



## Nope, it is Not Being Selfish

by Jani Kendy

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“Take several hours a day just for nurturing yourself AND know and realize that doing that is not being selfish.” This was advice from a friend years ago. Like most bits of wisdom, it got buried – until now.

As a Tai Chi instructor, my goal is to help people learn to relax and thus eliminate some of the negative impact that stress has on their physical and emotional health.

Every class, week after week, I ask my students to give themselves permission to relax. Giving oneself permission is something I have personally struggled with for many years and I realize that, in order for it to be effective, one has to also not feel guilty about it.

That is a tall order because guilt has a way of coming up on all of us and sometimes the reason is not as obvious as we may think. Like all emotions, it impacts diabetes, often leading to other emotions (depression, anxiety, worry, denial) and/or behaviors to compensate for those emotions.

For me, regardless of what I tell myself, the feeling of not doing something I should have done creeps up. My diabetic control goes right out the window as I wrestle with justifying that time I took for myself (reading that book, taking that nap, listening to music, playing with the cats, practicing tai chi). I remind myself of what I did accomplish – pointing out to myself that I am not as young or energetic as I used to be.

I wonder if the feeling of guilt may have its source in more than just failing to accomplish what I have on my to do list. For example, years after dropping out of art school, I spent time exploring why I was avoiding art, worked through my insecurities and learned how to give myself permission to create art again. Yet, even with some success, including a recent scholarship to a workshop based on my abilities, I still struggle with making the time for art – the time for that which nourishes my spirit. My excuse is that I have too much to do - or not enough space or not the correct space... the list goes on.

Now the last part of the statement that was told me many years ago kicks in -- “realize that taking time to nurture yourself is not being selfish.”

When I looked up the definition of selfish a light bulb went on. Selfish is defined as “lacking consideration for others; concerned chiefly with ones own personal profit or pleasure.”

Something inside of me knows that from a very young age I did not want to be selfish or have others think of me as being selfish. How would I have interpreted that as a young child? Children grasp simple concepts: good or bad, right or wrong. The idea of a middle ground or exceptions to something is not

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easily absorbed. So, as a young child, if I want to please I should do the right/good things. Selfish is wrong/bad so the behavior I conform to is to think first and mostly of others. The logic points to thinking of myself as the opposite and selfish.

As a child the concept of caring for others opened my heart to empathy, ethics, heartfelt compassion, the desire to use my abilities to help others – all qualities that I possess and use as an adult, qualities I feel good about.

Could the sense of guilt that wants to pop up when I do something for myself have its source in this simplistic childhood concept? Could that be why I am always finding other things to do instead of my art, like things that will help me support myself or things that others expect of me? Could the times when I slack on my diabetes care, over push myself, don't eat correctly, be tied into that concept of ignoring my own needs?

Could this almost 60 year old woman be reacting to a concept from when she was around 5 years old? She very well could. I still immediately wash my hands if I touch a mushroom growing in the wild because my grandfather made it frighteningly clear to me at the age of 7 that I was not to touch wild mushrooms!

Our brains and egos play games with us and the issues that accompany any chronic disease are much more complex than I, for one, like to admit. Sometimes the real reasons we do things are not ones we are most proud of. But then life is a journey and many of the most important travels are those that lead us to explore our own beliefs, thoughts and feelings.

So perhaps I will dig a little deeper and next week at classes I will have a new bit of wisdom to tell my students: that taking the time to relax, nurture and renew is not being selfish. Perhaps they won't bury it away for as long as I did.

As Richard Bach wrote in *Illusions* (© 1977), "You teach best what you most need to learn." Obviously, I am still learning.

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