

THE VALUE OF ORDINARY

AN EXCERPT FROM EARNING YOUR OWN RESPECT

Thom Rutledge

"What are you most afraid of?" she asked. I don't remember how we got on the subject of fear, but this was psychotherapy after all.

I took the question in, repeated it to myself: *What am I most afraid of?* My answer came back quickly, and it surprised me. "Being ordinary. That's my greatest fear."

Linda, my therapist those many years ago, did not seem surprised by my answer.

"Describe 'ordinary' to me," she said.

"Ordinary," I said as if I were in a spelling bee, "my idea of ordinary is losing all sense of individuality. Like getting up in the morning, going to work in a charcoal gray suit, with the standard maroon necktie, with a briefcase like everyone else's, with a haircut that is indistinguishable from my fellow residents in hell, to a day that is dedicated to meeting somebody else's agenda that I have no personal interest in. And at the end of my day -- that never belonged to me in the first place -- I would go to sleep so that I could get up the next morning and do it all over again."

What I have discovered since that therapy session many years ago is that my fear of being ordinary is not at all unique; you might even say it is quite ordinary. Each of us may have a different picture of what it means to be ordinary, but most of us will have, in one form or another, some fear of blending into the background of life, a fear that we might never distinguish ourselves from the masses.

I now consider it my challenge to make peace with my ordinariness. I have learned that without it, I am alone --- by my own choosing. To acknowledge the many ways in which we are all ordinary does not negate our individuality; in fact, it strengthens it.

Acknowledging how we are like everyone else is the experience of humility. Humility is the knowledge of our sameness, of our connection to other individuals and to community at its many levels, from familial to global. Humility is characterized by an awareness of who we are (as opposed to what we can do), and in this way, humility is an important part of developing realistic and positive self-esteem.

Abraham Lincoln is an excellent example of a man who certainly distinguished himself from his peers, a man of many qualities that were, to say the least, extraordinary; but by all we know of this great man, he appears to have perceived himself in quite ordinary terms. It might even be said that a significant part of Mr. Lincoln's greatness emanated from his refusal to think of himself as different from others.

Traditionally, we think of humility as being about not thinking too well of ourselves. But humility is also erroneously associated with the experience of being less than others and is equated with low self-esteem. However, to feel less good or less worthy than another is an experience of separation, not connection. There is a big difference between humility and humiliation. Humility can be evasive, confusing and even tricky, but one thing is for sure: Humility is the bedrock of personal responsibility.

Humility is not about being in the one down position; it's about being on a level playing field. It's not about being in a position of unreasonable vulnerability; it's about being in a position of strength. But the strength of humility isn't strength that is wielded over or against anyone or anything else; it is a strength that comes from knowing that we have a place in this world --- that we belong.

Thom Rutledge, LCSW is a psychotherapist and author of several books. "The Value of Ordinary" is an excerpt from *Earning Your Own Respect*. For more information visit www.thomrutledge.com or join Thom on Facebook: www.facebook.com/thom.rutledge.9

