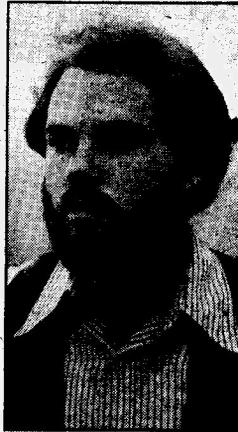


Ralph Keyes



I'm OK, You're Probably OK

By using Lifebuoy, I'm told, I can feel good about myself all day long, just as Geritol is for us who think enough of ourselves to take it and L'Oreal is for the woman who won't settle for anything less because she's worth it.

But is she? And are we? Or is an epidemic of self-contempt reflected by the marketing of self-love?

Self-love is the implicit promise of programs for self-improvement. And self-improvement is one of our few growth industries as America is crisscrossed by an army of peddlers hawking mind control and self-hypnosis, group therapy in a hundred forms and twice that number of meditations. The market they tap is a widespread hope that by engaging in such activity you'll feel better about yourself.

But implicit in any program promising to make you over is the assumption that something's the matter with you now. "To change," "How to Be Your Own Best Friend" has advised its millions of readers, "you really must look into yourself to see what you're doing wrong."

But suppose you're doing nothing wrong, basically? Suppose like most of us you have faults, grievous faults even, but are basically a decent person? Do the salesmen of change address you as you are, helping you to become more self-accepting—a good friend to yourself, if not the best?

The paradoxical effect of those peddling self-improvement can be to reinforce self-doubt. In an otherwise excellent report on encounter groups, three researchers recently have given as one of their premises, "It is essential that the experience be a *corrective* emotional experience."

ESSENTIALLY DECENT

Why? This assumes something needs correcting. I've been in encounter groups, had good experiences within, and learned from them much about myself. The main thing I learned was that I didn't need correcting. Basically. That I was essentially decent, that people liked me more than I liked myself perhaps, and always forgave me more.

This conclusion is what stands out in my mind after several years of dabbling in Advanced Personal Change where that subject is pursued most

avidly and intently: southern California.

"What are you into?" in this culture has for many replaced "What do you do?" as a courteous inquiry. Possible responses include: encounter, mysticism, ESP, est, TM, TA, Tai Chi, tarot and "I'm not sure."

In such a setting, "Are you still married?" is more courteous than rude an inquiry of someone you've not seen for a week or two. In a culture based on change, staying married too long to one person seems vaguely deviant. (After ten years together, Muriel and I sometimes feel certain we've been married longer than any couple south of Santa Barbara.)

WISH FULFILLMENT

I'm not trying to put a knock on southern California. What goes on here has always been a wish fulfillment for the country at large. Whittier's Richard Nixon, who as a youth studied Dale Carnegie on how to win friends and influence people, then struggled as an adult to be forever New, was really just an advance man for those of us country-wide who later studied "I'm OK, You're OK," "How to Be Your Own Best Friend" and now "TM" in our hunger to be different. The constant is a restless dissatisfaction with what *is*, especially one's self, and faith that by seeking change one's life may be transformed and one's soul redeemed.

After several years in this laboratory of personal growth, I returned to Long Island for a visit to the office I had fled in search of change. I was happy to leave that office, among other reasons because of a certainty my co-workers didn't like me. Four years later I walked in and felt just as sure people were glad to see me. It was amazing how much they'd changed in four years' time.

A friend of mine had a similar experience returning to Arizona, in his case for good. Like us, Bill moved to La Jolla with his family several years ago looking for a change. Over a period of several years he became a successful encounter-group leader and began jetting around the country as a consultant on "building community."

But ultimately Bill found that all this movement, both physical and personal, was keeping him from his own community—a wife and seven children. Today he's

stopped most consulting, rarely leads groups and has returned to teaching, writing and playing trombone in a jazz band.

Friends confront Bill about this change of gears, saying he seems to be turning back the clock. Bill doesn't argue the point, and concedes that in one sense he is going back to a way of life that is more comfortable. But in another sense, the psychologist says, the difference is profound. Because today he's *chosen* to lead a conventional life rather than it choosing him.

Choice, in this sense, is the issue more basic than change. In both cases, coming to terms with yourself is at issue. But movements promising self-love through change really can't help you get more than a crush on yourself. Lasting self-esteem is a bit more elusive. Choosing to accept, to live with one's self and be tolerant, is both more possible and more wearing. Any personal choice—even to stay the same—takes more effort than falling in step with the change of the hour. And today's options make choosing more burden than liberation. How to decide? What makes Gestalt therapy better than Transactional Analysis? Is Maharishi really the guru, or Maharaj Ji? Should I become my own best friend or just OK?

WEARY OF TRYING

With more alternatives to choose from and more freedom to make choices, we can quickly grow weary of trying. And, weary of trying, we grow tempted by those prescriptions for change which promise to make choices for us. Such prescriptions may not help us come to terms with self-doubt, but they can numb it for a time.

Alternatively, we can re-establish control over our own spirit, unswayed by the therapy of the moment and unbullied by self-contempt. As strong as our need to be different is what Martin Buber calls "man's thirst for continuity." This thirst is the one too often overlooked by those peddling the nostrums of change.

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