

THE SIX PILLARS OF SELF-ESTEEM



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ALSO BY NATHANIEL BRANDEN
HONORING THE SELF HOW TO RAISE YOUR SELF-ESTEEM
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Acknowledgments

To Devers Branden

Introduction

My purpose in this book is to identify, in greater depth and comprehensiveness than in my previous writings, the most important factors on which self-esteem depends. If self-esteem is the health of the mind, then few subjects are of comparable urgency.

The turbulence of our times demands strong selves with a clear sense of identity, competence, and worth. With a breakdown of cultural consensus, an absence of worthy role models, little in the public arena to inspire our allegiance, and disorientingly rapid change a permanent feature of our lives, it is a dangerous moment in history not to know who we are or not to trust ourselves. The stability we cannot find in the world we must create within our own persons. To face life with low self-esteem is to be at a severe disadvantage. These considerations are part of my motivation in writing this book.

In essence, the book consists of my answers to four questions: What is self-esteem? Why is self-esteem important? What can we do to raise the level of our self-esteem? What role do others play in influencing our self-esteem?

Self-esteem is shaped by both internal and external factors. By “internal” I mean factors residing within, or generated by, the individual—ideas or beliefs, practices or behaviors. By “external” I mean factors in the environment: messages verbally or nonverbally transmitted, or experiences evoked, by parents, teachers, “significant others,” organizations, and culture. I examine self-esteem from the inside and the outside: What is the contribution of the individual to his or her self-esteem and what is the contribution of other people? To the best of my knowledge, no investigation of this scope has been attempted before.

When I published *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* in 1969, I told myself I had said everything I could say on this subject. In 1970, realizing that there were “a few more issues” I needed to address, I wrote *Breaking Free*. Then, in 1972, “to fill in a few more gaps,” I wrote *The Disowned Self*. After that, I told myself I was absolutely and totally finished with self-esteem and went on to write on other subjects. A decade or so passed, and I began to think about how much more I had personally experienced and learned about self-esteem since my first work, so I decided to write “one last book” about it; *Honoring the Self* was published in 1983. A couple of years later I thought it would be useful to write an action-oriented guide for individuals who wanted to work on their own self-esteem—*How to Raise Your Self-Esteem*, published in 1986. Surely I had finally finished with this subject, I told myself. But during this same period, “the self-esteem movement” exploded across the country; everyone was talking about self-esteem; books were written, lectures and conferences were given—and I was not enthusiastic about the quality of what was being presented to people. I found myself in some rather heated discussions with colleagues. While some of what was offered on self-esteem was excellent, I thought that a good deal was not. I realized how many issues I had not yet addressed, how many questions I needed to consider that I had not considered before, and how much I had carried in my head but never actually said or written. Above all, I saw the necessity of going far beyond my earlier work in spelling out the factors that create and sustain high or healthy self-esteem. (I use “high” and “healthy” interchangeably.) Once again, I found myself drawn back to examine new aspects of this inexhaustibly rich field of study, and to think my way down to deeper levels of understanding of what is, for me, the single most important psychological subject in the world.

I understood that what had begun so many years before as an interest, or even a fascination, had become a mission.

Speculating on the roots of this passion, I go back to my teenage years, to the time when emerging autonomy collided with pressure to conform. It is not easy to write objectively about that period, and I do not wish to suggest an arrogance I did not and do not feel. The truth is, as an adolescent I had an inarticulate but sacred sense of mission about my life. I had the conviction that nothing mattered more than retaining the ability to see the world through my own eyes. I thought that that was how everyone should