

## Falling Out of Love...with Myself (1998)

When I consider the basic joyfulness of infants and young children I believe I started out being in love with myself. I took the greatest pleasure in discovering my arms and legs and other rewarding aspects of myself. Later, I got great satisfaction in learning to walk, talk, and feed myself. This is not to say that I did not develop anxiety and fears, yet I had a daily, large input of pleasure in my process of growing. My disillusion with myself began when I began to be criticized and disciplined for making mistakes.

Judging from my behavior with my parents, two things gradually happened. I shifted my focus from preoccupation with the *process* of developing to the end-point of achieved goals. I wanted to be as accomplished as my parents required. This is a fundamental change. Where before, I was perceiving the minute particulars of, say, dressing myself—connecting and making meaning of a sock that twisted and had to be straightened, and enjoying the learning—when I became more goal-oriented, the process itself became frustrating and I felt inept.

And at the same time, I became more and more subject to the extrinsic motives furnished by rewards and punishment; less and less available to the joys of perceiving and connecting with my process.

Parents tend to believe it is important to set high standards for their children. They cannot live up to such expectations, yet they could strive for them and thus achieve their maximum possibilities. The downside of high standards is that I fail a lot.

Another potent force in my relationship with myself is the way I *interpret* the efforts of my parents to civilize me. Appreciation feels great, while criticism hurts. So it is criticism that I become reactive to.

Gottman's research on the relationship between husband and wife has a bearing here. As reported earlier, he found that couples who balanced criticism with *five times* as much appreciation had successful marriages. My experience with child-rearing practices in our culture suggests the ratio is five criticisms to one appreciation.

In any case, there is considerable evidence that between parents, teachers, and peers, and given my faulty interpretations, I experience and pay more attention to being criticized than appreciated. That, together with the practice of encouraging humility and unselfishness, leads me to fall out of love with myself. In effect, my marriage with myself, my relationship, is a kind of divorce without separation. The voices in my head are seldom appreciative. The field tends to be overwhelmingly critical, with low expectations, high anxiety about competence, and well-developed defensive and avoidance strategies. None of these is supportive of a loving, nurturing relationship—of the holding environment that will bring out the best in me.