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# The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Bill Cosgrave

## Becoming The Best Person You Can Be: Part 2

April 2024

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## OVERCOMING LOW SELF-ESTEEM

If we turn now to the task of overcoming this deficit in one's self-esteem or one's love of self, then we find great efforts are being made in our world to facilitate and promote this much needed goal, since the problem is widespread and very many people are struggling to overcome it and reach their potential and real happiness. There is a vast literature on this topic but only a very brief account of it can be provided here. As one writer says: 'you are your own best guide and mentor when it comes to shaping and selecting the behaviour, values and lifestyle which can build and boost your own self-esteem'.<sup>1</sup>

*My own experience tells me that a basic thing in beginning the process of building or improving one's self-esteem is to deepen or improve one's self-awareness.* One will already be aware of the problem to some extent but there will usually be a need for fuller awareness of the factors that have brought about one's low self-esteem and the precise dimensions of one's deficit in one's love of self. Reflection on one's personal history will be necessary and important, in particular in regard to the quality of one's relationships and the personal factors that have made it difficult or impossible to realise one's full potential in one's career and one's life generally. This whole process will take time and effort. One has to do it oneself but can get help from others who are informed and sensitive and from reading some relevant literature.

*Essential* also to enable one to arrive at an appropriate level of self-esteem will be an effort to accept oneself as one is. In fact the basic challenge of every human life is that of self-understanding

1 Lindenfield, p 26.

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and self-acceptance.<sup>2</sup> *Self-acceptance* implies a joyful satisfaction in being who I am.<sup>3</sup> If I am to be a happy person, Powell says, I must learn to be happy about who I am. This, however, is not a simple matter, since most of us will have buried those things about ourselves that we don't like to face and usually we bury them alive.<sup>4</sup> So they continue to influence us but we are not aware of them. Powell lists signs of one's genuine self-acceptance: being happy, relating confidently with others, being open to make warm relationships, being able to attend to one's personal needs, making one's own decisions, being realistic and being assertive when appropriate. It will be clear from all this that arriving at true self-acceptance is another aspect of growing up and maturing and that will require effort and time. Having people around one who are truly caring and loving will be vitally important, especially in one's early years. Parents, naturally, will be the most influential in this regard and can help lay the foundations for their child's growth to maturity.

Another element or quality one needs to acquire to become the person one should be is what Powell refers to as a 'goodfinder'. This word can be understood to refer to a person 'who looks for and finds what is good in him- or herself, in others and in all the situations of life. One could perhaps see it as another way of referring to a person having a strongly positive attitude to and outlook on life generally. This doesn't mean overlooking the faults or failings in oneself or others but it does mean looking for and finding all the goodness and giftedness in oneself, in others and in our world.

To help in the struggle to overcome one's low level of self-esteem it will be necessary also to learn to take full *responsibility* for oneself, one's actions and one's faults, failures, mistakes and even one's emotions. When one is low in self-esteem and true self-love, one may be inclined to seek someone or something to blame for one's difficulties or problems, e.g., a friend, a co-worker, the system, the Church, society today, etc. This tendency has to be resisted as one admits one's ownership of or responsibility for what one has done or said or even felt. Growth begins where blaming ends. It is the mature adult who can and should accept responsibility for all one's initiatives and attitudes.

There is no doubt that one of the most important factors that promotes improvement in one's self-esteem and love of oneself is developing and enjoying good relationships of friendship and love with other people, both men and women. This may well

2 Powell, *Why Am I Afraid to Love?* Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1967 and 1982, p p 45 & 47.

3 Powell, *Happiness*, p 10.

4 Powell, *Why Am I Afraid to Love?*, pp 57-58.

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be challenging at first but as one works to overcome one's low self-esteem, along the lines suggested above, one will be enabled gradually to go out in friendship and love to others and establish the relationships that will enable one to grow and become stronger and happier as a person. These relationships will become deeper and more enriching over time and this will bring the reward of more personal growth, so that, as one loves others better, so one will come to love oneself better. Thus loving others provides one with the strength of character to love oneself more and loving oneself more enables one to love others more deeply.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these good and nourishing relationships at a personal level it is universally accepted and promoted in our society today that one very important and helpful means of overcoming low self-esteem and building one's love of self is to speak privately to a confidant or to a professional counsellor or psychologist about one's difficulties in this area. *It is good to talk*, they say, and experience proves the wisdom and often the necessity of doing so. Keeping one's emotional wounds completely to oneself is widely considered a wrong move when it comes to improving one's self-esteem. So to help oneself to improve one's self-appreciation and love of self, it will usually be very beneficial to find someone whom you can trust and who will listen to you as you open up about your experience of the emotional difficulties we are considering here. This will, of course, often be far from easy and will require courage and a good degree of self-knowledge and plenty of time. But the rewards can be great and significant in the process of coming to love oneself and building the self-esteem that one needs to have to become one's best self and to achieve real happiness.

### FLOURISHING AS THE PERSON YOU ARE

Maureen Gaffney in her book *Flourishing*<sup>6</sup> gives us a valuable and interesting explanation of what is involved in personal flourishing. We may summarise her findings in the following *four* points or elements that she refers to as essential;

- a) Rising to a challenge: This is the driving or core element and it may take the form of a new opportunity or a crisis of some sort. One must, then, own or take on this challenge and see it through. Examples are many: a health issue, a family problem, a business crisis, marital tension, loss of one's job, development

5 Powell, *Happiness*, pp 57-59; M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled – A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*. Arrow Books, The Random House Group Limited, London, 1990, pp 85-88.

6 *Flourishing*, Ireland:Penguin,2011.

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of an organisation or a skill, etc. In situations like these we often mobilise our best self and prepare ourselves to flourish.

- b) Having good self-awareness: This means being in close touch with what is going on inside you, being sensitive to your emotional condition and what you are feeling, and having a real awareness of the emotional wavelength of other people around you. When you are fully attuned in this way, you will be well prepared for whatever challenge may arise and in a good situation to find better solutions to problems. You will be moving towards flourishing.
- c) Feeling free to meet the challenge: This is an obvious requirement on the road to flourishing. Having this freedom will give you energy to undertake the challenge, enable you to feel you are in charge of your own destiny and that you are operating out of your real and true self. No doubt, then, you will feel happier.
- d) Using your valued competencies: We tend to feel good and positive when we are in a position to use the talents and skills we have and value as important in and for our lives. Using these valued competencies also means using the important lessons we have learned in our life from both our own successes and our mistakes.

So, when all four of these elements are working together in balance, Gaffney tells us, you will flourish. You will feel more positive about yourself and what you are doing. You will have a more open and coherent perspective on things. This, then, is the beginning of wisdom.

### ACHIEVING HAPPINESS

It would seem an obvious point to make or conclusion to draw that if and when you arrive at the stage of flourishing, then you have also entered the state of happiness. No doubt this is generally the case. Everyone wants to be happy and many are blessed to achieve it. To clarify what precisely we mean by being happy we may mention the essential elements or requirements for true happiness. It will quickly become clear that there is a significant overlap between happiness and flourishing. As Gaffney says: 'when you are flourishing you are happy' and 'happiness makes you flourish'. To begin it must be said that happiness is not something to be sought directly. It is more a by-product of doing something worthwhile or positive. As for the basic elements of happiness in a person's life the following would seem to be essential.

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As already discussed, it is necessary to have good self-esteem or love of self. This is fundamental, since no one can be really happy who dislikes or doesn't love him/herself. If one does have good self-esteem, then one is well placed to take a positive and realistic view or outlook about oneself and life in general. This too is needed for real happiness. To be happy one also needs to be a person who loves other people. It is generally agreed that having good relationships with some other people at a personal level is an essential requirement for a good happy life. Without this happiness will elude you. In order to be happy it seems important also that one appreciate and enjoy the good things of life. This refers to friendship, good relationships with those around you, a satisfying job perhaps, an enjoyable hobby, and appropriate relaxation and fun. Important here also will be an effort to grow and develop as a person through using one's personal gifts and talents as fully as one can by availing of the opportunities that come one's way to do so. This will mean, among other things, that one is endeavouring to live a good moral life in accordance with one's ideals, values and principles. For religious and especially for the Christian person a great source of joy and happiness will be one's faith in and relationship with God in Christ in the Church. Knowing that God loves you and gives you all the blessings that you experience in your life will deepen your sense of peace and happiness significantly and make your life more meaningful.

It hardly needs to be said that, if one is happy and flourishing, one will experience notable benefits or blessings in one's life, and will be more successful in the various domains of life. Gaffney mentions *four* major benefits:

- a) Happy people have better health, mental and physical, and they live longer.
- b) Happy people have more friends and better relationships and are less likely to be lonely.
- c) Happy people do better in work, are likely to be more successful and so to earn more money.
- d) Happy people are better in positions of authority, experience fewer interpersonal conflicts on the job and the organisations they lead are more likely to be more productive and more profitable

It will be clear from what has been said here about happiness and working to achieve it that it is not only a great blessing in one's life

but it will also be a notable challenge to arrive at true happiness and will require a significant period of time to complete the personal effort required to attain this highly desirable goal. It is generally accepted among experts today that once a person moves beyond the poverty level, a larger income contributes almost nothing to happiness. This holds true also in regard to external things like fame, success, promotion, associating with the great or famous and also in relation to having a big job, a high I.Q. or various skills. In a word, happiness comes from our deep needs being met. This means, as John Powell has written, ‘happiness is an Inside Job’.<sup>7</sup>

7 *Happiness is an Inside Job*, p 2, etc.

**Economic Models.** In some of his most prophetic language, delivered at a speech to the poor of Bolivia in 2015, the pope denounced the current economic model: “The first task is to put the economy at the service of peoples. Human beings and nature must not be at the service of money. Let us say NO to an economy of exclusion and inequality, where money rules, rather than service. That economy kills. That economy excludes. That economy destroys Mother Earth.” Needless to say, such unflinching moral language and such passionate advocacy have earned the pope some powerful enemies, especially among corporate interests, fossil fuel companies, and ideological libertarians. Yet Pope Francis is proving to be the prophet we need. He is touching into something deep in the zeitgeist – a feeling that our global economy is on the wrong path, driven by the wrong values, headed in the wrong direction. I would argue that we are going through an inflection point right now. For the past four decades, the dominant orthodoxy has come to be known as neoliberalism – the premise that free markets and free flows of goods and capital, unrestrained by government interventions, represent the best route to rising prosperity. But the results are in, and this narrative has now been largely discredited.

– ANTHONY M. ANNETT, *Cathonomics: How Catholic Tradition Can Create a More Just Economy*. US: Georgetown University Press, 2022, p. xiv.