

# Self-Respect & Your Personal Value System

An excerpt from *Earning Your Own Respect*  
by Thom Rutledge, LCSW

Be careful to not become so caught up in getting ready to live that you forget to live.

Imagine a football team that becomes so involved in planning their strategy for the big game that they forget to leave the locker room to go on the playing field, or the student who never applies the knowledge acquired from years of study. Psychotherapy, personal growth seminars, and reading self-help books (like mine) are classroom time, locker-room preparation. The real deal is out there – in our day-to-day, unpredictable lives. The challenge is to live a life that you feel good about, to be the person you choose to be. On your deathbed, when you are 112 or so, and someone asks you “how do you think you did?” most likely, you will want to be able to say, “Pretty good I think.”

Accomplishing this goal is very much like saving money: you cannot wait until the last minute, or even tomorrow – since tomorrow may be the last minute. You have to start now. You’ve probably heard countless times that if you want to save money, you have to “take it off the top.” If you wait for the “extra money” to save, there will be no savings. A life that you feel good about will be built out of days that you feel good about. You cannot afford to wait for spare time to feel good about yourself. Any more than you can wait for the extra money to save. Each day ask yourself, “How do I think I did?” And listen carefully to the answer.

Several of the books I have written have been about what happens – or what I believe needs to happen – inside the locker room. *Earning Your Own Respect* is about what I believe needs to be happening outside the therapy room, outside the personal growth seminars, and outside the covers of the self-help books. For as much as I believe in what I do for a living, I also believe that we must balance “study” with “application,” and “preparation” with “action.” As important as it is to break through the resistance to reaching out for help when we need it, it is equally important to learn how and when to rely on ourselves. The goal of any good therapy or strategy for personal growth should be to help set us back on our own two feet, to connect us with our own good judgment, to reintroduce us to the one person on this earth who we need to be able to trust above all others. Guess who?

## **Aligning Your Life with Your Personal Value System**

In its simplest form, here is my thinking as put forth in *Earning Your Own Respect*: To earn your own respect you must live responsibly. To live responsibly you must identify and clarify your personal value system and act on a daily basis in accordance with that value system. In other words, you will respect yourself to the degree that you do not violate your own value system. This is one of life’s offensively simple truths, something Alcoholics Anonymous refers to as “simple, but not easy.”

I worked as a magician off and on for much of my young life and still throw in a trick or two at my seminars and speaking engagements. When demonstrating sleight of hand with a deck of playing cards, I will sometimes show an interested spectator how I accomplish a particular effect. His response is often something like, “Oh I get it. That’s simple.” And then he attempts to duplicate the moves I have shown him, only to be frustrated again and again with each repeated attempt to follow my “simple” instructions. What He has not taken into consideration is that simple does not mean easy, and that by rehearsing my sleight of hand moves for years, I have created a secondary illusion: that the card trick is both simple and easy.

The same principles hold for the simple instructions for self-respect. Identify your personal value system, then act according to that value system. Presto, there you have it: self-respect. (Oh I get it. That's simple.) Yet here are entire books (mine and others') written to explore the meaning and practice of personal responsibility and self-respect, and the thoughts and ideas contained within those books can barely scratch the surface of all that can be said about such an important subject. The subject of my book in its broadest sense is an exploration of our human condition. More specifically, there are two questions I want my book to introduce or reinforce in the reader's mind; ask yourself, "What do I really want to do with my one human life?" and "Am I doing it?"

## **Aspiring to Selfishness**

Living responsibly requires a lifetime of rehearsal, and a dedicated, even selfish focus on the goal. Ironically, it is our acts of thorough selfishness that will often lead us to responsible lives and self-respect. Certain behaviors we traditionally think of as "selfish" are not, in the bigger picture, very self-serving. For example, the young man who has a gun in the face of the clerk at some corner market right now may seem to be acting selfishly, but his choices will not serve him well. The woman who rushes into a burning house to save children she has never even met will appear to us to be acting "selflessly," when in fact, it is a reflex of selfishness that drives her to the courageous act. Her value system is developed to the point where she knows instinctively that in order to remain congruent with that value system she must attempt the rescue. She is acting to avoid pain – the pain of violating her own value system.

Most of us will not often, if at all, face such dire circumstances in which our values are tested. But in more subtle packages, we are all presented with "values clarification" tests every day of our lives. To act in congruence with our value systems is to act responsibly, and this will serve us well. This is the selfishness to which we must aspire; this is the selfishness with which we will earn our own respect.

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"Self-Respect & Your Personal Value System" is an excerpt from *Earning Your Own Respect*.



Thom Rutledge is the author of *Embracing Fear & Finding the Courage to Live Your Life* (HarperSanFrancisco), and co-author (with Jenni Schaefer) of *Life Without Ed: How One Woman Declared Independence from Her Eating Disorder & How You Can Too* (McGraw-Hill). He has been featured on NBC's Today Show, CNN's Anderson Cooper 360, Fox News, and Australia's Channel 10. Thom is an outspoken critic of the international bestselling dvd/book project, *The Secret* --- his response to *The Secret* is available free at [www.thesecondantidote.com](http://www.thesecondantidote.com).

For more information about Thom's books, e-books, articles, seminars and availability as a keynote speaker, visit [www.ThomRutledge.com](http://www.ThomRutledge.com).