

Love Yourself

Love yourself first and everything else falls into line.

Lucille Ball

Valentine's Day celebrates a certain kind of love, encouraging us to send heart-shaped declarations of devotion or flirtation with hopes of an equal or even greater number of messages in return. The love that Lucille Ball refers to in the quote above is of a totally other nature — gravity to a Valentine's frilly lace — and forms the foundation of a happy and fulfilled life. Loving yourself has nothing to do with being self-centered or egotistical. Loving yourself does not take love away from anyone else because love obeys the law of abundance: the more I love, the more love I have to give. Only when I love myself can I truly love someone else without placing any demands or expectations on them. I am whole within myself, grateful for the joy of simply being, without judgment, comparisons, regrets or worries. True love of oneself is made of acceptance and forgiveness; I completely and unconditionally love myself just as I am. My sense of worth does not depend on other people or specific circumstances.

Though I absolutely believe the two previous sentences, there is a part of me that feels threatened by them. This part of me believes that I run on self-loathing. My vigorous inner critic makes a running commentary on my imperfections: "God, do you look ugly." "If you were as organized as other people you would have time to go shopping during the sales." "You should lose weight before you buy any new clothes." Sound familiar? Women are, not surprisingly, particularly prone to finding fault with their looks. Whole industries depend on our dissatisfaction and surround us with airbrushed images of the current aesthetic ideal, which is further than ever from reality. A recent statistic says that the average American woman weighs 144 pounds and wears between size 12 and 14 (42 – 44). Marilyn Monroe wore a 12. Size 10 used to be considered ideal. Models today wear sizes 0 - 4. If a real person had Barbie's figure, she would be too thin to menstruate and too top-heavy to walk.

Self-loathing is by no means limited to physical appearance, however. From motivation ("lazy") to skill ("I can't..."), to essence ("I'm not confident / smart /..."), we judge ourselves as lacking — to the extreme of doubting our very right to exist. I am not sure where this sense of unworthiness comes from. Some speculate that it is "a female thing," but I know men who are afflicted by it. Many of us experience conditional love as children: you are lovable if you "hush," "be nice," "stop crying," "behave," and, in general, are "good." With their positive intention of socializing us, parents and other authority figures in our youth inadvertently transmit these negative beliefs to us, which we internalize and perpetuate as adults. Our inner critics compare us negatively to others, blame us for things that go wrong, keep detailed ledgers of our failures and exaggerate our weaknesses into absolutes.

Although this inner commentary comes unsolicited, it is not beyond our control. We can change how we talk to ourselves and through it our relationship to ourselves. The first step is to become aware of what we are saying to ourselves. Repeat what you are saying to yourself aloud or write it down so you can look at it

objectively. Then ask yourself. "Is this true?" Is this belief serving me?" To cultivate compassion for yourself it can be helpful to imagine that it is your inner child who has these negative feelings and look for ways to reassure and comfort her or him. You may want to explore the origins of a belief in order to understand it better. Be careful, however, not to blame your parents. Every parent does the best that s/he can with the understanding and resources s/he has. Though no parent deliberately hurts his or her child, most of us acquire some emotional scars while growing up. The critical question is what we do about those scars as adults.

The best salve for emotional scars is love. All accepting and forgiving, much bigger than me and my ego, my hurts and limitations, this kind of love envelops and protects me. Whether you call it God, the universe, or Allah, this love connects us to a higher power. Ironically, religious education sometimes promotes self-hatred with concepts like original sin and repentance, and making self-love seem immoral. In his book, *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm wrote that "it is a widespread belief that, while it is virtuous to love others, it is sinful to love oneself. It is assumed that to the degree to which I love myself I do not love others, that self-love is the same as selfishness." Fromm goes on to argue that the opposite is true.

The idea expressed in the Biblical 'Love thy neighbor as thyself!' implies that respect for one's own integrity and uniqueness, love for and understanding of one's own self, cannot be separated from respect and love and understanding for another individual...The selfish person does not love himself too much but too little; in fact he hates himself...The affirmation of one's own life, happiness, growth, freedom is rooted in one's capacity to love, i.e., in care, respect, responsibility and knowledge. If an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love only others, he cannot love at all.

Self-love is a prerequisite not only for loving others but also for personal growth. Contrary to my inner slave driver's belief, I cannot be whipped into being a better person. Loving myself as I am opens the door to living more of my potential. So, I propose (over the protests of my own inner critic) that we all write ourselves a Valentine and see what happens. As always, I welcome your feedback.