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Love Begins With Me

Love of all kinds is often expressed through giving. There are many ways to give. "Paying it forward," a form of giving anonymously or in a hidden way is one. Charity, giving to those who are in need with a free and willing heart is another. This winter my husband and I helped a, elderly neighbor shovel out his car. It was quite buried in snow and he was not in the best of physical shape. It made us feel good and we also got some exercise. It was a pleasant way to give freely.

All the major religions emphasize, and many if not most children are brought up with the idea that doing for or giving to others is more important than doing for or giving to oneself. This is praiseworthy, yet it can lead to problems. While I certainly believe it is good for me to give to or do for others, I know from personal experience that it is vital to give to or do for myself first. If my cup is empty, how can I give from it? If I am exhausted, what can I do for someone else?

While helping the gentleman with his car was an easy choice to make, other choices are not always that simple. When the giving involves a lot of effort or takes more than I have to give at the time, I may not feel as happy to be generous. Yet from the time I was small I was told not to be selfish, to think of others, and to sacrifice if necessary on behalf of those in need. It is true that these behaviors are part of being a good person, however to be healthy, I need to make sure there is enough of me to go around.

While this is one aspect of the difficulty of giving too much, the other part is that if I give to others when I myself am in need, like any human being I naturally expect something back, even if only thanks. Yet when I give with expectations of a return, I do not give from a place of unconditional love, and I may feel resentment as well be sad or regretful if some kind of a return is not forthcoming.

If you've traveled on an airplane you're familiar with the idea of putting on your oxygen mask before helping another. It is only sensible to be sure you are all right so you can help others. How fine it would be if this idea were emphasized to those who are told that being generous to everyone else is the best, perhaps even the only way to act.

Because of the way I was brought up, giving to myself can make me feel guilty. Yet to be unconditional in nature, the love I give or the act of love I make needs to be given or done without any expectation of return. The conditional part would be my desire for thanks, for acknowledgement, or even for some kind

of payback. Do I deserve to put myself first? To help myself first?. How do I know I'm not being selfish? Like many I too struggle with this conundrum. If I feel lacking in self worth the issue becomes even more difficult to resolve because my self worth may be tied to my desire to give.

Having struggled with this over the years, I have come to a realization: If I feel resentment or suspect that I am being taken advantage of, chances are I need to do something for myself in order to replenish my cup. I do this with small treats: time to read, inexpensive fun purchases, playing several games I enjoy on my computer, and other small indulgences. I also make sure from time to time to pat myself on the back. All these are reflections of my own ability to love myself, as well as of my personal self esteem.

Fortunately for me, I had some real help in boosting my sense of self worth. At an earlier time in my life I was able to work with a therapist who began by helping me recognize that I was loved as a young child, and that I had always been. In addition and as time went on she also helped me see that I was loveable even if I did nothing to earn that in the eyes of another. Because of my upbringing I did not at first believe this. I am now very grateful for this help and feel it was seminal in helping me to become a more giving person, both to myself and to those around me.

Love really does begin with me. A healthy sense of self worth helps me decide how much giving is too much. I remember when this was not the case and I suffered from headaches I could not manage because I wanted to help everyone and didn't somehow realize that was not always possible. Now because I do not need to receive from another in order to give, I am able to give much more freely. In addition, I have learned that happiness comes from within, and most especially when I feel good about myself. What that means is that whatever I give out of love isn't given so I will feel good about myself or happy. I have discovered that once I have filled my own cup, expressing my unconditional love is a sweet source of happiness and one that makes others happy too.