

Hardly a week goes by without a featured article in The Age newspaper attached self-interest, self-love and self-esteem. The highly respected John Ralston Saul writes that human beings are more than the sum of all their self-interests and that we are not defined by self-interest (05/06/02). An article by Psychologist Lauren Slater was headed "The trouble with self interest". She quoted fresh research as challenging traditional views about self worth. Sean Prior (22/04/02) writes that the focus on self-reward can lead to malicious glee and blind us to the wider cost to the community. Anne Manne (20/04/02) writes that 'TV screens provide an unpleasant mirror image of modern society's control tenet: the worship of self-interest. Self-interest is pursued shamelessly even to the point of lying and cheating.' In another article in The Age Saturday magazine, another contributor writes that 'The use of legitimate psychological language such as the "self" has the same effect as gold leafing a piece of lead – adding weight to what is of little value'.

Yet, if we are to find a solution to the problems of society and family life, an essential concept in that achievement will be that of **self**. The problem is that the concept of self is not understood.

John Paul Sartre was a champion of the concept of self though he did not focus on that word. Sartre believed that our being was not fixed in any way. We exist in a kind of void or nothingness and are left to create our unique identities through the choices we make. To live authentically is to embrace this freedom and accept the moral responsibility that comes with it. It is true that if we are not free to choose, then our decisions are imposed on us and we are living in what Sartre called bad faith. Sartre leaves one key unanswered question. We may exist in a void but if we have no identity until we make a choice who is it that first makes a choice and who is it that evaluates whether the choices are moral or not.

Self refers to the core of what it is to be a person. It is the self which enables the person to choose and so define themselves through their choices. If a person's choices are made by others or to please others, the person develops a false identity or phoney self. The phoney self leads a furtive existence hiding behind ego or individuality.

The true self is not merely the sum total of a person's actions nor of the choices they make. That is character. The true self is not the more or less permanent traits or qualities of a person. That is personality. The true self of one individual can offer no threat to the true self of any other individual because the self is not in competition with any other self. The self becomes authentic through the nature of its choices, as Sartre makes clear.

The betrayal or suppression of one's true self is a major source of guilt, frustration, depression and anger which are increasingly common in modern life. These feelings are the source of alienation, hate and callous disregard of others. Note the increase in youth suicide, rape as an attempt at being powerful, road rage and multiple slaying's.

So the question is why is it fashionable to attack self-interest, self-esteem and self-love? There are two reasons:

- First is the failure to distinguish between enlightened self-interest and unenlightened (Sartre's bad faith).
- Second is the failure to define the meaning of self. Self is the core or source of each person's identity and worth. The true self enables human beings to recognise the building blocks for a full life, a civil society and a working democracy. The true self is both the integrating and motivating force within a human being. The phoney self which restlessly seeks its own aggrandisement at the expense of others who are seen as competitors.

The essential challenge in life is to be true to one's self not just true to my family, my race, my religion, my culture or my nation. Self-interest cannot be the pursuit of my own interest at the expense of others. The search for my own identity and fulfilment requires a bonding with other selves and a commitment to reality, truth and justice.

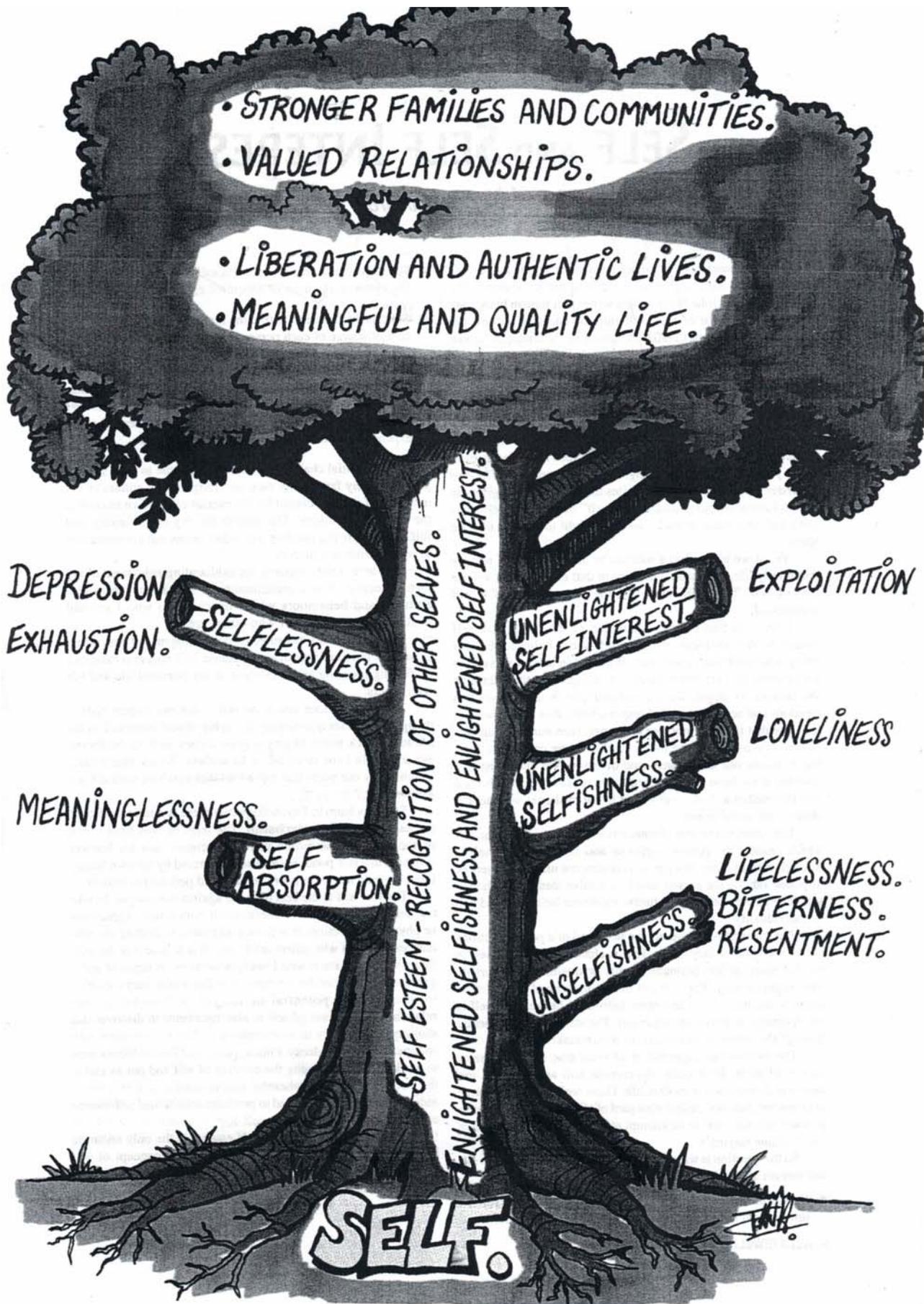
Self-love is not a passive yet exhilarating enjoyment of my own reflection. It is a commitment to search out the values, attitudes and behaviours which do credit to who I am and facilitates the discovery of who others are.

Self-esteem is not measured by comparing myself with others as success, fame and wealth are measured. Self-esteem is measured by finding meaning and fulfilment in my personal life and life with others.

The more serious attack on self is not the current rash of thoughtful articles questioning the value of self-interest. It is the life long attack which begins in good homes early in childhood. We are taught to be **unselfish** and to be **selfless**. We are taught early in school by our peers that to love yourself is not acceptable.

Students learn in Psychology that there is a serious form of mental illness called **narcissism**. The term derives from Greek mythology. The handsome youth, Narcissus, saw his features reflected in a still pond. He was so enraptured by his own beauty that he would not leave his reflection and perished of hunger.

The true self is the best defence against narcissism. To take one self seriously is not to confuse self with image, appearance or physical perfection. It is to be committed to finding out who one really is and who others really are. It is to discover the truth that who I really am is who I really want to be. A sense of self is a necessary condition for intimacy. It is also a necessary condition to discover the potential of long-term friendships and relationships. A sense of self is also necessary to discover that stability and security in relationships are not synonymous with routine, boredom or decay. Philosophers and Psychologists need to work harder at defining the concept of self and put an end to the current confusion whereby self is confused with person, individual and ego. They need to proclaim enlightened self-interest and promote the wisdom that self-love is a necessary condition for the love of others and that self esteem is the only enduring basis for esteeming others. In this sense the concept of self provides the most solid basis for building family, community, society and democracy.



The article was published in the *Relatewell Journal* (ISSN no. 1327-7553), June 2002, Volume 6, Number 2. Permission required to reprint.

© Copyright Family Relationships Institute Inc.