BORN TO BE WORTHLESS

THE POWER OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM

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CHAPTER 2 THE ORIGINS OF SELF-ESTEEM

"The greatest happiness is to know the source of unhappiness."
—Dostoyevsky

A HIGH ACHIEVER'S DEPRESSION: PHIL'S STORY

We are often surprised when we discover that people whom we admire—people who seem so confident and successful, people who seem to be on top of the world—can break down and collapse, and become what we now so easily refer to as depressed. Phil is a classic example of this.

Phil was a tall handsome man in his late forties. He was a successful lawyer with his own practice. He was married with two children and had an elegant lifestyle, lacked for nothing and was the envy of many who knew him. He came from humble origins and was self-made. He had put himself through university and established a thriving practice that was financially, intellectually and professionally rewarding. He had a busy social life and was active in his community. He was a high achiever with a golden touch.

But underneath the façade of Phil's easygoing and effortless interpersonal style lay a personality that felt responsible and worked tremendously hard to make others—his clients, colleagues and staff, his family and friends—happy. If he could make others happy, he thought, they would think well of him. As long as others thought well of him, he could think well of himself; he could feel worthwhile. The burden of keeping everyone happy was immense, and he hid the strain behind an affable and competent demeanor. But the stresses in his life had mounted over the preceding few years, and a situation that arose at his office proved to be the final straw.

A member of his staff had become domineering, and Phil failed to stand up to him. Phil never liked conflict, but in this instance, he thought that he ought to have stood

up to the staff member and provided leadership. He believed that his failure to deal directly with the situation had compromised the atmosphere in the office. He also thought that to some extent he had lost the respect of his staff. Phil became overwhelmed and unable to cope. He lost confidence, focus and eventually the ability to work. He began to ruminate about his perceived failure to provide leadership and maintain a congenial atmosphere in the office. He became fixated on his sense of failure, and this grew to the degree where he became unable to think about anything else. He developed morbid fantasies about losing his practice, his family and his lifestyle. Life no longer seemed worth living and he contemplated death. Acutely depressed, Phil left work and went on disability. He went to see his doctor, who put him on antidepressants. Meanwhile, he felt like even more of a failure for having to resort to pills.

Phil had been depressed for a year when he was referred to the mood disorder clinic, a specialist service at the University of British Columbia hospital, which is where I met and treated him. By this time he had been treated with three different antidepressants. Though he achieved modest relief of some symptoms, he remained sad and unmotivated. He was constantly tired and could no longer enjoy his family or his many activities. He was unable to gear himself up to go back to work. He could not sleep at night and he worried constantly. He was plagued with thoughts about not being not good enough, about being a loser. He was afraid people would discover that he was an imposter and a failure, so he shunned company.

It became apparent to me that despite his many outward signs of success, Phil had a surprisingly fragile sense of self-worth. He thought that unless he impressed people, he wouldn't be noticed. To him, not being noticed and appreciated meant that he was not

worthwhile, or worthless. This was made poignantly explicit when he described what happened at a recent public meeting. At one point, the organizers called on the audience for volunteers. Phil knew that he was already overcommitted, that he ought to keep his hand down. At the same time, he felt as though the organizers were actually directing their call specifically to him. In his mind, the meeting had been called so that he would volunteer, and everybody in the audience was waiting for him to do so. Against his better judgment, he felt compelled to volunteer because of his sense, unrealistic as it was, that the entire meeting was all about him, that he had to do the right thing, and that by volunteering, he would make everybody else happy, which meant to him that he would earn the approval and admiration of others. He was even more miserable after he raised his hand.

As we explored this incident during therapy, it emerged that he had been born into a poor but stable family. His father was austere and undemonstrative, and had had high expectations of Phil. Phil's view was that he had been raised in a normal family, enjoyed an untroubled childhood and, despite the lack of openly expressed affection, had never suffered unduly.

Phil was at a loss to explain why he was so sensitive to the opinions of others. Before the incident at his office and the ensuing depression, he had never given much thought to his dependence on the approval of others. As his crisis unfolded, he became increasingly aware of his deep need for approval, and how fragile his sense of self-worth was without it. He became very interested in understanding how his need for approval, his self-esteem and his depression were linked.

Through the course of treatment, he came to understand these connections, and was able to acquire a healthy sense of self-worth that was not dependent on the opinion (or imagined opinion) of others. As this fell into place, his mood improved, the symptoms of depression evaporated and he was able to stop his antidepressants.

THE UNIVERSAL NATURE OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM

In the case of Phil, low self-esteem was at the root of his unhappiness, depression, anxiety and despair. In my experience, the vast majority of people who exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety are struggling with low self-esteem. In fact, as I reflect back on my years working with patients, I can't think of more than one or two instances where someone with a genuinely healthy sense of self developed these symptoms and problems.

The connections between low self-esteem and depression seem fairly obvious. It is hard to imagine feeling happy when you think you're not good enough. So much anxiety comes from feeling inadequate and the accompanying fear that however hard you try to disguise your inadequacies with displays of competence, you will eventually be revealed to be of little worth.

I believe that the vast majority of humanity has low self-esteem, that it is acquired early in life, around the age of three, and that this state of low self-esteem emerges as part of normal, healthy emotional development. Nearly all of us in the course of our normal development reach the same conclusion: that we do not matter and that we are not worth caring about. This presents us with a crisis of how to be and how to become worthwhile. This happens, I believe, so early in our lives that we cannot remember reaching the conclusion of our intrinsic worthlessness. And because we can't remember reaching this

conclusion, we think that our low self-worth is a cosmic reality, a universal truth about ourselves. We cannot appreciate that we reached this conclusion ourselves, that in fact we made up the idea of our own worthlessness. None of us is able to appreciate that at this early time we formed this low opinion of ourselves, and that no other conclusion was possible.

Another thing to bear in mind about this inevitable conclusion of our intrinsic worthlessness is this: we all reach this conclusion irrespective of who our parents are and how they treated us, regardless of the family we were born into, regardless of our gender, culture or the era we were born into, and regardless of any other random influence. We reach this conclusion based on the inevitable unfolding of certain unavoidable and inescapable realities, and there is nothing that anyone—not even the most loving or informed parent—can do to prevent either the formative circumstances or the conclusions.

There are a number of specific events that occur in the course of early development that lead us to this painful conclusion about our intrinsic lack of worth. Let us consider some of these early developments, while bearing in mind that when considering the emergence of self-esteem, that self-esteem is a quality of the self. Therefore, we first need to address the question of the emergence of the self before discussing the emergence of self-esteem.

FUSION AND SEPARATION

One of the first of these lines of development to consider is the way in which you transform from being a creature fully fused with your mother, as you grow inside her

during pregnancy, to becoming a separate creature living outside of her body. In the womb you are like a parasite living off your host, who in this case is your mother. Between you and your mother is a layer, the wall of the womb. But as a fetus, you are oblivious to this. If it were possible at this stage—which it isn't—to think and to understand your experience of this very early time in your life, then you would understand that you were not a discreet, separate and independent creature, but rather a part of someone else, a part of someone else's body and being, a part of someone else's self. You would understand that as long as you existed inside your mother, you were not your own separate self, because you were literally a part of another self, the self that is your mother.

This state of fusion comes to a dramatic end at the moment of your birth, when you are expelled from your mother's womb and enter the world as a separate being. Once the umbilical cord is cut, you are literally separated from your mother is a way that can never be undone. You are now, for the first time in your experience, separate; you have become in that instant a separate being. In the process of being born, you have undergone a profound transition from being fused, from being a part of someone else's self, to becoming your own person, your own self. You of course are not conscious of this pivotal shift in your status. That awareness comes later.

Many people think that their life came into being when they were conceived. This is a perfectly reasonable view: that life begins at conception. But it is possible to think of the origins of your life from much earlier times.

You may think about your existence in terms of the self that you begin with, the self made up of the genetic material contained in the sperm and egg of your parents. In

this case, you can appreciate that even before you were conceived, you existed as a part of your mother and of your father; a part of you existed in the cells of your mother, and another part in the cells of your father. At conception, these different parts of you came together to become the fetus that grew into the you that you are now. In this sense, your fused existence did not begin at conception, but rather before conception, insofar as you were fused with both your mother and your father in the cells of their bodies. In other words, until you were born and someone cut the umbilical cord, your existence was in the form of being fused with at least two other human beings.

You can take this reasoning back to your existence in the cells of your parents' parents. Just as you existed genetically in your parents before conception, so they existed genetically in their parents before their conception. You then, existed genetically in your grandparents before both your conception and your parents' conception.

In fact, you can trace your existence all the way back to the beginning of the history of humankind, by imagining that before you were conceived, you existed literally as a part of all the individuals who came before your parents. You were present in the cells of every one of your ancestors, in the form of chemical matter inside the nuclei. In this sense your existence has always been fused with other individuals. You have always been a part of other selves, and it is only once you are born and the cord is cut that, for the first time in the extremely long history of your existence, you shift from being part of other selves to being your very own self. Considering your extensive history of being fused with other selves, the moment of your birth is indeed a dramatic and profound shift in your experience of life, in your existential reality. For the first time in your history, you are your own separate self.

It is not surprising then, that it takes some time before you are able to appreciate that you have become a separate being, and that it takes a while for your awareness to eventually catch up with the reality of your being separate. It is not clear when precisely this awareness dawns. There are differing views among child development experts as to when this awareness of self as a separate self emerges. It is likely that this self-awareness emerges gradually over time, in fits and starts, but that it eventually comes together in a way that is clear and irrefutable, where it becomes the only way that you know yourself, and it is no longer possible to know yourself in any way other than as a separate person, as your own separate self.

THE ROLE OF THE TANTRUM

I believe that if this knowledge and awareness of your separateness has not consolidated before you are two years old, then this is the age at which it does come definitively together. Two-year-olds become oppositional and begin asserting themselves. One of the ways they do this is by means of the well-known tantrum, and the tantrum is the clue to the falling-into-place of this self-knowledge. A tantrum is the child's way of expressing an opposing will. When the two-year-old child says "no" to her mother, what she is saying is that her will is different from her mother's. A tantrum is a particularly loud and eloquent behavioral expression of this difference of will or desire. If your will is different from your mother's, then it follows that you must be different from her. You cannot be the same as her if your wills are different.

It is likely that some sense of being separate develops before this time of tantrums, but by the age of two, children have no further doubt or uncertainty that they

are distinct from their mothers. They are able to appreciate that they are their own separate, individual human beings.

There is a delay between the reality of becoming separate and the awareness of being separate. This developmental arc of becoming separate and becoming aware of being separate is key to appreciating the later emergence of low self-esteem, firstly because it is the process of developing the self, of which self-worth is a quality, and secondly because of the actual mechanism whereby you are able to know your separateness, which is the next subject for discussion.

COMPARING YOURSELF WITH OTHERS

In order to appreciate your separateness, to know that you are your own self, you need to be able to distinguish yourself from others. Remember that the first and only way you knew anything about yourself up until this point has been as a self fused with other selves. To be able to recognize your own separateness, you need to notice the differences between yourself and others. The way you appreciate these differences is by comparing yourself to others. To know yourself, to have any awareness of yourself, you must have some sort of picture of yourself. The "picture" you form is a sensory impression of yourself to which most of your senses contribute, but it's primarily visual. You hold up this picture of yourself and compare it with the visual images of others—your mother, initially—and notice the differences.

So, when you throw a tantrum, you know yourself as wanting something. You compare that with the self that is not you, your mother, a self who wants exactly the opposite of what you want (expressed as a "no"). In this comparison, you know that you

and she are not the same. Thus, by comparing your wishes and desires with your mother's, you know that you are separate, you know that you are your own separate self.

We all have the built-in ability to form an image of ourselves, to hold the image up and compare it with the images we form of other selves—by means of our sense organs—and to compare these images and notice the differences.

Since your mother is the first person your identity is bound up with and the first person from whom you differentiate yourself, it makes sense that she is the first person you compare yourself to. When you do, you notice the obvious ways in which you and she differ. You notice, for example, that she is bigger than you are. You notice other obvious differences such as that she is stronger and smarter that you are, that she takes up more space, that she does things that you cannot. In contrast to her, you see that you are small, weak and incapable. In any way that you compare yourself to your mother, what you cannot help noticing is that you are less than she is, that you are inferior to her.

DIFFERENCES AND THE EMERGENCE OF SELF

It seems an inescapable aspect of animate life, at least from a certain level of evolutionary development, that creatures have the ability to recognize differences between themselves and others and to make decisions about their behavior based on an appreciation of the observed differences. Without this ability for creatures to compare themselves to others, a smaller, weaker creature, for instance, may well become the next meal of a larger, stronger and hungrier creature, and so cease to exist. Dying this way goes against the survival instinct, so we can think of the imperative to compare ourselves to others, and notice the differences, as a crucial survival tool. Since life depends on

passing on your genes to the next generation, being killed because you cannot notice differences—and therefore potential threats—makes it unlikely that you will survive to the point where you can pass on your genes to the next generation. So then, species whose genes do not allow for the ability to compare themselves with others are not likely to pass their genes on and will thus be eliminated from the gene pool, whereas species whose genes do allow for the ability to compare themselves to others will carry on. So when you find yourself comparing yourself with others, you are acting out a biologically driven survival instinct that is likely under genetic control.

It is not just survival from would-be predators, but all other essential life functions that depend on the capacity to compare and contrast yourself with others. Feeding, mating and territoriality are just a few examples. The act of survival includes activities where competition, cooperation and protection are vital. Without the capacity to compare—to notice differences as well as similarities—the ability to both compete and cooperate is severely compromised, and survival is put at risk. Life without comparison is unthinkable.

INFERIORITY: MAKING MEANING OF DIFFERENCE

In considering this whole business of comparing yourself with others, you will appreciate that most, if not all of us, spend our lives comparing ourselves with others. We make ourselves miserable when we think that others are bigger, stronger, smarter, richer, more beautiful, sexier, thinner or happier than we perceive ourselves to be. We may even feel victimized by the advertising industry, which seems to throw in our faces all the myriad ways in which we compare so unfavorably to others—there is always someone

bigger, stronger, faster, smarter, prettier, happier, and wealthier than we are—so that we we'll want to buy things to make us feel better about ourselves. But we have to remember that the advertising industry did not invent the activity of comparing. This drive to compare came about long before advertisers did; it is biological and a property of most animate matter. Just because advertisers exploit our tendency to compare ourselves unfavorably to others doesn't mean they invented it. Advertising merely exploits this drive in order to sell us stuff.

Snow White's stepmother didn't need the advertising industry to prompt her to murder in the famous fairy tale where she compares herself to her stepdaughter and comes off second best. Who can ever forget her desperate refrain of "Mirror, mirror on the wall/Who's the fairest of them all?" or the homicidal rage she flew into when the mirror answered that it was her stepdaughter, not her. The mirror, of course, told her the truth: that there is always someone more beautiful (or rich or handsome or funny or whatever). But the most important thing in her life was to be fairer than her stepdaughter—than all other women—so she constantly made the comparison and structured her life around being the "fairest one of all."

Our comparing faculties are so deeply ingrained that we are extremely adept at seeing ourselves as being less than others. We don't need help from anyone—or a magic mirror—in comparing ourselves negatively with others.

So then, you first compare yourself with your mother when you are two years old and notice the obvious differences: that she is bigger, stronger and smarter than you are. As you look beyond your mother and notice others in your environment and compare yourself to them also, you notice that everyone else stands in the same relation to you as

your mother does: everyone else is also bigger, stronger and smarter than you are; what you can't help noticing is that you are the smallest, weakest, stupidest and most incompetent self around. (Presumably, the only exception to this observation is if you have a younger sibling, who would, on the basis of your comparison, be the only smaller, weaker and stupider being than you.) In recognizing yourself in relation to others, you recognize that you are less than not just your mother, but less than every other being you know. You recognize that you are inferior to everyone else in your world.

With this as your very first piece of self knowledge, it seems then that from the point of view of self-esteem, you are off to a very poor start if the first and only thing you know about yourself is that you are less than others, that you are inferior.

Fortunately, the formation of low self-esteem is not so straightforward as to be based on simple comparison. The unfavorable comparisons we make with others around us at the age of two are not the cause or basis of low self-esteem. If it were that easy, you would expect to begin self knowledge with low self-esteem, but then acquire positive self-esteem as soon as you grew enough and noticed that you were bigger, stronger and smarter than other people around you, or at least bigger, stronger and smarter than your parents.

This natural and biologically driven inclination to compare yourself with others as a basis for establishing your initial sense of self is important because it prepares you for the time when you finally—and for entirely different reasons—form the view that you are worthless and that the self that is uniquely you is of no merit. You are receptive to the idea of your worthlessness because it is not an unfamiliar idea to you. It seems consistent with what you already know about yourself: that you are inferior to others. In developing

your sense of self by comparing yourself with others and appreciating your inherent inferiority, you in a sense are priming and preparing yourself for the later understanding you come to: that this unique self of yours is not only inferior, but also worthless. (Inferiority and worthlessness go hand in hand; they are internally consistent with each other.) When you reach the conclusion of your worthlessness, it is not entirely foreign to you, and it resonates with something—the only thing, in fact—you have known about yourself up until that moment: that you are inferior.