

## ORIGINS OF HUMAN WORTH

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Ellen,<sup>1</sup> a nineteen-year-old BYU-Idaho sophomore, has kept herself in a state of semi-starvation for the past eighteen months. In the mornings she eats a popsicle. Later in the day she eats a piece of fruit and a tortilla with cheese, but then she forces herself to vomit because she fears she's eaten too much. In the evenings she repeats her mid-day routine complete with self-induced vomiting. For Ellen, adding any weight to her 5-foot 5-inch, 96-pound frame is intolerable. Ellen has also used laxatives and rigorous exercise to control her weight in the past but has long settled on her current approach. Although her eating disorder is complex, weight gain is unacceptable to Ellen in large part because she believes her worth as a person is contingent upon her weight remaining under ninety-eight pounds. Many may think Ellen's sense of self-worth is highly arbitrary and significantly impaired, and they would be right. Ellen's sense of self-worth is irrational because it is *conditional*. Ironically, Ellen's definition of human-worth has much in common with that of many others who consider themselves to be well-adjusted.

Insightful human beings have long realized the impact conscious thought plays in shaping emotional experience. But in the modern era, Albert Ellis popularized these classical insights and made them common parlance in psychotherapy. Since the 1950s he has asserted that the vast majority of human emotional disturbance stems from irrational thinking.<sup>2</sup> In essence, Ellis believes people's emotional problems are caused by conditional self-acceptance—a dysfunctional life-philosophy which bases human worth on arbitrary, transitory, fluctuating conditions such as physical appearance, personal performance, or approval from others. Thus, a person with conditional self-worth believes she has worth only to the extent that certain cherished external conditions are met. If these conditions are not met, she will perceive a drop in her overall sense of worth, which often sets off a dramatic chain of events: feelings of inadequacy, self-loathing, despair, or anger, which can lead to self-defeating behaviors of all kinds—even a willingness to systematically starve one's self to feel better.

Although I don't consider myself a bonafide devotee of Ellis, my experiences as a psychologist working among Latter-day Saints have supported many of Ellis's assertions. Most of us Latter-day-Saints seem to perceive that our worth as individuals is contingent upon certain arbitrary external conditions or requirements being met. In my therapeutic work I often attempt to assist church members in becoming more aware of their conscious and unconscious conditions of worth in order that these

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ultimately be replaced with more healthy, reasonable, gospel-consistent sources of unconditional self-worth.

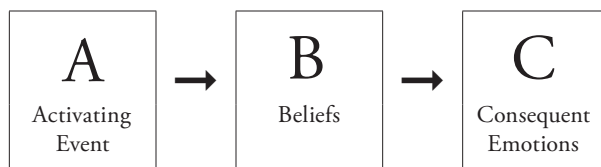
My purpose here is not to elaborate in depth on the causes of conditional self-worth or the therapeutic processes of changing unhealthy beliefs but rather to enumerate four simple yet key insights I have found helpful both in my own life and in my practice with those struggling with conditional self-worth. These insights build upon one another and ultimately lead one to embrace the same perspective I believe God has—unconditional human worth.

*Insight #1: Human beings are not upset by things but rather by the view they take of things.*

Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome—such as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius—knew that human beings largely create their own emotional experiences in life. They asserted that “things” in and of themselves, such as a public speaking engagement or lack of approval, are in fact neutral occurrences—neither positive nor negative—that it is only we, with our uniquely human experiences, values, beliefs, and biases who color such occurrences as either positive or negative, good or bad.<sup>3</sup> Human emotion is, for the most part, a socially-created phenomenon existing largely as a by-product of our learned beliefs and opinions about ourselves and the world around us.<sup>4</sup> Central to healthy emotional functioning then is the “soundness,” reasonableness, or rationality of our beliefs and personal life-philosophies. Yet, because human beings are imperfect, we have a tendency to adopt faulty, irrational beliefs about ourselves and the world we live in, which leads to emotional disturbance.

Psychologists have posited the following simple conceptual model of human emotion using classic ideas of Stoic philosophy:

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The symbol A represents the *activating event* or *adversity* that blocks us from attaining many desirable goals; B represents the myriad of thoughts and beliefs we have that are triggered by A; and C represents the *consequent emotional experiences* which result from B. Most of us make the assumption that life-events (A) lead directly to emotional experiences (C). But according to the model, emotion is the direct result of our beliefs, not our experiences. Let’s imagine, for example, that someone believes (B) the following very deeply: *I must be completely competent at all important*

*endeavors in my life, or else I'm worthless.* According to the above model, whenever this person experiences his own occasional incompetence, he will feel worthless. The primary issue isn't his being incompetent but rather what he told himself about being incompetent. If he can be convinced that his worth as a person has nothing to do with his competence and that his desire for competence is merely a *preference* rather than a genuine *must*, then he can work to adopt a more rational belief such as: *Although I'd strongly prefer to be competent at everything I do, I can't always be; and when I'm not, it simply means I'm a fallible human being, not a worthless person.* Such an adjustment in his beliefs will make him less likely to be emotionally disturbed the next time he doesn't perform as well as he'd like, while also motivating him to perform better in the future because he prefers competence.

The ABC model of emotion is elegant for a variety of reasons. First, the model is parsimonious—it is simple without being simplistic. It explains a great deal of emotional experience in only three basic steps. Secondly, the model shows how painful, often dysfunctional emotions such as depression, rage, or panic are actually self-created and self-sustaining. We play an active role, via our personal philosophies and beliefs, in generating our feelings. Thus, such beliefs can be unlearned over time; and as a result, dysfunctional emotions need not remain life-long realities. Knowing where emotions come from gives us hope and a greater sense of control. Once irrational beliefs are discovered, we are typically better off working hard to discard and replace them with more accurate, flexible, healthy philosophies.

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*Insight #2: All human beings are—by nature—flawed, imperfect, and fallible.*

This insight lays a foundation not only for healthy emotional functioning but also for true Christian discipleship. Once we acknowledge our inherent frailty—not just through lip service but through deep and sincere personal acceptance—we feel liberated. By embracing the reality that human perfection is an impossibility, I believe we're much more apt to live a grace-centered, Christ-like life in the following ways:

- a) We realize that much of the *spiritual life* is not and cannot be quantified but rather is a *state-of-being*;<sup>5</sup>
- b) We stop expecting personal perfection as a requirement for God to accept us; and as a result, we are likely to feel more love for God and from God;
- c) We increase our emphasis upon the Holy Spirit as a guide to help us negotiate the nuances of life and our relationship with God rather than focusing on the realization of perfection or even “100

percent effort,” both of which are impossible for human beings to achieve on any consistent basis or at all;<sup>6</sup>

- d) We become more accepting of ourselves at any given moment—as works-in-progress—while striving to improve;
- e) We become increasingly *compassion-centered* in our life-approach: more inclusive, accepting, and tolerant of others and their flaws; and
- f) We increase our faith and reliance in Christ as the “perfect half” of a redeeming, saving partnership.

If it *were* possible that human beings could attain perfection through their own efforts, earthly flawlessness would then be the standard of salvation. Fundamental gospel concepts such as atonement, mercy, grace, and repentance would become merely crutches for the weak rather than centerpieces of Christ’s gospel for all. When accurately translated and understood, Christ’s injunction for us to “be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect”<sup>7</sup> represents an ideal for us to be complete or *fully developed* (similar to the psychological concept of *self-actualization*) and in the larger context of the chapter admonishes us to be compassionate as part of our wholeness.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, one can be an actualized person—living a life of integration, wholeness, and compassion—and still be imperfect.

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Why are human beings imperfect? We as church members tend to endorse one of two views. One perspective asserts that human imperfection is due to *an inherent spiritual flaw*—that in spite of our best efforts over the span of a lifetime, we cannot always choose the good or do the best thing. Another view asserts that human beings are *spiritually sound but lack the proper guidance and direction* to be always spiritually competent. Knowing which perspective we endorse is significant because these beliefs lay a foundation for how we approach our own and others’ lives. If we are spiritually flawed, then spiritual empowerment (becoming “born again”), replenishment (renewal of covenants), and regeneration (progressive repentance) are necessary. If we are spiritually sound but unenlightened, then the answer is knowing proper laws, receiving proper guidance and education, and following these to the letter. The scriptures support the first alternative: “Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on the Redeemer.”<sup>9</sup> Because we are *fallen*, no matter how hard we try to live by all the proper teachings, moral exhortations, and commandments we’re given, we won’t always be competent and will need to experience, on a regular basis, the renewing power of the Atonement.<sup>10</sup> These facts are neither terrible nor catastrophic. Rather they imply that rules, regulations, and exhortations, while helpful and necessary, are not sufficient in themselves to keep us

from imperfection. Our flaws and attending behavioral lapses can be clarified by the law but not eradicated by it. While progressive repentance and utilization of the atonement can justify us before God;<sup>11</sup> so long as we live, we remain imperfect beings.

*Insight #3: All human beings have equal worth.*

Try a thought experiment: In a vivid way imagine President Hinckley. Then, on the other hand, imagine another elderly man who has lived a life filled with grievous sin. Who between these two individuals has more ultimate worth as a human being? I make the assertion that while President Hinckley is certainly *much better off* than the sinful man in many ways and that God is much more pleased with him, *both have equal ultimate worth*. On what basis does this assertion make sense? It makes sense only if human worth is *unconditional*, based on something common to all members of the species, something permanent, unalterable. The gospel supports this perspective: “all flesh is mine, and I am no respecter of persons;” “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God.”<sup>12</sup>

Some have made the error of confusing divine favor with divine love. While it may be true God is more pleased with the righteous than the unrighteous, and as a result the righteous are likely to enjoy more blessings than the unrighteous,<sup>13</sup> this does not mean the righteous have any more inherent worth than the unrighteous. The good parent realizes that while he or she may be much more pleased with an obedient child than a disobedient child, the love of the parent for the children and the ultimate worth of the children remains the same. The Jewish cultural elite of Jesus’ time did not believe in the unconditional worth of the human soul. Jesus did, however, and went to great pains during his mortal ministry to make this clear. The Pharisees often condemned Jesus for relating in close, personal ways with those considered by holy law to be unclean—“sinners.” The law represented a mindset suggesting that those seeking to imitate God could become most like him by following strict purity codes endorsing *cleanliness through separation*. Jesus, on the other hand, explicitly taught by word and deed that the best way for Israel to imitate God was by being *compassionate*.<sup>14</sup>

In one remarkable Bible chapter,<sup>15</sup> we have an account of Jesus, in defense of his open table fellowship with those the law considered to be unfit or unclean, offering three separate parables which reiterate the unconditional worth of the human soul: the parable of the good shepherd, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the prodigal son. In each case God represents the authority figure, and we as sinners represent the lost object. Each parable depicts God loving and valuing

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the sinner just as much as the righteous, so much so that he is willing to leave the righteous in order to find, reclaim, or embrace the sinner. While the prodigal son will likely not have the same sort of inheritance and reward as the righteous son, in the eyes of the father the wayward son has just as much worth to him as does his righteous son.

*Insight #4: ‘The worth of a human being is his/her capacity to become God’<sup>16</sup>*

For no matter how much we like to pussyfoot around it, all of us who postulate a loving God and really think about it eventually come to a single terrifying idea: God wants us to become Himself. We are growing towards godhood. God is the goal of [human] evolution.<sup>17</sup>

Each of us, at one time or another, has heard preached from the pulpit, “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God,”<sup>18</sup> that all people have infinite worth as children of God, that each of us was worth the life of the Savior. While most church members will claim to believe such statements, my experience has been that many of us don’t seem to be empowered much by them. Why is this? One reason, I believe, has to do with the fact that we belong to a very works-oriented church culture where measurable performance receives a great deal of emphasis and praise. For example, we are encouraged to feel good about ourselves because we’ve read the scriptures daily; or completed this month’s home teaching assignment; or held family home evening; or paid 10 percent of our gross income to the church; or attended all our church meetings; or not imbibed in tea, coffee, tobacco, or R-rated films; but we place much less emphasis upon feeling good about ourselves for things intangible or immeasurable. Many individuals can scarcely imagine on what human-worth could be based if not measurable performance. In the words of more than one of my psychotherapy clients, “What else is there?”

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Often within the first few sessions of my work with emotionally troubled Latter-day-Saint clients I ask, “The worth of a human being... What would you say that is based on?” In almost every case, my client will respond with some sort of conditional definition of human worth, such as, “Well, I suppose human worth depends upon whether you have a positive impact on others’ lives,” or “how much you’re able to accomplish in your life.” And often I find that my client’s suffering is linked, at least in part, to her perception that somehow she isn’t quite measuring up to her own idiosyncratic conditional definition of worth. While the client’s conditional definition of worth may represent a praiseworthy life-goal, it falls far short of the ideal mentioned by Elder Monson above. One of our

therapeutic goals, then, is to reformulate over time the client's definition of worth from the conditional variety to the unconditional.

Perhaps another reason statements such as "All people have infinite worth as children of God" are not so powerful as they could be is that they do not tell us exactly why children of God have such great worth or why the worth of souls (both righteous and unrighteous) is great in the sight of God. The principle that human worth is based on nothing other than our unique, innate capacity to ultimately become as our Creator answers these questions and has some profound implications:

- a) We have the capacity to become as God simply by virtue of being a member of the human race;
- b) While we are better off in many ways if our behavior conforms to God's commandments, our worth is not contingent upon our behavior. Therefore, whether we are proverbial saints or sinners, the worth of the soul is stable and remains intact; and
- c) In every phase of our eternal progression, we retain our identity as a member of a divinely-sired species; and thus, our potential or capacity for godhood remains intact.

When we make the erroneous assumption that our worth depends upon our past, present, and future performance, we begin to hierarchically arrange ourselves and others from the worthy to the worthless. If we believe we are worthless because of our sins, we are unlikely to reach to God for help. If we believe that our works place us in the worthy or righteous category, we are misguided, as Jesus taught:

Two men went up into the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the publican, standing afar off, would not so much lift up his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.<sup>19</sup>

King Benjamin pointed out this truth rather succinctly: "if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants... can ye say aught of yourselves?"<sup>20</sup> In other words, all of us, no matter how "righteous," prominent, or accomplished, are in the same boat: our works will never be good enough in themselves to save us; our behavior never gives us more ultimate worth before God because our worth is based on a completely different principle.

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On a more practical level, embracing an unconditional source of self-worth makes us much less likely to become emotionally disturbed (e.g., depressed, enraged, or panicked) when our lives don't unfold as we would like. Instead of rating ourselves, our global being, when we fall short, we are much better off if we instead rate our behaviors, thoughts, and feelings in regard to our goals and purposes. When we realize our worth is not at stake, our emotions are more manageable and healthy. For example, if I base my self-worth on having the admiration of my colleagues, then I will believe that I must have their approval, and I will be likely to become either depressed or resentful if I do not receive it. On the other hand, if I base my self-worth on the unconditional source mentioned above, then I will merely prefer to have my colleagues' admiration; as a result, I will probably just be disappointed or annoyed when my colleagues do not approve of me for whatever reason. Disappointment and annoyance are much healthier, more manageable emotions than depression or resentment.

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Let's return now to Ellen, our BYU-Idaho sophomore with an eating disorder. I believe that her cure in large part depends upon her ability to grasp a new reality about herself—one in which her old paradigm of conditional self-worth is supplanted by a more enlightened, unconditional self-concept. For some, psychotherapy will be a necessary part of the change process. For others, simply becoming aware of a more enlightened alternative vision of humanity will help them begin to make the transition. The more we understand and appreciate the primary insights above, the less likely we are to be emotionally disturbed when we are faced with a decrease in one of our cherished sources of self-validation. We can also be liberated from the drivenness and anxiety which accompany the attempt to gain or retain a false sense of achieved, conditional self-worth. Instead, our efforts can be calmly motivated by the simple desire to improve for improvement's sake, for the benefits which come from continued growth and development, and from gratitude to God for our unconditional human worth. ☺

#### NOTES:

- 1 To protect my client's confidentiality, I have changed her name and some of her demographic information. However, the content of her behavioral/emotional condition remains factual.
- 2 See Albert Ellis, *Better, Deeper, and More Enduring Brief Psychotherapy: The Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy Approach* (Brunzler/Mazel, New York: 1996).
- 3 For example, see the teachings of Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus.

- 4 This does not assert a morally or ethically relativistic universe since we maintain that some of the beliefs and philosophies we cherish have been imparted to us by God, but we assert that we place the morals and values we're given into a context imbued with our own limited and sometimes faulty understanding.
- 5 By spirituality as a state-of-being, I mean being in the sense Erich Fromm intended: "aliveness and authentic relatedness to the world.... the true nature, the true reality of a person in contrast to deceptive appearances" (*To Have or To Be*, 12). These aspects of being are spiritual: qualitative rather than quantitative in nature, difficult and complicated to measure. This is why our quantitative attempts to measure spirituality often miss the mark: one can be a consistent home teacher, pay a full tithe, and hold a temple recommend without "relating in an alive and authentic way" with God or the world. Conversely, one can relate with God and the world authentically and with aliveness without engaging in outward religious behaviors. Yet we often erroneously assume that measurable religious behavior is always synonymous with inner spirituality.
- 6 I believe all devout, emotionally-healthy Christians have some sort of reasonably flexible, "personal calculus" worked out between themselves and God. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they use their emotions and intuition to help guide them through the process of living—knowing they cannot live perfectly, nor can they give God 100 percent effort consistently, or at all (after all, what does 100 percent effort toward anything look or feel like?). If 100 percent effort isn't required by God, then what degree of effort is sufficient to sustain the relationship between ourselves and God? This must be personally discerned by the Spirit.
- 7 See Matthew 5:48 and footnote.
- 8 Dr. Paul R. Fleischman offers some profound insights regarding wholeness: Rather than representing a state of perfection, "wholeness requires an affirmation of our totality, the ability to uplift, incorporate, and synthesize, rather than to repress, split off, or deny" (*Spiritual Aspects of Psychiatric Practice*, 52). As President Kimball noted in *Miracle of Forgiveness*, people's sins often arise from their attempts to satisfy basic human needs and desires. "Wholeness," in this respect, means having full awareness of the needs and desires we are attempting to meet, and rather than repressing or attempting to split these off, consciously integrating these within ourselves so that our needs and desires might find fulfillment through nondestructive channels.
- 9 1 Nephi 10:6; see also Mosiah 4:5, Alma 12:22, Alma 34:9.
- 10 2 Nephi 25:23; Mosiah 2:21.
- 11 Galatians 3:24.
- 12 Doctrine and Covenants 38:16 and 18:10. Note the scripture does not state that only righteous souls are of worth unto God. See also Acts 10:34, Ephesians 6:9, Romans 2:11, Doctrine and Covenants 1:35, Moses 1:39.

- 13 1 Nephi 17:35; Acts 10:35; Doctrine and Covenants 1:30; 60:2; 98:19.
- 14 See Marcus J. Borg's *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, especially the chapter "Jesus, Compassion, and Politics."
- 15 Luke 15.
- 16 Thomas S. Monson, First Presidency Message, *Ensign* (September 1997), 2.
- 17 M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, 269.
- 18 Doctrine and Covenants 18:10.
- 19 Luke 18:10-14.
- 20 Mosiah 2: 21-22; 25.