

Perfecting Your Selfishness

by Kelly Bryson, MA, MFT

I want to be very conscious of when it would be more gratifying to give to myself or to someone else. I cannot believe it, but just as I was writing the preceding sentence a dear friend came into my study and asked if I'd be willing to listen about some distress she was having. I am glad I was focused just on this line because I was able to tell her the truth that it did not fit for me right now to give her my attention. I really wanted to continue giving to myself by writing this article. I was willing to allow her to suffer and trust that she can deal with her own pain. Now, I won't be tempted to try to make her suffer later, when my anger about giving in resurfaces in the form of withdrawal or punishment. And I am confident that later I will really enjoy giving her my attention and she will sense that joy, which will help her trust that her need is really a gift to me. If I had given in and given out of obligation or pity, she would sense and know it and possibly interpret herself as needy or burdensome to me. Also the quality or octane of my attention will be much higher once I have taken care of my need to finish my thoughts.

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I need to Perfect my Greediness. One part of my greed is to quit denying myself the joy of high octane giving.

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Some people are super nice givers but they are really focused on trying to buy love. They really have very little connection with others or true empathy for the needs of others. They are very anxious to give so they can get feedback that they are liked. However they are desperately focused on themselves and how to protect themselves from the inner voices that would say, "You're not nice enough. If you were, people would love you and you would feel O.K. about yourself." They are in a death raft in the middle of the ocean drinking more and more salt water with great confusion about why they feel more and more thirsty.

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Mayrtardom is an ecologically bankrupt principle to apply in relationships. To the degree my partner Debbie sacrifices herself to try to care for our daughter Mataya she becomes emotionally, physically and spiritually depleted. From this depleted place she has less presence to give our daughter or anyone else. It never pays off to sacrifice no matter how pure the intention to give is. This is not the same as stretching to contribute to someone's wellbeing.

If what you are about to do is not solely, and completely just for yourself, please don't do it.

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How can I show you that I value you without having to obey you?

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She fell asleep on my chest with her mouth nuzzled in my neck. Her sweet heaviness making it impossible for me to move. I thought about getting up to work, to do something useful that could help save the world. I should be writing on my book, making progress, contributing. But her sweet heaviness keeps inviting me into heavenly sleep with her. "I *am* doing something, I *am* contributing," I defend. I am a sort of fatherly futon for my child and that's what she needs right now. No I can't fool myself. It's all for me. She's my little heroine and I am her addict. My mind is right, I should be doing something to save the world right now, but I am just not going to. I have no good excuse. I choose to abandon the world and indulge in the ecstasy of neck nuzzling nectar.

- co-authored by Kelly Bryson and Mataya Rose Bryson-O'Connor

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Dr. Marshall Rosenberg was once watching his children blissfully feeding bread to some hungry ducks at the park. There was a profound, quality, mutual giving between the children and the ducks. The children were grateful that the ducks were eating and the ducks seemed grateful to be fed. This quality of mutually selfishly satisfying giving and receiving is what really enriches relationships and people's lives. This quality keeps love growing and prevents the hardening of the heart's arteries know as resentment.

So sometimes I tell people around me, "Please don't give me anything or do anything for me unless you can do so with the kind of joy a little child has when it feeds a hungry duck."

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Some mottos to help you "Perfect Your Selfishness":

- Me first and only in every situation at all times.
- Ask for 100% of what you want 100% of the time and be prepared to empathize with any response.
- Never listen to one more word than you want to hear from anyone.
- You never have to answer anyone's questions because you are not on trial.
- Never do anything to prevent others from freaking out.
- Trust that all you needs are gifts to other people.
- Present your needs like you were Santa Claus passing out gifts. "Ho, ho, ho you luck dog, you get to dance with me, if you'd like"

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Adonis and the hamburgers

Adonis, a 15-year-old black male, leans over and whispers in my ear, "Kelly, there's only two hamburgers left and I want them both. What should I do?" My friend Adonis, 10 other "adolescent offenders" and I were having lunch at CATC, the Comprehensive Adolescent Treatment Center.

"Well Adonis," I said with caution, trying to stay a guide-on-the-side, instead of a sage-on-the-stage, "You



know what I always tell you. Figure out what would be the most selfish thing you can do, and do that.”

Then, like the sun coming out from behind a dark cloud, a huge silly smile grows quickly across his face. He reaches down, grabs his fork, spears both of the remaining hamburgers on it and plops them down on his plate. He looks up toward me with the eyes of a returning hunter celebrating his kill, his trophy. Then across the table comes a sour matter-of-fact voice “That’s it Adonis.” “What’s it? What did I do?” says Adonis moving quickly into his familiar defensive stance. “That’s it. You are not borrowing my skates tonight like you thought you were,” says Jerry, Adonis’s only semi-friend.

Adonis turns back toward me with with genuine hurt and betrayal in his eyes said, “You set me up. I did what you said, acted selfish and it didn’t work.”

“The problem Adonis is that you weren’t selfish enough. You want the hamburgers and you want to borrow the skates tonight, right?” I asked.

“Right.” Replies the still confused Adonis.

“So if you were thinking Big Selfish your plan would have included the skates. I always try to get you to think like a Giraffe right?” I ask to see if Adonis is still listening.

“Because a Giraffe sees the big picture and is looking down the long road, not just for instant gratification,” says Adonis reassuringly.

“Right. So in order to keep being friends with Jerry and to still go for the hamburgers you might have asked ‘Does anybody else want these last two hamburgers?’ before you took them.” I explained.

“Yeah, you’re right I shouldn’t have been so greedy,” says the apologetic Adonis as he returns the hamburgers to the serving plate.

“What I mean is expand your ‘greediness’ to include taking care of your most precious resource — your good relations with other people,” I said sincerely.

Seeing the hamburgers returned to the status of community property Jerry says, “That’s OK Adonis, I’m full, I didn’t really want any more hamburgers anyway.”

“Really!” says Adonis with childlike glee. “I can have both hamburgers? What about borrowing the skates?”

“Yeah, you can borrow the skates, just as long as you don’t try to ‘dis’ (slang for disrespect) me again,” says the once again semi friend.

“It works,” utters the amazed Adonis with playful exaggerated awe.

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