

The Inner Virtue of "Selfishness"

Modern culture prizes selflessness and abhors selfishness, in effect setting the two against each other.

"The alternatives are either to love others, which is a virtue, or to love oneself, which is a sin," wrote social scientist

and philosopher Erich Fromm, in his essay titled "Selfishness and Self-Love."

While no one would argue with considering others, it could be worthwhile to re-examine our beliefs around being selfish. Do we really aspire to be without concern for ourselves? Or is it important to value and love ourselves, to think for ourselves, to have a life of our own and to be able to love others without losing ourselves? How do we differentiate between valuing ourselves and egotistically indulging ourselves?

The answers lie in self-knowledge. When we undertake an inner journey and come to truly understand ourselves—the sacred and profane dimensions of our lives—we develop the capacity to deal honestly, thoughtfully and lovingly with ourselves, as well as other people.

"The process of attaining self-knowledge both softens and strengthens us and serves to help us love and appreciate life and other people," says Bud Harris, author of the book *Sacred Selfishness: A Guide to Living a Life of Substance*.

Understanding ourselves better means discovering the negative effects of our histories, working to change them, building on our strengths and potentials, and relating to people in a more straightforward, authentic manner. It also means learning to love ourselves, to take in the fullest meaning of the biblical maxim "Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Self-love is the firm foundation that determines how strongly we can give love and receive love," Harris says.

Inner work, or the quest for self-knowledge, is greatly aided by the following three tools of self-discovery. Inner work

is not a quick-fix but a life-long deepening of the connection to your truest self that can enrich life beyond words.

"Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live."

—Oscar Wilde, playwright

Journaling

Writing in journals is not just recording events, as in a diary. To journal is to explore feelings, thoughts, experiences, to look for connections and themes, to express the innermost aspects of your life experience. Best is to pick a time—the same time every day—for regular journaling. If you can't think of anything to write at first, just write, "Can't think of anything, can't think of anything," until the hand begins to fly with the stuff just under the surface. Read Julie Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*, for great suggestions on journal writing.

Inner Dialogue

With this tool, you give voice to your emotions and states of being and actually converse with them. For example, ask perfection why it has been so ever-present in your life. What is its role for you now? What does it want, what does it fear?

Either write down your dialogue or enact it. If you choose to role play, stand in a different space, with a different posture and facial characteristics, when you become the trait with whom you are conversing.

Dream Work

Dream images can have several layers of meaning, but all speak the language of the soul. Step 1 in working with dreams is to remember and record them. Keep a pad of paper or a cassette recorder by your bed and record what you can remember as you awaken. ■

10 Fears That Ruin Relationships

Loving someone is risky business, so it's natural that fear is present in relationships. But when fear operates in our life in a way that hurts us or hurts others—through aggression or withdrawal—it becomes a problem. Recognizing these fears and how they affect our life can help us make the necessary changes to get the love we want.

1. Fear of losing freedom. Tied down, trapped, cornered, stuck—this "claustrophobia" points to mistaken beliefs about what relationships are supposed to be.

2. Fear of conflict. Let's face it, love can be messy. But it doesn't have to be destructive. Constructive communication skills can be learned.

3. Fear of change. Change means work, discomfort, uncertainty. But oh, the rewards of growth and depth and renewal!

4. Fear of giving up or losing control. We don't have to surrender personal power in a healthy relationship.

5. Fear of pain. Ultimately, we must decide whether we trust fear or trust love.

6. Fear of being "found out." When we hide our true self from those we love, we're usually afraid that our true self is unlovable.

7. Fear of losing self. Often this comes from watching others (parent, friend, relative) suppress their individuality in relationship.

8. Fear of not being enough. When we fear our own inadequacy, we often expect perfection in our partners.

9. Fear of rejection. To avoid being rejected, we may become pleasers, taking our authentic needs and desires out of the equation.

10. Fear of dependency. Some worry about losing the ability to take care of themselves, some about the responsibility for others. ■

A Letter From Yvonne Blockie M.A. M77



Attaining self-knowledge can both soften and strengthen us. When we look inside, we gain awareness of our essential human nature, our foibles, our true-heart desires, our undeveloped inner parts. We become more equipped to live authentic lives. We learn to love and appreciate life and other people.

The articles in this issue of *Thriving* speak to the need for and benefits of self-knowledge. The cover story on selfishness suggests that this emotionally laden word—*selfishness*—takes on an entirely different meaning when applied to the idea of valuing ourselves and our lives enough to take the journey of self-awareness. The Top 10 list points out the need to understand fears within ourselves that can damage or destroy relationships with partners, children, co-workers.

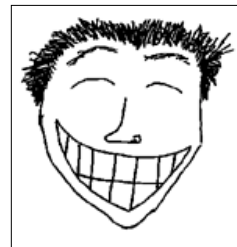
Quests for self-knowledge often start with a failure, the subject of the page 3 feature article. Failure, however painful and humbling, can be a lever to open the door to a richer, more authentic—even joyful!—life.

Speaking of joy—how much can you take? That's the bold question of this issue's quiz. And the back-page article looks at how clearing clutter in your home or office is a supreme act of kindness and self-care that can have far-reaching results.

May 2004 bring you more self-awareness and a profound experience of being alive. Please do not hesitate to call if you would like help with any issues in your life.

How Much Joy Can You Stand?

Everyone has a dream. It may whisper to us in a still, small voice or it may have the volume and intensity of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The problem is that not many of us are actually living our dream. But as Suzanne Falter-Barns says in her book, *How Much Joy Can You Stand?*, if we begin to nurture and pursue that dream, if we can manage to leap off the cliff and trust ourselves to fly, we will experience a fine, effortless joy like nothing else. "It may take a while to wade through all your resistance, fears, misperceptions and basic disbelief in yourself," she says. "It may take far longer than you think it should. But if you can just keep going through the process, and trust yourself in a basic way not attempted before, the joy will be yours." Test your joy quotient with this Thriving quiz.



True False

- 1. Creativity doesn't just belong to artistic types living in loft studios. It belongs to me and to every human. I AM creative!
- 2. I think of myself as someone who doesn't just want what I want, but as someone who is going to get it.
- 3. I keep blank notebooks in several places for jotting down my ideas and inspirations, and a tape recorder for recording observations.
- 4. No matter how "uncreative," sensible, logical and otherwise unimpulsive I might consider myself, if I have a pressing idea—a core desire—I'm going to express it.
- 5. My family, my community, my world all benefit from my pursuit of my dream.
- 6. Feeling vulnerable and insecure is part of the process of creating any dream. To see me through those times, I call on those who I know support my project, not those who might discourage my efforts.
- 7. I quiet my mind regularly, and when I do, creative ideas and inspirations often show up unannounced.
- 8. I look around my world—city streets or nature's paths—for creative inspiration and sources of joy.
- 9. I anticipate unexpected twists of fate, chance encounters and unorthodox solutions.
- 10. It isn't up to me what the world thinks of me. My job is to work on my dream and send it out there.
- 11. I make a regular habit of connecting with my wishes, and I'm not afraid to wish for too much. But rather than wish for personal success alone, I link my wishes to how they serve people.
- 12. I use affirmations—positive statements phrased in the present tense and repeated often—to calm any fears I identify as holding me back.
- 13. I know that false desires are accompanied by feelings that are anxious, grasping and withholding, whereas true heart's desires are accompanied by feelings that are joyful, releasing and generous.
- 14. I make it a habit to do one scary thing and to do one thing differently every day.

If you answered "false" more often than "true," you may be plugging up your joy channel. Please don't hesitate to call if you would like help clearing it and reconnecting to your joy.

How to Succeed with Failure When All Else Fails

Had it not been for failure, humankind may never have known the magnificent Audubon bird paintings that gave rise to the

Audubon Society or the inspiring music of Handel's Messiah, sung every year at Christmastime around the world.

It was only after John James Audubon's

business failed in 1819 that he began traveling and painting birds. George Frederick Handel unleashed his creative genius after a night of deep despair over his failure as a musician (he lived in poverty and had suffered a stroke).

The world landscape is strewn with such stories of success rising from the ashes of failure. Yet failure tends to strike fear in our hearts like nothing else. There is so little tolerance for it in our culture and tremendous pressure to get it right every time, to be in control, to succeed and win.

But because we are human, we cannot help but fail. We suffer from failed relationships, failed marriages, failed parenting, failure at work, failure in health. And when we do fail, the wounds may penetrate so deeply into our psyche that we begin to think, "I *am* a failure," rather than "I failed." We might begin to make safe choices, to settle for less than we really want, out of fear of failure.

What would it be like to cast failure in a different light, to take it out of the darkness of disgrace and guilt, to remove the feeling of "disaster" associated with failure, to look for what it tells us about our well-being and our conduct in life? What enormous amounts of energy would be freed up? And for what?

"You may have a fresh start any moment you choose, for this thing that we call 'failure' is not the falling down, but the staying down," said silent-film actress Mary Pickford.

Open Door to a New Success

Like Audubon, a failure can be a lever to open the door to a richer, more authentic life. Many a radical transformation has had failure at its root.

Author Suzanne Falter-Barns says, "There really is no such thing as failure. There is only the rearrangement of plans and the surrender of ego. There is only the twist in the road we never expect."

Spark Creativity

Sometimes we need to be jolted out of our routine and back into the essential work of creating ourselves. Failure doesn't just clear its throat, it blows a trumpet in our ears and stirs up all the creative juices. We can't help but respond with passion and drive, as Handel did while composing the Messiah.

Promote Risk-Taking and Change

Failure is a natural offshoot of adventure and risk-taking, and

"Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

—Theodore Roosevelt

growth is a natural offshoot of failure. Great courage is needed to face real change. A great failure can be the influence that enables us to risk and change.

Getting Through It

In his book *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*, Thomas Moore writes: "If we could understand the feelings of inferiority and humbling occasioned by failure as meaningful in their own right, then we might incorporate failure into our work so that it doesn't literally devastate us."

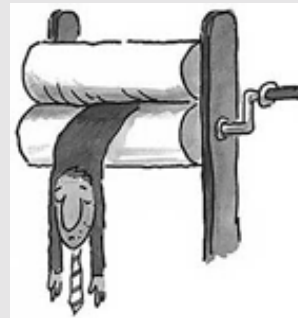
Here are a few suggestions for working constructively (succeeding!) with failure.

■ **Acknowledge your feelings** of pain, humiliation and/or inadequacy.

■ **Laugh, if you can.** A little bit of humor goes a long way in learning to accept failure.

■ **Acknowledge your responsibility.** Don't deny the importance of the failure, but neither let it overwhelm you with guilt. Guilt isn't helpful; taking responsibility is.

■ **Forgive yourself.** Forgiveness doesn't take away the consequences or the memory of the failure, but it does soften the fall and clear a path for the next step.



■ **Build a base of supportive people.** Share the reality of your life. When you stop hiding shame and denying negative feelings, issues are quickly surfaced and resolved.

■ **No self-recrimination.** Replace "If only..." with "Next time..." to keep focused on the future.

■ **Reflect.** Seek not to blame but to search for the wisdom beneath the failure. With real curiosity, ask yourself these questions:

- How can this failure serve me?
- What does this setback mean?
- What have I learned and gained?
- How can I use this failure?
- How can I see it in a different way?
- What is positive here?
- What am I really trying to accomplish?

■ **Expect to make mistakes again.** Some organizations are now building in this expectation and experiencing the enormous potential for innovation, teamwork and achievement that is unleashed when the fear of failure is removed. Individuals can experience the same potential.

Ultimately, failure is not about loss, deficiency and flaws. It's about learning lessons and courageously moving on. It's about retaining hope and the instinct for joy. The lessons of failure make us wiser, stronger and more prepared for the rest of our journey, if we take them with us. ■

The Ultimate Act of Self-Care: Clearing Clutter

When the mountain of paperwork and other clutter on her desk approached Mt. Everest proportions, Amelia would “organize” by sweeping it all into paper bags and boxes that she stashed in closets and under tables.

George didn’t even bother stashing his clutter. The obstacle course from his front door to the rest of the house meant friends and others generally just didn’t come over, and he grew increasingly isolated.

Kathleen kept her house pretty clutter-free, but her garage was loaded top to bottom with boxes of things she hadn’t used or read in years, including a box marked “RIP” filled with “mementos” of her divorce 20 years earlier.

Fortunately, all three individuals managed to regain control of the clutter in their lives by enlisting a few friends to help and by examining what drove their clutter habit. And one by one, miraculous things began to happen:

Sorting through papers, Amelia ran across the name of a colleague whom she hadn’t spoken with for years. The following week, the colleague called out of the blue and offered her an irresistible business opportunity. George fell in love within a few months of clearing his clutter and later married. Kathleen found herself suddenly presented with numerous opportunities for international travel, something she hadn’t done in several decades.

Miraculous or not, clearing away physical clutter often has the unexpected effect of clearing away emotional clutter, too, that may be holding us back from our heart’s desire.

In fact, organizing your life is one of the kindest acts of self-care there is.

Think about it: When things are organized, we spend less time looking for things, set a good example for our children, reduce overwhelm, do more with less time, make better use of our talents and skills, increase our self-confidence, feel more in control and make more/spend less money.

There is no shortage of ideas and books on how to organize. Julie Morgenstern, in her book *Organizing from the Inside Out*, takes the “how to” a step further and suggests that to arrive at any kind of a sustaining system, we need to understand and work with or around our psychological obstacles to a clutter-free environment. Do you see yourself in any of these obstacles?

Need for accumulation. People who need to keep a lot of everything around them may be filled with anxiety and dread at the idea of getting rid of things.

Unclear goals and priorities. Organizing is about defining what’s important and setting up a system to reflect that.

Fear of success/fear of failure. Disorganization may be a convenient way to hold back.

Need to retreat. Clutter can be a protective shield to keep others at a safe distance.

Fear of losing creativity. A common myth is that creative, “right-brained” people need to work in chaos to produce high-quality work. Balderdash!

Need for distraction. Clutter can provide a convenient excuse to avoid uncomfortable issues or unwanted tasks.

Sentimental attachment. Infusing objects with personality, emotions and meaning (“That vase will be sad if I throw it out.”) usually results in living with an enormous amount of clutter.

Need for perfection. Often, people won’t deal with clutter until it can be done perfectly. Translation: It will never get done.

Identifying these obstacles can help us create an effective, lasting solution to clutter and free us from energy-sapping self-criticism. ■



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