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The Paradox of Selflessness

Joan F Marques

Selflessness is an interesting word that denotes a disregard of the self. However, most of the time, selflessness feels good and brings about internal relief and peace of mind, which indicates that the self is very vividly involved in the act of selflessness. This article reviews the paradox of selflessness; subsequently introduces constructive and destructive selfishness; and presents a diagram to illustrate the occurrence of these two phenomena.

Selflessness Feels Good

Selflessness feels good, states Alex Pattakos in his book *Prisoners of Our Thoughts* (p.149), a pleasant reader about finding meaning and fulfillment in our work and everyday life.

From the many things I considered interesting in this book, the opening statement of this article was one of the absolute peaks. Not necessarily because of its references to good behavior, but rather because the sentence implies an interesting paradox.

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The Paradox

Dictionary.com (2006), the free on-line dictionary, defines selflessness as “Having, exhibiting, or motivated by no concern for oneself; unselfish”. Wikipedia (2006), the free on-line encyclopedia, refers the researcher to “altruism”, and explains it as “the practice of placing others before oneself”. Wikipedia continues, “[Altruism] is a traditional virtue in many cultures, and central to many religious traditions. In English, this idea was often described as the Golden rule of ethics. In Buddhism it is considered a fundamental property of human nature” (¶ 1).

Indeed, selflessness is the embodiment of goodness, and, just like Pattakos stated, it feels good. However, one can wonder if selflessness, in foundation, is not actually selfish. For, isn't everything that feels good ultimately a selfish experience? As can be concluded from the definitions and elucidations above, selflessness is considered a way of being, that disregards the self and therefore, the selfish motives behind one's actions. But if it also feels good to be selfless (and it does, of course), how is it selfless, really?

On a wider scope: We engage in most of our actions *because* we get to feel better about doing them. So, if almost anything we do is done because we feel better about it, how much selflessness really exists?

An Act of Selflessness

An interesting story that I once read may serve as a good illustration of the selfishness behind selflessness. The story leads back to the nineteenth century, when, one day, president Lincoln was riding on his horse and carriage over a bridge. Shortly after crossing the bridge, the president summoned his chauffeur to turnaround and head back for the bridge. Upon arrival, the president got out of his carriage, rolled up his pants, waded in the water, and brought a few piglets, which were about to be carried away by the stream's strong current, safely back to the side of the creek, where their mother was grunting helplessly. Upon arrival at the White House, the chauffeur complimented the president for his altruistic deed, to which Lincoln stated that he did not save the piglets for selfless reasons but rather for very selfish ones: He knew that he would not be able to sleep at night, once he had witnessed the imminent disaster for the little piglets, while

he could have easily done something about it. In Lincoln's opinion, saving the piglets was a selfish act, even though he could not foresee any immediate or even future gain for himself, other than his peace of mind, which he obviously valued highly.

This story illustrates the interesting paradox of selfless behavior. One can wonder if there is really such a phenomenon as selflessness, or whether we only have selfish behavior in various shades of beauty and ugliness.

Forgiveness as a Selfless Act

In the earlier mentioned book, *Prisoners of Our Thoughts*, Pattakos brings up another remarkable point that fits well in the picture of selflessness. He mentions forgiveness as a noble act. And of course it is! Pattakos reviews the lives of great souls such as Viktor Frankl, who survived the Nazi Concentration Camps and still managed to forgive his oppressors afterwards; and Nelson Mandela, the great South African leader, who also forgave those who held him captive for 27 years. Pattakos then states, "Forgiveness means letting go of our suffering" (p.152). The forgiver feels relieved and freed of the burden of anger and hate when he or she forgives. Is that not, ultimately, a selfish reason, then?

One can state along the same lines, that hating others only harms the hater unless, of course, he or she decides to physically harm those he or she hates. So, hate is a deliberate act of harming yourself, while forgiveness, once you decide to apply that, will set you free and make you feel better. Forgiveness may therefore, be regarded a deliberate act of healing yourself, and thus, a constructive selfish act.

Constructive and Destructive Selfishness

All of the above underscores that "selflessness" may actually be a sophisticated word for "constructive selfishness", because it engenders positive behavior and enhances the quality of life for all stakeholders, while selfishness as we normally mention it, is the general reference to "destructive selfishness", because it usually happens when one party gains at the expense of others. There is, hence, mutuality and a win-win mindset behind selflessness (or "constructive selfishness"), while there is hostility and a win-lose mindset behind (destructive) selfishness.

Yet, both behaviors, although one admirable and one contemptible, are ultimately applied with a major consideration of the self in mind.

So, ultimately, the best suggestion to end this review with might be for us all to develop and nurture the good tendencies within us, so that we may grow toward enhanced applications of constructive selfishness, and diminished demonstrations of destructive selfishness.

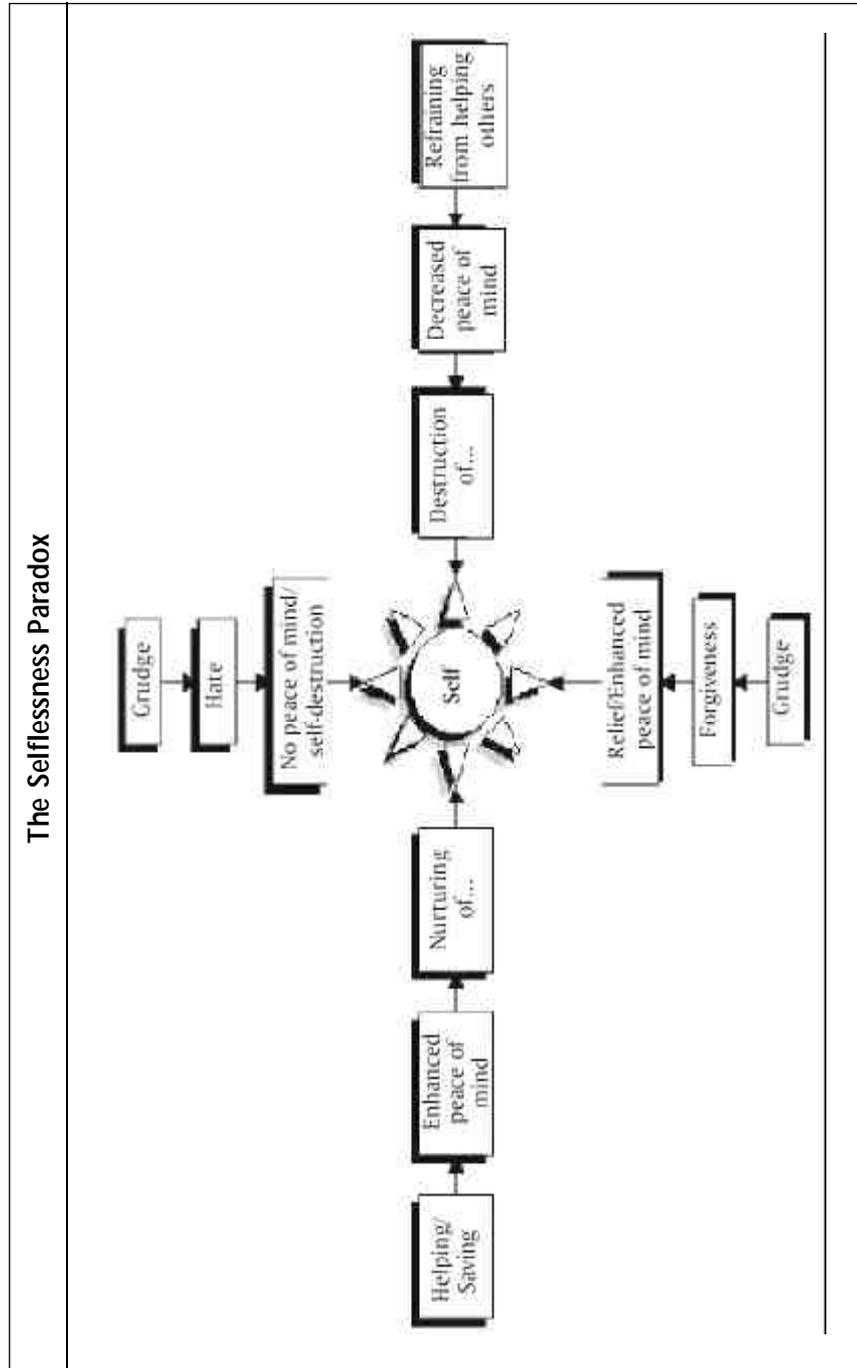
The figure on the next page illustrates the selflessness paradox with incorporation of the factors mentioned in this article: Holding a grudge, and subsequently deciding to forgive, leads to relief, and enhanced peace of mind, thus benefiting the self (constructive selfishness). Holding a grudge, and subsequently deciding to hate, leads to loss of peace of mind and self-destruction, thus harming the self (destructive selfishness). Helping or saving another life leads to enhanced peace of mind, and subsequently, nurturing of the self (constructive selfishness). Refraining from helping others leads to decreased peace of mind, and subsequently, destruction of the self (destructive selfishness).

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Servant Leadership – The Concept Embraced

It is the servant attitude of the leader that promises to lead the group successfully. The concept of servant leadership in the organizational context is a relatively new practice. Servant leader is a new breed of a leader who differs from the conventional leaders.

Southwest Airlines is an organization that has proved that servant leadership, as a practice, is not a mere academic interest but it is also practically applicable. Herb Kelleher states that the Southwest Airline's touchstones are humility and modesty, selflessness and altruism, and so on. He asserts that altruism is shown by people doing good to others instead of themselves. Kelleher states that his company seeks to hire people with this servant leadership mentality. He opines that people with this attitude and mentality are capable of being leaders and they rise through the ranks. Servant leadership is increasingly utilized as an efficient tool by consultants working directly with companies in the area of corporate training. Some of the companies that have implemented servant leadership are AT&T and Gulf Oil of Canada, to name a few. A related area of activity has to do with the growing interest in bringing together servant leadership and Total Quality Management (TQM). Several papers have been recently published discussing the benefits of using both TQM and servant leadership in the corporate setting. Servant leadership is being applied to a variety of programs involving Jungian psychology, feminist philosophy, men's awareness groups, etc. In these diverse programs, servant leadership is viewed as an epitome of success for both personal growth and service to others. Another area where servant leadership is being applied concerns the education and training of not-for-profit trustees. With the changing times, there is a need for change in leadership style as well. Corporates and the social organizations have realized the importance of servant leadership and it is proving to be a successful style of leadership.

Limitations

Undeniably, servant leadership stands as a leadership practice with supreme morale and high ethical standards. However, at the same time, the leader should be wary of certain limitations that the servant leadership suffers from. Paul Wong warns that inexperienced leaders feeling very insecure may not be able to implement the servant leadership model successfully as they are generally afraid of losing their power and position. Servant leadership is a risk-oriented practice, as it involves certain extreme approaches like voluntary subordination, empowerment, and humanistic approach. Paul Wong feels that it might attract the attention of those mischievous personnel with their unscrupulous plans to take the advantage of the selfless attitude of the leader for their selfish gains.

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