinity are in all of us. The day will come when we will all have to account to God for what we have done with that portion of divinity that is within us.

It is a lovely evening, and it would be nice for you young people to have some time to spend with each other, so I’m going to conclude. I want to teach you something else that I taught the General Authorities in conference—meetings do not have to be endless to be eternal.

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.

And I wish to invoke an apostolic blessing of heaven upon all of you and pray that we may come to know who we truly are, the sons and daughters of God. The blessing I should like to invoke upon you is the blessing that the Lord gave to Nephi, but I’m going to substitute each of your names, Bill and Henry and Katherine and Ellen, all of you, each one of you:

“Blessed art thou, [Bill and Henry and all of you], for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unwearyingness declared the word, which I have given unto thee, unto this people. And thou hast not feared them, and hast not sought thine own life, but hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments.” Now here comes the blessing: “Because thou hast done this with such unwearyingness, behold, I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works” (Helaman 10:4–5). In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (1974), 6–7.
2. In *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Milton* (1950), 281, book 8, lines 571–73.
3. See Matthew 22:39.
4. “Myself,” in *Collected Verse of Edgar A. Guest* (1934), 724.