



Introduction

What matters is that we stop hating ourselves; when we do so what has to replace it is Love!

Much of this book comes from my own struggles and journey and much from the experience of working with others. It has become my passion to teach people how to stop hating themselves and let the natural state of love shine through. In my darkest moments of despair and self-hatred I used a particular meditation practice which reminded me that whatever I was feeling, in that very moment there must be hundreds of thousands of people across the planet experiencing the same pain. Recognising this fact broke my sense of isolation and helped me transcend my own suffering to a place of compassion. It enabled me to make positive use of the negativity I was experiencing as a prayer for us all. Little did I think that the memory of those moments when I thought I was most stuck, would stay with me as critical turning points in my own journey. Breaking the Spell is as much a personal sharing as it is a self-help book and is a natural expression of that prayer.

My journey has been a long process of recovery from low self-worth to a sense of self that is solid, resilient and affirming. It is a journey that has led me through various routes, personal therapy, Buddhist Meditation, Feminist Goddess Spirituality, Twelve Step Recovery work, personal creativity through writing and artwork and the hard lessons learned through intimate relationships.

For the most part I have functioned in life, I have always done work that has fulfilled me, I have friends and I have a rich inner life. I am fortunate in having a wealth of creativity and spirit to draw upon. On the surface I appeared bright

and confident, but for much of my life, that confidence was a defensive front that hid a chronic underlying insecurity and lack of esteem. My first career was as a stage and television actress, a career that continually demands and knocks one's confidence and I developed a supreme ability to "act" with confidence.

There are many reasons in my background and in my personality that made it hard for me to develop self-esteem. I was loved, my gifts and talents were encouraged and lauded, but "me the child" was neglected. My parents' own lack of esteem was such that they were unable to provide me with a sense of self-worth or acquaint me with the skills of how to give it to myself. In addition, there are certain elements in my cultural background, personality and lifestyle, which have put me outside conventional norms and have made it much harder for me to feel acceptable.

Lack of self-esteem has cost me in relationships, health, income and career, as well as loss of joy and quality of life. It has led me into unhealthy dependencies and destructive relationships. It has meant frequent periods of depression and despair when simply getting through the day was a feat of endurance. Low self-esteem has led me to feel the deep pain of shame at not being able to stand up for myself at times when I knew others were taking advantage or mistreating me. It has made me needy and demanding of friends and partners as I tried to get them to help plug up the hole inside me.

Working with clients has perhaps been my most constant source of learning, teaching and testing the ideas and methods I have formed and I acknowledge how much of a privilege and inspiration it is to be able to do so. It has also, at times, been extremely challenging, especially with those people who have suffered intolerable levels of damage to their sense of self and worth. For a while I worked with women recovering from drug and alcohol addiction in a residential treatment centre. This group of clients present the most challenging of behaviour, lack of trust, aggression, self-harm, manipulation, and deceit. Whilst much of their behaviour relates to the consequences of prolonged substance abuse, it invariably stems from chronic low self-esteem and self-hatred. The road to recovery for these clients is hard and fraught with failures and it requires tremendous courage, faith

and persistence. But, when it works nothing can surpass the triumph of a woman who was once at the rock bottom of life and who is now starting to blossom with a new-found pride and love she is finally able to experience for herself.

Recently I have been using my approach with clients in GP Surgeries and with great success. This is short-term counselling work with patients receiving up to six sessions. I am amazed that what took me years is being achieved in two, or three sessions in some cases. The people I have quoted throughout the book have, been plagued by lack of confidence, poor self image for years, some as a result of abusive relationships. For some it is a matter of having the right information and acquiring the skills needed to halt the habit of low self-esteem. This automatically creates a sense of encouragement and of being in charge of one's life and very soon people catch onto the means of increasing and maintaining their self-esteem.

One of the most frequent reasons people seek help from a counsellor or therapist, is lack of self-esteem. Lack of self-worth is found in all areas of society. Poverty is more than a material condition; emotional deprivation and poverty of spirit can be found in the most outwardly successful, as well as the socially disadvantaged. Low self-esteem can be the driving force of ambition or the obstacle to it. It can be found in the silent everyday experience of those around us who appear quiet and caring; it can be hidden behind the bravura of the extravert and beneath the aggressive behaviour of the bully. So often our self-esteem is invested in and dependent upon what we DO, or what we HAVE, rather than upon WHO WE ARE. We base it on our work, our money, our relationships, or our role as parents. When Life strips these away, the solidity and authenticity of our sense of self is tested.

Lack of self-esteem is a frequent cause of depression, anxiety, addiction, and emotional dysfunction. So why is it that some people seem to be able to be confident, stay calm and stand up for themselves; while others, feel worthless, powerless, ashamed, to blame, guilt?

Some people have suffered abuse and violence, and have strong reasons to fear being themselves. Some have grown up in an environment where others around them suffered from

low esteem and they were simply not shown how to behave in a way that creates a healthy sense of self. Other people may have aspects of their cultural background, personality, sexuality or lifestyle, which place them in a social minority making it harder for them to feel acceptable.

Most people with low self-esteem believe they need to improve themselves in order to gain self-esteem. In fact they are continually working on it, driving themselves, berating and punishing themselves in an attempt to earn self-esteem. In effect what they are doing is maintaining a system of low self-esteem. One could argue that low-self esteem is in itself a destructive attempt to achieve it.

What we do not often realise is that low self-esteem is a form of self-abuse. We think we are being non-violent by turning guilt and anger onto ourselves. People with low self-esteem often have an abhorrence of abuse but do not recognise that mentally and emotionally beating themselves up is abusive.

People usually think that they have to feel better about themselves before they can find self-esteem. In fact it works the other way round. Once we make a decision to stop being violent towards ourselves, we then automatically start to feel better about ourselves. Self-esteem is largely the ability to refuse to be undermined and when we begin to create self-respect, we naturally start to experience love.

We have to prepare the ground for building self-esteem, to clear a space before we can nurture ourselves. Unless we learn to stop the self-defeating attitudes and behaviours that maintain worthlessness, all our attempts at positive re-enforcement and esteem building techniques will amount to nothing. We simply will not be able to let them in.

We have to make a choice to feel good about ourselves exactly the way we are. That choice comes with the recognition that self-esteem is a fundamental right. It is at the core of our human dignity. Just as we need to be able to talk and walk in order to function physically, so we need to be able to feel good about ourselves in order to function psychologically.

This book has its own unique angle on a popular topic and aims to put its ideas across in a direct and accessible manner. *Breaking the Spell* is about understanding how self-

esteem operates. It seeks to uncover the systems of negative and punitive thinking and behaviour, by which we maintain low self-esteem. It offers ways of breaking these destructive behaviour patterns and provides suggestions for creating a healthier and more loving sense of self. I believe that when we learn to stop hating ourselves, what has to replace it is Love.

Each chapter builds the journey, step by step, from low self-esteem to a sense of self worth that can be consolidated and can thrive. The chapters contain exercises for you to use and suggestions for rewarding yourself for having reached the end of the chapter. It is up to you whether or not you do the exercises, some people like to have things to do, others just like to read and take in the ideas. There is also a book list of at the end of the book.

Most people who lack esteem believe they are selfish, weak or ugly, in fact they are usually loving, caring and generous. The trouble is they just do not seem able to extend that love and generosity to themselves.

Proud

*And when I am nothing
Like a little lost childseed
Waitin' in de dark belly
I go down to de sea
Yemaya eh! Yemaya eh!
Mother Ocean help me!*

*An she say,
"You woman you proud!
You woman you proud!
You is de sea
You is de rock
You is de grass*

You is de tree

Take me into your child place

Take me into your belly

Take me into your heart

And let de sing come out!"

And de wave she rise me all de way up to my heart

And me sing

Me woman me proud, me woman me proud

Me proud, me proud, me proud!



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What Is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is about having a basic love and respect for ourselves and our right to be here with all our faults and attributes; our warts and our wings. It contains both acceptance of our humanity and pride in our potential. Self-esteem does not have to be earned, it is independent of achievement or behaviour; just being alive and being who we are, is enough. We deserve the best simply because we are. We are neither better nor worse than other people; we are equal and different. Self-esteem helps us to demand respect, it gives us the confidence to stand up for ourselves and to go out in the world. It enables us to take responsibility for our actions without wracking ourselves with needless guilt and shame.

Self-esteem is expressed through our ability to refuse to be put down; it gives us resilience, a sense of joy and love for ourselves that can withstand the knocks of life. It is like a warm smile in the belly with which we can reassure ourselves when times are tough. It is a tenderness in the heart that embraces us when we are hurt. Self-esteem is our own well of being that we can draw from when we are thirsty or tired. Self-esteem allows us to enjoy our own company and enables us to recognise that we are our own best friend. For these reasons, people with self-esteem are often good people to be around, they have a sense of joy, resilience and empowerment that is infectious.

How Self-Esteem Develops

If you observe an infant, invariably she or he expresses a joy and aliveness that seems irrepressible. They do not question their right to be here, they show little shame or inhibition in

expressing their needs, rather they yell when they are hungry, tired or needing some attention. Smile at an infant and it readily returns your smile, they love to be the centre of attention, they are curious, spontaneous and fearless. Infants are uninhibited about their bodies, their bodily functions and mess, they are naturally affectionate and trusting. If we consider all this we could say that self-esteem is our natural state, so how does this change?

As infants we are utterly dependent upon others for our survival and we are deeply affected by how our world responds to us, how it reflects back to us our sense of existence. As infants we have little sense of separateness from our Mother figure or our surroundings, we are merged with them. It is through the responses, the reflections and the affirmations we receive that we can begin to develop a sense of our individual existence. When we gurgle does Mummy smile and mimic our gurgling sounds? Through her mirroring we know we have an impact, we know we have made a sound that can be heard. When we cry to be picked up, or fed, does someone respond positively? It is through these positive affirmations that we begin to build a confidence and robustness in our ability to exist and survive as separate beings. We are sensitive to the tiniest of nuances, voice-tones, gestures and actions.

If we are not responded to we can experience a sense of powerlessness over our own survival, a doubt in our own existence. How able are we to make Mother's breast available when we need it? How able are we to fulfil our need to be held when we cry for it? If we are not, we experience ourselves abandoned in some existential limbo, in a lost and uncertain universe.

As we become toddlers we start to explore our world and experiment with brief periods of separation. This is tolerable as long as we can trust that Mummy or Daddy will still be there when we need them. We create substitutes to help us through those moments; teddy bears, blankets, transitional objects which symbolise the love and comfort of Mummy. We learn to internalise that self-image. As we first learn to walk, we wobble, as we first learn to hold an image of ourselves we also wobble. Eventually we are able to sustain a stable and loving enough image of ourselves to manage longer periods of separation.