

Health: Strength and Weakness

What if a topic on heroes helped learners to see themselves realistically?

Judy covered self-esteem as part of her health class. She wanted to help her students be realistic about their weaknesses and strengths and to put this on a firmer footing, not dependent on their feelings about themselves.

“I decided I wanted to look at significance and worth rather than self-esteem. I wanted to use examples of people who achieved in lots of different ways—some ordinary, some extraordinary—and also to put achievement in its place. By taking the focus away from the students, I hoped they would feel free to explore the weaknesses of the characters as well as their strengths, and use this as a way of reflecting on how they think about others and themselves.

“I changed my approach in personal development, and we ran a mini-project on heroes. We celebrated people who had achieved in different ways, but we also looked at their need of others; the times when they did not feel confident, and the times when they got it wrong. This did not detract from their achievements or their worth. I changed the tasks to include this different way of seeing heroes; in the lessons, I included thought balloons for the heroes’ worries and lack of confidence, and fill-in-the-blank rectangles for when the heroes got things wrong.

“At the end of the project, I created a hero template for each student with the thought balloons and the rectangles. They drew themselves, and could think about things they were not confident about and times when they feel they got it. Ours is a Christian school, and I introduced the ideas of being God’s masterpiece and treasure, and of how he accepts people through grace despite our failings. Although God accepts people as they are, he does not leave them as they are; with the help of the Holy Spirit, believers change. We may lack confidence, choose badly, or get things wrong, but that does not stop God from loving us: a painting may be severely damaged, but it can be restored. We talked about how people can admit failings to God and know he forgives and helps them to change.”

What's going on here?

Judy saw health education in terms of worth and significance and saw this as related to interdependence, not just found inside ourselves. She also saw worth as related to grace.

She engaged students in exploring both strengths and weaknesses so that they could apply this to their own view of themselves and think about the connections to faith.

She reshaped her practice by changing the way the tasks and worksheets were framed (worries as well as achievements, connecting to God), designing resources and using images to focus students' attention on the lesson theme, and making connections to faith explicit.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Christians find their significance primarily in being loved by God, but trusting God for a sense of worth is an act of faith. This does not mean that Christians do not need affirmation from other people; God acts through others to encourage and affirm us. Our deep-felt need to know that we matter can result in low self-esteem if we are not affirmed and loved. It can also result in an inappropriate sense of our own importance if we bolster that need by status, power, a misuse of relationships, or attention seeking. If we ignore the negative parts of our characters, we will create a fragile sense of worth that does not face reality.

What difference does it make?

Lessons on self-esteem usually focus on our feelings about worth and significance. Judy moved the focus so that it was less dependent on emotions and self-confidence, and more connected to the way we value one another in community and receive love from others and God.

Where could we go from here?

The question of where people find their sense of worth can be explored in drama, English, history, and art. For example, in a novel students can explore how characters see themselves and what that is based on. Portraits can reveal both a person's self-estimation and also how the artist sees them (e.g., see Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci

at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Leonardo_da_Vinci,_Ginevra_de%27_Benci,_1474-78.png).

Digging deeper

Our view of ourselves is rooted in how we see ourselves, how others see us, and how God sees us. God looks at the heart and knows everything about us (1 Samuel 16:7). God has no illusions about us but still loves us. Then there is the way we are perceived by others: a quick glance at ourselves through the eyes of others can break through layers of self-deception—others, however, are not always right.

O wad some Power the giftie gie us, [Oh, would that some power gave us the gift,]

To see ourself as ithers see us! [To see ourselves as others see us!]

Robert Burns

Finally, there is how we perceive ourselves. The Bible calls for humility in this. Biblical humility is not low self-esteem, but realistic assessment.

The Bible describes people as God's treasure (Deuteronomy 26:18). God knows each person in detail from before birth (Psalms 139:13; Jeremiah 1:5). Significance and worth are grounded in God, but can be affirmed by others.

We all sin and fall short not only of our own ideals, but also of God's standards (Romans 3:23). Sin is not ignored in the Bible; only through repentance, forgiveness, and trust, are relationships restored with God and with others. The way to a sense of worth and value is not by ignoring our failings, but by facing them. A knowledge of being loved and forgiven by God brings with it a freedom to face personal failings without our sense of worth crumbling. Repentance and guilt sometimes are viewed negatively, but guilt can be a warning system, like pain. There can be false guilt, and people can wrongly be made to feel guilty by others, but these wrong instances of guilt do not remove the fact that we

need it to function as moral people. We need to know when we have crossed the line. Repentance helps people face past sin and move on with forgiveness.

Salvation is all grace—the gift of God—and we cannot earn it, for no one is good enough (Ephesians 2:8). This emphasis on grace (rather than just human achievement) for salvation means that a compassionate and ethical way of life should flow from a relationship with God out of love, rather than a constant striving to do enough to be accepted by God. Our sense of worth should be enhanced by loving relationships within the family and the community of Christians so that we can turn outward and serve others.



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