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Rules, praise, and self-esteem

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I couldn't follow a single rule. I was attending a one-day writing seminar with short writing assignments. The rules included no crossing out, no stopping to reread what you've written, and no commenting when others read their work except to say, "Thank you." There were other rules, but this final one stumped me.

When we divided into groups of three to hear the efforts of our fellow writers, I listened intently. The first man was a craftsman. In five minutes he'd honed an engaging piece full of honesty and heart. I was impressed and said so.

The other member of our group began crying while she read words that revealed unresolved personal issues. I couldn't help acknowledging her courage in sharing with strangers. The instructor overheard and sprang to his feet. Encouragement was unacceptable. Not only did he cut me short; he reiterated to the group the inviolability of only saying thank you.

In my heart, I strongly disagreed with this rule. It seemed arbitrary and unkind. Now I had two issues: wanting to praise good ideas and disagreeing with a rule. I dealt with the second issue first. Quietly praying, I silenced my point of view. Since rules often seem to me to be the result of changeable human opinions, I decided one less opinion would be helpful. Instead of placing my view first, simply because it was mine, I sought higher guidance.

I didn't open my mouth

In the silence of self-abnegation, it was easier to hear God's voice. The thought came instantly, This was the instructor's show, and he deserved my full support and obedience in whatever rules he deemed appropriate. Conundrum solved.

So for one day I struggled not to cross out, reread, or praise others. A lifetime of identifying and magnifying the good in others seemed impossible to suppress. Finally I simply said nothing to the person reading. If I didn't open my mouth to say thank you, I didn't have to choke back the extra syllables of praise that naturally followed.

At the end of the workshop, I talked to the instructor about this rule. He firmly maintained that praise could be as harmful to free expression as criticism. He said that some students might feel that they couldn't duplicate the success of a piece, and that they would simply stop writing to avoid failure.

Other students might begin writing to earn another's praise instead of developing their own ability to discern what was good. What a fascinating concept that praise could inhibit progress.

On reflection, I remembered my stepson, who didn't tell us when he'd scored a 98 on a test. He'd never scored so well and feared that he might not do it again. He didn't want the pressure or expectation, or to disappoint us later. His grades did improve from that point. But we carefully avoided asking too many questions. We silently supported his intelligence and growing facility with schoolwork. We trusted he was doing his best, regardless of the score. Slowly he began to share a few successes on individual tests and then final grades. When he did, we rejoiced with him. Otherwise we allowed him the experience of discovering his own capabilities.

The Bible instructs: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness" (II Tim. 2:15, 16).

These verses are taking on fresh meaning to me. Is praise vain babbling, or is it rightly dividing the word of truth?

God's unconditional approval

I've realized that I need to consider carefully my motive in praising others. Is it to pressure them to repeat an action that I approve? Is it to feel important as a critic or to ride the coattails of their achievement? Is it to build their self-esteem? If the latter, I'm considering the fact that the biblical imperative directs the worker to feel approved by God rather than by parents, coaches, or teachers.

God's approval, like God's love, is unconditional. The communication of praise rightly comes directly from God to man and woman. I'm realizing the value of building self-esteem by acknowledging that *God* approves of the student rather than focusing attention on my own approval or praise.

I still look for what is worthwhile and good in others' work. But I'm thinking before I speak my approval. Each individual should realize that his or her ability comes from God and know that God approves of each one's unique expression and right action. The purpose of my praise, then, is to echo the praise of God. Perhaps then self-esteem will be built on a diviner basis.