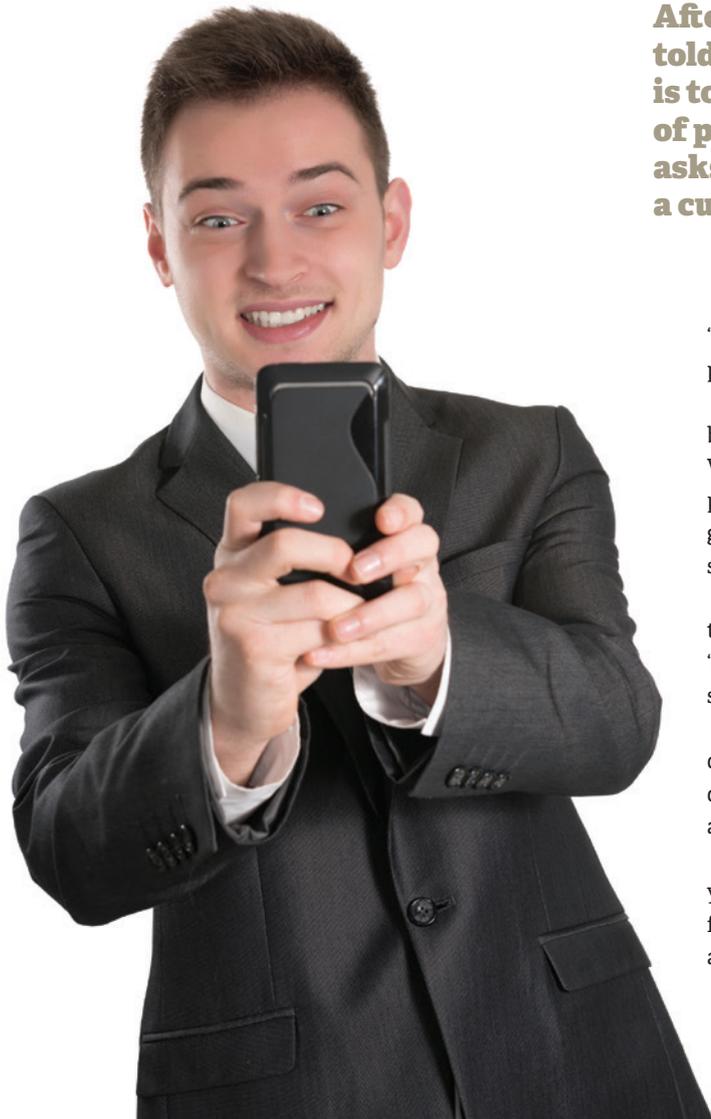


The ego trip generation



After 50 years of being told how important it is to affirm ourselves via the power of positive thinking, Glynn Harrison asks how we can rediscover grace in a culture of self-esteem

'You're special!' 'I am perfect in every way'; 'I'm a loveable person'; 'I'm powerful, I'm strong'; 'Hey, to God, I'm big stuff!'

Repeating such statements, mantra-like, has been the bread and butter of the self-help movement since Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* was first published back in 1952. Every day, millions of people go about their daily lives silently rehearsing positive statements such as these.

Indeed, one group of North American researchers found that over 50 per cent of survey respondents said they 'frequently' use this kind of self-affirmation. Only 3 per cent said they never used them.

Half a century ago, if somebody complained of feeling down or felt nobody liked them, that they were 'no good' or didn't like themselves, a friend would probably offer advice along the following lines:

'Don't get stuck in your own problems! Don't think about yourself so much. Think about other people. Make new friends and explore some new interests. You'll never get anywhere by contemplating your own navel.'

Today the same friend would probably offer radically different advice: 'You need to believe in yourself more! Stop thinking so much about other people's problems and worrying about their expectations. You need to discover who you are. Be yourself. Learn to like yourself. Build up your self-esteem.'

The success of the self-esteem movement

All this bears witness to the staggering success of the 50-year-old self-esteem movement. Self-esteem is now one of the most published topics in the psychological literature. And schools, with policies that deter criticism and discourage competition, have proved more than willing collaborators in the transmission of its ideology.

Our churches are not immune from the reach of the movement either. In my Sunday school days we sang a little song that went, 'Jesus first, myself last, and others in between...'

We rarely teach our children such self-negating lyrics now. Why not? 'Because you can't love other people until first you love yourself.' In this upside-down world of self-esteem it's not the sin of pride that we take into the confessional, but the transgression of 'not liking myself enough.'

What happened to bring this about? How did the self-esteem movement gain such a foothold in our lives?

First, the self-esteem idea (or 'boosterism' as I prefer to call it) made

bold promises. What started out with good intentions – to help some people crushed by criticism to stop beating themselves up and take a more realistic view – became a one-size-fits-all solution for everyone.

Self-esteem ideology seemed to offer answers for the big questions of significance and personal value too. Everybody has questions about their value and significance. Since the beginning of time humans have puzzled over where we figure in the grand scheme of things and what we are worth.

The self-esteem movement gripped our imagination because it engaged with this, the deepest and most profound problem of our lives, and it told us it could fix it.

Secondly, the self-esteem idea had experts, massed ranks of them. Marketing boosterism to parents and educationalists as a kind of social vaccine, the experts promised better mental health, crime reduction, less drug use and improved educational outcomes for all.

And finally, when the self-esteem movement took off in the 1960s, it was able to forge a powerful alliance with the emerging spirit of the age. After surfing the sexual revolution of the 60s, self-esteem ideology thrived in the new humanisms of the 70s and the materialistic orgies of the 80s.

Eventually, the primacy of self-admiration became the default cultural mode. If we want to love one another, then first we have to learn

to love ourselves – right? Who could disagree with that? And didn't Jesus even say something about loving your neighbour *as yourself*?

As a result, we overdosed on self-admiration. The self-esteem movement gained a powerful foothold in the Western mind, and reshaped secular and Christian cultures alike.

The big con?

But did it work? It was only after decades of promoting self-esteem that academic psychologists got around to asking this, the most important question of all. What did they discover?

Recent evaluations of the effectiveness of interventions to promote self-esteem have repeatedly turned up negative findings. There is no robust evidence that simplistic boosterism has produced any of the benefits promised. And there is emerging evidence that it may do more harm than good.

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For example, researchers at the University of Waterloo in Ontario persuaded a group of subjects to repeat and then 'focus positively' for several weeks on a range of positive self-statements, such as, 'I'm a loveable person'. When they compared the emotional responses of their subjects with control groups, they found that participants with low self-esteem at the start of the study actually felt worse at the end.

The authors concluded that repeating positive self-statements might marginally benefit certain people (those who already have good mental health), but 'backfire for the very people who need them most'.

Of course, we need to remind ourselves that the self-esteem movement is trying to address a real problem. For some, low self-worth and irrational self-blame has become the lynchpin of their personality, often born out of harrowing experiences of cruelty or abuse. And we all struggle with deeper questions of significance

and worth. So these are large and important questions.

But the self-esteem movement could never provide the easy solutions promised. Even judged on its own terms, it is a failed ideology.

Boosterism's veneer of 'science' cannot sidestep the larger philosophical questions that stand behind it, either. The self-esteem movement spins the fantasy that questions of worth and value can somehow be uncoupled from questions of world-view, but they can't.

We are not worthy simply because we assert it to be so. We cannot signify ourselves. That is why those with low self-esteem often feel worse after trying to 'big themselves up'. They simply don't believe their own propaganda. And why should they?

The gospel and self-esteem

The answer to putting yourself down isn't to boost yourself up. This simply keeps the self focused upon itself, prompting more comparison and envy. And it ignores the realities of sin and judgment. And so the gospel, fiercely realistic about our capacity for sin and wrongdoing, insists on something far more radical.

The gospel calls the self out of the search for self-fulfillment and orientates it to Jesus, the word made flesh, and to the pursuit of his kingdom. It insists that when we make self-fulfillment and the pursuit of self-worth the organizing principle of

mental life, we not only fall short of the glory of God, we fall short of being fully human too. Instead, it calls us into an entirely new identity, or way of thinking about ourselves, grounded in the grace and forgiveness of God.

In the first chapter of John's Gospel, the Bible catapults us to the summit of its teaching on Christian identity by revealing that those for whom the Word came will be called the very children of God.

Thus, the God who spoke in Jesus Christ speaks our identity to us. And this – our identity in Christ as God's children – must become the foundation of personal growth and the lynchpin of personal transformation.

Our new identity is a *project* as well as a *given*. There is much work to do. For many of us, the renewal of the mind involves a long, hard journey battling entrenched shame and self-condemnation. There are no simplistic solutions here.

But as the star of the self-esteem movement begins to fade, we can have confidence that in response to the age-old question, 'how shall we think of ourselves?' the gospel is still good news for everyone.

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