

keeping it real

The weekend that changed my life forever

There was no pool,
tennis court or gym at
this three-day retreat.
The only exercise for
guests was learning
how to love themselves.

By Sarah Bronson



I have always been known as a strong, relatively confident person. In high school I held several leadership positions; in college I gave campus tours, asserted myself at student meetings and spoke in front of large crowds on several occasions. Although I had a tough time finding my professional niche in my 20s and didn't date as often as I would have liked, I was nevertheless aware of my intelligence and talent. I was the model of self-assurance—or so I thought.

Nothing prepared me for the moment when, one year ago, at the age of 30, I stood before a group of approximately sixty people I'd known for less than a day and was instructed, "Choose the man you are most attracted to and invite him to sit next to you."

Swallowing a sudden vulnerability and fear of rejection, I pointed to a boyishly handsome man in his mid-20s I'll call Jeremy. Next thing I knew, Jeremy was instructed to take my hands—in front of the entire group—gaze deeply into my eyes, and, by focusing on what he could "see" of my soul, feel love for me. My job was just to accept his gaze and his affection.

Staring back at Jeremy, I suddenly realized how unworthy of being loved I truly felt. Where was all my hard-earned confidence? It was crumbling under the gaze of this gorgeous man. Clearly I was not as sure of myself as I'd thought.

The Self-Confidence Club

Jeremy and I were at a weekend seminar in Atlanta called Understanding Yourself and Others (UYO). Currently led by Global Relationship Centers at about sixty locations worldwide, the course was developed in 1975 by Bill Riedler, a disciple of Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, the founder of Chicago's Adler School of Professional Psychology. (Adlerian psychology is based on the belief that in order to function within a democratic society, we each must be able to recognize the unique societal contributions we can make, cooperate with others and take responsibility for our own decisions.)

My friend Steven had persuaded me to attend, citing his perception that in both my professional and love lives I was "stuck"; he claimed that this course—while not a replacement for therapy—would help me look at my relationships and goals in a new way.

Global Relationship Centers describes the UYO course as a "self-confidence club." The program, based on Adlerian theory, is not over until all the students have felt, for at least a moment, their inherent loveliness and power to improve their environment and reach their goals. Each three-day course is limited to twenty-four students, each of whom is assigned an assistant, someone

who has completed the course in the past and is now back to help the new student navigate his or her way through the program. The course is run by certified instructors who have each completed over 2,000 hours of classroom instruction by Bill and Beth Riedler at the Global Relationship Centers headquarters in Spicewood, Texas, and have extensive practical training as assistant instructors at UYO courses.

Before the weekend begins, the instructors and assistants meet to design the course in a way that will best help each participant reach the specific goals he or she has outlined in a written application. Over the weekend, they help participants identify the obstacles they place in their own paths, take responsibility for their actions and feel real love for themselves—so that in turn they can better express love for the important people in their lives.

During the weekend, all the instructors and assistants were kind and nurturing; the environment felt completely safe. I

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decided within the first few hours that as long as I was there, I would try to get everything out of the program that I possibly could. But I discovered that the path to loving myself was intense and complicated. In Jeremy's eyes, I thought I saw what I'd experienced in so many relationships before: a man who was desperately trying to feel love for everything that was good about me, but was losing the struggle. Rather than helping me feel lovable, the exercise made me wonder what it was about me that prevented Jeremy from connecting with me. As usual, I blamed my looks.

Face to Face With Myself

The next day, for another exercise, I was again instructed to choose the man to whom I was most attracted; he'd symbolize the imaginary husband I hoped to have someday. (Since my uninspired dating life was a particular concern for me, most of my exercises revolved around that. Other students focused on relationships with their parents or problems in their professional lives. Each participant's exercises are individualized, but are usually performed with the help of other students.)

Immediately, the people behind Jeremy indicated that he should get up.

"No, not Jeremy," I said. "I saw yesterday that he couldn't bring himself to feel love for me, and I don't want to go through that again." Jeremy sat down, and I chose instead one of the assistants, an extremely affectionate, effusive and handsome young man, Isaac. My exercise was to stand at the opposite side of the room from Isaac and symbolically let go of the fears or beliefs that were preventing me from

establishing a long-term romantic relationship. As I was letting go of my fears, I was told to approach Isaac and do the same hand-holding, love-gazing exercise that had failed with Jeremy.

With Isaac, I did the exercise twice. The first time, I thought it went well. I felt empowered and sensed a true connection with the man. But the second time, as

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I approached him, Isaac had a surprise for me. Just as I reached him, he held up a full-length mirror, so that instead of taking his hands, I was instead staring at my own image. Somehow I found confronting myself even more frightening than choosing Jeremy had been. For the next half-hour, the instructors guided me through an intense one-sided conversation with my inner child, as reflected in the mirror, culminating in my promise to take care of her.

Finally, the instructors told Isaac to put away the mirror and take my hands. And sure enough, the connection I felt with him this time was immensely deeper and richer than it had been before. Isaac was offering the same amount of love, but after honoring my inner child and all the dreams I had for myself, I was so much more ready to receive it.

So It Wasn't Just Me...

I completed more exercises and experienced more growth and self-understanding in

that weekend than I could possibly describe. Watching my classmates perform their own exercises was an education in itself. Regardless of our differences, we all, incredibly, shared similar problems of loving ourselves as we were. Even the most attractive and accomplished among us were riddled with self-doubt. Jeremy, during one of his own exercises, admitted that I'd been right to make him sit down; several girlfriends had left him because he couldn't bring himself to say "I love you," and he didn't know why it was so difficult for him.

One of my "UYO epiphanies" took place when I learned that a stunningly beautiful, intelligent and friendly woman I'll call Darlene was overcome with angst about her job performance and sincerely had no idea that most of the men in the room found her attractive. I felt compassion for her: Here was a woman with everything going for her, and yet she spent her life racked with fear of failure and rejection. Why didn't she see what the rest of us saw in her? Then I wondered, "Why don't I see in myself what all these wonderful people say they see in me?" Perhaps, I realized, I should reserve some compassion for myself.

Having completed the Understanding Yourself and Others course as a student, I was then eligible to volunteer as an assistant at any UYO course. Over the next year, I returned three times, twice to a center in Hartford and once to Atlanta, where I had been a student. And what I learned in the process has helped me find answers—and new power—for myself.

Rewording My Own Messages

By observing other students and talking with instructors about Adlerian psychology, I've learned new lessons about human nature—and therefore about myself—each time I've taken part in a UYO course. I've learned that to truly love ourselves, we have to return to the source of our self-doubts and understand their genesis.

As children, we all experience unpleasant and confusing situations: other kids' teasing, a parent's yelling, divorce, abuse, a death in the family or a sibling who seems to have unfair privileges. According to Adlerian psychology, when we're young, we don't yet know enough about the world to comprehend why these situations occur, so we "fill in" explanations that make sense at the time. Usually the explanations we create to

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explain troubling situations tend to focus on ourselves: "This is happening because I'm bad; there's something wrong with me." We also underestimate our ability to take care of ourselves because at that point we truly are dependent on others to fill our needs. But the messages "I am powerless" and "I am incapable of contributing much to the world" continue to play in our minds long after they cease to be accurate reflections of our capabilities.

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Tell me more...

Understanding Yourself and Others is taught in approximately sixty locations around the world, from San Diego to North Carolina to Moscow. Students typically attend programs at local centers, so they don't need lodging, but out-of-towners are welcome to stay in nearby hotels or make arrangements with other students. Held year-round, the courses run on weekends, with a graduation ceremony on Monday. Exercises generally run from 7 to 10 P.M. on

Friday evenings and 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. on Saturdays and Sundays, though the hours can be shorter or longer, since courses are "tailored to each group of students," explains founder Bill Riedler. "We don't end the day until everyone feels comfortable with the material." The weekend seminars, which bring together men and women of all ages, races and religions, typically cost around \$500 to \$600, depending on the location. For more information, visit grc333.com or call (512) 264-3333.

The weekend...

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Adlerian theory says that we then spend the rest of our lives in a quest to gain acknowledgement from others that these messages are untrue. Unfortunately, no one else can fill the emotional holes we've created in ourselves. Our loved ones might help us identify ways in which we're prejudiced against ourselves, but it is up to us to embrace our status as lovable, capable adults.

At UYO, I found ways of identifying and replacing the negative messages I'd fed myself for thirty years. For example, I developed one of my messages from "This man doesn't love me because I'm unlovable" into "I'm beautiful and incredibly lovable, and if a particular man doesn't love me, it might be because of his own issues or because it's just not meant to be." Now I realize that my value as a gifted, unique human being is absolute and does not wax or wane with others' opinions of me.

Acceptance and Growth

Ironically, once I assimilated my value as a person, I felt safer exploring my flaws. Before, criticism made me feel defensive: How dare others rock my shaky sense of self-esteem? But now, more often I can accept and laugh about constructive criticism ("I did something stupid? Heh! Imagine that! Well, it happens.") because my faults are contextualized within an overall sense of lovableness. And being able to confront our flaws enables us to truly grow and mature into our best possible selves.

I've found my new perspective very valuable in my everyday life. When I feel overwhelmed by the people around me—because they intimidate me, or they exude stress, or there is something about them that irritates me—I imagine them doing an emotionally intense exercise in front of sixty near-strangers in which their vulnerability and beauty shine through. Often, by looking at a person, even a stranger, and trying to feel warmth and compassion for them, I can discover the goodness in their eyes. And finding the good in others is great practice for finding the good in ourselves.