

Believing In Myself: Self Esteem Daily Meditations

By Earnie Larsen

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This enlightening book from a pioneer in the field of recovery presents a daily meditation for every day of the year, complete with an inspirational quote and a thought-for-the-day.

Believing in Myself is a must read for anyone struggling with self-esteem issues. A solid sense of self-worth is the single most important factor in determining our happiness in life and our success in work and relationships. With it, virtually all things are possible; without it, even victories can feel like defeats. Raising low self-esteem is an essential part of the healing process for those who are recovering from addictions and dependencies—and for anyone who still feels the pain of childhood traumas or other emotional wounds.

This book tackles important subjects such as: why self-esteem seems so fragile, how to define ourselves in terms of our own standards and values, why attitude is so important when we make mistakes, the difference between conceit and self-approval, how self-doubt triggers unattractive behaviors, and how self-esteem blooms when we have a sense of purpose in life.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Earnie Larsen is the author of *Stage II Recovery* and *Stage II Relationships,* and coauthor with his sister **Carol Hegarty** of *Days of Healing, Days of Joy.*

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Chapter 1

January 1

Even though time be real, to realize the unimportance of time is the gate of wisdom.

Bertrand Russell

Most of us measure the realities of life by time. Without our even being aware of it, the context of time directs, defines, channels, and limits most of our thought patterns. Concepts like past, present, and future divide our lives as neatly as three acts divide a play: One begins where the other ends, until the play is finished. That is the outer world.

But clock ticks and calendar pages don't control the action in the inner world. As we develop the inner awareness that develops self-esteem, we get in touch with a different reality. In the kingdom of our own minds and hearts we discover a self that is neither old nor young, neither beginning nor ending, but just *being.* In this world there is no such thing as before or after, on time or late. There is only the peace and serenity of *now* -- the now that was, is, and will be.

The healthiest people have dual citizenship: They live in both worlds. When they are saddened that some prized and precious time is passing by, they are also comforted by knowing that the richness of human experience is timeless. All that was good lives on in the inner world -- not lost, not wasted, not past. In the soul there is only the eternal present.

Soul making has nothing to do with time as the world measures it.

January 2

Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

"The Desiderata"

Self-esteem is not static. Within boundaries, depending on the ebb and flow of the tide of our lives, our sense of well-being naturally fluctuates. Many of our low points, however, have not so much to do with a particular problem as they do with the state of mind we bring to that problem.

We may not always have control over certain fears. If we were once badly burned, for example, we may always have a residual overreaction to fire -- and there are, of course, many kinds of fire. But we do have control over the fatigue and loneliness that set us up for fear attacks. Of all the efforts we may make to bolster self-esteem, avoiding such fatigue and loneliness may be the most important.

Is it always necessary to work as hard as we do? Can we never take a break or a little nap? When was the last time we took a vacation? And how often do we set aside time for a good long conversation with a friend? Sometimes "alone" is not a healthy place to be. Especially if we're also tired. Those are times when our fears find us most vulnerable.

I will avoid getting too tired to feel good about myself.

January 3
Comparisons are odious.

Sir John Fortescue

Talk about a setup! What are we really doing when we compare ourselves with others? Are we simply gathering information -- or are we actually gathering evidence of our own inadequacy? If that's our game, we're sure to win by losing every time.

Maybe we first learned to make unfavorable comparisons as a form of self-protection. Perhaps our tactic was to put ourselves down quickly -- before "they" could do it for us. As children, we may have used self-effacement to deflect even worse verbal abuse. But we're not children now. And those bullies who lurked in the bushes aren't there anymore -- unless we've internalized and generalized them into everybody who isn't us.

Do most of the people we know seem better, smarter, handsomer, more interesting than we are? If so, that's a sign that we're still playing out the same old self-defeating pattern. Out of fear, we're volunteering to be "worse" so that those who are "better" won't want to hurt us. After years of practice, self-effacement has become Our habit.

But we can form a new habit if we want to. We can begin by refusing to idealize people who are in fact the same mixed bag of strengths and weaknesses that we are. We can stop making comparisons to put ourselves down and start taking a look at the worthy people we really are.

Today, I don't need to vandalize my self-image by making unfavorable comparisons.

January 4

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Legal Oath

Some truths are harder to face than others. Yes. I eat too much and lose my temper with the kids. Yes, I tend to be selfish sometimes and manipulative, too. But no, I don't remember much about my childhood. I guess it was as happy as most people's.

Sound familiar? Many people working to improve their self-esteem identify themselves as Adult Children. To their great credit, they've joined forces for mutual comfort and support. But many Adult Children still spend a lot of energy fending off the past instead of accepting it. Understandably, they have more trouble than most in coming to grips with yesterday. Their yesterdays were a nightmare.

Perhaps their parents were practicing alcoholics or religious zealots or simply unavailable emotionally.

Perhaps there was constant fighting, or demeaning remarks were made. Who wouldn't want to forget such misery? Yet that misery really happened; it is an important part of the Adult Child's personal truth.

Only by acknowledging and accepting that truth can Adult Children be done with it and get on with the task of making today everything it can be. Only then can healing and restoration of a positive self-image begin.

Denial ties me to the past.

January 5

Each is given a bag of tools,

A shapeless mass and a book of rules;

And each must make, ere life is flown,

A stumblingblock or a steppingstone.

R. L. Sharpe

Who would try to nail boards together without a hammer or change a flat tire without a jack? To deny our need for tools would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? Yet many of us have trouble accepting that we need tools to repair our damaged self-esteem.

Sheer force of will won't lift a car so that a bad tire can be replaced -- and it won't lift a heavy burden from our spirits either. Insight and knowledge of carpentry can't pound a nail -- nor can insight and knowledge, without the help of tools, pound the dents out of our battered psyches.

It isn't weak or shameful to admit that a human finger isn't a screwdriver and a human eye isn't a microscope. Why do we resist the idea that spiritual work, like physical work, has its own set of tools? Reading, sharing, praying, attending our support group's meetings -- these are the tools that help us do the job. They aren't optional niceties or crutches. If we need to lay a new foundation, we need to dig a big hole. And if we need to dig a hole, we'd better be willing to use a shovel.

My willingness to use the tools determines the outcome of the job.

January 6

No one may abuse the truth with impunity.

R. Duane Joseph

A person's integrity is his or her own truth. To live honorably is to abide with the truth we claim as our own. Self-esteem is the sister of integrity; it's the natural result, the by-product, of honorable living. That's why both integrity and self-esteem are affected when we wander from the honorable path.

When we have affairs, go back on our word, tell half-truths, exaggerate to get approval, we chip away at our integrity. And any chipping away at our integrity undermines our self-esteem. This is the reason that even the smallest dishonorable behaviors are so destructive -- no matter how we justify them.

If we're involved in any activity that violates our moral code, that runs contrary to our own value system, then we're in self-esteem trouble. All the psychological maneuvering in the world cannot and will not restore serenity to the soul if this involvement continues.

Is there a basic decision, a letting go, that must take place? Although it may take heroic effort, that turnaround decision will give wings to our self-esteem.

Peace with self is a treasure beyond measure.

January 7

We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.

Iris Murdoch

Taking on impossible missions is the best of all possible ways to lose status with ourselves. Yet there are those of us who are powerfully attracted to the Superman cape, no matter how many times it failed to flutter before. Something in us keeps forgetting how short a trip it was from the roof to the sidewalk.

For the sake of our self-esteem, we need to remember how hard the sidewalk is the next time we're tempted to take on a task that can't be done. If we're trying to think for other people, resolve their self-made messes, or rescue them from their own willfulness, we're guaranteeing ourselves another hard fall. And the pity isn't that our attempts keep failing; the pity is that we hurt ourselves trying to do what no one on this side of heaven is allowed to do -- save other people.

The purest, most noble intentions in the world won't make the Superman cape billow. No matter how loyal or devoted, we are still and only human. Steadfast love and encouragement are the best we have to offer our troubled loved ones. If we want to salvage our self-esteem, we need to accept ourselves and our loved ones, limitations and all. And we need to hang up the Superman cape.

Even in a good cause, my grandiosity is self-defeating.

January 8

Procrastination means paying twice the price when you eventually must act.

T. A. McAloon

The relationship between procrastination and self-esteem is not coincidental. The reason is that self-esteem slips whenever integrity is sacrificed, and procrastinating always demands the offering up of a tiny piece of our integrity. Heavy-duty procrastination is also a first sign of depression in many people.

Suffering people say that when they are depressed they feel overwhelmed, overburdened with so much to do there's no hope of ever getting it done, of feeling powerless in the face of insurmountable odds.

Whatever the specific cause of a depression, however, procrastination often helps to set it up. Many of us have procrastinated until there really is an unmanageable logjam of undoable tasks. Or we allow terrible pressure to build up around a decision that we've put off time and time again. In these ways, procrastination invites depression just as honey invites ants.

Conquering my procrastination may eliminate the need to conquer depression.

January 9
In thy face I see The map of honor, truth, and loyalty.

William Shakespeare

What higher honor can we give but to say a person is "true blue," or "faithful to the end"? Loyalty is one of the most endearing and noble of all human qualities. How terribly sad when we place this priceless gift in the wrong hands!

Many people suffering from low self-esteem have developed faulty boundaries around who is trustworthy and who is not. Of course it isn't *trusting* itself that threatens self-esteem, but trusting untrustworthy people is always devastating. While everyone makes an honest misjudgment now and then, some of us go on making the same mistake with the same person over and over and over again. Such foolhardiness goes beyond the limits of loyalty.

Misplaced loyalty, especially if repeated, is evidence of willfulness rather than love. Because self-esteem cannot long endure the battering of betrayal, we need to get honest about what we're doing when we offer ourselves up to people who have let us down. To fail to learn from our past mistakes is to take a hand in our own injury.

My integrity is always lost when I set myself up to be hurt.

January 10

Let not thy Will roar, when thy Power can but whisper.

Thomas Fuller

Surrender, as taught and understood in Twelve Step programs, is anything but shameful. It means that we call off the war we've been waging against life as it is. It means giving up the losing battle we've been leading with our popguns of delusion and denial. In recovery, surrender is not a sign of weakness but of courage and strength.

Surrender is critical because delusion and denial prevent any meaningful move forward. The stinking thinking they produce tells us that black is white -- that getting our own sick way is winning, that the enemy is out there rather than in here. The longer and bloodier the battle, the more confused we become.

To get on with our lives, to have any chance of victory, means that we give up what doesn't work. We stop playing "general." In the face of our well-demonstrated powerlessness, continuing the charade now seems insane -- even to us. Our surrender doesn't signify defeat, but the fact that we are sick and tired of defeat.

The surrender of willfulness is often my first victory.

January, 11

All deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea, while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore.

Herman Melville

Building self-esteem takes introspection. But some of us get nervous when we start thinking about ourselves. Somehow it seems wrong to spend so much time digging around in the basements and attics of our personalities. We're afraid we're becoming self-centered, and we feel guilty about it. Haven't we always been taught to avoid selfishness?

But the search for self-esteem is more like a rescue mission than it is an ego trip. It isn't selfish to try to know and understand ourselves. And taking credit where credit is due shouldn't make us feel guilty any more than taking a paycheck at the end of a hard week. We deserve what we've earned. And all of us have earned more healthy self-regard than we've dared to claim.

We don't have to worry. Self-centeredness is no more like self-esteem than a flood is like a summer shower. One causes devastation and the other causes growth. If growth is our intention, examining our lives is not only allowable -- it's an absolute necessity. And if introspection makes us uneasy, it's because we're not used to it, not because it's wrong.

Squeamishness about self-scrutiny may spring from my false pride instead of my true humility.

January 12

A successful marriage is an edifice that must be rebuilt every day.

André Maurois

Without doubt a successful marriage can be a marvelous springboard for our self-esteem. When we are loved we live in the presence of a constantly reflecting mirror that tells us, regardless of all our faults and warts, that we are plenty okay people. What could be better than to have someone who loves you be there to scratch your back in the middle of the night?

But marriage, like self-esteem, requires daily effort. The bread can be no better than the grain that goes into it. To listen when we would rather not, to compromise when we feel like digging in our heels, to confront problems rather than let them slide on by, guaranteeing a more difficult time later -- all of these are kneading the dough.

It's a lot easier to dream about the wonderfulness of a finished product than it is to roll up your sleeves every day and do what is necessary to ensure that finished product will be there at day's end.

My precious relationships are worth the extra effort.

January 13

Pessimist -- one who, when he has the choice of two evils, chooses both.

Oscar Wilde

The only sensible way to live our lives is with optimism -- and a lot of it. It just isn't reasonable always to expect the worst to happen; it doesn't. Nor is it logical to paint all circumstances black; they aren't.

Although society has its fun teasing cockeyed optimists, cynical pessimism has far worse results. We have all known -- and avoided -- dismal people who long ago lost the heart to be happy and the nerve to be hopeful. Perhaps they chose gloom and doom because they were afraid the sun would never shine for them. Or perhaps their negative, peevish attitude toward life came from trying to be suave and sophisticated. But in any case, their negativity doesn't attract much company.

Optimism is healthy. Merry, upbeat people who look for the good *attract* the good, just as flowers attract butterflies. It is just as easy, and just as reasonable, to look up as it is down.

Habitual melancholy can be rejected as well as accepted.

January 14

Parentage is a very important profession; but no test of fitness for it is ever imposed in the interest of the children.

George Bernard Shaw

We are all born with a hunger for love. Our spirits crave acceptance and appreciation just as our lungs crave fresh air. We don't just wish or hope for love; we *need* it to thrive. Denied, we start to lose our grip on life and become frantic. That's why every one of us reached out early in life for that sense of belonging.

What happened when we reached out to people who didn't feel good about *themselves?* Understanding that they couldn't give what they didn't have can go a long way toward understanding where our self-esteem went. This is a sad realization for many, but it's a realization with an up side.

Understanding enables us to choose. And choice can free us from endlessly repeating lose-lose patterns. If the primary caretaker in our lives lived in a veritable haunted house of ghosts and demons, we must not go on looking to that person for protection from bogeymen. If they haven't been able to chase away their own spooks, it isn't likely they can help us with ours. Perhaps we need to spend some time grieving -- for them as well as for us. But mostly we need to reach out to healthier people. Now that we're grown, we get to choose for ourselves.

The reason I can't get blood from a stone is not that the stone is unwilling to give it; stones don't have blood to give.

January 15

Who ever is adequate? We all create situations each other can't live up to, then break our hearts at them because they don't.

Elizabeth Bowen

Things are not always just as we would like them. Often we would in some way re-create ourselves if we could. Some wish they were taller, others would like to have been the other sex, many are born with physical defects, some are just plain homely. But the most foolish thing in the world is to brood about our handicaps. We need to be more creative in working with what we have.

The great poet Lord Byron was one who did. He was born with a club foot, so he could not excel as a runner

or a mountain climber, as he wished. Instead he became a championship swimmer, winning many important swimming events and setting swimming records. Perhaps his experience of inadequacy was behind his great success in the literary world.

Some conditions must simply be accepted. But that doesn't mean we need to define ourselves by our limitations. It means we should make the most of what we have in spite of them. Self-esteem is the result of a positive self-definition.

I must accept and work around my limitations if I am to have a happy life.

January 16

Man is not the sum of what he has already, but rather the sum of what he does not yet have, of what he could have.

Jean-Paul Sartre

At times the obstacle course between us and improved self-esteem is a lonely run. Often the effort leaves us frustrated and tired. Persisting in some new behavior we have committed to may make every mental and physical muscle scream for relief. Easy for us to ask, "Why me? Why do I have to work so hard at this?" We tend to tell ourselves that there must be something unusually, perhaps hopelessly, wrong with us if we have to work *this* hard.

But the fact is that we really aren't much different than anyone else. The level of our self-esteem and the depth of our wisdom can always be increased. We're further along than some and further back than others. But everyone is somewhere on the self-esteem gradient. We're not alone, we're not last, and we're not the only ones who get tired.

The *me* in "Why me?" is the same *me* that runs along with everyone else. Of course, everyone else is not involved in a focused effort to improve self-esteem, but those of us who are, are a mighty force indeed. The more appropriate response is probably not "Why me?" but "Thank the Lord I am on the way."

Weariness after work is a sign of a productive day.

January 17

Friendship is almost always the union of a part of one mind with a part of another: People are friends in spots.

George Santayana

Screaming hunger makes a person unreasonable. This happens to those who have lived too long without nurturing relationships. Many, especially those of us who identify ourselves as Adult Children, imagine that there are ideal others out there if we can only find them.

But like all unrealistic expectations, this fantasy can only result in frustration and further injury to our self-esteem. No question that the world will go right on starving us out if we don't find friends. Yet how can *any* partner or friend be perfect? When we imagine that there will never be spaces in our togetherness, that there will always be complete agreement and fidelity, we set ourselves up for disappointment. Even our friendship

with God is limited by our own partial ability to be a friend.

People come in many varieties, but perfect isn't one of them. As we become aware that we may be asking too much, we can start thinking of our friends as a wonderful mixed bouquet, each flower contributing its own unique fragrance and beauty to the whole. Our disappointment with past relationships mustn't make us demand perfection where perfection cannot be found.

Unrealistic expectations are detrimental to my self-esteem.

January 18

There is no more certain sign of a narrow mind, and of arrogance than to stand aloof from those who think differently from us.

Walter Savage Landor

Many of us find that our self-esteem is attacked when someone resists our reasoning. When our analysis or plan seems so sound and logical, it's hard for us to understand why anyone would disagree. Then, rather than showing some flexibility, we dig in our heels and go to war over the seeming stupidity or denseness of those who prefer their own ideas.

Overcoming this resistance may become a crusade. We see the others and their ideas as an obstacle to fight thinking. Often we never consider that we may be just as irritating an obstacle to them as they are to us. It may never occur to us that they may be just as "right" as we are. Eventually, our spirits stumble under the weight of the negativity we attach to their motivation. And when our spirits stumble, our self-esteem stumbles.

Without sacrificing our integrity, we can become more honest people by becoming more flexible. Our truth, however true it is, is not necessarily the *only* truth. Our line of reasoning, which is so crystal clear to us, may be as valid as any, and yet not be the only possible path to a desired goal. We have every right to assertively present our ideas. But others have the fight to theirs as well. There's nothing wrong with agreeing to disagree, and no reason to put our self-respect on the line every time we have an argument.

"My Way or No Way" is the motto of a bully.

January 19

Relationships are not answers to problems. They are rewards for getting your life in order.

Horst S.

Many of us think that a loving, trusting relationship would be the answer to all our loneliness and self-doubt. We see a committed, one-to-one relationship as the answer to our most vexing problems; therefore, we put all our eggs in a "relationship basket." We wait rather than work.

Starting from such a position invites disappointment, however. A good relationship is much more a result than it is a cause. Often a relationship is our reward for dealing with life in such a way that low self-esteem, repressed anger, chronic evasiveness, and the inability to share feelings are no longer pressing issues. A relationship does not come along and cure our problems. Rather *we* cure our problems and thus become

ready and able to have a relationship. The relationships come after the work.

Like happiness and self-esteem, successful relationships are not ends unto themselves. Rather they are the rewards and results of living a life capable of producing such treasures.

How can I enjoy a relationship unless I'm capable of enjoyment?

January 20

God does not die on the day we cease to believe in a personal deity. But we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.

Dag Hammarskjöld

Believing is not our favor to God; it is God's favor to us to invite our belief. God is not sustained by our caring for him; *we* are sustained by God's fidelity to us. To call it off between ourselves and God does not decrease his light, but rather makes us even blinder than we are as we make our way through the shadows.

Somehow, in our egotism, we get our relationship with God all turned around. We forget which one of us is God and which isn't. We give God lists of things to do, we try to make deals with him and may even try to pull the wool over his eyes. We make him a scapegoat for our problems, blame him for our own mistakes -- and then whine about injustice!

The incredible thing is that God loves us anyway. Why would he care about people who behave so un-lovably? Why would he invite us, again and again, to seek the dignity of wholeness? Why provide so many lessons to such slow learners? Why keep on sending help to rescue us from the pits we dig ourselves? As the quote says, it's a wonder beyond all reason. Perhaps ours is not to understand, but to be grateful.

The God of my understanding can be my anchor in stormy seas.

January 21

Closure means dead.

Jonathan Jarvis

What could be harder on one's self-esteem than to be continually drawn back into a toxic relationship, or any toxic situation? Many of us, desperately trying to break free from an addictive stranglehold, make heartfelt, heroic efforts to break out. But ultimately, failing to walk *all the way* away, we slip right back, inch by inch, into the hell from which we had almost escaped.

When a situation has been deemed lethal, when we come to understand that to stay is to sacrifice self-esteem, then closure, and only closure, can set us free. Closure does not mean *sort of* separating. It means getting out all the way. It means the relationship is over and there is no possibility of going back. It means that even if the other person calls or invites or begs or pleads or cries or crawls the answer is no. Out means out. Closure means canceled, kaput, the end.

Difficult? Yes, indeed. Necessary? In some situations it is the difference between life and death, physical as

well as spiritual. Most of us need a lot of support from healthy friends to stick to our guns when we're trying to do away with a dangerous, but compelling, relationship.

Successful closure means being open to the new as well as closed to the old.

January 22

If wrinkles must be written upon our brows, let them not be written upon the heart. The spirit should not grow old.

James A. Garfield

Of all self-esteem issues, the comeuppance of aging has to be the most universal. Beauty fades, joints stiffen, and unproven upstarts threaten to overtake us at every turn. The calendar is exacting; no one is exempt.

Common sense tells us to face facts and reassess our options. But this is no small task in a society that worships at the altar of dewy youth. At the very time we need the confidence to keep on going and growing, authority figures no older than our children may be discounting us, humoring us, and treating us as has-beens. And loss of stature hurts our self-esteem even more than it hurts our feelings. If we don't work on it, we can let them convince us that we're no better than they say we are.

That's when our wisdom and experience come into play. These are our unfailing flak jackets. Whose standards will we allow ourselves to be measured by? Whose judgments do we respect? People with strong self-esteem ask themselves those questions every day -- and make their own decisions. Haven't we finished a lot of races the young haven't even begun yet? Haven't we put a lot of hard times behind us through courage and determination? Aren't we calmer now, and wiser, than we've ever been before? These are the prizes our years have won for us. If we want them to be honored, we must honor them ourselves.

I am only as vulnerable to societal judgments as I am fearful of them

January 23

No doubt Jack the Ripper excused himself on the grounds that it was human nature.

A. A. Milne

To plead "human nature" to our misdeeds is easy enough to do. "I couldn't help it!" we cry out. "That's just the way I am!" Yet it is exactly those very human, we hope dismissible, misdeeds that compromise character and thus self-esteem.

A case can certainly be made that many of our less-noble *tendencies* can be chalked up to human nature. Self-preservation, for example, may inspire selfishness and lying. But it's just as much human nature to strive against those tendencies as it is to give in to them. We are *human*, after all, not jungle animals.

There are many excuses but few good reasons for some of the things we do. The real reason is usually that we *"felt* like it." Many times in our lives we will "feel like" running away from responsibility, but that's no reason for running. Human nature can't be blamed. It's we who decide.

Ultimately I am what I choose to be; my self-esteem follows the same path.

January 24

Divorce is the psychological equivalent of a triple bypass. It takes years to amend all the habits and attitudes that led up to it.

Mary Kay Blakely

pardWho among us would shout "Hurry up!" to someone on crutches, or tell a bleeding accident victim "Snap out of it!" No one could be that unrealistic or insensitive, right? Wrong. That's exactly what we do to ourselves when we expect instant recovery from major life traumas. As unrealistic expectations go, that's about as unrealistic as it can get.

People who have recently experienced divorce -- or the loss of any once-loved reality in their lives -- are especially vulnerable to this self-harassment. Somehow we think we can skip right over the rehabilitation period that *must* follow so serious an injury. After all, there is not only the loss itself to be dealt with, but all the habits, patterns, and systems that grew out of this relationship. How unreasonable to expect that all of this can be dismantled immediately!

Even if we're glad the relationship is over, divorce is loss. And loss requires grieving, reflection, and healing. We not only have the right to heal, we have a responsibility to take all the time we need. Common sense, as well as self-esteem, forbids us to order ourselves to hurry up what can't be hurried.

How long does it take to heal? It takes as long as it takes.

January 25

Happiness arises in the first place from the enjoyment of one's self; and, in the next, from the friendship and conversations of a few select companions.

Joseph Addison

The dictionary defines happiness as a state of well-being and contentment, joy and felicity, which leaves us out if everything in our lives seems to be going wrong. Without our fair share of material comforts and pleasures, happiness seems beyond our reach. Perhaps the best we can do, we say to ourselves, is to try to be a good sport about not being happy.

Yet when we think about it, most of us have known people who seem to wrest happiness out of the most unhappy circumstances. How do they do it? It must be that they have discovered a happiness beyond pleasure and a serenity that is a deeper form of well-being than merriment. The great social reformer Jane Addams was one of these people. Her life was a life of service, not gaiety or pleasure. Yet she found happiness in the depth of her spirituality.

Happiness is not the result of getting everything we want, but of doing something worthwhile. So even if we are beset by many misfortunes, the example of other people's lives teaches us that we can be just as happy as we are wise.

I may need to redefine happiness, rather than put it on hold.

January 26

Marriage is our last, best chance to grow up.

Joseph Barth

Marriage has many advantages like emotional security and financial partnership. Seldom, however, does anyone mention that marriage provides a great opportunity for us to grow up. Yet surely it does. And the growth of maturity is always a growth in self-esteem.

The single life can be a veritable playground for faults, foibles, character defects, and the general acting out of selfishness. When we're on our own, who is there to say, "Stop," "No," or "You can't do that around here"? Marriage provides a boundary within which wackiness of all kinds -- which would otherwise skip merrily on its way -- gets confronted. In respectful, well-balanced marital relationships, we can't get away with the self-centeredness we don't even notice when we're alone. We are forced to listen better, share more, compromise fairly.

f0 If we are married, we have profited from the responsibilities that may also have irritated us. Marriage is good for most people -- not *in spite* of all its difficulties and demands but *because* of them.

Committed relationships deepen my commitment to self.

January 27

The beginning is the most important part of the work.

Plato

For the sake of physical fitness, a tennis shoe commercial urges us to *just do it!* Whether it is swimming, jogging, tennis, or slam dunking, just do it.

For the sake of emotional fitness, that's not bad advice either. Building self-esteem is like building anything else; nothing happens until you get started. Just do it!

It's a mistake to think that only major achievements count. We don't have to make president of the company or run a marathon or graduate from college to significantly boost our self-esteem. In fact the opposite is true. How we see ourselves is established more by the thousand and one small, daily things we do than by our infrequent moments in the limelight.

Speak up at a meeting, if that is new for you. Write a long overdue letter, especially if you have something important to communicate and you've been procrastinating. If you're working on standing up for yourself, express an opinion. If you're trying to mind your own business, keep your opinion to yourself.

Today it is enough to do whatever I can. I will just do it!

January 28

Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.

Thomas Jefferson

Truly overbearing, domineering people are a scourge on the face of the earth. They are executioners of self-esteem. As children, many of us quaked and quivered under the rule of tyrant parents. As adults, some of us are regularly bullied and browbeaten by tyrant spouses or bosses. Now that we're working on our self-esteem, we find these people easy targets to shoot at -- and hit -- when we go gunning for the bad guys who hurt us.

Yesterday's tyranny is one thing. Of course, we need to admit that it happened. It often helps to work it out by discussing it with a trusted friend, a support group, or a counselor. But beyond acceptance and understanding, there is nothing we can do but bind up our wounds and go on.

But the tyranny we're enduring today is another matter. As adults, we must take responsibility for our role in a tyrannical relationship. God made us to be happy, joyous, and free -- not cowering and cringing. Until we find the courage to stand up for ourselves, self-esteem will be impossible. If we need help, we must ask for it.

Resistance to oppression is my duty as a human being.

January 29

Listen to every prompting of honour.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

How we would all love to be honored! *Then* we would feel good about ourselves. Honor implies getting a medal, riding in the head car in a parade, or being recognized for some grand achievement. In these ways, honor is often publicly expressed.

Yet, far more often, honor is expressed by the private exercise of moderation, courage, and love. And these virtues are almost always demonstrated by frequent, small sacrifices. To be aware of the promptings of honor, then, is first to be aware of the promptings of these sacrifices. To hold back the negative word when everyone else is throwing stones at another gives rise to honor, even more so when we dare to contradict the stone throwers with a positive remark. We demonstrate honor when we reject a second, or third, helping of food when we are already comfortably full, or when we exercise even when we don't feel like it. Such sacrifices earn us the kind of medals we wear on the *inside,* rather than the outside.

Honor is an old-fashioned concept these days, a dinosaur among modern values. Yet honor is the foundation of self-esteem. And it is most often gained by the willingness to sacrifice little things many times over.

The honors I bestow are nothing compared to the honor I earn.

January 30

There are offences given and offences not given but taken.

Izaak Walton

We bring on a lot of unnecessary suffering by being supersensitive. How often, for example, do we get our feelings hurt by what someone else has said? If this is a regular refrain in our lives, we may need to listen more closely to what is actually being *said.* Perhaps it's a whole lot less than what we are *hearing.*

If our basic posture in life is defensive, we find ulterior motives everywhere. Then there can be no such thing as a simple statement that simply means what it means. No! Then *what* is said is not nearly so important as *why* it is said. When we're listening for motives rather than messages, we hear what we expect to hear. If we expect to be personally attacked, that's the way we'll translate whatever is said to us. Most of the time the speaker intended no such thing and may not even be aware that we were hurt.

Supersensitivity is always a sign of low self-esteem. It's a symptom of a deeper disorder called chronic defensiveness. Except in wartime, it isn't necessary to look for aggressors behind every bush. It isn't appropriate to "hear" put-downs and insults when none were spoken. Until we deal with that defensiveness, we have to accept responsibility for our own hurt feelings.

As I grow in self-esteem, I become less vulnerable to imagined slights.

January 31

God is never late.

Jo Sibet

Let's get the show on the road! Here we are, ready to roll with a handful of new insights and all the good intentions in the world. This time we're going to throw off our negative old habits and charge straight ahead toward a better life. We've got a plan now and we're going to stick to it. Nothing can stop us because we've finally learned to reach out for help. With prayer as a new part of our daily routine, we're on our way at last.

So when is lift-off? What's the delay? Why are we so disturbingly like our old selves so long after we launched off in another direction? There's no question that we're doing *our* part; when is all this prayer going to start paying off? *Where's God?*

Perhaps the better question is "How does God work?" After persisting long enough with "our part," we can usually see that God was powering us all the way. Concepts like *slow* and *late* are always relative to expectations. Can we be so sure that ours are the same as God's? Can we even be sure that we were as ready as we thought we were to get the message?

Farther down the road, we often discover that God had been pointing and pushing us at some door that we were too blind to see for months or even years. Then, when we finally get the picture, we turn to our patient, sweating God and say, "About time!"

My Higher Power is never indifferent, capricious, or on vacation.

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