

3.

Learning to Love Oneself

No animal can hate itself, perhaps, except – of course – a human being. It's one of the strangest and most regrettable flaws in our condition. We may hardly even have noticed our settled tendency towards self-disgust, which probably shows up as a persistent substratum of sadness or a compulsion to ruminate on our errors and to anticipate disaster. As victims of self-hatred, we cannot forgive ourselves for the many sickening and abhorrent things we've done; we are never far from remembering how much we've messed up our lives, how we've let others down and the ways in which we're excessively weak, deceptive or ugly.

This settled tendency towards self-hatred is not only destructive of our spirit, it also constantly undermines our efforts to establish workable relationships, for it is logically impossible to allow anyone else to love us while we remain obsessed by the thought of our own loathsome natures. Why let another think better of us than we think of ourselves? If anyone did step forward and try to be kind to us, we would have to despise them with the intensity owed to all false flatterers.

It therefore turns out that one of the central requirements of a good relationship is – surprisingly – a degree of affection for our own natures, built up over the years, largely in childhood. We need a legacy of feeling very deserving of love in order not to respond obtusely and erratically to the affections granted to us by adult partners. Without a decent amount of self-love, the love of another person will always be prone to feeling sickening and misguided, and we will self-destructively – though unconsciously – set out to repel or disappoint it. It will simply be more normal and more bearable to be rejected.

We can investigate our core attitude towards ourselves via certain targeted questions:

Exercise

How ready would you be to agree – in your most private moments – with the following statements?

- *I don't like how I look.*
- *I have not lived up to my potential.*
- *I am not proud of my career.*
- *I am not as creative and successful as I should be.*
- *I am sexually insufficient.*
- *I have let everyone down.*
- *No one would want me.*
- *No one impressive could approve of me.*
- *I am not a good person.*
- *I should not exist.*

The more statements we agree with from this list, the closer we are to the self-hating end of the spectrum. We should not continue to imagine that love could be easy, even if the most accomplished person were to enter our lives – indeed, especially if they were to make the error of doing so. Our underlying disgust at our own being would only create a harrowing conflict. We would recognise that another was offering us their deep affection, but in the secret folds of our souls, we could only be certain of a mistake or delusion. We would have to reject, recoil,

not follow up, push away and in a thousand small and large moves ensure that a lover would eventually have to align their view of us with our view of ourselves.

To begin to counterbalance the hatred, we have to learn to extend compassion to ourselves for our self-lacerating impulses, and remember that how we feel about ourselves is – we can be certain – a bitter legacy of how other people, at a formative age, viewed and treated us.

Exercise

How did we arrive at the tragic conviction that no one could know us and love us at the same time?

Complete the sentences:

- *My mother made me feel I was ...*
- *My father made me feel I was ...*
- *From my early years, I learnt I was essentially ...*
- *My past taught me that my body was ...*
- *The younger me believed that I deserved ...*

The adult process of recovery involves grasping that we have indeed absorbed unduly harsh ideas about who we are, but that it is entirely in our power to begin to counteract them by imagining how a better caregiver might have supported us in the past – and how a kind lover might help us in the future. An ideal, compassionate figure would have known at the start never to equate lovability with perfection; they could have cared for us despite our coming last in the race, our missteps and our confusions.

Exercise

We need to build compassion for ourselves. Try answering these questions:

- How should we treat ourselves?
- If we saw a friend treating themselves as we treat ourselves, what would we advise?
- Looking forward, how might we dare to respond if someone one day decided we were really rather lovely?
- Could we forgive someone who did not have contempt for us?
- How might we overcome the nauseous feeling of realising that we were admired and adored?

The phrase 'self-love' misleads us when we imagine that searching for it would mean striving to acquire a conceited, pompous view of ourselves. True release from self-loathing tends to be a great deal more modest: we are only after a sane, fair and more accurate perspective on our ordinary earthly nature. We can, with kindness and good humour, accept that being silly is entirely normal; wasting opportunities is universal; average sexuality is to be expected. Self-love shouldn't be predicated on the competitive idea that we must pull off extraordinary feats of courage or intelligence. True love is only ever the compassion of

the fallen for the fallen; it's the search by one radically imperfect being to express their tenderness at the sight of the struggles and pains of another. We should – henceforth – allow ourselves enough self-love to be able to endure a little kindness.