

Am I Good Enough?

Christine Celata

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After I completed my PhD research in physics I went to an Ivy League college to be a professor. I taught; I did research; I got my research grants funded. I looked competent. I *was* competent, now that I think about it. But any time I was doing my research there was a war going on in my head. I was saying over and over to myself, “What if I can’t do this? What if I’m not smart enough? What does that mean about me? Will I fail and have to leave? Where will I go? What will I do?” And simultaneously I was trying to do the research—to make mathematical choices and do calculus integrals, never knowing whether I would make it through the day without proving myself to be a failure. It was exhausting. It went on for years.

Perhaps you can identify with this questioning of your own competence. If not, try this one. Just about every time I leave a church discussion group I turn to my husband and I say, “Was I OK? Did I say the right thing? Did I talk too much? Was that point too tangential?”-- all aimed at the real questions: “Was I socially acceptable? Will they like me?”

This problem of constantly wondering if one is good enough really affects our lives, and is beginning to affect the work world in strange ways as our 20- and 30-something children, whose self esteem we have assiduously built up and guarded, enter the workforce. Before the recession I heard an NPR report about white-collar companies who hire these young adults. They were finding that they had to hold weekly sessions where they told their younger employees, individually and together, that they were doing well. Otherwise, the lack of the praise they were used to at home convinced them that they weren’t doing a good job or weren’t wanted, and they left in record numbers never seen before in other age groups.

So the question of how we judge ourselves affects our world in profound ways. But this sounds like a topic for therapy. Why am I discussing it here? It is because this topic has an important spiritual dimension. We UUs have certain beliefs about the worth of a person. Our first principle says that we believe in the inherent worth of every person. It is counter to those beliefs to think of ourselves as not having enough value, so that we are unlovable and unable to add something important to the world. *Counter to our beliefs*. Moreover, we UUs see it as our task to make the world a better place. If you have a sound sense of self worth you can set out to do this. But if not, you can really limit your own impact. As a teenager I worked with a competent woman of average or above-average intelligence who was convinced that she was not capable of thinking deeply or understanding anything mechanical. One hot day she was standing near the air conditioner and someone asked her to turn it on. She refused. She was convinced that even with instruction she couldn’t figure it out. Much worse, she had never voted because she felt that she didn’t count, her vote didn’t count, and she thought she couldn’t understand the issues well enough to vote. If you don’t believe in yourself, you tie your own hands and feet when it comes to making the impact on the world that we want to make.

So, to start at the beginning, who puts those critical voices in our heads? Who convinces us that we might not be OK? Well, we of course should start with parents. Like most parents of their generation, my parents didn't praise accomplishments, they only pointed out deficiencies or mistakes. They believed that praise would make us prideful and give us "swelled heads". What this did for me was to convince me that if I could do something it must be trivial, since no one seemed to notice. My mistakes, on the other hand, were always the focus and showed how badly I did things. You can see how a parent forms the way a child judges his or her competence. At the other end of the spectrum there are those of us who overpraise their children for ordinary accomplishments, convincing them that maybe that is all we think they can do, or just skewing their idea of when praise should come. So parents have a large effect on how we learn to judge ourselves. And then there is advertising. It is the job of advertising to convince us that we are lacking something and that if we pay some money we can become more likable, more beautiful, more competent at home, etc. And then there are school grades, which tell us on a scale of A to F several times a year for 12 years of our lives in several subject areas how smart or competent we are. And in the background there are the paradigms we live by. The American Dream is sitting there telling us that if we just try hard enough we can own a beautiful home, have a good job, and become someone important. So if I don't have one of these things, there is something lacking in me. And let us not forget capitalism, which tells us each time we get a paycheck, if we are lucky enough to get one, exactly what we are worth in dollars and cents-- to the second decimal place-- to our coworkers, our companies, our economy. All of these ways of judging ourselves are harsh and are inconsistent with our UU values. None of them can arrive at the conclusion that all of us have worth, inherent worth.

There is one more player in this game that deserves mention. Let's consider how we each, individually, rate a person when we first meet. We listen for his or her credentials and salary, we try to discern how much power he/she wields in the workplace or in the community, we look at skills, and at weight and height and beauty and at how nice the person is. Evolution is at work here. In this circumstance we are looking for protectors, breadwinners, allies, mates, and we have bred into us as a species over millennia the criteria that are needed for these relationships. We also rate ourselves this way, since these characteristics are the things that make us desirable to others. But this again is a rating system that is not consistent with our UU values. In this system we ask, "What can this person do for me?"

We pass these rating systems on through various cultural means. When I taught our Science and Religion religious education course to little kids, one of the classes I taught was on intelligence, on the brain and computers. At the end of the class I asked the children whether they thought it was fair that people with lesser intelligence were not treated as well in school as those who were smarter. Their answers surprised me. They told me that the system was fine with them because every child had some talent; some were good in art instead of English, or some had a talent in soccer or in math. So all had their time to shine. At this point I pulled rank as an experienced adult and assured them that there were people out there who were not smart or talented. They refused to believe this, they didn't want to hear it, and after a short while were silent. One of the parents told me later that this had been bothering her. There is a classic and common plot in children's books where one child is left out of the group, has no friends. By the end of

the book that child is revealed to have some special gift that brings everyone to his or her side. Again, we are teaching that it is what you can do for the community that determines how much you should be valued and loved. Neither this, nor any of the rating systems I've just mentioned, are consistent with our UU values. Not one of them tells us that a person has worth that is inherent and incontrovertible.

So what can we do about the critical voices in our heads that come from these systems of judgment? We can take cognitive therapy (or Buddhist) approaches and recognize and stop the voices. We can also make rules for ourselves. When I was raising my daughter as a single parent I made these rules for our house: "No self put downs, and no generalizations like 'I can't do anything right'." A friend taught me a useful trick that helps with my research problem. If I am stuck and start to panic, I stop and realize that I don't have to have the answer right away. I tell myself that I will just play with the problem for, say, 4 days, and that will be play time, not a serious time in which I can fail. After that I'll get serious. I've never gotten to the end of that time period without solving the problem, either by myself or by looking in books or talking to someone. These are all good techniques for coping with the inner critic. But while they are useful and important, they only allow us to cope with something that shouldn't be there in the first place. They don't solve the fundamental problem that we are not seeing ourselves as inherently worthy, valuable people. We somehow need to change the way we see ourselves, not just fight off a bad image.

So let's leave therapy and go deeper spiritually. I suggest that we start with the UU saying, "Every child born is one more redeemer." That applies to us, not just our babies. What huge potential, to be a possible redeemer*. What does it mean? Is it true? I believe it is true because no matter who you are, no matter what your intelligence or economic level or ableness, whether you are a leader or follower, you can stand up for what you believe in. You can sit in, stand up, feed the homeless, volunteer in schools or in hospitals. And if you do this, and do it on a regular basis, you will have an important impact on the world. You cannot help but have an important impact. That is what it means to begin to redeem the world. And then together we really will change the world. Consider one more thing. Think about the fact that you are a scientific miracle. Study one hand, or your tongue, and know awe. And think for a moment about how you view your pets. I never look at my dog and say, "Is she a good enough dog?" She just is, and just by being she adds immeasurably to my world. For that matter, I never look at a mosquito and think, "Not a great mosquito!" We are beings in nature also, just like the dog and the mosquito, and each one of us is a unique scientific miracle, amazing and immensely valuable just as we are. It may not be easy to revision yourself this way. It is a lifelong study, a long spiritual practice. It means relearning who you are.

So have I cheated you by changing the subject? I just said that we are all important and valuable because we can each do important things that change the world. But will knowing I can do good works that impact the world help with my self-doubt when I do physics research? All I can tell you is that since I wrote these words I have been taking my own advice and trying to revision myself in this way. And for me it works. This is the solution. It seems that if I believe that I can do important, good things for everyone then I feel like I have worth and I shine, and I know that I can take the next step to do whatever it is I have to do.

The final irony is that this “solution” brings me back to my original problem. I find myself wondering how many good works I have to do to be good enough! This question hit me when I retired recently. Many retired people I know spend their retirement enjoying themselves or working. It seemed to me that I would love to have time to read and draw and learn languages and generally have a grand time, but shouldn’t I spend some time making the world a better place? Assuredly. But how much time? How many good works do I have to perform to be “good”? Do I have to be Mother Teresa? If not, where is the line where I’ve done enough? Surely religion tells us this. I searched my memory, but found no guidance in all the UU sermons and classes I’ve heard. I went to the library. I studied the major religions. Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam lay out lots of things one has to do to live the good life, and if you do them all, presumably you are “good”. Christianity and Buddhism and of course UUism, interestingly enough, do not do that. These religions tell us what not to do and leave us with vague admonitions to be loving and of service. But even with the more proscriptive religions, is it better to do more? Is there a line to cross where “good” becomes “enough”? For the first time in my life it occurred to me, though I am an agnostic, to wonder whether there are levels in heaven, depending on how much good you do. Is it like getting into college? Do I have to obsess about getting into the Harvard level of heaven or settling for community-college level? Do I need to get an A+ in life, or will a B do (for all eternity)? After much mulling, I decided that the important thing, the thing I must do, is to do enough good works that if everyone did the same, the world would be what we want it to be. That is doing my share. I never took philosophy courses, because philosophy is my favorite thing, and I wanted to be able to do it myself. But looking through philosophy books for this sermon I found that the principle I just expressed is called the “categorical imperative” by Kant. Well, that is what I have settled on. I will do my share. I will do enough that if everyone did likewise we would have the world that I want to see. And if I have the time and strength maybe I’ll do more. I’ll just have to count on the fact that everyone doesn’t do their share to boost my grade, and hope god grades on a curve.

So how should we judge ourselves? Most Buddhists would say that the self is an illusion, so there is nothing to judge. What we see as our “self” is only an ever-changing series of moods and personalities. What is important is that in every moment we make choices, and we should concentrate on making good choices. But many of us like to look our lives over and try to see whether we are doing all right. If we do judge, then we should judge by healthy measures consistent with our values. Am I respected by those whom I respect? Am I accomplishing good things and doing it as well as I can? Am I contributing something positive to society? Am I doing my share? Mix in a lot of self-forgiveness. Every day is a new beginning, after all. And remember that each of us is truly one more redeemer, that we are each unique scientific miracles, and that certainly that is enough.

Amen.

* Note: After I gave this sermon I was asked by a few people what I mean by the word “redeemer”. There are several definitions in the Merriam-Webster dictionary that one might think of: “to free from harm”, “to extricate from or free from something

detrimental”, “to change for the better, or reform, or the classic religious definition, “to free from the consequences of sin”. I was in the sermon referring to the definitions that fit with what we are thinking when we use this word in our UU baby dedications, and the best of these would be “to change [the world] for the better”. Thank you to those who called my attention to the confusion and to the resonances of this word with our experiences in the religions we grew up with.