

# Self-esteem/OKness: a personal story<sup>1</sup>

*Summary: Through a psychotherapist who understood God's grace better than his theological student patient, I found a non-contingent ('by God') self-esteem/OKness that freed me from trying to earn esteem by my actions. This 'by God' self-esteem has served me especially well now in my old age in which I have reduced ability for actions that might elicit esteem.*

My basis for writing a personal story is the belief that what is most personal is most universal.<sup>2</sup> To set the stage for my story, I am unpacking the two key words in the title.

The psychological use of 'self-esteem' goes back to 1890 and William James, often called 'the father of psychology'. Abraham Maslow, whose writings<sup>3</sup> helped me become a more authentic person, reckoned self-esteem as a basic human need.<sup>4</sup>

Words related to self-esteem include self-respect, self-worth, self-love, and self-compassion. Together they can be pictured as facets of one's self-perception, each with its distinct connotations and issues. Perhaps Mark Twain described the essence of the self-perception issue: 'the worst loneliness is to not be comfortable with yourself.'

One's self-esteem can be contingent, being derived from one's own accomplishments or from approval, affirmation, and emotional support from others. The problem is that contingent self esteem 'constitutes a highly unstable self-esteem that fluctuates with success and failure' and entails a constant 'need to strive for self-esteem.'<sup>5</sup> My striving for a contingent self-esteem is described in the first part of my story.

The second part of my story tells how a 'non-contingent' self-esteem was given to me. This brings us to the second key word in the article's title: 'OKness.'

During my striving for self-esteem, I sometimes looked at the 'OK Used Cars' tags that hung on cars on the dealer's cars that had been deemed OK and fantasied that a noncontingent OK tag could be awarded me. In his 15 million copies in print *I'm OK – You're OK*, Thomas A. Harris observes that 'NOT-OK feelings generally outweigh the good' in both children and adults. He finds a parallel to this observation in the theologian Paul Tillich. In Harris' OK language, Tillich saw people as being in a 'NOT-OK position' until they hear and believe the Christian message of grace. In Harris' interpretation, 'grace' for Tillich is 'a theological way of saying I'M OK–YOU'RE OK. It 'is not YOU CAN BE OK, IF or YOU WILL BE ACCEPTED, IF, but rather YOU ARE ACCEPTED, unconditionally.' Perceiving oneself as unconditionally accepted parallels what other psychologists call 'non-contingent self-esteem.'<sup>6</sup>

Those of us old folks who possess only contingent self-esteem derived from human sources such as approval and affirmation by other people for our work and accomplishments suffer traumatic loss of self-esteem when we are no longer able to do what we 'used to do' in our younger days for which we were esteemed. One 85+ person put it this way: to adapt to being old, I have had to 'reconstitute a self-concept that is consistent with the realities' of old age.<sup>7</sup>

## **My First Appointment**

I began my conversation with the therapist by saying, "I don't know why I am here. I don't have any real problems." He suggested that maybe I should leave, but I said that I would like to stay. In one of the sessions, I lit into him in anger because he had suggested that I was

missing the main point of Christian faith; I had always been a church member and now I was a theological student.

He accepted me, anger and all, without reproach. For the first time, somebody had seen me at my worst and had accepted me as an OK person in spite of my not-OK behavior.

### **Why I Went to the Psycho-Therapist**

I didn't know why I was there until later. I had never believed that I was really 'by God' OK. The affirmations I received from family, teachers, and friends were not enough. I did not intentionally will unbelief. I wanted to believe I was really 'by God' (ontologically<sup>8</sup>) OK, but I could not. I had been grasped by belief that I must constantly prove my OKness by OK thinking and doing. I tried to rationalize that my motives were right, even if my actions were wrong, but I could never be right enough. Even if others thought so, was I really 'by God' OK? I always saw myself as 'falling short.' In Harris' language, I was in a 'NOT-OK position.' To build up my ego, I often tried to prove myself right by proving others wrong or proving myself better by finding fault. If I was more right or better than someone else, I got a boost of self-esteem. But it was only a temporary boost, so I kept playing the 'one-up' game.

Trying to prove my OKness alienated me from other people because I was boosting myself at their expense and thereby I inflicted suffering on them. Also, because whatever self-esteem I had was based on human approval, any criticism set off an anger that hurt me and other people. The more I tried to prove my OKness, the less OK I was in the eyes of the people I was trying to impress.

Looking back, the pain caused by this behavior was why I sought therapy.

### **Why I Believed I Had to Prove my OKness**

I am not sure why I believed that I had to prove my OKness. I had no doubt that I was an OK person in my parents' eyes, but I had the feeling that I had to always behave in an OK manner to be an OK person, and even if my parents thought I was an OK person, they saw me through the eyes of parents. Was I *really* an OK person? Was I 'by God' OK? Was I ontologically esteemed?

Neither my parents nor my Sunday School teachers ever taught me that I was 'by God' OK as a person no matter what other people thought of me and even if my behavior was not OK. So I believed that I had to prove my OKness and I could never do so well enough.

### **Therapy**

I was blessed to have found a therapist who helped me believe that 'by God' I was OK. Through Dr. Warkington's acceptance, I could believe that I was an acceptable and accepted as a person even when my behavior was not. Somehow, his acceptance came across as an expression of a 'by God' acceptance. It came across not merely Dr. Warkington's opinion, but as an ontological 'by God' reality. I was accepted as a person no matter what anyone thought or said. This belief freed me from believing that I must always prove myself right, even at the expense of others.

## In Religious Language

In religious language, through my therapist I had experienced being “justified by grace as a gift through faith.” Dr. Warkington helped me believe (faith) that I was accepted (justified) in an unconditional sense (what we mean when we say something is the ‘by God’ true) by grace (that is, as a gift).

This religious language can be summed up in these two passages:

[We sinners] are now *justified* by [God’s] grace as a *gift*, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through *faith*. [So it is that] God *reckons* righteousness apart from works [behavior]. (Romans 3:24-25; 4:6)

The words in the passage that I italicized will be expounded in the following sections.

### *Justified and Reckoned Righteous*

Being ‘justified’ is synonymous with being ‘reckoned righteous.’ Being reckoned righteous could be freely translated as being reckoned OK by God or esteemed by God.

In Paul’s assertion that ‘God reckons righteousness apart from works,’ the word ‘reckons’ translates the Greek *logizomai*, a cognate of *logos*, meaning ‘word.’ If the verb ‘to word,’ meaning ‘to cause to be by use of words,’ were not obsolete, it would be a more cogent translation than ‘reckons.’

In Scripture, God’s word is how things come to be, as in “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). When God ‘reckons righteousness’ to people, their ‘by God’ state of being becomes a state of righteousness or OKness. We are worded righteous and accepted as persons, even when our behavior is not acceptable.

Another idiom that depicts how people become ‘by God’ OK is ‘*justified by grace as a gift*’ (Romans 3:24). A more literal translation of the passage would read ‘*righteoused by grace as a gift.*’ But, because ‘righteoused’ is an obsolete word, various translations seek equivalent expressions, such as “declared righteous” (Romans 3:20 NIV), “counts as righteous” (REB), and “accepts as righteous” (TEV). But, regardless of the translation, the promise is that by the righteousness of Christ we are accepted into a state of a right relationship with God in spite of our often unacceptable behavior. Thus, through the perfect OKness of Christ we can say, ‘By God, I am accepted as an OK *person*, even when my *behavior* is not acceptable.’

### *Effective through Faith*

There was a proviso in the Romans 3:24-25 passage: justification becomes ‘effective through faith.’ This proviso recognizes that the gospel of being reckoned righteous cannot become personally operative until you are grasped by belief in ‘the fact that you are accepted,’ until we are grasped by belief that we are ‘by God’ OK as persons, even when our behavior is unacceptable. We are enabled to believe when we are grasped by belief in what we have heard, something like being grasped by the point of a joke. Our believing that ‘by God’ we are accepted as righteous, that ‘by God’ we are accepted as OK, happens when the assertion grasps us, as I was so grasped in my sessions with the psycho-therapist. So St. Paul says that not only is our ‘by God’ OKness a gift so, also, is our belief (faith) in the assertion (Eph 2:8).

## Conclusion

No matter whether the religious language is used, this I know. The belief that I am 'by God' OK, that I am 'by God' esteemed, and that I do not need to prove my OKness has given me a peace with myself, made me less demanding of affirmation, enabled me to accept criticism more readily, and (as a friend told me) made me less of 'an obnoxious bastard' to other people. In my old age this belief has become even more important now that I have less ability to evoke esteem from people by my behavior.

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1. I previously posted a similar article as a Google Knol.
  2. Carl Rogers, 1967, quoted in Philip Burnard, *Counselling Skills for Health Professionals* (2005).
  3. Carol Craig, 'A Short History of Self-esteem,' Centre for Confidence and Well-Being, 2006, [www.centreforconfidence.co.uk](http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk) Positive Psychology Resources, Confidence. This web site contains many articles relating to self-esteem.
  4. Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.
  - 5 Victoria Blom, 'Striving for Self-esteem' (Department of Psychology, Stockholm University, 2011)
  6. Thomas A. Harris, *I'm OK – You're OK* (Harper 15 million copies printed in many editions since 1969) Chapter 12 'Moral Values' §P-A-C and Religion. Book can be read online at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/61994529/i-m-Ok-You-Re-Ok>.
  7. Colleen Johnson and Barbara M. Barer, *Life Beyond 85 Years* (2003), 220.
  8. Relating to being, i.e., the way things 'be' without contingency.