WHY SELF-ESTEEM IS SELF-DEFEATING

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I have no self-esteem.

I'm not saying I dislike myself, or that I have a problem with my self-image. And I don't have low self-esteem. I'm just saying that I have no self-esteem at all.

Why? For the same reason that I have no pet unicorns. Self-esteem is a fantasy. It's a meaningless fabrication that exists only in your imagination.

The dictionary defines "esteem" this way: "To regard with admiration." Self-esteem, therefore, means to regard yourself with admiration. But is that how we should see ourselves?

If someone asked you who you admire, would you really want to answer, "Well, I admire myself"? Would that be a good thing?

I would say no... emphatically.

I was hardly a precocious kid, but I think I realized this "self-esteem" thing was a racket as far back as junior high. I remember when the guidance counselor at my school handed out a worksheet and asked us to "rate" our self-esteem on a scale of 1 to 10. Meanwhile, kids in China were learning silly things like "math" and "science." Now we're bankrupt and they own the country. But at least we all feel pretty good about ourselves.

In any case, there we were, facing the important task of arbitrarily quantifying our egos. When I asked my teacher why I should have high self-esteem, she said, "Because you're special." When I asked why I was special, she said, "Because you're you!"

I found this an odd statement at the time, coming as it was from the woman who'd just given me a D on my last math quiz. Most of my classmates, though, quickly jotted down nines and tens. Incidentally, some of them would grow up to be unemployed alcoholics, but I'm guessing if they could take that test again, they'd score themselves exactly the same.

See, that's the whole point of self-esteem: to be proud of yourself even when there's no reason to be proud of yourself.

Of course, apologists will claim that self-esteem is simply about confidence, and that you need confidence to succeed in life. Okay. But if self-esteem is simply about confidence, then why don't we just call it "confidence"?

Because confidence must be earned.

A student is confident about doing well on a test if he studies for it. An athlete is confident on the field if he practices. A singer is confident in her abilities if she, in fact, has abilities.

Self-esteem, on the other hand, can be defined as "unearned confidence." The person with "high self-esteem" (also known as a "narcissist") feels good about himself on the basis of nothing. We may ask him: "Why do you esteem yourself?" And his learned response will be: "Because I'm me."

Like a modern day Narcissus, he can't see the world outside the window because he's too busy whispering sweet nothings to his reflection in the glass.

In a saner, less confused time, people saw it the opposite way. It didn't matter how you felt about yourself; it mattered what you did.

Funny – that's what my parents taught me. I remember one time explaining very carefully to my dad that he couldn't expect me to do my math assignment because math made me feel bad about myself. In return, he suggested that maybe I should study more and then math wouldn't make me feel so bad. "But in the meantime," he said, "it doesn't matter how you feel. Do your homework."

It doesn't matter how I feel? What a scandalous notion. I probably should have called social services.

If this self-esteem thing was just another benign form of entertainment, we could just laugh it off. But it's become a serious problem because this "I'm special," "love yourself," "you get points for breathing" dogma taints everything it touches. It equips you for nothing. It won't help you at school; it will stifle your career ambitions; and it will certainly wreak havoc on your relationships.

Sure, insecurity and self-doubt can also be defeating, but at least there's a chance that they might drive you to be better. Self-esteem actually prevents improvement, because you can only improve if you first acknowledge what you're not good at. But that process might take a toll on your self-esteem, so many people avoid it.

I'm not saying that you should hate yourself, and I'm not saying that you should have low self-esteem. I'm saying have no self-esteem ¬– as in, stop thinking about it. Period.

Do good things with your life and you'll have all the esteem you'll ever need.

I'm Matt Walsh for Prager University.