

Selfish, Selfless and Self-Disconnect

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I was talking with a friend a few years ago about the idea of selfish and selfless. We in our Western Society think of selfish as bad, unpleasant and immature. We think of selfless as a desirable quality, even virtuous. My friend said it was the opposite, that selfish was good and selfless was not. At the time I silently scoffed, but as we were actually in a conversation about something else, I didn't press the point. However, it did sit at the back of my mind. Now two or more years later, I have come around to her point of view and I offer it for your consideration. It will at first seem simplistic thinking, but I ask you to reserve judgment until you have not only heard me out, but gone home to observe your own life with care. I will be interested to hear of your insights and challenges to my thinking, because life is complex and often requires patience and deep thought.

What I want to do is to deconstruct our idea of selfless because I think we have two opposite things collapsed into the same word. And I want to look closely at the notion of selfish because it also is not what it seems to be.

When I was growing up, we children were encouraged to dedicate our lives to God, to subject ourselves to God's will and to put the needs of others ahead of our own. This was selflessness, and considered virtuous, especially in a woman. I am still weighing the virtue of selflessness, but my interim conclusion about it is that putting the needs of others ahead of our own as an all-the-time practice shows a lack of balance, and more than that, it shows an erosion of an important connection in our internal structure. Here's what I mean.

When I was in my 30s I met a man who lived in Boulder, Colorado. We had a long distance relationship for a while, then he invited me to join him and his two daughters in a camping trip to Utah. I flew down, met him and one daughter and spent several hours hanging out. Next morning I had a few minutes alone at one point. I stood in his living room looking out the picture window at lovely mountains, and knew I was unhappy there, that I would rather him drive me down to Denver where I could take my chances with some acquaintances at finding free accommodation. That was a pretty daring thing for me to consider. And right in the middle of thinking this through, he came along and asked, "What's on your mind?" I wasn't ready to talk about it. Instead of leveling with him, I said something about the view and changed the subject. I never did discuss it and the holiday was not much fun.

Now, I had a boundary and I knew what it was: my long-distance pictures didn't match the up close reality and I wanted to leave. But I was wishy-washy, couldn't stand my ground in the clear light of day, so I dropped my boundary. ?What was the mechanism by which I sabotaged my own good, healthy limit?

I disconnected from my desire to leave. I clothed this in my mind as altruism, not hurting his feelings. So I was "nice" to him and I disconnected within. I lost touch with my inner

voice and so I became a person without a clear sense of my self. Have you ever noticed yourself being “nice” and disconnecting from your desires and needs? (pause)

The lack of self-connection resulted in me failing to be deeply in touch with who I was. The real me is cut off and what’s left is a fake me, trying to please others or do my duty. “I” become what everyone else wants or needs me to be. So “I” am no longer responsible...the others are, those whose wishes I am “fulfilling.” With self-disconnect going on, we’re adrift from our deep self ... self-less ... unable to set and maintain effective, healthy boundaries. We can’t stand for ourselves, can’t stand up to bullies. We’re weak. And as you know, weak individuals cover their weakness by bossing others, to prove to everyone how strong they are. They are not in touch with the strength they really have, so they will never have enough proof of their strength. So the bullying escalates. And this is why we must never give in to bullies, even a little, but stay very connected to our deep core and stand our ground.

Now, people hold up selflessness as a virtue. Sometimes it is. Let’s take an example for closer inspection. Some people choose a simpler, less expensive lifestyle because it’s the sustainable way for all humanity to live on the planet, and because living this way expresses a commitment to those in the developing world that we wish to live in a world that includes everyone. This kind of selflessness seems to have nothing in common with my description of disconnect with the deeper self. And it’s true. What it takes to practise a commitment like this is actually connection with the deeper self, connection to our commitment to live in sustainable harmony with all humanity. If we have this commitment, if it is a true expression of our core, doing it will nurture us. That is the opposite of self-less, it is self-honouring. It is integrity. And it is true power. Consider for a moment an example or two of selfless behaviour in your life. Did it involve self-connect or disconnect?

Let’s take one further, harder example. Someone once said to me, “I have my own life, I don’t want to look after my aging parents ... but if I don’t do it, what will people think of me?” Simplistic thinking will not resolve a complex problem. One technique I have found useful is to keep my eye on a wider definition of me and a broader vision of my life. The work of looking after people when I have my own busy life may feel like a bother when I think of me in my own little pond, but if my definition of a worthwhile life includes a rich and positive relationship with my family or my wider community, that impacts my limits on what I will and won’t do. Maybe it’s time to stretch myself. This moves the problem out of the realm of “what will they think of me” and puts it into “What will I think of me?” Connecting with our deep core and living into our vision of who we are in the world is both powerful and nurturing, if all parts of us are fully aligned with the choices we make.

Jesus was once asked how to tell righteous people from the phony righteous. His response was “By their fruits you shall know them.” That holds true here, too. If a problem leaves you dissatisfied or troubled, that fruit is worth our attention. If a memory keeps surfacing over and over, look for the moment of self-disconnect. And if you are feeling challenged but strong, nurtured ... the way a mentor might say, “This will be hard, but you are a match for this challenge,” then you will have very different fruit, even if you fail. When we speak from connection, while being in our truth, there lies true safety. We are safest with what our deep core says, safest when all of us aligns within in the same direction, for then we can access our true power.

I said at the beginning that selflessness is considered virtuous. That is a curious thing, because it can be a very destructive quality. You see, in the moment that I chose not to speak to my friend in Boulder about my desire to leave, I was trying to refrain from being a wet blanket. My childhood trained me well to keep things “nice.” I didn’t want him to feel rejected. This is altruistic, but unfortunately, being “nice” is actually very negative. In the first place, it doesn’t respect my boundaries, it overrides them for the so-called sake of the other. In the second place, it also diminishes the other person because it treats him or her as incapable of dealing with my true desires. How often have you said, “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

The following little gem is thinking I picked up in a course by Werner Erhard. I learned two useful things there, one being that we can have extraordinary lives by choosing to and the other being how to think. I don’t recall to what particular pattern of behaviour this mechanism was applied, since it was about 30 years ago, but it fascinated me at the time and definitely fits this topic.

Here’s the kicker to selfless behaviour: it is used to excuse our wrongdoings. How? This is often part of a subconscious mechanism, so if you’re trying this on for size, don’t look in your conscious mind. You won’t find it in your awareness. But just see the logic of how this fits together and then go observe life. First, we feel bad or guilty about something, and we do something selfless to assure ourselves that we are a good person after all. A little later, we do something else bad, and we do another selfless thing, almost like making up for our faults. When we remain disconnected from our core, our life can become a cycle of bad thing, selfless thing, over and over. When this sets in as a habit, the selfless acts become a mechanism that actually assists in the perpetuation of us doing the bad things. Selfless things create an excusing mechanism that lets us feel good about ourselves, even as we keep doing bad things ... and this means we don’t ever have to look really closely at the bad things we do. Looking closely would allow us to see the cost of what we have done. But every time we start to feel really bad, we lift ourselves away from reality, we go do a selfless thing. (pause)

We need to be attentive to our inner voice. Disconnection from deep core has three results:

1. Our inner weakness fails to inspire our self-respect.
2. We haven’t the strength to be responsible for things going wrong, and so we fail to inspire the respect of others.
3. We hide our weakness by blaming things and people ... actually, we pretend-hide our weakness. We feel safer blaming others, but few are fooled by the excuses.

Since we are weak, we are needy and become selfish. We also have the ground-work laid for us to be a bully. Why? Because when we lost our grounding in our own power, we lost our authority. We’re bankrupt with no authentic voice. All we have left to get our way is force.

I’d like to tell you about an amazing lesson I received in changing this pattern. When my son was two, he began attending a Montessori school. The staff there soon recognized my inability to effectively parent him, in particular, to manage him without using force. I

was astonished when the owner explained to me one day that I didn't know how to say no, and then in conversation next day told me I still didn't get it yet. So we went out for coffee. She began to teach me how to speak to get the child's attention and cooperation without the use of force or loss of dignity.

It was in the tone of speaking, she said. She told me to remove the force. You'd think a voice would be a simple thing to copy but I kept getting it and losing it. It took the entire 45 minute meeting to solidly get her approving nod. This mystified me at the time but now I know that I was learning to generate a different ground of being for myself as I spoke. I had to learn to BE a different me. And although at the end of our meeting I could do it, I realized with dismay on the way home that I had already lost my grasp of it, so I asked for another meeting. Next time, the entire meeting consisted of her saying over and over a simple sentence like "bring the ball to me." She modeled it and I copied it. In spite of my hard work to get what she was saying, by the time I got back home, I again could not remember the right tone. It took three lessons to be able to take this home and re-create it from within.

What was she teaching me that was so hard? A person with true, gentle authority has a no that says "You are to stop now." But the no of a victim merely says, "I don't want you to do that." In order to speak with her tone of voice, I had to come from a different place within. It was very hard to find this place. I had to become a person who had something to communicate that was worthy on its own merit. In fact, I had to be a worthy person in order to say a worthy thing. It may astonish you that this was a novel idea to me. Nothing less than becoming worthy would generate words from my mouth that got her approving nod. I had to reconnect with my self. I had to find and speak from my deep core.

My victim's mentality had me well trained in my fear that I was a nothing and would never be able to copy her voice. And underneath that fear was a plain fear of being me. I wonder if any of you have known that fear? I was so utterly unacceptable when I was little that I became afraid of being me, just as I am; and I was really afraid of unfolding and growing into more. Now, I'm not saying this for your sympathy; it's not necessary. I offer it because this description, these fears, might speak to some of you, in some way might be relevant to a lot of you. Watch the people in your life. They might look different now.

Our society applauds living for the greater good and touts it as a virtue. Living for ourselves is seen as immature and selfish. Self-sacrificing is self-martyring. And last Fall it occurred to me that if we have a society of people living for everyone else's good, we end up in the end with a world full of people who are self-martyring, needy and lacking courage. Through disempowerment they are immature, unfulfilled and blame everyone for their problems.

By contrast, a society of self-connected individuals is a society of beings with a voice. They know who they are, they live courageously with limits they can stand for and with the benefit of their core convictions behind their actions. They can live *for* something larger than themselves, live out their dreams, for they are free from trying to please and trying to feel connected. These people are truly self-ish: they are self-honouring, self-trusting, self-respecting ... and because of this are able to honour, trust and respect others.

May we forge a deep and true connection with our core. More than anything, the world needs this of us.