

The Seventh Cardinal Sin of Thinking: Self Belittlement

by

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Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The Golden Rule. It's the same idea in just about every religion. But, consider this. What if the original translation was more along the lines of a statement of fact than an injunction: "You do unto others as you do unto yourself." We treat others as we treat ourselves. If we are kind to ourselves, we are kind to others. If we are self degrading, we degrade others. If we accept this as at least a reasonable possibility, and if we look at the brutality of the world, it's not difficult to see that we don't treat ourselves very well.

The history of self belittlement is lengthy and complicated. It has roots in both religious and secular thinking. It is sometimes considered kin to humility and therefore not only tolerated but encouraged. But, like the overly exaggerated self promoter hiding a sense of inferiority, humility can too be a sign of an over active ego. As the saying goes, "don't humble yourself, you're not that great."

But, not being great or successful or wealthy or healthy or smart or...whatever desirable trait we might imagine, is no reason for self belittlement. There is no rational reason for engaging in the kind of self talk which demeans or degrades us. It's bad enough that others may belittle us. In fact, we often learn how to do it to ourselves from others, in particular parents, teachers and others who are close to us and in a position of perceived authority. The litany of phrases used on misbehaving children is extensive. In many cases, the phrases would fall into the category of verbal abuse. It's easy to recognize how a child can become an adult with a poor self image.

Self image is the foundation of our psychological life. Although it is just an image, it nonetheless exerts tremendous influence over our emotions and our behavior. There is hardly a psychologist, psychiatrist, counselor educator, sociologist or philosopher who would deny the importance of self image. Fortunately, because the image of our self is an image, a mental concept, it can be changed. It is not a fixed, concrete formation. Our self image has been built up largely through our own self talk. Year after year, layer upon layer, the experiences, the interpretations and evaluations, the meanings, the sentences...they all combine to form a knot of self. Tight. Tense. Defensive. Yet, not without creativity, spontaneity, insight, tremendous potential...Coming to understand and accept ourselves may be our life work – for each and every one of us.

Our path towards a new, improved, better self image need not be based on repeating a string of affirmations about how positive we are; it is not, necessarily, about being “ok.” We might not be ok, we might be a wreck. But, that is no reason for self belittlement. Regardless of how bad off we might be, how screwed up, how confused, how conflicted, how much in debt....none of that is reason for self belittlement. Yet, our upbringing has likely trained us to do just that: belittle ourselves when we are not living up to expectations so often set by others - which we often internalize as our own.

Our task, if we choose to take it, is simply to refuse engaging in any self talk which is degrading, demeaning, debasing, disparaging, deriding, or denigrating. Using positive self talk is certainly helpful; however, it is more important to stop the self belittlement as what good would it do if we tell ourselves how positive we are when underneath, quietly and secretly, we are telling ourselves just the opposite. We can also practice avoiding belittlement of others. There is enough research to strongly suggest that people respond better to encouragement than belittlement! And the same is true within us. Encouragement is more productive than belittlement. Stop the belittlement. Increase the encouragement.

We need to pay special attention to our own negative self talk, catch it in the act and gently acknowledge the untruth of it. The habits of negative self talk can be deeply entrenched. It may take years of diligence to uproot self belittlement. The result, however, is a much more natural, healthy, easy going, unfrightened and generous self.

It all comes back to our thinking. Our thinking can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven. Our thinking can make us healthy and happy or sick and miserable. Unreasonable, unrealistic and irrational thinking doesn't work to anyone's benefit. There is no better time than right now to begin the task of making our mind a more heavenly place.