



A HARD LOOK IN THE MIRROR

What kind of relationship we have with ourselves is crucial in mapping out who we become and how we relate to others.

By Elise McIntosh/Staten Island Advance

Do you love yourself? It's a serious question but one few take seriously. So much of our love, energy and attention are aimed at other people – our parents, our spouses, our children, our friends – that we kind of run on auto-pilot doing for others and neglect little ol' us.

“So many people don't make themselves a priority,” comments Dede Henley, CEO of The Dede Henley Group, a Seattle-based leadership-development firm. But they should, she adds, since how we treat and regard ourselves are important in mapping out our futures and what we'll become. Yet, people often lose sight during the hustle and bustle of everyday life that the most important relationship we have while on this earth is the one we have with ourselves. After all, this unique relationship is constant, non-stop, 24 hours a day, from cradle to grave – so we may as well like, and be kind to, the people staring back at us in the mirror.

There was time when George Harris didn't think he'd ever feel good about himself; his self-esteem was mangled as a boy growing up in Colorado in an emotionally and physically abusive home. Though his mom and dad

despised each other, the pair of devout Catholics refused to terminate the marriage. With relations so strained, Mrs. Harris forbade their children to have any sort of contact with Mr. Harris, and she'd make them hide in their rooms whenever he was present in the house.

Blamed for everything that went wrong, including his mother's breakdowns and depression, Harris, the eldest child, became hypercritical of himself. Paranoid that others would discover the family's secret, he'd go around the house shutting windows during summer, trying to shield the fury from neighbors.

Eventually, his turbulent childhood led to three failed marriages with women as every bit controlling as his mother, two suicide attempts and very little self-respect.

TURNED IT AROUND

But, Harris proves no matter what kind of hand life deals you, you can turn it around.

“Although I did not have a lot of self-esteem, I had a strong desire to overcome these negative experiences, and to never give up on ‘me’” Harris states on his Web site, www.familylivingsystem.com.

Through years of purposeful self-analysis work, Harris overcame the fear, reprehension and doubt that smothered his soul. Today a holistic therapist in Albuquerque, N.M., he helps others to achieve similar inner peace.

Though most people don't have to conquer the demons Harris faced, he stresses how important it is for everyone to work on the relationship they have with themselves. He says the first step is to examine what happened during the early years.

Ms. Henley, whose book *“The Secret of Sovereignty”* (Ragnelle Press) was released earlier this year, agrees:

“We learn who we are, how we interact with the world when we are 4 to 8 (years old). Through the eyes of a child, we unquestioningly take in, like sponges, everything our parent say.”

“Because young children do not have the words to express their feelings, they stuff their emotions inside,” Harris notes. So, if kids constantly are being condemned by the people who mean the most to them, i.e. their parents, they will internalize these criticisms and start feeling negatively about themselves.

To transcend this “recycled ignorance,” Ms. Henley says we need to “upgrade all those young conversations,” which is something she trains her clients to do.

And though it can be a long a difficult process, “it's never too late to change,” promotes Harris, who started his own transformation in his 40s and still works at it today at age 60.

Developing a good relationship with ourselves – as well as changing the things we don't like about ourselves – requires hard work, Ms. Henley notes, pointing out that's why many people don't make the effort or give up too quickly.

But “nothing happens” without self-transformation,” she says, quoting Mahatma Gandhi. “It takes a commitment to self-reflection, to looking about why “I do the things I do, say the things I say,” she explains.

Perhaps another reason why we “ignore” ourselves is because if we really start analyzing how we feel, our realizations may be too unsettling. Many of us take comfort in not knowing, the whole



“ignorance is bliss” attitude. And right now so many “I’m so fats,” “not good enoughs” and “can’t do it” roll across our minds so effortlessly and regularly, we hardly take notice anymore. Why would we want to disrupt that?

. Because the consequences hinder us from attaining the lives we really want to ourselves, answers Ms. Henley. “On the basic level, (people) don’t eat well, exercise or take care of themselves physically” by smoking, drinking and doing drugs.

We sabotage ourselves in other ways, too, such as staying trapped in toxic relationships or dead-end jobs and complaining we have not control to change our situations.

On the deepest level, we fail to “stay awake to our desires and wishes,” Ms. Henley adds. We don’t “nuture or engage in practices to have our creativity inspired,” which is the “fuel for an extraordinary life.”

We feel unfulfilled when we neglect the “inner, undiscovered self that clamors to escape,” echoes Dr. Wayne Dyer, who spoke at a conference two weeks ago at the Jacob Jarvis Center in Manhattan.

“Don’t die with your music still in your heart,” continues the motivational speaker, who has written 31 self-help books.

NOT A SELFISH IDEA

As he’s come to learn from his own experiences, Dr. Dyer recognizes some people feel all this “me, me, me” attitude is selfish or self-indulgent. But, in fact, it’s quite the opposite since the relationships we have with others.

“The more understanding you have about yourself, in general, the healthier and more gratifying your other relationships are,” explains Dr. Monica Indart, a psychotherapist with a private practice in Maplewood, NJ.

If you are not in touch with yourself and your emotional needs, she continues, it can have negative effects on the ones closest to you of which you aren’t even aware.

For instance, Dr. Indart says, a father may have self esteem issues and not understand why he is overly involved in trying to make his son the most popular kid in school or the star of the football team. Or, a mother may be so preoccupied with her depression, she may be neglecting the needs of her kids and spouse.

“We tend to give to others the same level of regard we have for ourselves,” agrees Ms. Henley. If we aren’t feeling good about ourselves we act out in destructive ways toward the ones we love.

Or, we may engage in “victim mentality,” complaining our spouses, children or bosses don’t treat us well and that’s why we are so unhappy, explains the author. But, by putting blame on others, “we make ourselves powerless.”

She adds it’s important to realize you can’t change others, but you can change yourself and how you interact with them.

Harris agrees, noting you are the “common denominator in all of your relationships” and can direct the way they flow.

“When you begin to see your relationship with yourself as the root cause – the central moving force - of all your other relationship dynamics, you are ready to take conscious steps toward transformation,” Harris says, pointing out how he felt toward his mother colored every relationship he had with women, “I felt like could not make any of them happy.”

But after Harris “made over” himself, his other relationships

dramatically improved. He reconnected to one of his three sons with whom he had lost touch. He forgave his mother for years of abuse. In fact, when he went to visit her in a nursing home, compassion had replaced resentment.

“The most positive and powerful changes in your relationships,” he says, “will happen when you clear out these unresolved issues and establish a positive and loving ‘self-relationship.’”



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