AN EXPERIENCE OF SELF-HELP or How I Learned to be Selfish

by

Anne

A hundred years ago, one Tuesday morning in March 1977, a very frightened and anxious woman was on her knees leafing frantically through a telephone directory. Upstairs, in his blue and white nursery, her baby screamed. She was lonely, desperate, exhausted and filled with anger and misery. She was trying to find someone to talk to.

She did find someone and the process of talking set off a chain of events which lead inexorably up to this moment and to me as I sit here typing. What happened, after I had been enabled to regain balance and make some pressing decisions, was that I became involved in a self-help group. The mechanics of setting up a local helpline and befriending service and then a national charity, have occupied much time in the past eight years, but they do not concern me here. I want to try to elucidate what "self-help" has meant to me.

When I started out, my two main motives and sources of energy were: anger and reparation. I was angry with the professionals who had not listened to me and I wanted to offer some reparation for the damage I believed I had inflicted on my child during the months after his birth when I was depressed. During those months I had felt neglected, ignored, stupid and mad. I wanted revenge for my suffering and I also wanted to help to create an organisation which would "model" a person-centered approach; which would listen and support parents, rather than label them the witless perpetrators of psychological and physical trauma.

In the first year of the organisation, I was able to accept that many of the professionals I met, most of whom encouraged and supported us, were, in reality, trying their best to remain human within mechanistic structures. But the revenge/reparation energy drove me on at a furious pace. I defied the medical establishment with my embryonic sense of self-worth, and had my second child, painlessly, at home. By my third pregnancy, however, I was exhausted and serious cardiac illness was the only way my body could find to get me to stop.

This was one of the two reference points in my process of self-help: when my cardiac physician sat on my bed and said, "Now, I know what's gone wrong, but I want you to tell me why". That prompted me to ask some very pertinent questions of myself. The other reference point came slightly earlier, when I attended a BAC conference for the

first time. I went with a colleague from the helpline and we went with great feelings of trepidation and inferiority; but we were met with kindness, concern and interest and, gently but firmly, we were made aware of the importance of developing our own self-awareness. The seed was planted.

From that time, self-help for me has meant the painful process of learning not to scapegoat, learning to believe that my time and energy are valuable, learning to face the shadow of my actions and my attitudes; and learning, above all, that there is no formula or theory or system of belief which holds anything but a minute part of the meaning of another individual's life. But most of this has not happened within the self-help group for which I worked. Most of this has happened in my own therapy, in my own writing, in my relationships with my family and in my training and work as a counsellor.

If we are drawn to help others because they mirror for us our own dilemmas, how many people join helplines in order to learn how to articulate their own despair? How many people come into befriending groups in order to learn what help they, themselves, need? And yet they are encouraged to pour their energy into other people's lives and little or none is reserved for themselves and, further, work on the self is frequently branded "dangerous" or "unnecessary".

The self-help groups with which I am familiar seem quickly to become caught in the trap of administration and systematisation; work on the self is not an integral part of a volunteer's commitment and groups for volunteer support often degenerate into scapegoating sessions in which the unspoken frustration and misery of volunteers' lives are heaped upon any convenient Aunt Sally, be it "professionals", fellow volunteers or the group's committee. There is nothing new about this, of course, but it is sad that the ostensible aim of the work (to give support and listen effectively to others) is always directed out to others and away from the self. Volunteers who do begin to question themselves, their motives and behaviour, often find themselves labelled as "too deep", "too analytical", and (again!) "dangerous".

I am aware that I say nothing new here and that it is clearly recognised by many that voluntary work is a minefield of unconsciously damaging self-neglect and paranoia ... and yet support is offered and taken. Thousands of people use the services and find relief and solace in the way that I did when I became involved.

But I tax myself constantly with the question: How to enable people effectively to break out of the self-obliterating iron mask of the "helper" ? How to enable them to give a little love to themselves? Every trick in the repertoire of self-

awareness consciousness-raising courses seems to no avail with so many of these tired and very important people.

There are most important questions of selection and training, about which understanding varies enormously Groups learn, slowly and painfully, their own lessons in this area. But I return to that individual process of opening the windows of the soul: in my experience (that is, of me), it feels as if self-help meant exactly that. Help to know myself; help to like myself; help to realise myself: self at the centre and others surrounding; walking the boundaries of self; visiting cellar and attic. Perhaps it was the process of acting-out an impossible fantasy of "selflessness", the indefatigable voluntary worker, which showed me so clearly that concern for self and listening to self were the only methods through which I could listen and give concern to others effectively.

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