

TEDx – Mine is the Care of the Future

**Audience cues included*

Can everyone in the audience who has ever given a friend relationship advice raise their hands? [*expect most hands*] Now can everyone whose first instinct was to tell their friend to be selfish in their decision keep their hand up? [*expect majority of hands*]. Thank you, you can put your hands down. Has anyone ever considered that when we give relationship advice our gut reaction is to tell our friend to do what makes them happy, no matter how selfish? I mean, if you're anything like me, you'll say the wrong thing anyway and be escorted out, but that's a bit beside the point. It seems that often in love, when emotions defy all reason, a person often loses a small part of themselves and sometimes forgets who they are in the first place -- the person who their partner fell in love with. Which is why, it seems, we can't help others without helping ourselves, and commit to someone without knowing who we are. So when something goes wrong, the best thing is to act selfish and find our own happiness.

I don't think it would be an overstatement to say that our generation grows up with the idea that selfish behavior is condemnable and irresponsible; that by being selfish we cause harm to others and demonstrate a flagrant disregard for people's lives and public opinions. I think the fact of the matter is that by growing up this way we are also subconsciously ingrained with the idea that self-love and self-respect can in some ways damage our chances at living a fulfilling life -- a life that can in turn bring happiness to others and make the world a better place. Earlier in history, before the industrial revolution, our ancestors had children for efficiency's sake: more children meant more strength for physical labor and more income. That changed in the late 20th to early 21st century, when the industrial revolution brought about enough tools, energy, and technology to make having more children unnecessary, sometimes almost burdensome. Oh, and let's not forget birth control! I'd put that in the top 3 best things that happened to humanity after coffee and sex itself. People started having children out of self-fulfillment needs. People wanted children and a family, and hopefully were able to sustain it. This seems to have been a turning point in history, when the living generation started to "live" for the next generation, and the one to come after that; we started prioritizing making the world better for our children. I'm here to argue that maybe these ideas shouldn't be a priority. I'm also here to argue that by not making them a conscious priority they become a priority anyway.

When we make living for ourselves a first concern we create a world in which we are self-loving and self-respecting. This might seem at first glance as a selfish endeavor, but as philosopher Nietzsche once said, "Most people are far too much occupied with themselves to be malicious." Granted, if you forgive me for saying, Nietzsche himself died from a mental breakdown, but I wouldn't be standing here giving this speech if I didn't know how to exploit philosophical ideas to my advantage. This non-malicious kind of selfishness that Nietzsche refers to also happens to be the anchor for inspiration and passion; the reason why people are able to devote themselves fully to their research, their art, their writing, and countless other ventures. But what is almost even more important, is that this kind of passion, inspiration, and (if you must) selfishness also teaches our children to be the same for themselves -- passionate, inspired, self-loving. By creating an environment for ourselves that makes us better, we make our children better. This kind of thinking starts small and grows exponentially with a strong foundation. Suddenly, the care for OUR future becomes a care for THE future.

The reality is that there are 7.2 billion people on this planet. The United Nations Population Fund predicts that in another 12 years there will be 8.2 billion people. There are enough of us out there to be passionate about countless different things -- some of us want to be environmentalists, reduce carbon

emissions and design solar panels, some of us want to play with the circuitry for those panels. Others want to research string theory and discover the ultimate equation of the universe, some of us want to write and entertain. Others want to be doctors and save lives. Between all of us, there are enough people passionate enough to **MAKE** the world a better place. I think it's important to think about the fact that this makes the world a better place for us, because that gives us all the more reason to follow our inspirations, and that provides our children with all the more reason to follow theirs. In his appropriately named book, *The Selfish Gene*, the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coins the idea of memetics. You can see the definition on the slide behind me: **the meme is an element of a culture or system of behavior that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by non-genetic means, especially imitation.** Cultural ideas and memes can be passed on from generation to generation with almost as much ease as DNA replicates itself.

Dawkins says, albeit a bit unkindly, **“When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.”** A society that turns passion and the pursuit of personal goals into a meme, can pass this meme to its children, almost, or exactly like a virus, which in turn will pass it even further down the line – and all the people who want world peace, or environmental sustainability, or the answer to our origins NOW, will serve as inspiration for decades to come for generations that will want to solve the same problems LATER. Humans are evolutionarily prone to selfish behavior: Richard Dawkins speaks in detail about this, but most importantly, we are genetically programmed to replicate our best traits. If our physical bodies are built to be selfish, it follows that our emotions are as well – after all, we are nothing less and nothing more than a number of chemical and neurological signals. That's the excuse I give myself every time I want to enjoy a whole pint of ice cream. Although selfishness is the linguistic antonym of selflessness, the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, selfishness that sprouts from passion inspires a world of selflessness. Through such passion, we make it okay for others to dream. It is not always wrong to give into our selfish genes, and explore the consequences.

I think that the idea that we can inspire the next generations to follow our lead and strive to fulfil their own goals with no expense at our OWN happiness and well-being is so powerful. Even as a by-product of our love for ourselves and the passions we hold we can make our children love themselves, and I think that is the ultimate victory.

I think most of us are at least a little familiar with the Maslow triangle of hierarchy of needs. In 1943 the psychologist Maslow posited a hierarchy of human needs based on two groupings: deficiency needs and growth needs. [*triangle at the bottom of the script*] On the triangle, the deficiency needs are on the bottom layers of the pyramid, and further up, the pyramid displays growth needs. Within the deficiency needs, each lower need must be met before moving to the next higher level. I want to concentrate on the uppermost section of the pyramid: the self-actualization. This section contains the realization of personal potential, self-fulfillment, personal growth and peak experiences. Maslow himself conducted research in the 70s of characteristics of self-actualized persons (he included Einstein and Lincoln as two of his case studies), and came to some surprising conclusions. Among other character traits, these people displayed the following:

- 1) **Acceptance for themselves and others for what they are**
- 2) **A tendency to be problem-centered (not self-centered)**
- 3) **Concern for the welfare of humanity**
- 4) **Strong moral/ethical standards**

The funny thing is that in our time, self-actualization is often misconstrued as arrogance and a sense of self-importance. And who can blame us? I certainly grew up thinking that way. However, I prefer to call it self-love. If people who achieve the top section of the pyramid and self-actualize in their own personal way display even SOME of the characteristics Maslow found in his research, I will go as far as to say that they deserve to be a little arrogant. I will also go as far as to say that sometimes, we can all make use of a little arrogance, as long as it is at no expense to others. It is okay to teach our children to follow their dreams and not let anyone stand in the way of their goals and passions. If we, or our children achieve self-actualization and it contributes to strong morals and a concern for humanity, we have already won. And we have achieved that victory by caring for ourselves. Look at me – in a moment of insanity I decided to submit an application to give a TED speech, and here I am selfishly enjoying the attention. I'd like to think that you guys are getting something from this as well; I hope I've inspired some questions! This self-love that we dedicate to ourselves drives passion and transpires into not just a world with TED speakers, but also a world with doctors who love their jobs and save lives, physicists who spend nights on their research and (fingers crossed) send us to other galaxies through interstellar travel. That idea makes me giddy. I once heard a story about a man who travelled through galaxies to save the human race. Now that I think about it that might have just been Matthew McConaughey. I think it's obvious that not all of us, maybe not any of us are as brilliant as physicist Albert Einstein, as famous and innovative as businessman Bill Gates, as eloquent as historian Niccolo Machiavelli. Don't make any mistake; not everyone can achieve self-actualization and rise up to influence 7.2 billion people, but every single one of us can achieve personal happiness and pass it onto our children, our friends, our family. We're not special on our own, but we can be special together. We CAN, and we DO inspire – but we have to realize that our influence would be all the more multiplied if we devote enough consideration to our own curiosity, because curiosity is infectious. There is a false notion in our generation that private and personal success is built on the suffering of others. It is not so. Talks, ideas, values that we are passionate about spark debates, thoughts, and discussions among everyone in the world. Follow your passions! Follow your curiosities!

I once asked a good friend how he knows all the right things to say to people when he gives advice. Jokingly, he responded that he “practices on himself.” He wasn't wrong. Treat others the way you want to be treated yourself, the saying goes – all we have to do is understand how we want to be treated, and devote ourselves the same level of respect. Treat others AND yourself the way you want to be treated. Teach your children to do the same by setting an example.

Let me leave you with this: we are instructed to put our masks on first, before our children's masks in a depressurized cabin on an airplane, because if we're not around to help them, no one will be. Just like in a depressurized cabin, in today's world we have to make ourselves better to make the world better for everyone else. This way, we create OUR future and we create THE future.

