

VILLAGE VIEW

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Seems as though, these days, we have a week for almost everything imaginable. It's a fine idea, of course, to have a Hire The Handicapped Week, and we all applaud Employ the Elderly Week; I don't have any objection to Pucker Up With Pickles Week, either. As a matter of fact, I think weekly specials are an effective way to jostle our heads.

And that's good for us. How about having a Self-Improvement Week? No, you won't see it publicized; it's something each of us could do for ourselves, though. To give it a good shot, we'll have to do some preparation and that could hurt a little.

Taking a good objective look at ourselves, seeing us as others see us, may result in surprises, but needn't be devastating even if it fails to give us distinct pleasure.

For starters, listen to yourself talk; that's hard unless you use a tape recorder. If you've never heard yourself on tape, you could be in for a shock. Chances are good you'll think the tape on the recorder is distorting your voice. A check with relatives and close friends, however will disabuse you; if they know you well enough to recognize your voice on the telephone, they'll assure you the tape duplicates your voice perfectly.

I had no idea, for instance, that I sound so "thin" when I

talk. Not physically thin, alack and alas, but vocally thin. The natural pitch of my voice is higher than I wish it were. For Self-Improvement Week, I should start training myself to speak in a lower range. That would produce pleasanter sounds for other people to hear. Next time you run into me, if I seem to be growling, you'll know I'm practicing.

Have you ever caught sight of your reflection in a window or mirror and, for a split-second, failed to recognize yourself? It's happened to me. It's startling to realize the golden locks have silvered. Worse, it's unnerving to have to admit I habitually slouch instead of standing up straight. Only a conscious effort brings my shoulders square and tummy flat.

How much better I look when I remember my posture; if only I remembered it more often, it could become a habit. Does it really matter how I look? Well, I can't honestly say I don't care and, although I hope I'm not loved for appearance alone (more probably in spite of it), I don't mind if family and friends don't have to apologize for my appearance.

While I'm about it, I could remind myself to be generous with friendly smiles and kind words. Lucky are we to live in small communities where smiles aren't misinterpreted, where it's safe to be pleasant, even to strangers.

Little courtesies won't be taken amiss, either. I'm not so rushed I can't hold a door, permit someone to move into traffic flow even if I do happen to have the right of way, or pick up something someone else has dropped.

It wouldn't hurt me to treat my immediate family with the same degree of good manners I accord friends and acquaintances. There's no excuse for leaving my manners outside when I come through the door. Remarks delivered "for your own good" seldom seem to have much effect. Perhaps I'd achieve more if I set a good example instead of criticizing, even when criticism seems warranted.

People with self-esteem "like themselves" and have self-respect. They've gotten that way because their families have given them respect. That's how they've learned they're worthy.

Living with people who speak gently and politely to one another, who are considerate and thoughtful, helps teach everyone in the household ways to use graciousness to enhance life's pleasure. I could make a greater effort to do that.

The people I like to be with, those who make me feel comfortable and secure, are invariably thoughtful and kind to those around them. It seems to come natural to them. In reality, their good manners are deeply ingrained habits. With practice, I could form those same habits.

When I think about actually doing these things, of course, I find myself looking for excuses so I won't have to make all that effort. "I'm the way I am," I find myself saying to me; "I can't help it. There's no way I can be different because this is the way I'm put together."

Nonsense! Just because I'm used to me, this way, is no reason I can't change. I'm changing all the time, to be truthful; I'm aging, and that's change, like it or not.

Not only am I changing, but it's entirely up to me to control how I'm changing. After all, nobody can do that for me. Only I can control what I say and do.

Can anyone else help me form habits to stand up straight? Can anyone else train my brain to sort through the several possible responses so that I'll make the gentlest one, the best one, the response to make another person comfortable?

No, indeed. It's up to me to do that, for myself.

Can anyone else smile for me? Or say "Thank you", in my place? Can someone else allot my time and choose to spend a few extra minutes doing a kindness, being cordial, taking an interest in someone who may be lonely or depressed?

Who can notice a friend's new dress and pay a compliment for me? Who can tell a bedtime story for me? Who can say, in my stead, "That's a good haircut; it's very becoming to you," or "My, that's a handsome suit. It fits beautifully and looks great on you"?

Nobody can do these things for me; should anyone try, they'd be the ones being pleasant, charming and thoughtful, not me. To improve myself, I'm the one who must walk the extra mile, say the right words, establish the desirable habits.

Perhaps Self-Improvement Week could become a national event; perhaps, if I start, someone else will be inspired, as well. Maybe it'll be contagious and spread; as others catch the spirit we'd all reap the rewards.

It's even believable, if a lot of people were to celebrate, privately, their Self-Improvement Weeks, we'd all gain greater joy from life. The secret, though, is to tell noone this is your week to make a better person of yourself; just do it as a gift to yourself.

If nobody seems to notice, it doesn't matter. You're not doing it for someone else. You're doing it for you. That's what self-improvement is all about, isn't it? If, in the process, others are helped too, that's just an extra bonus.