

# I was taught always that I should put other people first. I've done a lot of that in my life but nowadays most people seem to be totally selfish Do I care too much?

To support others is kind and virtuous – but you need to look after yourself as well, says psychologist **Alf McFarland**

**The idea of sacrificing yourself** for the sake of others is accorded a very high place in British culture. The heroism of the men and women who fought in two world wars for our freedom fully justifies this attitude.

Also in this country we have the cultural legacy of the Christian era with its emphasis on self-sacrifice and self-denial as the highest good. In both Catholic and Protestant traditions the image of Christ on the cross was, and generally still is, emphasised as the great example of love. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

The sacrifice involved in being a mother has also been highly valued in these traditions, and justifiably so. And yet we instinctively recognise that there is also a negative aspect to the person who makes self-sacrifice their whole way of life.

Indeed, there is a profound truth expressed in the thought that self-sacrifice is not a way of life, it is a way of death. There is, of course, a genuine sacrifice involved in any woman having a child and she undergoes a "death" of her life as a woman who is free of the responsibility of a child.

Depending on the choices she makes, her career may also come to a halt either permanently or temporarily. Where this is justified in terms of the true benefit to others, then it is rightly lauded. But when anyone maintains a protracted self-sacrifice for anything less than saving the life

of another, then it's likely that something much more sinister is at work.

One important aspect of self-sacrifice is self-neglect. There are, of course, times when any of us will decide to set aside our own needs for the benefit of another in a small or large way. But any carer needs to have one eye fixed firmly on their own needs and their own life if the caring is not to become contaminated.

Sacrificing yourself for another can stir up powerful feelings of obligation and debt in the person you are trying to help – who may also feel you are trying to control their life.

The unspoken bargain: "I am sacrificing myself for you, so you must do the same for me," is emotional coercion which has nothing whatever to do with love. Underneath such self-sacrifice lies a secret aggression which will

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surface at some point, sometimes with devastating violence.

The woman who suffers years of emotional or physical abuse from a husband and then suddenly, one day, snaps and sticks a knife in him is the extreme example which we can clearly see. Less obvious is the sly belittling comment to a visiting friend or a request quietly forgotten.

Many people will recognise such a tendency in their own lives.

Some mothers who sacrifice their careers to be at home for the children become over-protective and controlling; and paradoxically, the children of such mothers can become pathologically self-interested and incapable of relating, because a relationship brings with it the expectation of being embroiled in a smothering mire of obligation and guilt.

As it happens, the clearest statement I know of the life-enhancing alternative to pathological self-sacrifice also arises from within the Christian tradition. "Love your neighbour as yourself" has it in a rather understated nutshell: loving yourself is assumed. It implies the profound idea that it is through knowing how to love and care for oneself that one actually knows how to care for someone else.

It has often been said that the British are at their best when their backs are to the wall. The experience of fighting for survival and rising to the heights of heroic self-sacrifice seems to be fixed in the collective psyche.

But what seems to be much more difficult in the culture is the capacity to celebrate excellence in each other, to thrive and take pleasure in each individual being all that they can be. That British tendency to cut down the tall poppy arises, I think, out of the collective failure to embrace the idea of loving oneself and the other as the basis of life.

We create instead a culture of emotional deprivation in which we feel unloved and undervalued and so someone else enjoying success and happiness is intolerable and has to be attacked.

So here is the paradox. We cannot truly love others in the absence of a capacity to love ourselves. We may appear to love others by pouring ourselves out in self-sacrifice, but with the exception of the rare act of self-sacrifice that is truly altruistic, this is an illusion, concealing the exertion of power over the other that is not actually loving at all. ■