

SELF-ESTEEM AND LUNCH ROOM TABLES

This was especially important in middle school. Here, there were rigid social distinctions between groups of kids and where they sat. When going to a new middle school, I figured out that I would need to sit at least for a week or two with the “undesirables” before being brought up the social pecking order a bit. This required befriending the right people, being invited to a better table, and then no longer associating with the people I had sat with initially. I would then potentially have to repeat this process with different groups over a few months until I got to one of the top tables. I eventually ended up at a private school where this dynamic did not seem to occur as much. Nevertheless, I found the entire process a total pain in the ass, and it was something I never enjoyed. It was phony, took a lot of effort, and distracted me from more important things I could be doing with my time. It was also something that people seemed to take very, very seriously. In fact, many people never stop playing this game. Rather than lunch tables, it becomes about the parties you are invited to, the people you travel with, and more.

To my astonishment, when I was visiting my grandmother in a retirement community when she was in her mid-90s, I noticed a pecking order to the tables in the community dining room as well.

A pecking order in the lunch room may not seem like a big deal to some. If you have not had to switch schools and arrive at a new school with zero friends, perhaps this pecking order never posed any issues for you. However, for me it was a bit stressful. The reason this was stressful, I think, had to do with the fact that I had a need to be accepted.

Everyone out there needs to feel accepted, praised, and important. There is nothing more essential than this. If you make someone feel unimportant and not accepted, he or she will very quickly turn into an enemy and may even turn violent. In the tragic cases when kids have gone to school and shot it up, most of the time these kids felt like outsiders and unaccepted by the main society. The same goes for people who go to prison and others who have problems in society. If you make someone feel unaccepted and unappreciated, then they are going to lash out in some way.

In every instance where I have been in a serious conflict with someone, the conflict has arisen out of something I have done to make the person feel unaccepted and unappreciated. In situations where people have become very close to me and have been my supporters, I have made those people feel appreciated and accepted. Making others feel appreciated and accepted can make a huge difference in how others feel about themselves. Even for adults, the people you know and who accept you can have a huge link to your self-esteem.

All over the world there are various sports teams, and with them come sports fans. These sports fans may wear colorful jerseys, fly flags from their cars, and do all sorts of other things that increase their feelings of association with the team. I believe that many of these things are done for people to increase their feelings of acceptance and belonging. Despite the fact that no one on the team may know who they are, these fans have a sense of acceptance based on their association with the team and the identity they have created around this association.

When I was 15 years old, I moved in with my father after living with my mother my entire life. Originally, I was going to attend the local public high school for three or four months before moving permanently overseas to Thailand to complete the rest of high school. My father lived across town from my mother, and when I arrived at the new high school, I figured I would be there for about twelve weeks or so. I had no interest in playing social games and trying to rise up the social hierarchy—I had done this at the previous three schools I had attended over the past few years and was tired of it.

Instead of basing my self-worth on who I was associating with, I decided that I would just keep to myself since I was going to be at the school for such a short time. I would grab a quick lunch and then would head to the library or take a walk around school. To me this seemed to be the easiest option. It was not easy at first and felt like going “cold turkey” from what had previously been competitive social climbing and a sense of worth based on being above others in the school’s social hierarchy. Suddenly, my self-worth and self-esteem had to come from within. This was the start of ninth grade for me, a time when social acceptance assumes a profound importance in the typical teenager’s life. Here, I decided to let it all go. This was one of the best decisions of my life and taught me some incredible lessons about self-esteem.

For most people, self-esteem is tied up with being accepted by others. In fact, for a lot of people, their feelings of worth and adequacy are tied up with things like (1) being the best compared to others, and (2) having more of something than someone else. Worth becomes tied up with external things and methods of comparing ourselves to others:

- If your worth is based on external factors, then you are likely the person who thrives on rumors and pushing other people down.
- You probably also believe that there are scarce opportunities for advancement, rewards, and money.
- You are concerned with possessions, rankings, your group associations, and how you compare with others.

If your feelings of worth are based on how you feel you compare with others, then this is not self-esteem—it is pride. If your feelings are based on how you feel you compare with others, then you will never feel satisfied for long because someone better will always come along, something better than what you have will always come along, and a better ranking or association than you have will soon replace what you are holding on to.

If you have true self-esteem then you have confidence in yourself that is not influenced by external factors and comes from within. Self-esteem that comes from within is the most powerful and best type of self-esteem. Because your worth comes from within, you feel a sense of abundance because you are not limited by comparisons to others.

Sitting on the sidelines for several months before moving overseas taught me that comparing myself to others was a waste of my time. Instead of looking at others, I was forced to look entirely at myself. Relying on yourself for your emotions gives you a greater sense of internal security and puts you in an entirely different life position. The lessons I learned from this time helped give me security so that I would not get bogged down by what others thought of me and, instead, could rely on myself for my feelings of self-worth and success.

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