FOR THE LOVE OF 'ME'

BY FRANK STEPHENSON

Man’s status as a “worm” turned sharply in the 1980s. After 180-odd years, worshippers finally got to belt out Watts’ old standard without having to compare themselves to such lowly life forms. Watts’ hymn got washed in the blood of a spanking new social movement hotter that today’s low-carb craze. New hymnals appeared with Watts’ phrase “for such a worm as I” changed to “for sinners such as I.” Reportedly, no complaints from the author, dead two centuries.

In the waning days of the 1960’s counter culture movement, America’s youth—tired of trying to change the world—passed into a phase of trying to change themselves. A sort of collectivistic contemplation of one’s navel emerged, sparking a revival in interest in religion among young people (e.g. the Jesus Freaks; Krishna Consciousness) and in self-evaluation and self-healing (e.g. transcendental meditation; Rolfing).

continued on next page

Are we Happy Yet?

In one of his more famous sermons, the 15th century German monk Thomas a’ Kempis admonished believers to stamp out all vestiges of self-esteem or face eternal damnation:

“If I humble myself and acknowledge my nothingness; if I cast away all my self-esteem and reduce myself to the dust that I really am, then Your grace will come to me, and Your light will enter my heart; thus will the last trace of self-esteem be engulfed in the depth of my own nothingness, and perish forever.”—The Imitation of Christ (1390?), Chapter VIII

A’ Kempis described himself and his fellow humans as “abject worms,” actually a biblical theme picked up 400 years later by the English hymnist and preacher Isaac Watts:

“Alas! and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die? Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?”—1707, 1855*

Time was, the term “self-esteem” was used primarily by poets, philosophers and preachers.

Especially preachers.

Since the dawn of Christianity, any notion of heaping praise on oneself for any reason at all generally has been viewed as sinful and a mighty affront to God.

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This sudden, mass rediscovery of the self (pre-TV American culture had its own versions) hardly escaped the attention of academic types, particularly sociologists and psychologists.

Among the early arrivals was the late psychologist Carl Rogers (d. 1987), regarded by some researchers as the grand-father of today’s well-established self-esteem movement. Rogers came up with the idea of “unconditional positive regard,” a technique he intended as a means for helping kids cope with feelings of inadequacy in the eyes of their parents when they failed to meet certain goals.

Another early force was—and still is—Nathaniel Branden, a Los Angeles psychotherapist whose name in some circles is nearly synonymous with what by 1980 was recognized as a self-esteem movement gaining steam from coast to coast. Branden’s book, The Psychology of Self-Esteem (1969 and still in print), laid a blueprint of sorts for the rise of self-esteem in the public consciousness. Since then, more than 4 million copies of Branden’s 20 books have been translated into 18 languages, according to his Web site.

Like a creature not quite ready for prime time, self-esteem— as given airs by serious researchers—soon escaped campus psych labs and entered the mainstream. By 1985, a tidal wave of self-esteem awareness was breaking over nearly every cultural beachhead in the land. Suddenly, the “me” generation was in full swing, swaying to the mantra of self-worth at any cost.

Kindergartners and elementary school kids soon began hearing from their teachers that they were “special in every way,” that they were “excellent,” regardless of what their report cards may have suggested otherwise; that they were “superstars.”

For a flagging civil rights movement, self-esteem provided a much-welcomed shot of energy. Self-esteem pressure groups supplied minorities with plenty of new ammunition to push for better treatment in classrooms and on the job. African-Americans were told that they didn’t perform as well as whites on standardized tests, for example, because as a group they were victims of a racist society that eroded their self-esteem. All they had to do to fix things—succeed in school and later in life—was to find them some more self-esteem.

Women’s rights groups soon chimed in with their own self-esteem issues. For far too long, women said they had suffered under the thumb of gender bias, and in particular, of men’s irrational assumptions about sex, physical beauty and relationships. Consequently, females’ selves were in danger of being completely eclipsed by bias and male fantasies. A strong dose of self-esteem, liberally applied to schoolgirls, clearly was called for.

A 1995 bestseller, Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls (Ballantine), by psychologist Mary Pipher, shook up complacent moms and teachers with the revelation that girls’ self-esteem “plummers” during their teen years. A crisis was afoot, and the only hope for saving an entire generation of young American women from “a girl-poisoning culture” was the immediate and determined application of self-esteem therapy as prescribed in her book.

But what about boys? Could it be that they, too, were being sold a bill of goods by a macho society whose values ill-fit boys’ natural proclivities for expressing who they really are and rejoicing in that?

Citing “more than 20 years of research” on the subject, Harvard psychiatric professor William Pollack, in his 1998 book Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myth of Boyhood (Random House) sounded an alarming “yes!” to the question.

Pollack revealed that society’s stereotypes of boys—that they tend to be “tough, cool, rambunctious and obsessed with sports, cars and sex” as one reviewer put it—are threatening to destroy boys’ “fragile self-esteem.” This menace was sapping boys’ creativity and keeping them from exploring their sensitive sides. Pollack’s book helpfully gives details on “proven techniques” that parents can use to protect their sons from stumbling into unfulfilled, dead-end lives.

Self-esteem rules

By any standard one can use to gauge the scope of anything short of war that triggers massive social change, the self-esteem movement entered the 21st century as a spectacular success. American society—indeed most Western societies (self-esteem is decidedly a preoccupation of the Western mind)—quite literally experienced a fundamental revolution in thinking about the importance of self-worth and its value to individuals and to society at large.

The blitzkrieg-like advances of the movement’s early years had made “self-esteem” a household word by 1982, and by the close of the 1990s, the central tenet of the movement—essentially that building self-esteem among youth was of paramount importance not just to individuals but to civilization—was deeply engrained in pedagogy, parenting, child and criminal psychology, psychiatry, family therapy, addiction treatment programs and, in some notable cases, even religion.

California’s enormously popular televangelist Robert Schuller, borrowing 30-year-old themes from Norman Vincent Peale’s famous conviction in “the power of positive thinking,” put a whole new spin on sin. Schuller literally redefined sin to mean the lack of self-
estee. To be “born again,” he wrote, people must first free themselves “from the sin of self-degradation” (e.g., quit a 2,000-year-old habit of regarding themselves as worms) and realize that “self-will is sin (while) self-love is salvation.” Indeed, in his 1982 bestseller, Self-Esteem: The New Reformation (Word Publishing) Schuller proclaimed that “the lack of self-worth lies at the root of almost every one of our personal problems.”

Amen, echoed a host of professionals in a new field called self-esteem therapy. Here was the whole point, they said. Lying at the bottom of America’s cesspool of crime, poverty, sloth, drug abuse, violence, depression and greed was a vicious void of self-worth.

In 1984, Nathaniel Branden wrote that he couldn’t think “of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to spouse battery or child molesta—tion—that is not traceable to the problem of low self-esteem.”

Echoing Branden’s sentiments was another Californian, Andrew Mecca, a prominent public health official in the state. Mecca was quick to note that “essentially every social problem can be traced to people’s lack of self-love.”

All that was necessary to make the world a happier and safer place, the thinking went, was to make people start feeling good about themselves for a change. But how best to do that? And what would it cost?

The move was made substantially on economic grounds. Leave it to California—the bell cow of bellwether states—to take on the task of revamping California’s public education system in the name of self-esteem.

What the task force’s team of scholars found surprised the crusaders. Not a single one of the studies they looked at showed much, if any, connection between self-esteem and all the good things that were supposed to come from it.

This somewhat embarrassing finding essentially was interpreted as evidence of the need for more research to corroborate common sense—everybody knew that a lack of self-esteem was crippling young Californians and thus wreaking costly civil havoc.

California “Esteeming”

While the task force busied itself with setting up self-esteem committees around the state, it also assembled a group of university professors to study what scientific literature there was on self-esteem and find out what research had to say on the topic. Such a scientific foundation could come in handy as lawmakers took on the task of revamping California’s public education system.

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The California findings. Years before, as an undergrad at Princeton, he had launched what would become an academic career with a study of self-esteem.

At the time (1973), the term “self-esteem” had barely entered public consciousness. Baumeister was casting around for a topic for his undergraduate thesis, and when a favorite professor suggested he give self-esteem a whirl, he jumped at it.

Taking a strong liking to the subject, Baumeister pursued self-esteem research straight into Princeton’s doctorate program. All this made me realize that it doesn’t do much at all,” he said.

“We thought it would advance the cutting edge of social psychology,” he told an interviewer recently in his new office within FSU’s psychology department.

Last year Baumeister came to Florida State (as a Francis Eppes Eminent Scholar in psychology) from a post at Case Western Reserve University. He reflected at length on his grad school days at Princeton and on his subsequent research that has made Baumeister one of the nation’s foremost authorities on self-esteem. Since 1978, he has produced dozens of papers on the topic, plus at least six books dealing with various aspects of mankind’s age-old struggle with the self.

“We figured that if we could boost self-esteem we not only could learn about ourselves but maybe prove some good in society,” he recalled.

“We thought it would advance the cutting edge of social psychology. And it was easy to get good data—it was fairly easy to get a handle on the lab. So, all this made me think I was onto something good.”

But this rosy outlook took a turn in the early ’80s, when Baumeister learned that not all scholars held his line of research in such high esteem.

At a scientific meeting he attended at Stanford in 1984, a sociologist turned to him and asked: “What’s wrong with self-esteem? How come it never does any good, never predicts anything?”

“Theo Baumeister was incredulous. “What do you mean self-esteem doesn’t do any good?”

“We figured that, for some reason, maybe sociologists weren’t getting much in their own studies, maybe measuring things wrong or what not.”

But as the ’80s wore on, Baumeister paid closer attention to the larger—and rapidly growing—body of research on self-esteem.

From a number of perspectives, he began to re-examine what the phenomenon really does—and doesn’t.

“I started to realize that it doesn’t do much at all,” he said.

“At least not much of what had been promised for it.”

Then he heard about the California task force search for scientific evidence of self-esteem’s efficacy in people’s lives, and how the search came up empty.

To me, this was quite a black eye for the self-esteem movement.”

From that point on, Baumeister designed his lab experiments (primarily involving student subjects) with a more critical eye. For example, in 1993 he edited Self-Esteem: The Puzzle of Low Self-Regard, an in-depth analysis of self-esteem research. The book summarized 20 years of psychological and sociological investigations of self-esteem and its correlations to such things as academic accomplishment, job success, aggression and violence.

By this time, Baumeister had begun to understand one of the key flaws inherent in much self-esteem research. Too many studies were based either largely or entirely on subjective data. Studies would be asked to fill out questionnaires on how they felt about themselves—were they smarter, more attractive or more well-liked by others than average?

Although such self-reported data can’t be avoided in any psychological testing of humans, Baumeister and others worried about the impact of bias in such studies. Devising some objective techniques to reveal bias in self-evaluations, researchers soon proved what many had suspected all along: People with high self-esteem tend to rate themselves as more intelligent, more attractive and more socially appealing than they really are.

Beneath the movement’s enormous popular public face lay a growing discontent among researchers.
Conversely, people with low self-esteem often give themselves poorer ratings in such categories than they rightly deserve. Such findings soon led to clever new ways to crank more objective measures into self-esteem research, Baumeister said.

By the mid-1990s, researchers were conducting some of the most rigorous investigations of self-esteem’s link to behavior ever done. It soon became obvious that there was little in the new findings that the potencies of the self-esteem movement could use to bolster their claims. It hardly mattered. By 1992 the movement had morphed into a mega-industry with embedded, highly lucrative ties to nearly every facet of society.

I think I can! I think I can! I think I can!

Once upon a time, American children heard bedtime stories about a little engine that could. The message: You can overcome obstacles in life if you work hard and try your best.

But by the mid-90s, children were hearing another message: They were great! Miracles even! In classrooms from California to Maine, pre-K through 12, motivational posters proclaimed: “LOOK! HERE IS A VERY SPECIAL STUDENT!”

In 1996, Baumeister’s findings were summarized in an article subtitled “The Dark Side of Self-Esteem” that ran in the journal Psychological Review. The article not only emphatically denied the existence of a link between low self-esteem and aggression, it went a step further—given the right circumstances, high self-esteem can lead to hostility—even violence—against others.

High self-esteem comes in a variety of categories. People with high self-esteem can be highly aggressive, even murderously violent—or congenial pussycats as well.

Aggressive or violent people typically do not have low self-esteem, as many people think. Low self-esteem doesn’t predict a life of crime, aggression or drug abuse. But it can lead to depression in young people.

Slight differences exist in how self-esteem manifests itself between the sexes. Men tend to have slightly higher self-esteem, basing it chiefly on achievement and competence; whereas women place more importance on interpersonal relationships. Women also tend to have more of a negative view of their bodies than do men, a factor that may account for some of the disparity in self-esteem with the opposite sex. —F.S.
will be fine. If you criticize them, they will respond with much greater hostility than anyone else.”

By 1998, such findings—amounting to blasphemy among the self-esteem crowd—had yoked into a substantial backlash against the self-esteem movement by academics and others. Much of the alarm was being sowed over what self-esteem promoters were constantly preaching, namely that children could be given self-esteem without necessarily having to earn it. Simply through daily exposure to self-affirming messages (e.g., “I’m a marvel!”) and pleasant experiences, children could absorb enough “feel-good” self-confidence to tackle (and presumably succeed at) anything. The theory was that this heightened sense of self-worth would better prepare kids for their lessons in reading, math and so forth. Good feelings bring good results, in other words.

By the close of the century, a spate of popular books had appeared harshly attacking this fundamental principle behind what some critics were calling “the cult of self-esteem.” Conservative commentator Charles J. Sykes was among the first to fire a shot. In Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can’t Read, Write or Add (St. Martin’s, 1995), Sykes cited research showing an inverse relationship between kids’ academic accomplishments and their self-esteem. He wrote: “American students who rank last in international comparisons of math abilities, for instance, rank first when they’re asked how they feel about their math abilities.”

In 1998, John P. Hewitt, a University of Massachusetts sociologist, weighed in with The Myth of Self-Esteem: Finding Happiness and Solving Problems in America (Contemporary Issues). The book exemplified an increasingly critical view by scholars of the self-esteem movement’s most cherished claims. Chiefly among these, the notion that genuine self-esteem can somehow be “built” without a foundation in genuine competence.

Meanwhile, additional research was mounting. In 2001, psychologists at the University of Georgia and San Diego State University released the results of a new analysis of 25 years’ worth of data on self-esteem among college students dating back to 1968. The aim was to determine what impact self-esteem has on self-esteem among college students dating back 2001. The findings showed that between 1968 and 1994, students’ self-esteem jumped dramatically, while their SAT scores fell and their anxiety rose. University of Georgia’s W. Keith Campbell, coauthor of the study, summed up the findings this way: “There are many potential benefits of self-esteem, but we wanted to see, among other things, whether those benefits are clear when viewed across time.”

“Unfortunately (we found that) few positive changes have occurred in children’s and young adult’s behavior. Indeed, most of the relevant behavioral indicators have worsened.”

Campbell’s coauthor, Jean Twenge of San Diego State, was more succinct: “College students’ high self-esteem seems to be built on a foundation of sand,” she said.

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**IT’S HARD FOR A PERSON to enjoy life when he or she feels worthless.**—excerpt from advertising copy for a 2002 self-esteem DVD

It’s also hard for millions to resist such pitches by self-esteem purveyors, apparently. Since 1988, readers have snapped up more than 3,000 titles of “how-to” books and manuals related to building self-esteem. Reading material aside, here’s a snapshot of what other self-esteem products were recently available, as found on amazon.com:

**AROMATHERAPY:** essential oils of larch, pine, verbena, neroli and clary sage, all with self-esteem-enhancing powers—$10.95 ea., Bach Flower Essences

**STUFFED TOYS:** five “lovable creatures”—the “Quarks”—who “learn that they do not need to change to be liked.”—$19.95, Discount School Supply

**CDS:** Self-Esteem Through Hypnotherapy—$24.95, MindFit Technologies • “I Can Do It!” Positive Self-Esteem Songs for Kids by Michele Blood—$14.95, MVM/Enlightenment Journeys, Inc., and distributed aimed at children—bullies, thugs, cheats and criminals.

**JEWELRY:** Rhodolite self-esteem pendant ($17.60) ear-rings ($17.40) ring ($22.50)—Silvermoon Jewelry

**GAMES:** “U.R. The Star,” personalized game/pack- age—various prices, Sentimental Journeys, Inc. • “The Dilemma” (noncompetitive family board game)—$16.00, Talicor

**TEACHING AIDS:** “Manifest Your Magnificence,” set of 64 affirmation cards for children—$15.95, P.P. Enterprises • “Assorted Self-Esteem Wall Posters”—$9.99/pkg of six, Discount School Supply

**SEMINARS:** Nathaniel Branden’s Six Pillars of Self-Esteem On-Line Course and Teleseminar—$69.00 • Jack Canfield’s 7-Day Self-Esteem Seminar—$2,495.

**FOR THE LOVE OF ‘ME’**

**SELF-ESTEEM**

For decades, psychologists generally have believed that low self-esteem is the chief malady troubling society’s least favorite individuals—bullies, thugs, cheats and criminals. As touched on previously, the sinister side of self-esteem was never considered until fairly recently. Traditionally, bullies and other “troughs” have been profiled by psychologists as people with hidden feelings of inadequacy, a low self-esteem masked by a nasty, even vicious, exterior.

With hidden feelings of inadequacy, a low self-esteem masked by a nasty, even vicious, exterior.

“Generally speaking, people with low self-esteem tend to be shy, modest, self-effacing, reluctant to take risks, unsure about themselves and likely to blame themselves for failure,” Baumeister wrote. “Aggressive, violent people are not like that.”

**AGGRESSION & VIOLENCE**

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**SEX, DRUGS & OTHER DIVERSIONS**

What does self-esteem mean in the way we play with each other—as both kids and adults? If we like ourselves a lot does it pay off in popularity? In success on the job?

Can a better sense of self-worth keep us healthier? Keep us from smoking, abusing alcohol and other drugs, from finding ourselves pregnant at 16?

If we accept the standard code of today’s self-help industry, the answer to all of the above is an unqualified ‘yes.’ Poor self-regard is the genesis of these and so many more social ills, we’re told.

ment has been glossed over,” he said. “In the 1970s, the California initiative was launched by those who saw an association between high self-esteem and good things, and concluded high self-esteem was the cause. That’s not a legitimate conclusion. “In school, the association of high self-esteem with good grades is certainly nothing, but when you track kids over time, self-esteem does not lead to them to doing better in school. In fact, it’s really more the other way around. Doing better in school leads to higher self-esteem.”

In other words, it’s impossible to predict how a student with high self-esteem is who doing fine academically in sixth grade, for example, will be doing in the ninth. But the research shows a strong correlation between early classroom success and future performance, Baumeister said. Success tends to breed success, which over time can produce a true, uninflated—and far more emotionally healthy—sense of self-worth, he said.

Of all the outcomes studied by Baumeister and his team, school performance was given the most attention. Much of the energy that has driven the self-esteem movement from the beginning has come from a widely held belief that kids with high self-esteem make better grades.

Some of the best evidence reveals just the opposite—that kids with better grades go on to have higher senses of self-esteem. In a 1990 study of 600 Norwegian third- and sixth-graders, researchers tested kids who made good grades in a given school year. They found that in the following year, those children’s self-esteem had risen substantially.

Most of the studies, in fact, showed little, if any, evidence that high self-esteem played any role in children’s future success in the classroom. One of the more compelling studies, a 1986 investigation by two University of Michigan psychologists, Jerald Bachman and Patrick O’Malley, showed that such things as socioeconomic background, I.Q., and early school grades are far better predictors of children’s academic success than their levels of self-esteem.

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Baumeister’s analysis of the data offers little support for such beliefs. When it comes to interpersonal, even romantic, relationshipships, the old saw that you have to love yourself before you can expect others to love you simply doesn’t wash, says Baumeister. In fact, the research testifies that people with high self-esteem often don’t see the world around them as it really is. They often think they’re widely accepted socially, even loved, when in fact they’re self-deluded. Science confirms that conceit as big a turn-off as conventional wisdom always said it was.

“People who have elevated or inflated views of themselves tend to alienate others,” the report states. But a better person with average self-esteem can be a plus in a bad romance, one study found. People with high self-esteem tended to be more willing to take the initiative to break out of a love affair gone bad.

As it turns out, this trait could come in handy for some sexually active young people. Contrary to what self-esteem promoters say, high self-esteem is hardly a recipe for abstinence among youth, the study found. Several large-scale investigations of self-esteem’s association with sexual behavior among people at vulnerable ages all found the same thing. High self-esteem tends to lead to more sexual experimentation, not less. The problem may be worse among girls, in fact.

A study done in 2000 in New Zealand schools showed that girls with higher self-esteem at age 11 were more likely to begin having sex by the age of 15. Another study found that sexually active older girls with higher than average senses of self-worth tend to discount risks of accidental pregnancy, somehow believing they’re exempt from such a calamity.

“All in all, the results do not support the simple view that low self-esteem predisposes people to more or earlier sexual activity,” Baumeister’s team wrote. “If anything, people with high self-esteem are less inhibited, more willing to disregard others’ disapproval or disapproval of one’s behavior.”

For problem drinking and drug abuse, the analysis showed similar findings. As in the work done on smoking, self-reporting bias also may influence the research done in this arena, Baumeister said. Nonetheless, the evidence led his team to conclude that “whatever the causes of alcohol abuse and drug addiction, low self-esteem per se does not appear to be one of them.”

But low self-esteem does play a substantial role in a growing aspect of health that predominantly concerns young women, namely, eating disorders.

Today’s teen- and college-aged women face a national epidemic of anorexia and bulimia, two closely associated emotional disorders that can be fatal if not treated. Irrational worries over weight and body image cause unknown thousands of young female in the U.S. and Europe to starve themselves to within some physical ideal. A great deal of evidence indicates that feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing—low self-esteem—is in fact “a risk factor in disordered eating,” Baumeister’s report noted. Work by Kathleen Vohs, one of the report’s authors, for example, found that bulimia is intricately associated with low self-esteem. About 80 percent of bulimics are female. The researchers thus conclude that “high self-esteem reduces the chances of bulimia in females.”

So, if there’s no good evidence that self-esteem can reliably help students do better in school, stay out of trouble, get along better together or act more responsibly when it comes to sex and use of alcohol and drugs—aside from keeping young girls from purging themselves to death’s door to stay thin, what good is it?

One of the things the research shows is that high self-esteem can make people more resilient, make them keep on plugging after initially failing at something. That attribute can plausibly contribute to what the research says is the number-one benefit for developing a good self-image.

“If the main thing self-esteem does for us, apparently, is to make us feel good, it makes a lot of sense at least for awhile,” Baumeister said. “It makes us feel good, at least for awhile.”

Feeling good about oneself can be a fine thing, he said, particularly when troubles arise, as they inevitably do in all our lives. A genuine sense of self-esteem can give people a stock of positive attitudes that can help them cope with life’s trials. People who don’t have this handy psychological care-package are likely to be more vulnerable to stress and depression, he said.

Is the pursuit of happiness alone ample justification for keeping the fires burning under the self-esteem enterprise pervading today’s educational system?

“If a primary job of our schools is to make kids happy, then maybe it is,” says Baumeister.

Programs that constantly stress the importance of pleasant feelings, that rarely criticize, that avoid competition for fear of hurting someone’s feelings, surely are much more fun on a day-to-day basis than learning how to do square roots or write essays. But here’s where the “feels good first” philosophy ultimately loses its grip on legitimacy as a tool for training young people, he and his coauthors believe. Ultimately, kids who are brought up in an environment where there’s no clear link between personal accomplishment and self-worth too often pay a hefty emotional and even physical price down the road, they argue.

In his college classrooms, Baumeister sees the consequences all the time, he said. Students show up with attitudes that they are somehow entitled to an “A” in his courses because that’s what they were used to getting in high school.

“These people honestly believe they are good when they’re not,” he said.

Sudden doses of reality come as a real shock to some students who lack the emotional fortitude for dealing effectively with failure or challenges to their lofty opinions of themselves. This can be a sure-fire formula for frustration, anxiety, depression and even violence, Baumeister believes.

A noted psychologist and outspoken critic of the self-esteem movement, Martin E.P. Seligman, not only endorses Baumeister’s view on the dangers of unwarranted self-esteem, he regards it as something of a clear-and-present menace to society. In a 1998 address to the National Press Club, Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, laid the blame for the nation’s epidemics of depression and violence squarely at the doorstep of the self-esteem campaign.

In a reference to the rash of schoolyard killings that have traumatized the nation over the past decade, Seligman said that kids with “a mean streak” who have developed high self-esteem “regardless of how well (they are) doing in the world” are prime candidates for resorting to lethal violence when confronted with rejection (as from a girlfriend) or proof of their own inadequacies in schoolwork or in social circles.

Seligman has written a series of books extolling the virtues of using what he calls “positive psychology” to battle pessimism and depression among young people. The happiness that kids get through “feel good” programs at school is “transient,” he says, and often leads to exactly the kinds of problems that self-esteem is supposed to solve.

“What I think has gone wrong,” Seligman said in a subsequence call to dismantle school-based self-esteem programs, “is that we now think we should inject self-esteem directly into our young people, as opposed to producing warranted self-esteem, which I believe comes from doing well with the people you love, doing well in sports (and) doing well in school.”

WHAT COST HAPINESS?

The Poisoion of Empty Praise

Consider the change that the self-esteem movement has wrought in the American public classroom. Seligman told his audiance. Under the banner of building students’ self-worth, many school districts have “dumbed down” coursework, eliminated I.Q. testing and tracking programs, deemphasized individual
Old-Fashioned Willpower

In 1841, the American philosopher poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, drew from his roots as the son of a Protestant minister to write an essay on self-reliance.

In that, Emerson laid out his recipe for building strong character. He implied that such dedicated self-searching isn’t always fun. It requires hard work and willpower, he argued.

Emerson was talking about the practice of self-regulation—the exercise of self-control. Today, the term sounds almost quaint. With our hidebound approach to life’s many diversions, the Puritans may have given the concept a bad name, but the old-fashioned ethic of self-control is nonetheless sound, Baumeister believes. A self-control revival in America’s education system could do wonders, he’s convinced.

“My profound disappointment with the benefits of self-esteem has been partly offset by discovering something else that does seem to work,” he has written. “Self-control, as in being able to regulate one’s emotions, impulses, performance patterns and thoughts, has been partly offset by discovering something else that does seem to work.”

If returned in force to American classrooms, the principles of developing and using self discipline most likely would be bitter medicine indeed to many in the education world who’ve grown accustomed to a diet of warm fuzzies. Such would mean that self-esteem would return to being a byproduct of good performance, as it once was. Some kids would succeed and feel good about themselves; others would fail and take a beating to their egos.

Ultimately, that’s how life is, and how teaching should be, too. Baumeister’s team said in its summation. In the end, all students would wind up with a more accurate, unvarnished understanding of who they are, what they’re capable of—and what they’re not. In short, such a system would equip kids with the knowledge they need to make better life choices, the team said.

“If seeing nothing wrong with praising a child (or adult) for hard work is the hard way. The market has surely seen to that, as even a cursory search of the Web will show.

All told, there are more than 3,000 titles of self-help books and “how-to” self-esteem manuals available, not to mention hundreds of helpful videos, compact disks and family-oriented games (self-esteem building is supposed to be fun).

If one isn’t inclined to read or watch videos, there are other ways to soak up self-esteem. For example, one can wear self-esteem jewelry, made from rhodonite, a mineral advertised as having the power to “uplift the emotional foundations,” thereby making the wearer “more solid and secure.”

Another choice, perhaps used in conjunction with the aforementioned jewelry, is aromatherapy. A variety of “essential oils” squeezed from plants ranging from jasmine to larch are sold as promoters or restorers of self-esteem.

That Americans are hooked on self-esteem as a product, as something sitting on a shelf like a can of peas, is hardly news. The mass marketing of self-esteem, which began in earnest in the early 1990s, has produced a multi-billion-dollar industry, complete with a boardroom of infinitely famous captains. Top salespeople include late-night TV pitchman Anthony Robbins; self-proclaimed New Age guru Deepak Chopra; feminist icon Gloria Steinem; best-selling author Bernie Siegel and of late, pop psychologist Phillip (“Dr. Phil”) McGraw.

Against such phenomenal commercial appeal, do the latest findings that reveal the true nature of self-esteem have any hope of reforming American education?

“There are too many people making lots of money off self-esteem,” Baumeister said. “They’re very reluctant to hear that it doesn’t really work, and I doubt they’re going to change their opinions any time soon. But, you never know what may turn up.”

Just recently, prominent leaders within the self-esteem movement have modified some of the louder claims made by early boosters. Acknowledging scientists’ growing concern over the issue of promoting self-esteem per se, with no clear association with one’s subsequent personal behavior, J.D. Hawkins, former president of the National Association for Self Esteem, said “any conception of self-esteem” must include accepting responsibility for one’s actions.

“If you are not personally and socially responsible, then your self-worth is built on a false reality and, therefore, it’s not healthy,” Hawkins was quoted as saying.

On the self-help orthodoxy of daily reminding ourselves how great we are as individuals, Hawkins association now carries the following caveat on its Web site: “Receiving positive affirmations about yourself—and hoping for results—is like wagging the tail of a dog in hopes (that the) tail-wagging will make the dog happy. It won’t.

“The dog must be happy first, and then its tail will wag.”

Watts wrote this as the hymn “Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed,” in 1707; it was set to a different tune and copyrighted by Ralph E. Hudson and published with the title “At the Cross” in 1855 —Editor.