

It's
to
say
NO

OK

Breaking
the chains
of self-
sacrifice

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It's OK to Say NO: Breaking the Chains of Self-Sacrifice

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Breaking the Chains of Self-Sacrifice

Let's start with this premise: the world is essentially a good place, people are essentially friendly, and life is good.

Assuming this to be true, we must then ask ourselves why there is so much unhappiness in the world, so much misery and injustice? The answer is easy. It's because we *allow* it to happen. We let the serpents into the garden when they have no business being there.

Happiness is not a tangible thing that we seek as though it were the Holy Grail. Happiness is nothing more than the absence of unhappiness, which means that if we can get rid of all the disruptive elements in our lives—things, situations, people—we can achieve the norm: which is happiness. The big advantage is that we're working with a sliding scale, so we don't have to face an all-or-nothing proposition. If we drive only half of the snakes from the garden then we are 50% better off than we were, and 90% is sheer bliss—far better than any of us can hope to expect.

The point is, we have a choice—we can choose to live happily or choose to live unhappily. Personally, I believe that given the choice, it is better for me to give up something I want than to have something thrust on me that I don't want. For example, I would give up lobster to avoid eating Spam; I would give up a free trip to the Bahamas to avoid a three-day orgy watching someone else's vacation slides; or I would gladly give up an evening with good friends if it meant avoiding a corresponding session with ignorant louts.

As you can see from my examples, the choice I'm talking about is whether or not to permit myself to make an unreasonable or ignoble sacrifice in order to accommodate someone else—especially if that person is undeserving. We're taught from a young age

that self-sacrifice is good, noble, and honorable—and it can be. What we're not told is that self-sacrifice is a very valuable commodity that should be treasured and not be wasted on trivial matters. Most of the unhappiness in our lives is often a result of willingly sacrificing ourselves, our time, or our money for causes or reasons that don't deserve it.

Making a definitive choice to sacrifice ourselves sparingly is truly the secret of happiness. The funny thing is, people almost never trade something they really want to avoid something they really don't want. If we diagnose this problem, we'll find such symptoms as indecisiveness, a desire to avoid conflict, the inability to assert oneself, or ascribing too much value to something we like. However, if we find a healthy person who is able to make definitive choices that avoid the tendency toward self-sacrifice and lead to happiness, we'll find that the choices are often interlaced with the wonderful word, *No*.

“No, you cannot live with us.”

“No, I will not give you a thin dime.”

“No, you cannot borrow my car.”

“No, you will not sing at my wedding.”

Admittedly, the word *No* is a hard thing to say, especially the first time. After all, people have been trained from the beginning of time *not* to say it. We even laugh at that moment in a parent's life when a child first learns to say “No” . . . as if the word was in some way inappropriate. Granted, it should be used with wisdom, but there is value in saying “No,” and when you finally garner the courage to try it, the rewards are great.

By deciding to say this simple word and then standing firmly by your decision, you have broken the chains of self-sacrifice and are guaranteed to live a life of contentment that will let you enjoy every glorious day to the fullest. Life is not a matter of getting or acquiring, but rather of avoiding and preventing. We start living the day we learn to say “No.”

Problem Perennials (Responsibility vs. Obligation)

True friendship is never based on need. A real friend is someone who doesn't want—or expect—anything from you.

In my opinion, people who talk about the value of sharing problems have little grounding in the realities of life. It isn't that I disapprove of people finding help when they need it. Everybody needs a shoulder to cry on from time to time to help them past the difficulties of life. Ideally, I tell you about a problem I can't resolve, and you help me figure out how to solve it. I grow from your help and don't need to bother you again the next time I face the same problem. In fact, I'm now in a position to help someone else. Eventually, everybody knows how to solve that particular problem and it no longer plagues mankind. Unfortunately, it usually doesn't work this way.

The truth is, precious little problem “sharing” goes on in the world. The reason for this is that many people believe it's the *problem* that's being shared when in fact, the thing that's being shared is the *solution*. As a result, there are problem *dumpers* (people who aren't looking for solutions but only want to unload on anyone who lacks the dexterity to get away from them) and the problem *dumpees* (people who consistently listen to other people's problems, but rarely have the opportunity to unload their own prob-

lems). Indeed, the problem dumpers tend to be *Problem Perennials*—people who *always* have a problem and *always* want to involve someone else in it—and any amount of joy they might bring into our lives is usually swamped by their unbearable demands.

This brings us to the second reason we don't say "No" to people. Since the middle ages society has taught people to have an inherent sense of *noblesse oblige* (the obligation of nobility, a/k/a the moral obligation to sacrifice ourselves for a cause). We're taught to feel an obligation toward people in need—and the problem dumpers take advantage of this. This isn't to say we shouldn't help people in need, I'm simply pointing out that we shouldn't feel obligated to help people who don't need or deserve our help. We're not responsible for the Problem Perennials who enter our lives.

Unfortunately, the odds are that we all know at least one person who is a Problem Perennial. Problem Perennials usually want something, which is why they lean on our sense of obligation (usually because they can't manage their lives by themselves), requiring us to be the responsible party. This makes them moochers—people who need a ride, a small loan, or a place to stay. Or maybe they want to borrow your camera, your typewriter, or your vacuum cleaner. Problem Perennials are usually one short step ahead of bill collectors and lawyers: they drive with a suspended license, owe everyone in town, and can't keep a job; but their current problem is always somebody else's fault.

"The bank mixed up my account."

"The police report was in error."

"The boss blamed the wrong person."

"The witness was lying."

Isn't it odd that these problems rarely seem to plague the rest of us?

Characteristics of the Problem Perennial

.....
 : You're not doing a Problem Perennial a favor by being respon-
 : sible for them, nor are you helping them by caving in to your
 :

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sense of obligation. Where helping the deserving needy brings joy because your help changes their lives, helping Problem Perennials changes nothing and only guarantees they'll be back for more. This behavior makes them prime candidates for an emphatic, "No!"

There are several distinguishing characteristics that bind all Problem Perennials into one big, undesirable lump, and knowing what these characteristics are will help us to say "No" when they lean on us.

1. *They never learn.* This characteristic is truly constant. There are Problem Perennials still unborn who will buy lightning-rod franchises or swampland in Florida. The poor soul who makes stupid investments and loses his shirt at age 25 will be surrendering the same shirt at age 70—still trying for that big score. It shouldn't surprise you to discover that Problem Perennials tend to be the biggest advocates of Positive Thinking—it's usually the only way they can get people to agree with them.

Consider the plight of a female Problem Perennial who is married to a husband who comes home drunk every night and beats her. She will eventually divorce him, then marry a man who—guess what?—comes home drunk every night and beats her.

Or consider the hypochondriac who receives neither attention nor sympathy for his fancied illnesses but who will continue indefinitely with the ailment routine, each time gaining nothing from it.

Problem Perennials are almost always repeaters, and they learn absolutely nothing from experiences that should be sufficient to deter even preschoolers from making mistakes.

2. *They need to tell their story—again and again and again.* Problem Perennials always have the need to air their problems, and no matter what course a conversation takes, they're going to do it. A discussion on grain subsidies, for example, might bring out the following response: "George and I were discussing that very subject the day before he ran off with that tramp and left me

with three children to raise.” Or, “That no good lying boss of mine used to write letters to the paper about grain subsidies. He fired me because he knew that I had the goods on him.” Or the ever popular, “I have a good book on that subject, but I’ve been too sick to read it”

A Problem Perennial can steer a conversation in his or her direction no matter what the original topic, whether it be nuclear disarmament, euthanasia, animal experimentation, or the relative advantages and disadvantages of term life insurance. A real professional can even sense a drift in the topic and flawlessly steer the conversation right back to the “fleeing husband” or the “vengeful employer.” It’s a morbidly fascinating and utterly reprehensible talent.

3. *They always need something from you.* If someone is going to hit you up for money (or anything else), they will go along with sports, politics, or what-good-books-have-you-read-lately for just so long, then comes the bite. This is the primary reason that nobody wants these people around: they can’t walk away without getting *something* from you. Problem Perennials don’t care one iota if you can’t afford to give them money or if it is going to be an inconvenience for you to drive them someplace. They don’t care if you have to miss a day of work to tend to their needs or if you don’t want them driving your car. These telephone marathoners don’t care in the least that their victims might have something else to do. I find it amazing that people with a long history of marital problems have no interest in learning that other people may have marital problems, too.

Simply put, Problem Perennials don’t want to hear about other people’s problems and don’t care about other people’s needs—they only care about (and want to talk about) their own. *They are oblivious to other people’s needs.*

4. *They’re driven to bring other people into their misery.* Problem Perennials are vitally concerned with one-way sharing. Whatever

the problem, anyone within a five-mile radius must be a part of it. Here we see the drunk who cannot drink alone, or the neglected spouse who wants to harangue the world with an endless monologue. Nor can we overlook that bundle of cheer who is still telling her grown children about the agonies of childbirth and how she suffered bringing them into the world. (And these people wonder why they aren't invited anywhere?)

You can always identify a Problem Perennial by the fact that *everybody* knows who they are, knows what their complaints are, and has a desire to avoid them.

5. *They can tune any subject into the “problem channel.”* Problem Perennials who have come to air their problems are going to do it, no matter what. *They are unscrupulous.* Every one of them comes equipped with a lever, often a blood relationship or some other personal bond, which they use to exploit family, friends, old school ties, and presumably even God and the flag. This is what I meant when I said that Problem Perennials know we all have a sense of obligation which they can use to their advantage. These people will use every known ploy to make you act in their behalf. The defense to this exploitation is to remain firm and say “No” to their appeals. Any sign of weakening will bring on a full attack, and the slightest rift often leads to total collapse. These people are cagey foes indeed, and they know how to make it past the moat and into your castle.

6. *They don't want their problems solved.* Without doubt, the most significant characteristic that distinguishes Problem Perennials is that they have learned to treasure their problems like collections of fine Dresden china or Hummel figurines. They love their problems, but above all, they *need* them. Problems are their only link with mankind. The Problem Perennial sees complaining as communication: to talk is to gripe. Problems are their world, so don't talk to them about solutions. They don't want to hear them.



Remember, we are *not* talking about people with normal—and therefore solvable—problems. We are discussing people with chronic problems, usually self-inflicted, that will never go away. These people are determined to keep the pot boiling, and they rely on your sense of obligation to do so. And there is no defense against them except the word *NO*.

Ploys of the Problem Perennial

It is worth taking time to describe the various ploys used by Problem Perennials to leverage our sense of obligation and gain access to our lives. After all, nothing annoys an honest person more than knowing they've been *used*, so knowing how Problem Perennials lay their traps is the first step in avoiding them.

Exploitation: A lot of the stress a Problem Perennial can bring to bear can be attributed directly to the “relationship” lever that he or she exploits to work on our emotions and make us act in an illogical manner. For example, a case of the “old-town tie” occurred a few years ago with a friend of mine named Nora. Nora received a phone call one morning from a woman named Daphne, whom Nora had known slightly during her high school years in Minnesota. Daphne, a single woman in her forties, had just arrived in town . . . had in fact moved there . . . and wanted to “get together.” Nora invited her over. They spent a few pleasant hours reminiscing about mutual friends and Daphne stayed for dinner. She was also back the next night, and at least three nights a week from that point on. When Nora and her husband Bill went out to dinner, Daphne went along, and when they stayed home, Daphne was there, too. They had clearly become a threesome.

When Bill complained that he had had about enough of Daphne, the explanation was always, “Be patient. She’s new in town and doesn’t know anyone.” Can you see how Daphne had taken advantage of Nora’s sense of obligation toward a friend?

After a year, however, it became readily apparent that Daphne

had no interest in meeting anyone or in getting a life of her own. Her problem was (and always would be) that she didn't know anyone, but as long as she had Nora and Bill, she wouldn't even make the effort. She would never solve her problem because she didn't want it solved. The "old friendship" was fictionalized to the point that she and Nora were inseparable as teenagers, when the truth was, they had hardly known each other.

By this time Nora had clearly reached the end of her rope, but she had no idea how to handle the situation. Bill stepped in and settled it for her. He told Daphne to back off and give them some space, and to find a life of her own that didn't involve them. In short, he said, "No!" to her unwelcome intrusions.

Daphne, incensed, quit her job and moved back to Minnesota, firmly believing that Bill had maliciously broken up an old friendship. Of course, this was not true, but there is one thing he did accomplish—he got Daphne off their backs forever.

Pressure: Another ploy of the Perennials is to back their marks into a corner and attempt to leave them no way out. For instance, "I have to come up with \$714.18 by midnight or my family will be put out onto the street and I will be marched to the stockade and trampled to death by wild horses." Well, if the half-wit could see this coming, why didn't he look for advice a long time ago?

This is a common scenario with Perennials. They never recognize their weaknesses and therefore, don't look for advice to prevent their inevitable catastrophes. Instead, they mismanage right down the line, tell no one, then expect a bailout from someone else once they've run out of options. (Watch out for their stories. They usually contain a grain of truth, but they'll pad the facts to make sure you're cozy in that corner and feel very responsible for their future.)

If I could ever instill a single attitude into anyone, it would be a profound resentment at being backed into a corner and then (seemingly) given no choice but to respond as directed. Here's a more subtle example, "If I don't find the money in the next few

days, the bank will take my car. Don't you have equity in your house you can use to help me?" For my part, I would refuse on the sole grounds of resentment, because anyone who would presume that I could be so misused and manipulated deserves no consideration whatsoever.

If, however, you need a more compassionate reason than this for saying "No," then consider compassion for yourself! After all, you're not filing bankruptcy, it isn't your car at stake, you've acted responsibly—and you darn well want to keep it that way. Where was this person months before when a simple change in lifestyle could have solved his problem? You didn't make any financial mistakes, so why should you pay for the mistakes of the Problem Perennial?

Remember, I'm not advocating that you throw every needy person out into the street—I'm talking about not letting yourself become the quick-fix for people who should have known better. You are responsible for yourself and the well-being of your family (to a point—we'll get to that shortly), but you are in no way obligated to fix problems in the lives of people who, through their own negligence, regularly have them.

Guilt. Let us remember—and never forget—that Problem Perennials thrive on other people's guilt. They cannot exist without it. They have to convince the rest of us that "less fortunate" includes those people who blew their rent money at the race track, or snorted it up their noses, or who bought things they couldn't afford and are now facing payback time. However, the person who refuses to work or to manage his or her life in even the simplest way is *not* "less fortunate." People who bring on their own misfortunes (usually after repeated warnings) are not to be pitied and are undeserving of anyone's compassion. There are too many deserving and legitimately needy people in the world for anyone to be wasting time and money on those who repeatedly bring the world down upon their own heads.

This reminds me of another sad story involving some very nice

people—Chuck and Peggy. They lived on a cul-de-sac in Los Angeles that was filled with starter homes for young couples who hoped to move on to better things. Chuck, an aeronautical engineer, was making a better than average salary and had prospects of living a long and comfortable life. Peggy worked as a technical writer and also earned a reasonably good salary. Like most young couples, they looked forward to children, a better house, and maybe seeing Paris before they died. The only flaw in this plan was Peggy's brother Larry, a lifelong Problem Perennial whose sole function in life seemed to be showing up at Chuck and Peggy's doorstep several times a year and mooching money, favors, and “. . . a place to stay until I can get back on my feet.”

Chuck eventually grew tired of this constant albatross around his neck and told Larry, “*No*,” which Peggy resented. As she said, “He *is* my brother.” She kept sending him money, but without telling Chuck. Eventually—and inevitably—Chuck found out. They argued and ultimately divorced, with Larry being the sole cause.

Today, more than 25 years later, Chuck is remarried (his wife is an only child, incidentally) and Peggy lives alone in Los Angeles. She still gives regular handouts to Larry (“After all, he *is* my brother”) and looks forward to the day when Larry will get back on his feet and start catching a few of those good breaks that seem to go to everyone else.

Peggy is the personification of the professional mark. Larry has known all his life that there will always be “something in the well”—a financial handout, a meal, a place to stay, and someone to lie for him and not condemn him for being the loathsome parasite that he is. Peggy benefits by escaping guilt, and this is exactly the way Larry wants it. The more guilt that Peggy feels, the better it is for him. (The only big winner is Chuck, who is out of the whole mess forever.)

Another family story I've come across that has a happier ending involves Andy, who also had a brush with a Problem Perennial. Andy is now an architect in Seattle, but his story starts in Los

Angeles at a time when he had been divorced for about five years. When he met Marcy, a photographer and an attractive, personable young woman, it seemed obvious that they were a perfect match. In fact, they became engaged when they had known each other for only a few months.

There was a strange piece to the puzzle, however. Marcy was never able to be with Andy on Sundays, and after some intense questioning, Andy learned that she, her two brothers, and her brothers' wives were expected to be at "Daddy's" graveside every Sunday. This Sunday gathering of the clan was a regular event. Mother demanded it, and no excuses were accepted. The woman could not let go. Therefore, no one else was allowed to let go either, and the entire family went as a sop to the mother's hang-up. When Marcy's mother expressed grief she expected a cheering section. For Marcy, it was a 60-mile drive each way, but she hadn't missed a Sunday in the seven years since her father had shuffled off this mortal coil.

When all of this business finally came out into the open, Marcy went a step further. She told Andy that he would be expected to participate after they were married. This rang an immediate bell in Andy's head: no Sunday golf, no weekend trips, and no goofing off around the apartment pool. Even more, he resented the fact that it was *expected*. Andy thought about it for all of 15 seconds and told Marcy that he was not about to spend his Sundays sitting in a cemetery. They argued and broke up, but eventually got back together when Marcy shrugged off the guilt of saying "*No*" to her mother and realized what it meant to be an adult. She told her mother that she would no longer be part of her Sunday sickness, and she has never regretted it. She and Andy have been married for over eight years now, and Mother (so far as I know) has survived this mutiny in her ranks.

Inability to Compromise: Problem Perennials have probably ruined more lives than all of the dictators, racketeers, terrorists, and serial killers combined. These people live by keeping everyone

else in line, and there is no way to reason with them. They don't want to give an inch because they can't. They don't believe in compromise because it puts them out of business. Their entire existence is based on their problems taking precedence over all other things. When this is challenged, they lose. Theirs is a risky business, but to them, the fight is worth it. Losing means total, crushing defeat and (even worse) the possibility that they might have to start living (and even thinking) like responsible human beings. For them, this won't do at all.

Trying to reach an accommodation with Problem Perennials has been about as successful as man's eternal battle against cockroaches and gophers (a battle man is *not* winning). There are only two courses of action available when dealing with these people: we can play it their way and spend a lifetime both supporting them and listening to an eternal monologue about how society has "done them wrong," or we can say "*No*," and walk away happy.

Your Relationship to the Problem Perennial

Let me wrap up this discussion of the Problem Perennial by reminding you that there are reasonable limits to our responsibilities and our obligations. These limits are important when working out our relationship with Problem Perennials.

Understanding and caring

We hear a lot about *understanding* these days and modern *noblesse oblige* teaches that we should first understand the problems of our fellow beings, then act in their behalf. Taken to the extremes of today's liberals, this is a supposition that no sane person could ever justify. Social dogooders would have us believe that if we could just *understand people*, we would want to help them (i.e., give money to someone who is going to flush it down the sewer, or spend an evening being ground into the floor by a repetitive account of someone's self-made problems). Thus, we are

left with the conclusion that we must listen to these people, and that if we listen to them, we are *obligated* to help them. (But who listens to the listeners? Most assuredly not the Problem Perennials.)

When used in this manner, understanding will be interpreted by the Problem Perennial as *approval*, which isn't the case at all. So let's dispense with that notion now and forever: *understanding has nothing to do with approval*.

For example, people during World War II certainly understood Adolf Hitler. And there was no lack of understanding for Judas Iscariot, Jack the Ripper, Al Capone, and the Freeway Strangler. These people were understood completely, but no one in their right mind would *approve* of their actions.

When used correctly, understanding truly leads to caring (which includes caring for yourself). If you understand what type of people Problem Perennials are, what drives them, and how they try to use you, you will do the very best thing for both them and you: you'll tell them in no uncertain terms, "No!"

Priorities

An important factor to consider when dealing with Problem Perennials is the inevitable hardship that your family will suffer if, for example, you plunge deeper into debt. Why should your spouse and children suffer from an added financial burden while the Problem Perennial escapes justice in Pago Pago or the Australian Outback? The answer, clearly, is that none of you should pay the price. Put your priorities in order and let this disgusting individual eat prison food for awhile.

Morality is a cloudy thing indeed, and we often find ourselves groping for the *right* thing to do. Too often we grope in the wrong direction and make holy hash out of virtue. When we talk about helping our fellowman—or *caring*, as the popular notion is expressed—we often take as a blanket moral dictum the belief that we must help anyone and everyone who is in trouble, even if innocent people get hurt. This, of course, is absolute rubbish.

It is our privilege to help those people who deserve our help whenever we are capable of doing so, but the Problem Perennials do not fall into this category. And they certainly are not responsible enough to judge their own worthiness (it isn't even reasonable to expect them to do so)—we have to make that judgment. Even if we should decide that a person is worthy of our assistance, we must then determine if such help will impose a hardship on others (especially our immediate family). Thanks, however, to our inbred sense of responsibility, saying “*No*” often brings about feelings of guilt. This is why understanding our priorities is so important: you first, your family second, your immediate relatives third (at best), and everybody else *last*.

And for those of you who think the “me first” is selfish, remember that if you can't help yourself, you're in no position to help another.

Responsibility and Obligation

This is where it all starts coming together. When a Problem Perennial stands on your doorstep with a heart-wrenching story and a hand halfway into your wallet, ask yourself the following questions: are you responsible for this person's welfare? Is there any reason that you are morally bound to keep this person afloat? If the answer is *No*, then have you signed any papers or even agreed with a handshake that you will be on hand to alleviate this person's problems? If the answer is still *No*, then you have scored a double “*Noway*” and you are free of the situation completely.

All of this leads to the heart of what we really owe the people who make demands on us. Put succinctly, *those who didn't cause a mess are not responsible to clean it up!*



Responsibility is an accountability, usually moral, for behaving in a certain way. We are responsible for the welfare and happiness of our spouses, our children, and to a lesser extent, our elderly parents. We also have a responsibility to be good neighbors and good citizens. We are not responsible for the actions of our grown

children, distant cousins, the guy across the street, or old Little League teammates.

An obligation is a somewhat different thing. Here we are talking about a binding promise, a good example being a formal debt. When we borrow money, we sign a paper agreeing to the terms of the loan and are obligated to repay it. Employment is also largely a matter of obligation. On accepting a job, we agree to work certain hours at a specified salary and to perform in a manner consistent with the standards of the workplace.

Mature individuals understand the difference between responsibilities and obligations, as well as those things that are *not* responsibilities or obligations, and will not accept a debt (financial or otherwise) that clearly is not theirs. However, the Problem Perennial desperately wants you to believe otherwise.

It's Okay to Say No—Really!

We often make the mistake of believing that we can compromise our way to happiness. You give, I give, we meet somewhere in the middle, and everybody goes away happy. But this is a sunshine philosophy that tends to break down when we're faced with a Problem Perennial.

Remember that a Problem Perennial is someone with no other interest in life than his own *big* problem. He introduces the subject, won't get off the subject, and rejects all suggested solutions. These people aren't going to change, so the strategy of waiting them out and hoping for the best really isn't an option. *You* have to change things, distasteful as that might sound, and this is accomplished only by employing that wonderful word, "No." Once the deed is done, the world is immediately a better place.

An interesting thing about the word No is the great sense of relief that it brings us once it is spoken. The hours prior to this traumatic oral delivery can be stressful and taxing. Many people spend sleepless nights because the morning is going to bring about a confrontation with a Problem Perennial who has an impossible

