

Trumpeter (1993)
ISSN: 0832-6193
On Self-Validation

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What makes our life happy and meaningful? What makes us feel valued and respected by others? What helps us appreciate our personal uniqueness and competence? What gives us feelings of deep connection with god, the universe, or something greater than our conscious self? Conversely, what makes our life unhappy and meaningless? These are all questions pertaining to self-validation.

Motive to Self-Validate

Self-validation, the term I wish to use here, is the process of recognizing and transcending the sense of self by various means to appreciate the unconditional value and meaning of our personal existence. In other words, self-validation is the process of restoring and reinforcing the sense of self-worth, meaning of life, and personal identity and competence through a variety of activities and interactions with the natural and social environments, and transcending these qualities to a spiritual level.

Life is a process of self-validation. Every person, or every conscious being, is given the life-long mission of recognizing the value of their unique individuality, and their collective existence. It is a mission of actualizing their potential for attaining the highest form of harmony and perfection within themselves and in the relationships with their natural and social environments.

We are driven to restore, maintain, and further enhance the appreciation of self-worth, meaning of personal existence, and the spiritual or trans-personal aspects of our existence. Ever since we were born, we have been exploring and experimenting with various ways of validating ourselves. We realize that healthy sources of self-validation can provide us with comfort, security, joy of living, identity, self-acceptance, connectedness with others, and spiritual enlightenment, among other qualities.

Loss of the sense of self-worth and meaning of life temporarily creates despair, pain, loneliness, anxiety, sadness, emptiness, and sometimes anger. While submerged in these powerful feelings, we often start restoring self-worth and meaning of life both consciously and unconsciously. In the case of permanent loss of a significant source of self-validation, such as loss of spouse or job, we have to seek new ways of validating ourselves elsewhere. Somehow we know deep down that we should not allow self-validating conditions to continue to eat away our

inner peace and self-esteem. It would mean existential and spiritual death and the deterioration of our health. Survival and enlightenment depend on how we validate ourselves.

However, some people choose neurotic and manipulative self-validation. They may resort to political and economic power and social manipulation to buy others' approval and affection and a conditional sense of self-worth. They may exploit nature and society to derive pleasure and satisfaction at the others' expense. Some rely on their physical and facial attractiveness as the primary source of self-validation.

Some people wish to restore self-esteem and inner security, but find it too demanding and threatening to commit themselves to a hard-working process of building mutually validating relationships in a genuine and responsible manner. Therefore, they might resort to neurotic defense mechanisms to deny or rationalize the inner pain. They might become dependent upon only one person or one aspect of life as the exclusive source of self-validation and avoid the risk of exploring and cultivating new ways.

Self-Validating Experiences

We experience a number of tough moments and situations that temporarily or semi-temporarily shake the basis of our self-worth and identity or diminish the meaning of our personal existence. Being criticized or ignored is one of the most self-invalidating experiences since our life revolves around social relationships and self-concept. It is a lonely and alienating experience to be criticized or misunderstood by others. It hurts to be treated as someone inferior or unworthy of others' attention and respect.

Furthermore, losing our spouse or a closest friend and moving away from a familiar and comfortable environment can create a sense of uprootedness and loss of the primary support system. Being with people who persistently attack or disagree with our values and world views could make us feel unappreciated and invalidated. As we go through personal developmental changes, our intimacy need is also changed from a sheer need for protection and approval to the need for being fully understood and connected emotionally and spiritually. When the people very close to us fail to meet such a higher need, we experience the lack of spiritual self-validation. Sometimes we exaggerate minor incidents through selective perception and self-critical reasoning into crisis situations, and fail to value our self-worth and competence.

Various psychological processes take place when we are in these situations. We feel denied access to the right to be and the right to feel at such moments. We feel as if a part in us is slowly dying in pain. We start doubting our self-worth, and losing confidence and self-respect. Our self-identity gets shaken, and we

become unsure of who we are and what we are. We lose sight of the meaning of life and become hopeless and directionless.

Needless to say, these are sometimes so unbearable and threatening that we use defenses and shut off the painful feelings and self-awareness to protect our fragile and shaky ego from the final despair. However, we eventually need to face the self-invalidating situation or lifestyle and confront ourselves with the task of restoring inner harmony and seeking self-validating relationships and activities.

Modes of Self-Validation

How did you deal with the latest experience of self-doubt or loneliness? Who gave you emotional support and validation of you being a valuable and unique individual? What kind of activities did you do to regain self-confidence and a positive perspective on life? What did you do to divert your attention away from the inner pain? What kind of physical comfort and dietary care did you provide yourself with?

A man who received severe criticisms from his colleagues may go to his best friend who would remind him of what a special person he is. He may go for a swim or jogging to shake off the bad feelings of the day. He may look at his personal accomplishments to remind himself of his competence. He may go for a long walk, or watch the sunset and forget himself in oneness with nature.

In my view, there are basically three inter-related areas or activities (social, personal, and physical) of self-validation, to restore or enhance a general feeling of self-worth and a meaning of life in the direction of ego-transcendence and spiritual union with others. Some activities could be self-validating in more than one area at the same time, such as performing arts, group sports, eating and drinking with good friends, and non-solitary outdoor activities.

Self-validation does not stop at restoring the damaged self-esteem and meaning of life in crisis situations. It is an on-going process throughout life. We are constantly maintaining and enhancing self-validation as part of our lifestyle. We deliver proper care to maintain the self-validating life-style in working order to instill happiness and meaning in life and cope with stressful and self-invalidating situations. Therefore, we treasure nurturing relationships, seek and try to perfect personal activities and talents, and incorporate healthy diet and exercise and create a familiar and pleasant environment.

Self-validation could go beyond the functional levels of restoration and maintenance. It can transcend to a spiritual level, thus facilitating the validation of our spiritual self. Part of us, the spiritual and collective self, is always seeking union with god, the universe, mother nature, the higher self, or whatever you may call it. The spiritual self seeks to be acknowledged and validated.

Thus, our conscious individual self is constantly challenged by transpersonal experiences such as dreams and intuitive knowledge of a higher self. We seek union with god and union with the natural and social environments. There is a force to make us accept and appreciate the world beyond the conscious and time- and-space bound ego. In social relationships, we seek deep union with the loved ones where love and caring transcend a possessive and egoful level to a spiritual level. Thus, we inevitably seek an ego-transcending quality in all the areas of our life. This is spiritual self-validation.

Social Self-Validation

We influence each other and depend upon each other for mental well-being. Be it our spouse, children, parents, best friends, counsellor, or even our pets, we need each other for social and emotional survival. When we feel lost or alienated, we normally go to certain significant individuals who would accept us unconditionally and provide emotional nourishment for our damaged or confused ego. We do not have to wear a mask or appear to be perfect with them. They would listen to us with respect and caring. We share the joy and hardship of being alive. We feel safe and validated by these special people.

Moving to another city or country is an extremely challenging experience. Being uprooted from a familiar and well-developed network of social support and transplanted into a new environment usually would mean loss of the familiar and validating relationships. Similarly, when we are a vulnerable underdog and have to face criticisms and self-doubt in one group, we may look forward to being with another group who would validate us more readily and give us a sense of self-control. This is why status loss and transfer to another location are so devastating.

In some instances, such as being in an unfamiliar situation and being in a foreign culture, we may simply appreciate being able to communicate with someone in our mother tongue. Since much of our identity and self-evaluation is based on cultural conditioning, being with someone who shares the same cultural norms and value system could be a most validating experience after struggling with an unfamiliar culture as an outsider.

Self-validating relationships are often mutual. Others need us to validate their self-worth and identity, and vice versa. Self-validation is furthered by the knowledge of being wanted and valued by our children, students, colleagues, customers, dependent pets, parents, and a local community.

In receiving and giving genuine love and caring in a non- possessive and non-manipulative way, we experience a deep spiritual bond with certain individuals who make our life especially meaningful. Even in the midst of a personal crisis of facing a social rejection or a major vocational failure, the loving presence of

such special individuals helps us keep hope and meaning in life and a balanced perspective on life events, thus validating the way we are.

Personal Self-Validation

We validate our self-worth and the meaning of personal existence through various personal activities such as arts, sports, music, religion, hobbies, meditation, personal projects, reading, and many others. There is much overlap between personal and social self-validation here because of the social contexts where many of these take place, but these activities are often intrinsically motivating and we are not always motivated by others' reinforcements. When we are upset or self-critical, we often engage ourselves in our favorite personal activities which would give us a sense of comfort and confidence. They are fun and personally rewarding, and we are not dependent upon getting social praise and approval. There is an element of private life and private meaning in these activities.

In personal self-validation, we experience the joy of self-improvement and competence and the comfort of being in a familiar environment where we feel in control and at peace with ourselves. Such personal activities sometimes give us a timeless flow experience and a feeling of being one with nature. Through them, we validate our timeless and spiritual self. This is partly why we enjoy meditation, music, star-watching, reading novels, nature walking, creative and artistic activities such as weaving, dancing, pottery, painting, etc.

In personally validating activities, we value the intrinsic reward of doing something personally meaningful and productive. We find precious moments of recognizing and validating our competent self, timeless self, and spiritual self. Some of us find chanting a mantra, saying a prayer, or reading scriptures comforting and enlightening. Some experience ego-transcendence through being immersed in actions such as painting, dancing, jogging, cooking, gardening, singing, house-cleaning, etc.

Physical Self-Validation

Our body and mind are intricately connected, and we regain the sense of who we are by respecting the body and responding to its needs. We thus validate ourselves physically by restoring comfort, pleasure, energy, and familiar physical sensations. Certain activities have relaxing and attention-diverting effects. They also provide physical and physiological sensations associated with good memories and relaxing and self-validating feelings and imageries. Some people like to take a long nap to regain energy and a more balanced perspective on life when they are feeling down. Certain brands or types of food may remind some people of their home and loving memories.

A foreign student experiencing much self-doubt and homesickness may recreate a familiar and self-validating environment by cooking one of his native meals, and playing familiar music or singing songs in his mother tongue. This may take place in the company of friends from his homeland who would share the same hardship of being a foreign student in another culture.

We also sleep and rest appropriately, and engage ourselves in regular physical and dietary activities to maintain our well-being. We take sensitive care of the body and discipline ourselves to maintain a healthy physical condition and avoid abusing or spoiling the body.

Furthermore, appropriate physical self-discipline combined with right attitudes can transcend from a mere physical activity into a spiritually enlightening and ego-transcending experience. Here the mind and the body become one, and we enter the world of beauty, timelessness, and union with the greater self.

Solitary arts of meditation, body movements, dance, martial arts, for example, are more than simple exercises for physical comfort and energizing. People may take a martial art, for instance, in order to feel superior to others or to have muscle toning and mental relaxation. Some, however, take the discipline beyond the level of physical and technical training. They pursue the art seriously with a lifelong commitment and immense concentration to integrate philosophy, lifestyle, and physical art into a unified whole through years of hard work. And a selected few successfully enter the world of divine perfection, beauty, and virtue.

However, there is a danger of using these arts as an easy escape from facing stressful ego-threatening situations, and a danger of becoming addicted or compulsively attached to them. This is because body-oriented activities are concrete and easy to focus on and the sensations derived are rewarding. Without much self-discipline, some people go to the extreme and become rather abusive or hedonistic to their precious body that needs to be well-maintained and cared for.

Some develop a self-defeating lifestyle when they overuse physical activities to escape from the painful feelings of self-criticism and self-doubt, and postpone or avoid the direct confrontation with the underlying emotional dynamics. Alcoholism, eating disorders, and drug abuse are examples for such failures in physical self-validation.

Conclusion

I have discussed my model of self-validation in terms of social, personal, and physical areas and activities. It is necessary to recognize that we are constantly validating ourselves in many different ways at conscious and unconscious levels. When significant sources of our self-validation are threatened or lost, we become keenly and painfully aware of the value of such self-validating activities and

relationships.

It is important for us to develop a well-rounded lifestyle for validating our self-worth and meaningful personal existence without solely relying on one kind of activity or on a relationship with one significant person as the only available sanctuary for emotional and spiritual safety.

We are facing the challenging task of developing self-reliance and trusting the highly talented self, and accepting the deeper self connected with others, and the spiritually transcending self. We have the responsibility to cultivate and strengthen self-validating relationships with people around us at the same time. Therefore, internal (self-reliant) and external (other-reliant) modes of self-validation are not mutually exclusive. Rather, a healthy development of internal self-validation comes from the solid experience of being loved, cared for, and respected by significant others in a non-possessive and non-manipulative manner.

It is the role of parents, educators, mental health workers and society in general to provide a nourishing ground for social self-validation for the young. Further, it is their educational responsibility to help their children, students, and clients to discover and strengthen a variety of ways of validating their self-worth and to cultivate skills and self-confidence in creative and practical activities and interpersonal communication. It is the responsibility of every member of the community to validate each other's self-worth and extend their sensitivity to the emotional and spiritual needs of the troubled.

Finally, it is the wisdom of well-developed cultures and mature individuals that guides us from the struggle for the sheer survival of the fittest to the joyful discovery and appreciation of the ego-transcending and spiritual aspects of life through healthy self-validating activities and relationships.

Citation Format

Ishiyama, F. Ishu (1993) On Self-Validation *Trumpeter*: 10, 4.
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