Beyond the Myth of Self-Esteem

Finding Fulfilment

John Smith
with Coral Chamberlain
To my wife Glena and my family for their loving support, and for keeping me on track through often difficult times
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Preface

I have lived most of my life in suburban middle-class comfort, and I share many of the privileges and aspirations of the average citizen in the Western world. However, I have been experiencing a growing unease. Pleasant evenings chatting with people in pubs, adrenalin-charged hours on a motorcycle with outlaw acquaintances, and disturbing experiences with homeless young people, broken families and the working poor have tempered my confidence in our current system, with its emphasis on the pursuit of success and individual happiness.

My involvement, since the late 1960s, in lifestyle seminar presentations in many thousands of secondary schools has helped me keep in touch with the monumental changes in beliefs, institutions, popular culture and family structures that have taken place over the years. We live in exciting and exhilarating times, it is true. We marvel at human potential and the wide range of options that are now available to the individual. For many of us, life seems good and happiness achievable – and yet, I am concerned about what I am seeing.

It was in part this concern that drove me to move to the USA in the mid-1990s to pursue six years of research and doctoral studies. I was seeking to understand the impact, causes and significance of vast changes I saw occurring as we approached the twenty-first century. Like David Suzuki, David Attenborough and others who share their views, I am passionate about the survival of the planet in all its glorious diversity. As a father, and a survivor–thriver of a long partnership with a warm and vibrant wife and mother, I care deeply about my children and my grandchildren. I also care about yours, and the future they will inherit.

I feel that we need to discover a sense of being part of a healthy community, of being individuals united in a commitment that goes beyond the distraction of self-obsession. Interestingly, the ideas presented in this book may perhaps be more pertinent now in the
context of global economic and climatic crisis than would have been apparent just a few years ago, when greed was good and enlightened self-interest was the driver for a more prosperous and fulfilling life.

I bring to this book an experience of the joy of being fully alive to something much bigger than myself. I now realise that the search for a sense of accomplishment, fulfilment and belonging is quite distinct from the current fascination with the isolated self. One of the world’s most influential visionaries long ago asserted that to find ourselves we must lose ourselves to a greater vision. He also said that discovering this truth is liberating.

I am inviting you to come on a journey with me to explore a new way of living, a way of living that liberates us from the confines of an obsession with self and self-esteem. But be warned. This book will challenge almost all you have ever heard or read about self-esteem as expressed by contemporary popular culture.

John Smith
Self-Esteem, Self-Respect or Self-Obsession?

In Western cultures, there are many different views about what will make us happy. Some see happiness in materialistic terms: if I have a good job and sufficient money to buy whatever I fancy, I will be happy. Others link happiness to human freedom: my financial situation may not be great but being able to do what I want to do, without censorship or regulation, is truly a happy existence. For some, relationships are the key to happiness: if I have a good relationship with my partner, my children and my work colleagues, then I will be happy. Others seek happiness by detachment from relational demands or limitations.

Of course, the very definition of happiness is open to debate. A millionaire may appear to be happy but show less serenity and wisdom than a homeless person.

Social commentator Clive Hamilton describes three ways of viewing happiness or wellbeing: the pleasant life, the good life and the meaningful life. The pleasant life, he says, is a life that produces a sense of pleasure. It is about maximising emotional and physical highs, and it centres on achieving financial independence, as this gives people the
capacity to build a pleasureable lifestyle. The good life is about fulfilling personal potential, pursuing dreams and developing innate capacities. Again, the focus is still very clearly on the self. The meaningful life goes beyond these, to a life committed to something larger than self – a higher cause of some kind.

Some of us would say that happiness comes from knowing that our life has meaning and purpose. Even through tough times, we can have a sense of dignity and significance that brings peace and fulfilment. In this context, self-respect may seem of greater importance than self-esteem. Social researcher Hugh Mackay expresses this view when he writes:

Overly hyped self-esteem can slip very easily into vanity, arrogance and triumphalism, whereas self-respect is our personal, private reward for living in ways that are true to our noblest and loftiest ideals – especially those concerned with the wellbeing of others.²

Self-esteem has become an almost ubiquitous term. It permeates pop-culture journalism and fills the books on the shelves in the self-help, business and spirituality sections of commercial outlets, creating a bonanza for motivational speakers, TV gurus and pop psychologists.³ It is now such common currency that it is mentioned in almost any discussion of youth affairs, gender conflict, education and even popular religion.

Thirty years ago, self-esteem barely rated a mention in the popular press.⁴ Now a Google search for this term yields more than 30 million hits. Many factors have contributed to this explosion of interest in self-esteem, as later chapters will reveal. Here, I want simply to draw attention to a few of the key events that have brought us to this point.⁵

The first purely psychological use of the term self-esteem can be traced back to 1890 and the work of William James, who is often referred to as the father of modern psychology. However, self-esteem
did not even begin to emerge as an influential idea among psychologists and academics until the late 1960s, when, with the rise of wealth and consumerism, it became easier to conceptualise the individual at the centre of his or her destiny.

A significant figure in the emerging focus on self-esteem was psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden. He was a devotee of philosopher Ayn Rand, who through her novels was a strong proponent of radical individualism and enlightened self-interest. Branden is regarded as the intellectual father of what is now called ‘the self-esteem movement’, which extended his ideas into popular culture. It must be said, however, that many popular beliefs about self-esteem and the strategies advocated for boosting self-esteem are a far cry from both his original concepts and those he now espouses. It is as though he opened the stable door for a horse that has since bolted out of his control.

It was not until the late 1980s that the concept of self-esteem moved out of academia and the clinic and into public awareness. This was largely because of its perceived political implications. John Vasconcellos, a member of the California State Assembly, proposed that low self-esteem was the cause of crime, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse and school underachievement. He became an influential and successful advocate of a policy aimed at boosting young people’s self-esteem as a ‘social vaccine’.

Vasconcellos also argued that boosting self-esteem would help balance the state budget, because those with high self-esteem would earn more money and so pay more tax. A task force set up as a result of his efforts continued operating until 1990. It was then replaced by the still-active National Association for Self-Esteem (NASE), committed to fully integrating self-esteem into the fabric of American society – within families, schools, the government and the workplace.

Despite a lack of evidence for Vasconcellos’ initial claims, and the discouraging results of numerous studies since then, the idea that boosting self-esteem can vaccinate against all kinds of societal ills,
personal failures and inner problems persisted. Rather than fading with time, this faddish notion flourished and became incorporated into the emerging self-esteem movement.

Unlike most fads, the general fascination with self-esteem did not simply run its course and disappear. Instead, throughout the Western world, attractive but unsubstantiated beliefs about self-esteem gradually became woven into the fabric of popular culture. As a result, over time, the teachings of the self-esteem movement were transformed into a powerful cultural myth, that is, a collective belief built up in response to people’s wishes rather than a rational analysis of the situation. I call this the myth of self-esteem. This overarching myth encompasses many individual myths. Anyone born since the 1980s in the Western world is likely to have lived their entire life under the influence of myths about self-esteem, at least to some extent.

I have taken a keen interest in the emergence of this phenomenon and its impact on the individual and society for many years. As I have delved and discussed, listened and pondered, I have come to recognise the following as characteristics of the myth of self-esteem:

- isolation of the individual from traditional social relationships
- an assumption that life is a level playing field, that anyone can succeed in finding the ‘pleasant life’ and the ‘good life’
- an emphasis on feeling good and looking good
- an emphasis on trusting and acting on feelings in relation to heart aspirations
- a prioritisation of personal success over social responsibility
- a justification of self-focus by the assertion that we must love ourselves before we can love others
- a spirituality defined by personal fulfilment rather than divine or cultural expectations.

In subsequent chapters, I will return to each of these points, highlight individual self-esteem myths associated with them and provide
my rationale for including them. My thinking has been shaped not only by academic delving but also by powerful life experiences and by my close connections with people in many strata of society – in my home country, Australia, and throughout the world.

Because the teachings of the myth of self-esteem have become so deeply embedded in Western culture, they are virtually unrecognisable as myth. I therefore devote a large part of this book to bringing these teachings and their consequences to light, so you, the reader, are in a position to make your own evaluation. Chapters 2–6 identify and describe individual myths that are part of the myth of self-esteem and explain some of their pitfalls. Chapter 7 describes ‘gurus’ of the myth of self-esteem: influential people who, whether they are aware of it or not, have effectively promulgated the teachings of the myth over the years. Chapters 8–10 look at factors I believe have made us, as individuals and societies, particularly vulnerable to assimilating the teachings of the myth and experiencing the global consequences of that process.

The final four chapters, Chapters 11–14, turn to the quest for identity and meaning, and the role of the spiritual dimension of life in bringing true fulfilment and deep joy. These are the chapters I have most enjoyed writing. I can well imagine that you may be tempted to hop and skip your way through earlier chapters to get to these key chapters quickly. You may do that, of course, but I suspect you will find that reading this book is a bit like reading a mystery novel. You will get more out of it if you follow the ‘plot’ as it unfolds than you will if you skip to the last few pages to find out how it ends.

The ancient Greek myth about Narcissus seems to be finding new relevance in the postmodern cultures of today’s affluent societies.  

Narcissus, cursed by the gods to be infatuated with the first human face he saw, happened upon a deep pool of water. Seeing his own face reflected in its smooth surface, he fell instantly in love with his own image. When he
touched the surface of the water, to his dismay, the image became distorted. Such was his fanatical obsession with his image that he could not bear to lose sight of it for a moment. He could not disturb the pool in order to drink or move from it to obtain food. Pathetically, he sat there and wasted away.

Over the last few decades, many psychologists and social analysts have spoken of our modern and postmodern societies as being, in broad terms, profoundly narcissistic. We are in danger of becoming so obsessed with self-image and self-esteem that our lives are diverted from productive paths onto the bypath of a self-obsession that borders on destructive self-worship.

The nurturing of self-esteem, now widely perceived to be an important means of achieving success, seems to have become an end in itself. Low self-esteem tends to be regarded as a primary problem, which must be addressed directly by a whole array of self-esteem-boosting techniques, rather than as one of the results or symptoms of a more profound personal dysfunction or a failure of modern and postmodern culture.

The self-esteem-boosting strategies presented to us, often as part of a slick and expensive self-improvement package, seem so much more attractive and doable than addressing underlying personal, spiritual and societal issues. Yet, it may be much more important to deal with the latter if we are to achieve happy, satisfying and meaningful lives.

I am not suggesting that all the insights to be found in presentations and books that extol the importance of self-esteem are unhelpful. Nor am I saying that we should have a negative view of ourselves or life – quite the contrary. However, I am convinced that there are destructive flaws in the confident communications of unregulated, market-driven, self-proclaimed ‘experts’ in this field. I am concerned about the widespread and growing acceptance of a culture of pleasure and self-gratification that amounts, in some cases, to a compulsion to feel good about oneself at all times and
an excessive need for enjoyable experiences.

This culture is promoted by many who wield great influence in society. Their assertions, if presented with sufficient charisma on the right TV channels or at a motivational seminar in the presence of an applauding audience, have a huge impact on individuals exposed to them. They also generate substantial incomes for the presenters, with the possibility of bestseller listing in *The New York Times*. If their theories are flawed, then we have among us many people who are the products of a well-intentioned but misguided crusade – one that has the potential to leave in its wake an epidemic of disillusionment and despair.

In days gone by, when gold was discovered, the news spread rapidly and people rushed to the site. Sometimes it was a false alarm or the supply was small. For all those who returned gloriously enriched, there were just as many who went home having spent all they had for nothing. A key question in relation to self-esteem is this: how much is real gold and how much is fool’s gold? My purpose is not to deny the existence of some gold. It is to question some dangerous exaggerations and mistaken views about the significance of self-esteem as the source, rather than the result, of a truly successful, meaningful life.

My clear message is this: *there is more to life than the nurturing of our self-esteem*. Many people are already abandoning that pursuit in favour of the search for meaning and fulfilment. My hope is that this book will open many more hearts and minds to the possibility of a new and more satisfying way of living.