

Taking a Stand for Selfishness

By Valerie René Sheppard

I am resolved to be more selfish, and I'm inviting you to join me! "Why on earth would I want to do that!" you ask? Because even a little self-awareness, self-care, self-respect and self-love – what I call healthy and responsible selfishness – can bring a lot of powerfully positive experiences into your life! Of course, I'm talking about capital S selfishness - as in tuning into and being in relationship with our higher Selves.

I was speaking before two different audiences of students at The Paul Merage School of Business at the University of California Irvine in October 2010. I used to teach marketing and business strategy as an adjunct professor there, and I still guest lecture about once a quarter. Generally, I speak with both the graduate and undergraduate students, which was the case this time. I typically talk very specifically on marketing principles-in-action and the role of a brand manager in particular. This time, however, I waded into new territory. I shared my perspective on what it takes to be a successful leader in a 90-minute talk entitled, "Leadership for Success." My focus is on an area of leadership that I believe is not widely or deeply taught.

After asking the students to share what they believed were the "hallmarks" of their personal leadership styles, I discovered one foundational aspect completely missing: a deep relationship with the self. When I asked why no one had included 'relationship with self' or 'self-realization,' or 'self-actualization,' or some other term that reflects knowing and expressing from the higher self, what I heard was disappointing, albeit not surprising. The students were concerned that this kind of focus would make them selfish leaders. While communication, negotiation, collaboration, listening, engaging, and motivating were seen as imperative, among other things, selfishness is not regarded as a key trait for world-class leadership. In fact, I'd struck a nerve – they were intrigued with how boldly I was taking a stand for selfishness, something just about all of them had learned was downright unacceptable in most aspects of life.

Without a doubt, the various definitions of the word selfish make it clear that to be so is not so good. However, the negativity feels driven by the aspects of the definitions that make the behavior ego-based and exclusive – a 24/7/365 focus on self. I've emphasized such language in the following definitions to make my point. For example, the Encarta Dictionary defines selfish as "Looking after own desires; concerned with your own interests, needs, and wishes while ignoring those of others." It defines selfishness as "the condition of habitually putting one's own interests before those of others." The World English Dictionary defines selfish as "Chiefly concerned with one's own interest, advantage, etc, especially to the total exclusion of the interests of others." Dictionary.com says: "1. Devoted to or

caring only for oneself; concerned primarily with one's own interests, benefits, welfare, etc., regardless of others; 2. characterized by or manifesting concern or care only for oneself."

I will agree, focus on self to the exclusion of all else all the time, is neither healthy nor appropriate. But when you strip out the lingo of exclusivity and look deeper at the rest, the definitions provide guidance for exactly what I believe is a foundation for a happy and vibrant life – an exploration and valuing of inner interests and welfare which feel both healthy and responsible. Here's my own definition of the kind of inner focus I'm calling for:

"Basing my choices on my needs, desires and welfare without losing compassion for and interest in others; ensuring that I know and keep important in my life my True Self."

There's no "only" or "to the exclusion of" or "regardless of." I'm not saying that I stop caring about or for others. Nor do I suggest my interests be the focus for others in my world. I'm not saying you should focus on me, take care of me, make me happy, or treat me as the centerpiece of your life. In fact, those actions are more about codependency, and they have no place in a model for vibrant living. I am simply suggesting that all our relationships, our ability to create our own happiness, our connection to our passion, and our ability to express truth are all enhanced by how well we connect to our deepest and most truthful Self. This is the centerpiece of how I take the best care of me. It's how I connect best to the peace, love, abundance and freedom that is my birthright.

The negative view of selfishness is learned behavior. In fact, I learned it just like the students who brought it up during my talk. It started for me at home, where we were taught that we had specific and important responsibilities to the family and to the smooth running of the household. This included watching out for each other on the walk to school, helping with homework, and of course chores like washing dishes and keeping our rooms in order. Then, came girl scouts, sports teams, school clubs, church leadership – they all have cultures focused on service to others. Add to that popular culture with famous lines like "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." (Dr. Spock in Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan) and away we go.

It's no wonder we are so outwardly focused! But here's the problem...when we're talking about creating vibrant lives, living our purpose, following our passion, being successful, feeling peaceful, feeling happiness ... being focused so much on the needs of others while ignoring our own can create situations ranging from uncomfortable to disastrous. It may not be such a big deal if you end up going to a movie you never wanted to see or eating a meal you wouldn't choose, just to please your date once in awhile. These can be a part of the natural give-and-take in relationships.

But, it goes deeper than that. I was amazed at how many students in my talks admit to pursuing a college major solely because it will please their parents, even though they have little or no interest in the discipline. That is a personal sacrifice of several years! Do you know anyone doing work they don't like because they are afraid their spouse won't condone what they really want to do? Ever hear

someone lament not pursuing a dream because their family would think they were crazy? How many parents in unhealthy relationships are staying together solely for the children's sake? I talk to countless people who don't really know how to find their purpose and passion, or who are uncomfortable being alone.

I would suggest that making selfishness bad or undesirable on the surface doesn't serve us. My healthy and responsible version of Selfish just means making a choice about what comes first. It's about ensuring my needs and desires fit into the equation of my life. It reminds me of the pre-departure safety demonstration on airplanes. We're told that if the oxygen masks drop down from the overhead compartment, we should put our own mask on first, before helping someone else with theirs. I take this to mean that being a hero/heroine for those around us requires us to be a hero/heroine to ourselves first.

Yet, I know many people who've sacrificed so much of themselves to their work, their parents, their children, the PTA, the soccer team, the alumni association, they are totally disconnected from being that hero for themselves. That's a real shame, and if this is you, I invite and encourage you to shift. Think of your life as your very own movie. As you write and produce the next chapter of your life epic about success, love and happiness, don't cast yourself as an extra when you should really be the star! And keep in mind...there is only one performance. You don't get to rehearse. This is it.

Right now, take a look at your life and how you're living it. Ask yourself: Is the way I treat myself an asset? Do my choices enrich me, attract my good, make my life feel expansive? Am I choosing people, places and things that nurture and support me, keeping me healthy, peaceful and happy? Am I breathing new life into my life? Am I getting beyond my personality and identity to get to the deepest aspects of my Higher Self, and letting that ME lead?

Or am I my own worst enemy? Seeing things only with the Ego's eyes. Am I living in my past, worried too much about pleasing others, or afraid to express my brilliance because others might take offense? Am I feeling unfulfilled but not changing things so I don't rock the boat? Am I locked in a downward spiral of discontent? Am I accepting what doesn't please me because I don't know what will?

I started this article off with the phrase "I am resolved to be more selfish." By rearranging some of the letters, out of that comes the affirmation: "I love Self more." How about it? Are you ready to shift into a deeper relationship with your Self? Start by getting clear on the choices you're making. Perhaps you'll see that some healthy and responsible Selfishness would be the start to a life you love living. Everything in life is choice. That's what free will is about. If you're not choosing you, who are you choosing and why?

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