

Chapter 4

The Basics of Human Worth

Unconditional human worth means that you are important and valuable as a person because your essential, core self is unique, precious, of infinite, eternal, unchanging value, and good. Unconditional human worth implies that you are as precious as any other person.

Howard's Laws of Human Worth

Unconditional human worth is beautifully described by five axioms, which I call Howard's Laws, based on the work of Claudia A. Howard (1992).

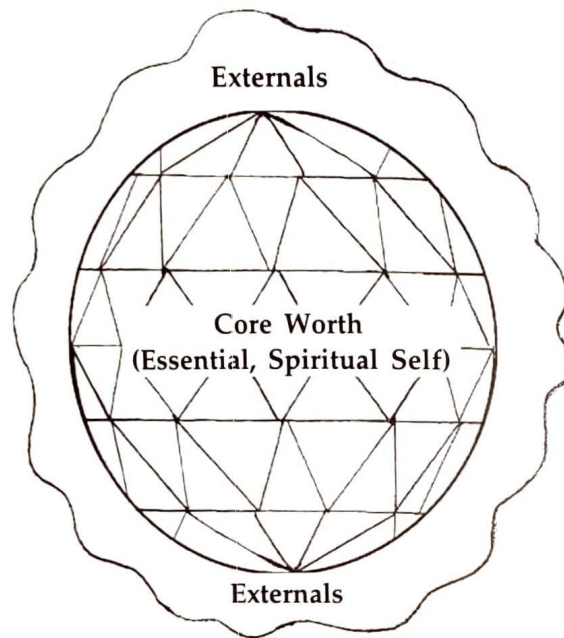
1. All have infinite, internal, eternal, and unconditional worth *as persons*.
2. All have equal worth as people. Worth is not comparative or competitive. Although you might be better at sports, academics, or business, and I might be better in social skills, we both have equal worth as human beings.
3. Externals neither add to nor diminish worth. Externals include things like money, looks, performance, and achievements. These only increase one's *market* or *social* worth. Worth as a person, however, is infinite and unchanging.

4. Worth is stable and never in jeopardy (even if someone rejects you).
5. Worth doesn't have to be earned or proved. It already exists. Just recognize, accept, and appreciate it.

The Core Self

The *human core*, sometimes called the essential, spiritual self, is like the European crystal, whose facets so beautifully reflect the sunlight.

The Core Self



Much like a newborn baby, the core is fundamentally right and whole—complete, but not completed. *Completed* means fully developed and finished. A person is *complete* in the sense that each has every attribute, in embryo, that everyone else has—every attribute that is needed. The core is beautiful, lovable, and full of potential. The inner quality of the core self is demonstrated by this anecdote told by George Durrant (1980), a kind and loving teacher.

One man was wrestling on the floor with his children and he decided he was tired so he faked like he was dead. That's one way you can get a rest. And the little boys were very concerned and one was a little older than the other and pried open his daddy's eye and he said to his little brother with some reassurance, "He's still *in* there."

What's *in* there is the core self. Over time, the core becomes surrounded with externals. Like a dirty film, some externals can hide the core. Other externals, like a halo, can brighten the core and allow its light to be seen or experienced. For example, mistakes or criticism may camouflage the core, making it difficult for one to see and experience one's worth. The love of others helps us feel our worth. A talent shared is one way to express worth. These change the way worth is experienced, not the worth itself.

Some spend their lives trying to look good on the outside to cover up shame, or a feeling of worthlessness, on the inside. If, however, we use externals to fill the empty feeling at the core, we will remain unfulfilled, perhaps always seeking approval, perhaps becoming cynical. Psychiatrists tell us that their offices are filled with people who ask, "Doctor, I am successful. Why am I unhappy?"

It is impossible to earn core worth through personal performance or any other external. It already exists. Consider the following list of externals.

Worth As a Person Is Independent of Externals

Energy level

Appearance/Looks

Strength

Intelligence

Education

Gender

Race/Ethnicity/Skin color

Scholastic achievement/Grades

Skills

Friendliness

Talents

Creative ability

Handicaps

Material advantages

Wealth

Mistakes

Behavior

Decisions

Positions, Status

Physical fitness

Manners

Net/Market worth

Voice

Clothes

Car

Spirituality

Church activity

Worthiness

Blessings

Family image

Parents' status or character

Personality traits

Marriage status

Dates

Power

Being right

State of the economy/stock market

Inexperience

Present Functioning Level

Attitudes

Daily self-evaluations

Performance

Hygiene/Grooming

Sickness/Health

Productivity

Resilience

Confidence

Control over events

Selfishness or selflessness

Feelings

Comparisons

Competence relative to others
(e.g., in sports, salary)

Judgments of Others

How many people like you

Others' approval or acceptance

How others treat you

Illustrative Examples

The person with self-esteem beholds and appreciates the core self. This person sees flaws external to the core, which require attention, developing, nurturing, and/or acceptance. When change is not possible. The following four examples illustrate the idea of core worth.

A Spirited Young Boy

I take courage from a spirited young boy's example. Confined to a wheelchair, he matter-of-factly explained, "A tumor broke the nerve that tells my legs what to do." He knew how to separate worth from externals.

A Former Student

Another who radiated a quiet inner gladness is Ken Kirk, a former student of mine. He recited this poem:

If I Could Be

If I could be a tree I would
provide shade for all mankind.

If I could be the sea I would
be calm for all to travel.

If I could be the sun I would
provide warmth for all living things.

If I could be the wind I would
be a cool breeze on a hot summer day.

If I could be the rain I would
keep the earth fertile.

But, to be any one of these things would be to miss out on all the rest. And this is why, if I could be anything I would be nothing more than me.

—Ken Kirk, student

The State of Virginia

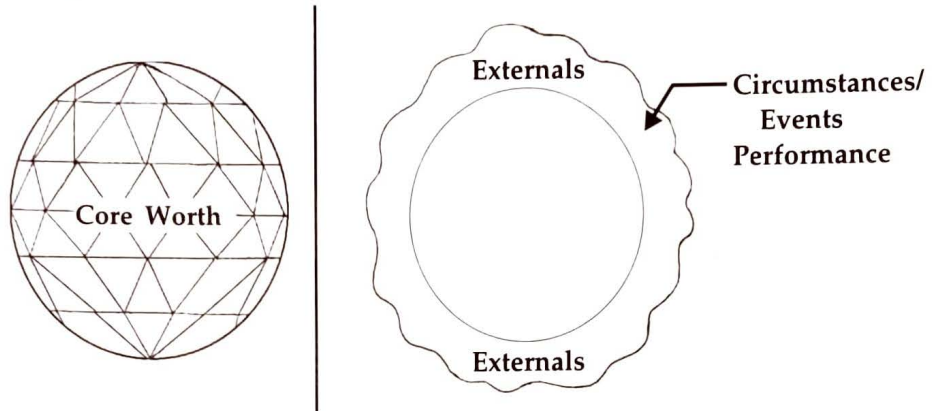
The state of Virginia has several beautiful colonial bed and breakfast inns. Staying in one with a lovely stone fireplace, I beheld an antique wooden duck. Large, plain, unpainted, carved perhaps by a colonial farmer, it added a simple touch of class to the homey room. Near the fireplace was a large log, which was appreciated because the night was chilly. I asked my student which has more worth, the wooden duck or the wooden log? One woman thoughtfully answered, "Their worth is the same. They are just different."

Through the Eyes of a Schoolteacher

A friend, a schoolteacher, was in a bus with her students. The bus was struck by another bus resulting in a number of injuries. Afterward, she reflected, "After the accident, I watched the children running around assuming leadership and caring for each other, and then I could truly see their worth." Events can help us to *see* worth, but they neither add to nor diminish core worth.

Separating Worth from Externals

This is the goal: Separate core worth from externals.

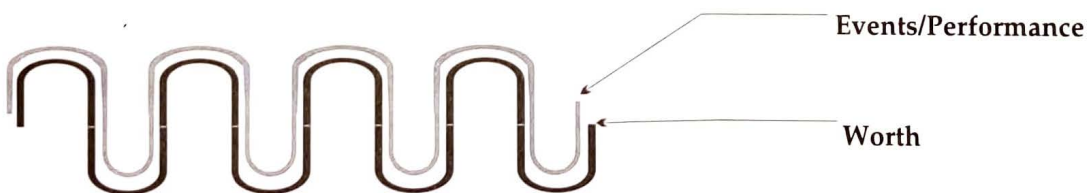


Used by permission Claudia A. Howard, Individual Potential Seminars, as are the next two diagrams.

The goal of separating worth from externals can be difficult in today's culture. The emphasis of today's television programming can convey the message that you are not worthwhile if you are not young, bold, beautiful, or wealthy. Fast-lane living in today's cities conveys the message that you must be high powered and successful to be somebody. Taken to the unrestrained extreme, today's work ethic can suggest that one loses worth if one is sleeping, vacationing, or not producing.

Let's consider two ways to look at human worth: Proposition one: Worth equals externals. Proposition two: Worth is separate from externals.

When Worth Equals Externals

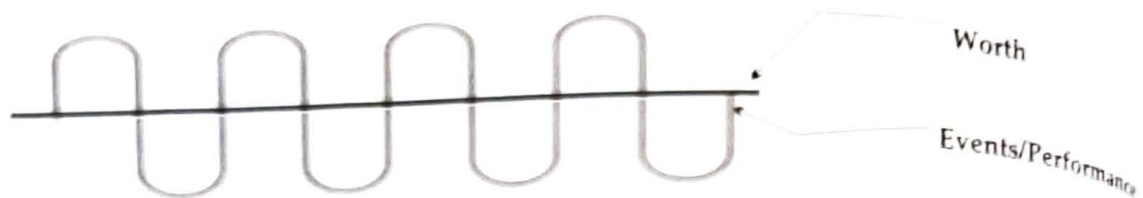


When worth equals externals, self-esteem rises and falls along with events. For instance, a high school student explained that she feels less worthwhile when she looks in the mirror and notices her complexion. Then she feels better when that cute guy says hello; when he fails to ask her for a date, she feels depressed. A compliment on her dress, she feels great; a math exam, she feels bad. She feels great when she and that guy begin dating, miserable when they break up. She is on an emotional roller coaster.

For adults, the highs may come with promotions, awards, or entrance to medical school. The lows may come with criticism, poor performance, or when your team loses.

If your worth equals your job or your marriage, how will you feel if you realize you have already gotten your last promotion or if you divorce? Your feelings would probably go beyond the normal and appropriate sadness and disappointment. When worth is in doubt, depression usually follows. If human worth equals market worth, then only the rich and powerful have worth. By this line of thinking, a Donald Trump or Hitler would have more human worth than a Mother Teresa.

When Worth Is Separate from Externals



When worth is separate from externals, human worth is intrinsic and unchanging, irrespective of outside events or circumstances. Here, we distinguish feeling bad about events or behaviors (guilt) from feeling bad about the core self (shame). Guilt for foolish behavior is a healthy motivation for change. Condemning the core, however, saps motivation.

The idea is to judge behavior, but not the core. One can be reasonably objective in judging behaviors and present skill levels. It is difficult to be reasonable or objective when one has condemned the self at the core.

It is also wise to separate uncomfortable feelings arising from disappointment, illness, fatigue, chemical fluctuations, anger, anxiety, etc., from feeling bad about the core self.

Let's take an example of a difficult situation. Say that a promotion you desired was awarded to someone else. You tell yourself, "Perhaps some of my skills are not up to par yet for this job." This is a statement of fact that judges your skill level, experience, or training. This would result in appropriate disappointment and perhaps the decision to improve your skills. On the other hand, if you told yourself, "I'm not good enough as a person," this is a statement of worth that means you are inferior as a person. Obviously, this self-destructive choice of thoughts would lead to self-dislike and perhaps depression. So judge your present skills and performance, never the core.

Why Individuals Have Worth

I dedicate this section to people who struggle with the notion of unconditional worth. I think of a man who was attending a self-esteem class. Intellectual and bright, he listened to the axioms of human worth. He was struggling, looking like he wanted to believe them, but unable to grasp why all human beings could have worth, despite their imperfections and foolish behaviors. The light went on eventually, to his great pleasure.

I'd like to start by posing some questions: Why do people spend millions of dollars to extricate from a well a two-year-old girl who has never done anything of note? Why do we love a baby? How are we like a dog or an inanimate object? How are we different?

A human has worth for at least four reasons:

1. *Present endowments.* A human's innate nature is enjoyable. It is fun to watch a child play in the leaves or respond to the beauty of nature. It is fun to love children and see them respond with a smile, joy, a sense of play, affection, or the security to take on the world with enthusiasm.
2. *Capacities.* When people behave obnoxiously, it is fun to ponder their potential to beautify life with art, craftsmanship, or other creations; with emotions of pleasure, acceptance and encouragement; with laughter, work, and love. Capacities are innate, and able to be discovered and developed. When we err, we have the capacity to correct our course. Thus, we observe that human beings are fallible but infinitely perfectible and have an

“ability to convert not just their food, but also their hopes, into vital energy” (Cousins 1983). When theologians point to the notion that humans are created in God’s image and likeness, they refer to the concept that a person is like a seed—whole; complete, but not completed—possessing in embryo every conceivable capacity: to think rationally, to emote, to sacrifice, to love, to make ethical choices, to recognize truth and worth, to create, to beautify, to be gentle, patient, or firm.

3. *Past contributions.* If one ever contributed to the well-being of others or self—in any way, large or small—then that person is not worthless.
4. *The craftsmanship of the body.* Although it is an external, the body is a nice metaphor for the core self. A number of influences in today’s culture tend to “thing-ify” the body. The media glorifies using others as pleasure objects. Many individuals have been sexually or physically abused. When a body is mistreated, a person can come to see the body as disgusting. The greater danger is that they will come to devalue the core self. On the other hand, considering the marvelous intricacies of the body with respect can help a person appreciate the worth of the core self. (We shall return to this important concept in chapters 15 and 16.)

Sometimes people ask, “What if I am ugly or crippled—how can I feel worthwhile?” I challenge them to pretend they are crippled and to come up with ways by which they could still assert and experience their worth. The responses are often illuminating:

- I could convey love through my eyes
- I could learn to allow people to help me and to enjoy their service
- I could change my thoughts; I could learn to define myself as more than my body
- I could demonstrate my will (e.g., by appreciating what I see, by trying to move even a finger, by improving my mind)

We repeatedly return to the underlying concepts. Worth is already there. It is there whether you are sleeping or producing. The core is more than behavior, position, or any other external. Our challenge is to experience and enjoy that core worth.

Worth is neither comparative nor competitive, as is demonstrated by the experience of this father:

Three of my children were swinging at a park and two of them had learned to pump themselves in the swing and that’s always a happy day for a father when his children learn to pump themselves in a swing. And two of them were going real high and Devon says, “I’m keeping up with Katherine,” and Katherine looked across and said, “I’m keeping up with Devon” ‘cause they were swinging right together. And little Marinda was in the middle and she was just barely moving because there was a breeze. And little Marinda, hearing them saying they’re keeping up with each other . . . said, “I’m just keeping up with myself” (Durrant 1980).

Even at a young age, a child can understand the concept of intrinsic worth that is not comparative or competitive, and will be better off for it.

Reflections on Unconditional and Equal Human Worth

Please ponder the reflections on human worth below. When you finish you'll be ready to begin the human worth skill building activities, which are found in chapters 5 through 9.

*We (are) equal inhabitants of a paradise of individuals
in which everybody has the right to be understood.*

—Richard Rorty (1991)

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,
that among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

—The Declaration of Independence,
July 4, 1776

*We are all basically the same human beings,
who seek happiness and try to avoid suffering.*

Everybody is my peer group.

Your feeling "I am of no value" is wrong. Absolutely wrong.

—The Dalai Lama

You're as good as anybody.

—Spoken to Martin Luther King
by his father.

You're as good as anyone, but you're no better than anyone, and don't forget it.

—Spoken to legendary coach John Wooden
by his father

All men are alike when asleep.

—Aristotle

*(We) are made in the image of God—a good God, a God of beauty
... God declared his creation good.*

—Rebecca Manley Pippert (1999)

We need to see ourselves as basic miracles.

—Virginia Satir

Men can be human, with human frailties, and still be great.

—Stephen L. Richards (1955)

Heroes don't need lettermen jackets. We know who we are.

—Evil Knievel

*Letting circumstances or others determine worth
gives them inappropriate control and power.*

—Anonymous

*When our value as human beings depends on what we make with
our hands and minds, we become victims of the fear tactics of
our world. When productivity is our main way of overcoming
self-doubt, we are extremely vulnerable to rejection and criticism
and prone to inner anxiety and depression.*

—Henry J. M. Nouwen (1989)

*Problems are weaknesses (which respond to strengthening),
not illnesses (which need removal of causal agents).*

—William Glasser

*Every cliché you've ever heard about babies is true, it seems to me.
They are soft and warm, fascinating, cute, and lovable. I never met
one that wasn't, and it's a good thing too, because if babies weren't
so cute and lovable maybe we wouldn't so gladly put up with
the fact that they're so demanding and so much trouble.*

*Babies are pure potential. You pick up a little baby and you're
amazed by how light it is, but you feel also that you're holding the
future, the earth and the sky, the sun and the moon, and all
of it, everything, is brand new.*

*Babies help us to put the changing world into perspective too.
Changing the world has to wait, when it's time to change the baby.*

—Charles Osgood