



When I was 13, I watched my first Winter Olympics in glorious black-and-white. I marveled at meticulously-executed spins and glides as Carol Heiss nabbed the gold medal in women's figure skating. Her performance was flawless, as were those of many athletes competing in Squaw Valley. But the ski jumpers had me spellbound.

I watched their coaches' last-minute atta-boys, the total concentration on the jumpers' faces, their tight crouch speeding faster and faster down the chute, and at the last instant, their spring into empty air in a chevron position they somehow held until the final second before their skis touched the snow-slick outrun.

As an adult, I cannot comprehend how nor why anyone would choose to ski-jump, but back then, a voice in my head assured, *I could do that if I had to. No problem.* And believing that voice, I'd practice the leap and the chevron-position on the den rug in front of the TV over and over again. Thank goodness, my den was as far as I ever got.

Unfortunately, however, that voice has remained with me to this day. It's the voice that can set me up for failure, convincing me I can accomplish a challenge that's way beyond my capacities. It's the same voice that can chip away at the ol' self-esteem if I believe its suggestions and especially, its judgments. It's the voice of that sly self-critic.

If you've no clue what I'm talking about, consider yourself lucky. Most people have at least occasionally experienced that sucker's harsh assessments of perceived physical shortcomings, "limited" capacities and Achilles heels, whether those reside in our bodies, our minds or often, our imaginations. For many, those critiques can occur daily, hourly or even by the minute. We become so used to that voice that we simply hear it and believe it, instead of questioning its validity.

Though I've been a professional writer for many years, I'll occasionally begin a story, and the self-critic will start harping in my ear, "That's a bunch of garbage. Nobody will want to read it." Though that's not true, I first have to climb up from the "downs" to recognize the words as false, then make the effort to dispel them. (Read on for a way to accomplish that.)

The pursuit of *any* creative activity can be a spiritual endeavor. Creative work is important, whether it's writing, painting, sculpting, directing a play, strumming a banjo, hooking a rug, baking a birthday cake, designing a house, rearranging furniture, spending time as a caregiver, tucking a special note into a child's _____ or adult's lunchbox, watching waves roll in at a beach, or cleaning out a garage (really!).

So many folks think they're not creative if they don't have artistic talent. But we all do at least one thing well – and often many things – that makes us feel good when we do it. And if you create, you deserve to give yourself credit, and ignore that big-mouthed critic trying to convince you otherwise.

One of my favorite chores is washing dishes. Go figure. Many years ago, I was invited to spend Christmas on a lovely horse farm with a household that included a dear friend. Though I liked them all, holiday family dynamics soon kicked in, and arguing and snipping at one another ensued. Not a comfortable situation for a guest. Seeking solace, I slipped into the kitchen, washed stacks of accumulated dishes, and found my useful place away from the family feud engaging in a task that also kept my self-critic at bay, as I'm *certain* I'm a good dishwasher!

As you may know, that inner voice can run rampant at holiday time, one reason 12-Step meetings tend to be packed during those pseudo "Norman Rockwell" seasons. At any rate, I became "official dishwasher" for my entire visit, happily scrubbing every casserole, greasy skillet, wine glass and silver implement. Initially, I had to insist, but the family was appreciative and I felt a useful part of their holiday, tucked away at times of discord, both theirs and my internal. A win-win.

Following is an exercise to help dispel that vociferous self-critic. It's based on the premise that if you can "hear" what the rascal is saying and distinguish its opinions from the truth in your heart, you can learn which voice to listen to, which one to trust. You're in the habit of hearing and believing those negative statements. Here's a way to break that pattern.

Listen to your internal dialog for self-critical statements. As soon as you hear them, write them down. Start making a list and number each entry. You'll be amazed at how easy it is to accumulate these habitual falsehoods that can bring you down when you hear and believe them, that you don't even realize are thoughts because you're so used to the voice that says, "Oh, yes, you can do this" to something absolutely ridiculous, or "Yep, this is all your fault because you are a mistake and you don't deserve to be right." You might entitle this list "Horse Puckey," for obvious reasons.

My challenge to you is to write down 100 of these criticisms. Sounds like a lot, but, trust me, you may be surprised at how fast your list will take shape and how often those bogus reels play across the mind's inner movie screen. Because again, we're so used to hearing that voice that we take it all in, believe it and lose a chunk of self-esteem in the process.

As you're making this list, think about each entry, and using your *rational* mind – the one that knows the truth – determine how each is but a message meant to bring you down, to keep you from living from your heart, to prevent you from shining your light in your life and in the world. When you realize your own truth, you'll recognize false criticism as just that.

And you can challenge that sneaky inner voice with a hearty "Sez you!"

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