

No Love Lost

By Theodore Dalrymple

Some people keep reading matter in their lavatories, though whether for their own benefit or that of their visitors I have never been able to determine—nor have I ever asked. I suppose that it comes in handy if you're constipated, though this is a problem from which, as yet, I have never suffered. On second thought, I daresay the constipated are otherwise too preoccupied to bother themselves with literature.



There is probably scientific research to be done on the relation between reading matter found in lavatories and the nature of the household in which it is found, because there is scientific research to be done on everything. There is a version of Parkinson's law according

to which work expands to meet the time available for its completion that relates to the academy: Research subjects expand according to the number of university students who go on to do a PhD.

All this is but an introduction to reflection on what I found recently in a friend's lavatory when I visited his home. It was a little book titled *The Wit and Wisdom of Women*, a title that is significant in itself, for no one would publish a similar book with the title *The Wit and Wisdom of Men*. There is something either plaintive or condescending about the title, as if neither wit nor wisdom, but especially the former, were to be expected of the fair sex (or, as we must

now say, the fair gender).

I regret to say that when I opened the little book of wit and wisdom my eye fell on a quotation that was neither witty nor wise. It was from Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, the Swiss-American psychiatrist who wrote a lot about death, identifying five stages where death is slow and announced rather than sudden and unexpected.

This was the quotation:

The ultimate lesson all of us have to learn is unconditional love, which includes not only others but ourselves as well.

When I read this, I felt very much as I felt long ago when I guzzled too many rich chocolates before the curtain went up in a theater, namely queasy verging on nausea.

Which others are we supposed to love unconditionally? Kim Jong Un? The Ayatollah Khomeini? Who do we think we are, to confer our unconditional love on all and sundry?

Perhaps Kubler-Ross meant only *some* others—but which others, and by what criteria are we to chose whom to love unconditionally? Love, of course, is not usually a matter of choice, as many a person has found to his or her cost. Perhaps the greatest good fortune in life is to love unconditionally a person who is worthy of it; but it is a great misfortune to love unconditionally someone who is not worthy of it.

All this pales into insignificance by comparison with the nauseating idea of loving oneself unconditionally. Self-love has until recently been regarded not as a virtue, as a desideratum or a sign of good character, but as a vice, indeed as among the worst of vices.

What could unconditionally loving oneself entail? It would seem to imply that deep in one's heart, however one actually conducted oneself, there was something lovable, indeed so

lovable that it more than made up for all one's disagreeable, bad, or vicious qualities, such as cruelty, laziness, mendacity, dishonesty, boastfulness, slyness, and so forth. Within every person, therefore, there is necessarily a pearl above price, and it is this that every person must treasure above all else. What need of goodness when one loves oneself?

Not a few vicious persons used to say to me that they could not have done the things of which they were accused because they were not the sort of things that they did, and they said this even if the record showed that they had done such things repeatedly. But in a sense, they were not straightforwardly lying, because they had absorbed the common notion that there was an inner and an outer me, the latter being unimportant by comparison with the former. This meant, of course, that nothing that the outer me did could affect the regard in which the inner me was held by the me that was neither inner nor outer, but the third me who talked about him- or herself. Loving oneself unconditionally gives one *carte blanche* to behave as one chooses, for such self-love is never having to say you're sorry—or rather, never having to *mean* that you're sorry when you say it.

Self-love is like self-esteem, according to this philosophy: It is something to which one has a right merely because one draws breath. But in fact, one is already lost if one even considers the question of whether one loves or esteems oneself. One is already on the royal road to egotism and self-absorption.

There are some people, no doubt, who are egotistic by nature. It would not occur to them to behave otherwise than they do. They are not as bad as people who *decide* to become egotistic because they have a duty to love themselves since this is the ultimate lesson that they have to learn (as Kübler-Ross puts it).

Of course, the quotation might have been torn out of context.

The fault might not have been Kübler-Ross' but the editor's. It doesn't really matter whose the fault was: The odious words were made to stand alone in the little book, as if they were gems of wisdom that presumably readers were intended to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.

The sentiment expressed by the words no doubt will have an appeal to many, as fast food does to people who are either too lazy to cook or whom no one will cook for. The sentence is the philosophical equivalent of the Whopper.

Why do people say and listen to whoppers? It is because they obviate the need for real and possibly painful reflection, which requires the exercise of judgment and therefore runs the risk of error. Such whoppers are the fast food of the mind: They satisfy while they malnourish.

You should not love yourself or hate yourself; you should not have any attitude toward yourself at all.

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