

How important is SELF?

By Don Burnard

'The true self of a person cannot be boring. The phoney self or over inflated ego certainly can be. The truth of the matter is that if we reveal what is within us, then what is within us will bring us alive and keep us relating with our selves. If we fail to reveal what is within us, it will make us the most boring of subjects and destroy us'.

This article argues that the concept of **self** is confused even among the most articulate of journalists, writers and social commentators and that the word self is one of the most abused words in the English language. The clarification of the concept of self, a precise definition of the term self and a more accurate use of the word self are urgently required. Let me give examples from the writings of authors I hold in high regard.

Martin Seligman author of "Learned Optimism" links the spreading epidemic of depression with the growth of the self-esteem movement. Nicholas Emler in his book "Self Esteem: The costs and causes of Low Self Worth" argues that those who think highly of themselves are most likely to engage in anti-social behaviour. His conclusions are that programs designed to cure anti-social behaviour by raising self-esteem are a waste of time. Society needs to cure high self-esteem. The social disease of our time is self love. In fairness, Emler recognises that low self-esteem is damaging but only the victim of the complaint.

The critics of self-esteem confuse **self** with an inflated sense of ego. This important distinction has been described in a previous **Relatewell Journal (volume 5, number 4, page 8)**. Self-esteem, which is the esteem I give my self, is a dynamic process which is facilitated by positive parental attitudes during childhood and genetic endowments in adolescence. The **self** is who a person really is, who they really want to be.

Self is the key to identity not the product of an identity bestowed by others. The Psychiatrist James Masterton uses the term phoney self to describe an identity adopted to please parents or a significant other, win the praise and respect of one's peers, conform to social pressures or win admiration from ones local community or ones nation. The real **self** is who I need to be to achieve personal fulfilment, intimate involvement with a significant other and social connection.

Let me give an example. I once worked with a woman who was a brilliant neuro surgeon. Although everyone respected her knowledge, skills and dedication, no one admired or loved her. Her family had arrived in Australia in the 1950's. Her great grandfather was an eminent surgeon as was her grandfather and father. She was the oldest of three. She was the most brilliant of the siblings and topped her school. There was no son so she was expected to carry on the family tradition of eminent surgeons. She loved her father and did what he expected of her, even though her first love was art and painting. She had the ability to sail through medical studies and complete her training as a specialist neuro surgeon. She was eminently successful in her discipline. But her true love remained painting. Despite success and fame in her career, there was a profound frustration and anger within the core of her being. She had a divided self and it was her true self that was suppressed. The phoney self was the eminent surgeon whom everyone respected but no one could get close to. Eventually this woman gave up medicine and began the journey she had always wanted to make. She went to art school then art classes. She is still seeking to make a name for herself in the art world. The important thing is she has found a peace and happiness that she could not find as a nationally recognised neuro surgeon. She has found these things without becoming a nationally acclaimed artist. Being true to her **self**, she has direction and purpose in her life.

Self-esteem can take two very different directions. It can become a basis for either enlightened selfishness or unenlightened selfishness. Some of the most wonderful people whom I have met have been the most selfish people I have known. What I mean by this is that they enjoy whatever they do whether it is helping other people, taking time out, working for a just cause, having fun, caring for their partner and children, or pursuing some creative past-time or hobby. There is nothing of the martyr, the victim or patient sufferer in their love, care and enjoyment of

others. Their lives are balanced and their generous pursuit of a full life is not a burden nor is it exhausting. Whatever they do, they believe in it and it increases the satisfaction of a task completed.

Shane Watson in an Age article fell into the snare of defining self so loosely that the term can only end up a whipping boy. He writes, *'there is no room for false modesty in these self-obsessed times. An epidemic of self-importance is sweeping the Western World. What was once self-centred behaviour is now seen as evidence of healthy self-esteem. People who are obviously terrific bores have been given licence to bore others on the most boring of subjects – themselves.'*

The true **self** of a person cannot be boring. The phoney self or over inflated ego certainly can be. The truth of the matter is that if we reveal what is within us, then what is within us will bring us alive and keep us relating with other selves. If we fail to reveal what is within us, it will make us the most boring of subjects and destroy us.

When Hugh Mackay questions the value of the term “knowledge nation”, he points out that knowledge in itself does not help us make sense of our own lives – the problem he writes, is that *'knowledge is merely something we have, it doesn't define who we are and it doesn't suggest what we need to do.'* He fondly remembers a teacher who taught pupils that knowledge is merely a resource to achieve our goals. It is not an end in itself. Knowledge and cleverness are no guarantees of wisdom. Knowledge is important for the ego. Wisdom is available only to those who find their true **self**. We need an education process that helps discover our true **self**, move to the recognition of other selves and contribute to the building of community and the creation of social capital.

The concept of **self** is philosophical, psychological and spiritual. It is profoundly different from the concept of soul in the sense of an immortal soul residing in a mortal body. But in many sayings and writings the word soul is synonymous with **self**. There is a Russian saying “Keep your hands off my soul.” A library of gnostic texts discovered in Egypt in 1945 records Christ is saying to his followers, *'Whoever has known himself has simultaneously achieved knowledge about the depth of all things.'* In another of the discovered texts, Christ says to his companions, *'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.'*

Let me finish on a more contemporary note quoting tennis star Boris Becker: *'When I was a teenager I was looking for my own identity and winning was a way of expressing myself. When I lost, I wanted to die. I felt my world had crumbled down on me. And because I thought that in victory I became someone, it followed that in defeat, I was nobody.'*

It is **self** that offers us the change to integrate all of our complex characteristics and traits and integrate the often contradictory experiences of our lives.

The late Graham Little, a well-known Australian Psychologist, was beautifully described by his daughter as a man who *'bravely explored his own self as long as I knew him and as a result had a deep and generous knowledge of the softness of a child's developing self.'*

There are those who use terms such as reinventing oneself. Michael Lewis in “The Future Just Happened” speaks of a great advantage children have over adults. *'They haven't decided who they are. They haven't invested such a lot of psychological capital into a particular self.'* What I believe is important is that we lead children to the discovery of how important it is to constantly invest some of our psychological capital into discovering one true **self**, which is not capable of being exchanged, only of being enlarged. Kierkegaard understood the concept of **self**. He wrote that, *'it is dangerous to venture . . . and yet, by not venturing, it is so dreadfully easy to lose that which it would be difficult to love in even the more venturesome venture – one's self.'*

This philosophy outlined in this article underpins all RelateWell Family and Relationship Courses offered at the Family Relationships Institute Inc.

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