

Healing My Self Image

By Janet Crocker

Many of us battle with seeing ourselves as people worthy of being loved and respected. Though we may project an image of confidence, underneath our self image is fragile and, for many, even broken.

What image do I have of myself? Am I confident and free to express who I really am and how I really feel? Or, am I hesitant about letting others see the real 'me' for fear of being rejected because, "If people really knew me they wouldn't like me"?

In a spiritual reflection group entitled IMAGES, we work from the premise that self image can change; that a fragile image can be strengthened and a broken image can come to healing. In IMAGES we seek to understand how each person's image of self has developed, how it has been supported and challenged by others and by life experiences. We seek to understand how, from that fragile or broken self image, one has related or tried to relate to others, to the world and, above all, to God.

Within the group we use the following definition of 'image': "the coalescence of learned ideas, imaginings, thoughts and decisions with audio, visual and kinesthetic memories which affect one's values and behaviours". Exploring images of God, self and world using this definition as a basis can yield powerful insights into a person's own values and behaviours. Likewise, exploring these personal values and behaviours can help the individual recognize images of God, self and world out of which they live and act.

Southdown may be the first place where I can find the courage and opportunity to reveal how fragile I feel about who I am a revelation not only to others but to myself as well. This may be the only place where people have listened to me, accepted me, supported me and encouraged me in my brokenness. This may be the place where I can dare to develop a feeling of self worth.

As I become involved in the process of healing my self image I can begin to explore new ways of relating. It may take many weeks to hear and to trust that others can not only accept me, but like me and even love me in my brokenness. When I can start to believe that I am lovable to other human beings who know 'the worst' in me, perhaps I can begin to look at the possibility that God loves me even in my brokenness too. Perhaps I can look at how I have imaged God in the past and how I have related to God.

So long as I believe no one can love me as I am, how can I trust in the words of a God who says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love"? I may preach about this kind of God, but I may not recognize this God in my own experience. My image may be of a demanding God, or a scorekeeper who constantly checks and weighs my faults against my attempts to do or to be good. My image of self cannot be separated from my image of God.

With the freeing of my image of self comes the possibility of developing a new relationship with God. I no longer need to work to placate an angry God, or struggle to earn God's love. Rather, I can respond to God in freedom and with the dignity God intended for me. Similarly, I can begin to relate to others as equals.

It is gift to *know* within myself that I am good, lovable, talented and have great value. To walk with dignity with my head held high is evidence of the healing of my self image. To be able to claim my place among the saints is a major step on the road to wholeness. But it is not the end of the journey. If my focus goes no further than this, the journey to wholeness will be incomplete.

It is when this new self image becomes so much a part of me that I can begin to see God, others, and the world through tills new perspective that the journey becomes exciting again. Then I can recognize it as gift. Then I can express gratitude. Then I can go beyond holding it or even grasping it, to freely give of it - to move to the stance of self donation.

Ministry becomes revitalized as it becomes a response of loving service from one who recognizes themselves as loved and valuable.