

# A Conversation in Healing...

with Angela Smith

## Introduction...

I have dedicated over a decade to exposing institutionalized child abuse. In that time, I have had the opportunity to know many survivors of behavior modification programs. My heart breaks daily for the seemingly endless pain I see in many of you. I am offering this "conversation in healing" as a fellow survivor with hope that my experiences and thoughts may help you heal.

I am not a counselor or therapist. I see therapy as similar to religion. It takes a margin of faith for either to be effective. And, for me, my faith in both therapy and religion has been broken. That is not to say I lack faith in humanity or even "God". But, the manmade institutions that dictate what is true, best, or right for humanity have in no way proven themselves to be effective in protecting or guiding others to ethical living.

## How I lost my religion...

In a bit, I'll describe the process I went through to come back from trauma and reclaim my life. But, first, I think it may help you to know my experiences in trauma and hope that if we have survived similar pains, that the healing process may also be similar.

I was born in 1973. By the time I was 3 years old, my parents had been divorced twice and I had lived in California, Montana, New York, and Washington. In the initial custody arrangement (divorce #1), my father retained custody. However, he was in the military and moved from California to New York (a continent away from my mother) and left me in the care of my paternal grandparents. I was a toddler at this time. My parents reunited briefly and in the second custody arrangement (divorce #2), my mother retained custody. After this, I rarely saw my father or his side of the family. And, when I did see my father it was more a curse than a blessing.

My father, Robert Smith, was neglectful and abusive. I always felt like I just wanted his love and acceptance. I did everything I could to be the "best" I could be and could never understand why he never seemed to care about who I was or what I needed. I thought if I could just make him see that he had the wrong idea (because, I thought that was the problem) that he would understand that it was okay for him to love me and provide for me (because, I was a "good kid"). It took a lot of support from caring male role models to

teach me that I was lovable and that if my father wasn't fulfilling my paternal needs, that it was his fault/responsibility, not mine. I still couldn't shake the desire to be loved and have my needs be mutually respected with the needs of my father. And, around 1995, my father wrote me a letter bragging about his new job at a "troubled teen" program in Missouri. He never named the program. But, he bragged about how he abused children at the facility. He knew I had been traumatized by my experience at Provo Canyon School in 1989 and this letter was the end of any latent desire I had for his love and acceptance.

My father is also an evangelical "Christian" and has tried to sell me on everything from his latest church to his latest money-making scheme for most of my life. It is in part, my experience with my father that has left me with an overall distaste for religion.

In 1979, at age 6, I was orally sodomized by a babysitter's son. He also left bruises and tearing on the exterior of my vagina. I was then given my first pelvic exam by a pediatrician, which, felt like being violated all over again. The prosecutor allowed for a plea-bargain so I would not be forced to testify as my therapist and family thought it would further harm me. I went to individual and family counseling twice a week from the time I was molested in 1979 until I was fourteen.

When I was fourteen, my mother remarried. My step-father was physically, psychologically, and sexually abusive to me. My mother worked night shift and he worked day shift. I rarely saw my mother and spent too much time alone with my step-father. The abuse became so bad that I called my mother at work and begged her to come home. She said we would talk about it later. But, in the end, she did come home early that day. I told her about the abuse. I showed her the bruises and cuts. And, she didn't believe me. I broke down. And, soon thereafter I attempted suicide as I felt it was my only escape from that particular hell.

In spring of 1989, I took an overdose of tranquilizers that had been prescribed to treat my nerves and assist with curing my stress-related ulcers. I slept for over 36 hours. When I woke up, I was both relieved and afraid. I called my grandmother and told her what had been happening and that I had attempted suicide. She called her therapist and the therapist recommended voluntary in-patient care at Fairfax Psychiatric Hospital in Kirkland, WA. At Fairfax, they had me on anti-depressants and I was soon "magically cured" of my depression and suicidal thoughts. However, being "cured", I was told I was going to be discharged. At the time, I knew of no other option except returning to the abusive environment that had inspired me to attempt suicide. I asked my assigned psychiatrist what other options were available because I did not want to return to an abusive home. The psychiatrist showed me a video-tape advertisement for Provo Canyon School in Utah. The video showed a beautiful

campus and stated it was a college-prep boarding school that provided counseling 24-hours a day for victims of trauma and abuse. I thought it would be a place to heal. But, it was the worst trauma I have ever experienced. (see: [www.provotruthexposed.com](http://www.provotruthexposed.com))

Provo Canyon School, like most, if not all, behavior modification programs, uses a level system. The level, phase, or step systems used by behavior modification programs are often broken up into a variety of labels and numbers. However, they are all based on the following method:

Phase 1. Deny all contact with outside world. Deny interaction between “students”. Deny basic needs as punishment (food, sleep, clothing, heat, water, etc.). Create confusion and use physical and mental exhaustion as a tool to breakdown “old behaviors”. This causes a complete mental breakdown in the child. (Forced betrayal of one’s self.)

Phase 2. Once a child becomes “agreeable” to submission, small “rewards” are given for obedience and the risk of being returned to the earlier phase is held out as the worst punishment one can receive. Children are persuaded to make up stories (false confessions) about themselves and others in the program in order to get rewarded for their “honesty”. (Forced betrayal of one’s peers.)

Phase 3. The child has no more opinion of him/herself based on own self-image or the reflection of his/her peers. The child completely loses and disassociates between “old life/old behavior” and “new life/new behavior”. (Complete mental/emotional breakdown and intentional creation of dissociative disorder.)

Phase 4. The child is completely submissive and brainwashed. The child hates everything they once were or knew. The child only feels safe in the program and only credits the program with his/her success. Child is given “responsibility” to “lead” other children. (Child is now brainwashed and actively aiding his captors in brainwashing others.)

In order to undo the damage done by these programs, it may be necessary to retrace our steps back through the process and take healing measures as we go. Many survivors effectively reject the program and acknowledge that the program has caused harm. This, in my experience, is the initiation of the healing process. Unfortunately, most of us get lost between rejecting the program and learning to accept ourselves.

Next, we find ourselves in need of reclaiming who we are and what we want for our lives. In 2003, I suffered an extreme post-traumatic stress experience. I had thought I had a handle on everything. But, I was faced with the trauma I experienced at Provo Canyon School and knew that I had not really begun to heal from the fear and trauma. I took six-months to hermit away and work to reclaim myself. I had been exposed to enough therapy in my life to understand the basic process of "peeling the onion" and finding out the underlying issues causing my current distress. I spent months examining my pain and suffering through the following process. It helped me strengthen my self-esteem and self-confidence. I believe it allowed me to reclaim myself. Here is that process:

I had a pretty severe PTSD episode in 2003 at the UW. The TA for my Women and Law class was a raving lunatic. She screamed at me about paper margins and failing and threatened me with academic dismissal (she did not have that power, btw) and it was simply because my old printer wasn't apparently printing the 1" margins properly. I had the printer set correctly and followed the directions for the paper requirements to a "t" but she was wholly unreasonable and blaming me for a technical error beyond my control. I felt like I was back at PCS. In fact, I really, for about half an hour, thought I was at PCS. I was really disoriented and in a semi-state of shock. I was shaking and nearly collapsed.

Anyhow, I took a hardship withdrawal and went to a therapist (once). Her office was in a maze of a structure and I felt high anxiety about being there. She was nice enough, but, I felt trapped and forced into seeing someone. But, I never wanted to have that kind of episode again, so, I went. I explained the situation to the therapist and she wrote the letter I needed to obtain the hardship withdrawal for that quarter. I ended up spending about 6 months in isolation. Meaning, I stayed home. I didn't see any friends, didn't talk to anyone on the phone. And, basically hermitted (if that's even a word) myself and I believe healed myself psychologically without any outside help.

I did a few things. I sat quietly and asked myself a number of questions slowly but surely to get to the root of my anxiety and trauma and then reclaimed my heart and mind. Basically, I had to teach myself to care about myself and my needs and undo all the damage done by adults during my "developmental" years. I had to re-establish my sense of autonomy, independence, and confidence. I had to learn to trust myself completely. I think it may take separating yourself, briefly, from those who think they know you, and letting yourself know you again. I really don't think therapists can help with that. But, if you find solace in therapy, I support that.

Peeling the onion goes something like:

What am I feeling?

Anxiety

Why?

Because I'm afraid of losing control.

Why?

Because I've had my control taken from me in the past.

How?

I was raped. I was institutionalized. etc.

How did I feel?

Helpless and hopeless, desperate to survive but praying to die.

Who made me feel this way?

My neighbor. My father. My step-father. Provo Canyon School. etc.

Okay, then...

I connected with the memories of the moments of despair and self-doubt created by the way I was treated by those in positions of "authority" and "trust" (this may include you, your "old self" (who you truly are) may need to be reclaimed from your "new program-created self") one by one (those that left noticeable mental scars) and shouted out:

"You have no control over me."

"You have no right to my body or mind."

"You have no control over me."

"You will never have control over me again."

"You only had an illusion of control because I was foolish enough to believe you over myself."

etc. etc.

It was a long process. But, in the end, I feel confident. I know myself heart, body, mind, etc. And, I am making it my mission to be free and help others be free. Free from self-doubt and shame and despair. Free to live, love, and be loved.

I hope this helps. It helped me. And, it was all on my own.

After reclaiming myself, I made commitments to myself. This in part was necessary for me to maintain my commitment to who I truly am and not what anyone else thinks or wishes I would be. Once I reclaimed myself, I needed to find a way to be my own best friend and self-advocate. Below is an article on understanding self-esteem and self-respect:

Published on *Psychology Today* (<http://www.psychologytoday.com>)

## **SELF-ESTEEM VS. SELF-RESPECT**

By *admin*

Created *Nov 1 1999 - 12:00am*

Our culture is concerned with matters of self-esteem. Self-respect, on the other hand, may hold the key to achieving the peace of mind we seek. The two concepts seem very similar but the differences between them are crucial.

To esteem anything is to evaluate it positively and hold it in high regard, but evaluation gets us into trouble because while we sometimes win, we also sometimes lose. To respect something, on the other hand, is to accept it.

I enjoy singing and do so quite frequently. As those within earshot will attest, I'm not very good but I love to sing anyway. During summer parties I frequently sing solo and play the part of the "moving ball," trying to stay just ahead of the music to provide the words for those who don't know the song. I am not saddened by my lack of talent. I accept the way I sing. Because of this acceptance, I am able to sing without being evaluative of myself or concerned with what others think.

The word acceptance suggests to some readers that our culture does indeed deal with this idea of self-respect; after all, don't we have the concept that it is important to accept our limitations? Aren't many of us encouraged "to change the things we can change, accept the things we cannot change and know the difference between the two?" I believe I could learn to sing better, so my acceptance is not based on my limitations. Nor is it based on resignation, since I am not resigned to the belief that I cannot sing well and am not committed to any particular belief about my voice in the future.

The person with self-respect simply likes her- or himself. This self-respect is not contingent on success because there are always failures to contend with. Neither is it a result of comparing ourselves with others because there is always someone better. These are tactics usually employed to increase self-esteem. Self-respect, however, is a given. We simply like ourselves or we don't. With self-respect, we like ourselves because of who we are and not because of what we can or cannot do.

Consider an interesting test of self-respect. If someone compliments us, what is our reaction? If we are very pleased, it would suggest a certain amount of uncertainty about our skill. Imagine that somebody whose opinion we respect told us that we were great at spelling three-letter words, or that our pronunciation of vowels was wonderful. Chances

are we would not be moved. We know we can do it in the first case, and we don't care in the second. Because we were not evaluating ourselves, the compliment was unimportant. The more instances in which we don't "take the compliment," the less vulnerable we become to evaluation and insult.

My recent research, with Judith White and Johnny Walsch at Harvard University, points to the advantages of self-respect. Compared to those with high self-esteem who are still caught in an evaluative framework, those with self-respect are less prone to blame, guilt, regret, lies, secrets and stress.

Many people worry whether there is life after death. Just think about it: If we gave up self-evaluation, we could have more life before death.

Adapted by Ph.D.

Ellen J. Langer, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, is author of *The Power of Mindful Learning* (Perseus, 1997) and *Mindfulness* (Perseus, 1989).

(Source: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199911/self-esteem-vs-self-respect>)

I have committed myself to the principles of truth, beauty, freedom, and love. And, through a commitment to empathy, kindness, acceptance, humility, and self-analysis, I have been able to maintain my self-esteem and self-respect.

As a co-founder of HEAL, a survivor, and an activist I have been repeatedly attacked by those working in or in charge of behavior modification programs. I have been called names and harassed. I have had passersby spit in my face at protests and have witnessed those I care for and respect attacked in similar ways by the same or similarly situated people. An elderly woman was slapped in the face by a passerby at a protest I attended in 2000. She had done nothing to provoke that attack. And, none of us have done anything to warrant our being abused, then or now, by behavior modification programs or their supporters.

I am able to keep fighting because of the commitments I have made to myself to allow myself the freedom to be me and to express my thoughts and feelings without fear. Many people do not understand or allow themselves such freedom. And, many survivors, like most of society, allow social norms and peer pressure to prevent self-actualization or self-expression. ([Behaviorists say the opposite extreme of behavior modification is the allowance of self-expression.](#))

Once I reclaimed myself and made a commitment to the values I have always believed in, I was ready to begin healing my relationships with others. I

recognize that nobody is perfect. And, that a free world is far better than an isolated world. I allow myself to accept myself and others. I allow for social awkwardness, eccentricities, and idiosyncrasies. In this world, we are exposed to so many cultures, religions, ideas, and individuals that it is nearly impossible to safely navigate without a firm foundation in ourselves as individuals. It is easy to get lost in the sea of consciousness and find ourselves without a voice. This is why healing takes self-knowledge, self-actualization, self-acceptance, self-esteem, and self-respect. And, healing our relationships takes a commitment to ourselves and our desires.

Here are some additional resources on healing:

#### BOOKS

Toxic Psychiatry by Dr. Peter Breggin

Reclaiming Our Children by Dr. Peter Breggin

The Art of Loving by Erich Fromm

#### ARTICLES

Self Esteem vs. Self Respect (full article above)

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199911/self-esteem-vs-self-respect>

Self-Actualization (full article below)

Maslow on Self-Actualizing Persons

Maslow, on the basis of a study of persons (living and dead) selected as being self-actualizing persons on the basis of a general definition, described the self-actualizing person as follows, as compared to ordinary or average people (Maslow, 1956):

1. More efficient perception of reality and more comfortable relations with it. This characteristic includes the detection of the phoney and dishonest person and the accurate perception of what exists rather than a distortion of perception by one's needs. Self-actualizing people are more aware of their environment, both human and nonhuman. They are not afraid of the unknown and can tolerate the doubt, uncertainty, and tentativeness accompanying the perception of the new and unfamiliar. This is clearly the characteristic described by Combs and Snygg and Rogers as awareness of perceptions or openness to experience.

2. Acceptance of self, others, and nature. Self-actualizing persons are not ashamed or guilty about their human nature, with its shortcoming, imperfections, frailties, and weaknesses. Nor are they critical of these aspects of other people. They respect and esteem themselves and others. Moreover, they are honest, open, genuine, without pose or facade. They are not,

however, self-satisfied but are concerned about discrepancies between what is and what might be or should be in themselves, others, and society. Again, these characteristics are those which Kelly, Rogers, and Combs and Snygg include in their descriptions.

3. Spontaneity. Self-actualizing persons are not hampered by convention, but they do not flout it. They are not conformists, but neither are they anti-conformist for the sake of being so. They are not externally motivated or even goal-directed- rather their motivation is the internal one of growth and development, the actualization of themselves and their potentialities. Rogers and Kelly both speak of growth, development and maturation, change and fluidity.

4. Problem-centering. Self-actualizing persons are not ego-centered but focus on problems outside themselves. They are mission-oriented, often on the basis of a sense of responsibility, duty, or obligation rather than personal choice. This characteristic would appear to be related to the security and lack of defensiveness leading to compassionateness emphasized by Combs and Snygg.

5. The quality of detachment; the need for privacy. The self-actualizing person enjoys solitude and privacy. It is possible for him to remain unruffled and undisturbed by what upsets others. He may even appear to be asocial. This is a characteristic that does not appear in other descriptions. It is perhaps related to a sense of security and self-sufficiency.

6. Autonomy, independence of culture and environment. Self-actualizing persons, though dependent on others for the satisfaction of the basic needs of love, safety, respect and belongingness, "are not dependent for their main satisfactions on the real world, or other people or culture or means-to-ends, or in general, on extrinsic satisfactions. Rather they are dependent for their own development and continued growth upon their own potentialities and latent resources." Combs and Snygg and Rogers include independence in their descriptions, and Rogers also speaks of an internal locus of control.

7. Continued freshness of appreciation. Self-actualizing persons repeatedly, though not continuously, experience awe, pleasure, and wonder in their everyday world.

8. The mystic experience, the oceanic feeling. In varying degrees and with varying frequencies, self-actualizing persons have experiences of ecstasy, awe, and wonder with feelings of limitless horizons opening up, followed by the conviction that the experience was important and had a carry-over into everyday life. This and the preceding characteristic appear to be related and to add something not in other descriptions, except perhaps as it may be included in the existential living of Rogers.

9. Gemeinschaftsgefühl. Self-actualizing persons have a deep feeling of empathy, sympathy, or compassion for human beings in general. This feeling is, in a sense, unconditional in that it exists along with the recognition of the existence in others of negative qualities that provoke occasional anger, impatience, and disgust. Although empathy is not specifically listed by others (Combs and Snygg include compassion), it would seem to be implicit in other descriptions including acceptance and respect.

10. Interpersonal relations. Self-actualizing people deep interpersonal relations with others. They are selective, however, and their circle of friends may be small, usually consisting of other self-actualizing persons, but the capacity is there. They attract others to them as admirers or disciples. This characteristic, again, is at least implicit in the formulations of others.

11. The democratic character structure. The self-actualizing person does not discriminate on the basis of class, education, race, or color. He is humble in his recognition of what he knows in comparison with what could be known, and he is ready and willing to learn from anyone. He respects everyone as potential contributors to his knowledge, merely because they are human beings.

12. Means and ends. Self-actualizing persons are highly ethical. They clearly distinguish between means and ends and subordinate means to ends.

13. Philosophical, unhostile sense of humor. Although the self-actualizing persons studied by Maslow had a sense of humor, it was not of the ordinary type. Their sense of humor was the spontaneous, thoughtful type, intrinsic to the situation. Their humor did not involve hostility, superiority, or sarcasm. Many have noted that a sense of humor characterizes people who could be described as self-actualizing persons, though it is not mentioned by those cited here.

14. Creativeness. All of Maslow's subjects were judged to be creative, each in his own way. The creativity involved here is not special-talent creativeness. It is a creativeness potentially inherent in everyone but usually suffocated by acculturation. It is a fresh, naive, direct way of looking at things. Creativeness is a characteristic most would agree to as characterizing self-actualizing persons.

(From Patterson, C. H. The Therapeutic Relationship. Monterey, CA. 1985. Dr. C. H. Patterson)

Source: <http://www.personcentered.com/selfact.html>

I sincerely hope this helps everyone heal. You all deserve and have always deserved to be treated with acceptance, love, kindness, compassion, and respect.