

Sarah Yeamans

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Stina French

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Learning Altruism in an Egoist's World

Crazy, like a base jumper or trapeze artist. People seemed to think I was crazy...or at the very least, foolish and naïve. “Why go to the Philippines?” they would say. “Can’t you learn how to be a midwife in the U.S.?” I probably answered these questions about a hundred times. From about the 15th time on, I had to repress my desire to make snide remarks about the inquirer’s lack of imagination and adventurous spirit. Usually, however, I recited basically the same spiel: I thought it would be a great opportunity to learn this amazing skill while at the same time *helping people*. It sounded terribly generic coming out of my mouth, this expressed desire to contribute positively to humanity. I sincerely wanted it, though. Of course, I recognized that this trip would satisfy my hunger for adventure. I was also aware that I was going to be getting plenty of benefits from attending school in the Philippines: cheap education, cross-cultural experience, lots of hands-on midwifery experience. Underneath it all, I truly believed that I was making this choice for the good of humanity. I boarded the plane to the Philippines full of a sense of calling and the heart-open optimism of youth. I was going to help save the world, one impoverished mother and baby at a time!

When I first heard a Filipino say “ma’am,” I giggled on the inside because it sounds so much like the word “mom.” They would say, “Hey, mom, you’re so beautiful! What’s your

name?” When I first saw the children who linger near the mall begging, my heart was rent in two. Dirty, disheveled, and barefoot, they would crowd around me. “Ma’am, ma’am! Please, ma’am, I’m hungry!” I didn’t know how to respond. In our school “orientation” our teachers warned us not to give money to beggars. They said that child beggars usually worked for parents or other adults who would keep the earnings for themselves. I didn’t want to feed into this messed-up system of child exploitation, but...I didn’t want them to be hungry! I soon discovered that being tall (for Filipino standards) and blonde put a big target on my back. I would see these little urchins cross busy roads and run down the street just to get a chance to ask me for money. Sometimes I would give. Sometimes I didn’t have any money. Sometimes I would lie and tell them I had nothing. In the beginning I wanted to feed them all, but day after day, the weight of their suffering pressed in on me, and I felt I had no choice but to slowly harden my heart before I went crazy.

For the first time in my life, I saw what it meant to be poor: makeshift shacks built on roadways or in dumps, people suffering and dying from preventable illnesses, mothers unable to feed their children. Every day I was confronted with the gap that existed between the Filipinos and me. Every day I shopped in their markets, caught their babies, and witnessed their poverty, and every day I returned to my cool, clean, sunset-bathed home and closed my door on their hunger. Ate Nora, the clinic helper, told me her struggle to feed her children. Rose May, one of the Filipina midwives, asked me for money to pay for school. I realized that I have never and probably will never experience such a seemingly hopeless struggle against poverty. It is far harsher than I had imagined. Growing up, I thought my family was poor because we bought our clothes at the second-hand store and didn’t get expensive Christmas gifts. There was one time my dad told me to take shorter showers because he thought I was running up the water bill. That’s what I thought poverty was. Now, face-to-face with true hunger and suffering, I realized I had no idea.

As always, the streets were filled with the brain-jolting clamor of drunkenly staggering karaoke. I followed Fe up the dimly lit, rickety stairs to the second floor. Two bamboo chairs and a floor mat were the only objects visible in the room. We sat and chit-chatted for some time. I was leaving in just a matter of days, going back to my privileged life in Colorado after spending two years in the Philippines. She asked if I'd be back. I said, "I hope so, but I don't know when." She gave me two sealed envelopes. One was for me, a letter and a CD, goodbye gifts. The other, she explained, was for a man in the U.S. A man she didn't know, but one to whom she was hoping I would deliver the letter. To say that Fe had a difficult life would be an understatement. She was the mistress of a man who already had a family he couldn't support. Her first daughter lived with Fe's parents, and she currently had no way to support her new baby girl. This letter she wanted me to deliver was, in essence, an advertisement...for herself. She wanted me to give it to a nice, single man in the U.S. who might like to marry her. The letter encompassed a thin strand of hope that maybe an American man would rescue her from hopeless poverty. I can't think of that letter without feeling a twinge of guilt. Guilt that I still have the letter. Guilt that I am still appalled at the idea of giving the letter to any man. Guilt that she thought I could help her...and I couldn't.

The realization hit me like an avalanche: my desire to "help people" looked terribly anemic in the face of all of this suffering and hopelessness. As the reality of my feebleness against poverty crushed in on top of me, I was forced to look deeper and deeper into my reasons for going to the Philippines. I began to wonder what had truly motivated me to go in the first place. I thought I went there to help people, but was I just trying to live out my childhood fantasy of being like Florence Nightingale or Mother Teresa? Was I just trying to save the day? To be noticed? To be liked? The truth dawned on me. I had glamorized poverty and my response to it: altruism. I was horrified to find that my motivations were far more selfish than I had originally assessed them to

be. I saw myself now as that same little girl I had always been: longing to be noticed, longing to be praised. Like the time I spontaneously cleaned my mother's bathroom with just water and paper towels. I wanted her to be so pleased. I wanted her to notice me. I had always tried to be perfect, not necessarily because I really wanted to be good, but because it got me noticed and praised. And here I was. Older now, but still living the same old story. Still just trying to stand out.

In general, international volunteerism is not always what it aspires to be. Peter Devereux, in an article in *Development in Practice*, points out that the very worst kinds of international volunteer work "can be imperialist, paternalistic charity, volunteer tourism, or a self-serving quest for career and personal development on the part of well-off Westerners" (358). This sounds a lot like me. There I was in the Philippines, largely motivated by a desire for personal development and in pursuit of a career. In an article in *Voluntas*, Sherraden, Lough, and McBride suggest that the motives of volunteers are important to the outcomes of volunteer work. They say that "volunteers focused primarily on personal benefit may have less to offer host organizations and communities" (399). Is it possible that by having self-serving motives I was doing more harm than good? With that squirming feeling that accompanies the doubt that you are doing the right thing, I began to wonder if I could be contributing to the very problems I would like to help solve.

The world is not as I thought it was. The seed of cynicism began to spring up in my heart. I wondered if anyone could have anything other than selfish motives. Psychological egoism is the idea that people always do what is in their own best interests (Pojman 82). Can't help it. Born that way. The argument is that even if you think you are acting selflessly on behalf of another person, if you looked honestly and deeply enough, you would see that self-interest is the root of your motivation (86). Again, this sounds a lot like me. The deeper I looked, the more I saw my motives to be selfish. But wait a minute; does this philosophy get me off the hook? If I am not *able* to be

altruistic, then I cannot be *expected* to be altruistic, right?

Although this reasoning certainly seems to be legitimate, I can't help but think that there's something missing. It sounds a little too much like a lazy person's excuse to me. It's like saying a child shouldn't have to read because she doesn't know how. Sure, you can't expect the child to do something she doesn't have the capability to do, but the child does have the capability to *learn* how to read. What if the psychological egoist was wrong and I do have the capability to *learn* to be altruistic. Does this mean that I have the moral obligation to do so?

Ayn Rand, the revolutionary 20th century objectivist philosopher, took the idea of egoism even further. She believed that altruism, as defined as “any action taken for the benefit of others,” is immoral and even evil (qtd. in Pojman 90). According to Rand, altruism causes us to devalue individual life by holding self-sacrifice, and as she would have it, death, as its highest goal (90). She said that altruism “has indoctrinated men with the idea that to value another human being is an act of selflessness, thus implying that a man can have no personal interest in others – that to *value* another means *to sacrifice* oneself – that any love, respect or admiration a man may feel for others is not and cannot be a source of his own enjoyment, but is a threat to his existence, a sacrificial blank check signed over to his loved ones” (Rand 49-50). She asserted that any action done in the interest of a loved one is not self-sacrificial at all since it benefits oneself in the end (51). She suggests that self-sacrifice is only moral if the recipient of the action is valuable to you. The degree of sacrifice should be proportional to the degree that the person's well-being is of value to you (53).

A year into my stay in the Philippines, my little sister, my best friend in the world, suffered a massive personal loss. The day she told me about it, I felt alone in the world. Alienated from the people I loved the most. And for what? For this grand adventure I was having for myself? For the

intangible benefit I was providing for these Filipino women and their families? They probably cared less if I was there. If I weren't there helping them, there would be another naïve white girl in my place, or, if they were really lucky, a person who actually knew their language and culture. They didn't need me. But my sister? Maybe she didn't need me either, but she at least *wanted* me; and I wasn't there. I felt guilty at being so far away – and then I felt guilty for making her loss about me. I can just imagine Ayn Rand's vindictive voice whispering in my ear, "This is what you get for trying to help people you don't personally value. This is why altruism is immoral." Maybe Ayn Rand is right and all of my altruistic aspirations are not only worthless, but immoral.

If it is immoral to sacrifice for people outside of our personal value structures, what would the world look like? I imagine a world in which everyone is constantly pursuing their own self-interest and weighing how much another person is worth in order to determine how much they are morally allowed to do for that person. In some ways, this doesn't seem too terribly far from what most of us do all the time. Whether we fully realize it or not, we all make decisions in life based on our own cost versus benefit analysis; and this bleeds over into our relationships as well. I like hanging out with my friends, not because I think I'm doing something tremendously beneficial for them by doing so, but because, for whatever reason, I derive enjoyment from being with them. I will usually do a great deal more for my close friends and family than I will for a stranger. Good or bad, this is just reality, and Ayn Rand would say this is as it should be. But what about Ayn Rand's assertion that we are obligated to seek our own self-interests? What would it be like if we were all truly doing so? What happens when someone else's life threatens my own happiness or well-being?

As the world becomes more and more populated, this dilemma becomes increasingly a reality. My consumption of resources affects the availability of resources for someone else. It is in

my best interests to consume for the benefit of my own happiness and well-being, but everyone else on the globe feels the same. What happens when I come into direct competition for the resources that I need or want? On a global level, we face an extreme example of this competition in the form of the global food crisis. United States, Brazilian, and European thirst for fuel has increased the demand for biofuel crops, such as corn, to be turned into ethanol. This increased demand for biofuel crops helps increase crop prices, which in turn causes farmer's to choose growing biofuel crops instead of food crops. The math is simple at this point. Fewer food crops mean less food, and less food means higher food prices. In the U.S., most people hardly notice food price hikes, but for people living in extreme poverty, higher prices mean that they can't afford to eat as much food. For people already hungry, reductions in food consumption are devastating. On the effects of rising food prices, Lester Brown, founder of the Worldwatch Institute, said, "I think a lot of those on the lower rungs of the global economic ladder and barely hanging on will simply lose their grip" (qtd. in Tenenbaum A257). While American demand for ethanol is certainly not the only factor influencing increasing food prices, it is certainly significant. We (as Americans) are, in effect, helping push people off of the global economic ladder. If Ayn Rand is correct, do we not have the moral obligation to do so? In her defense, she is a proponent of creating a social system that allows people to pursue their own happiness. She says, "One's sole obligation toward others...is to maintain a social system that leaves men free to achieve, to gain and to keep their values" (Rand 55). This sounds so rational, but in a world in which we are increasingly in competition for the things we need and want, I can't help but think that this ideal might require some sacrifice on behalf of one's fellow man.

I agree with Ayn Rand that individual life is important and that my life is as important as anyone else's. But to me, this also means that everyone else's life is as important as mine. My

conservative Judao-Christian upbringing imbedded into me the belief that we are all made in the image of God. No one is greater than another. From this seed of equality grows the imperative to altruistic action. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The philosopher Thomas Nagel suggests that the argument of “How would you like it if I did that to you?” is central to the idea of altruism (Nagel 123). Nagel argues that this type of thinking is effective in motivating altruistic behavior because it moves one’s personal needs, actions, and desires to the realm of objective interest. These values that are important on a personal level become important in their own right. He points out that “the recognition of others as persons like yourself permits extension of this objective interest to the needs and desires of persons in general” (Nagel 124). He goes on to state that “Recognition of the other person’s reality, and the possibility of putting yourself in his place, is essential” (124). In light of Nagel’s arguments, the connection between empathy and altruism is clear. Most of the time, I am so caught up in my own reality that I am oblivious to the needs and feelings of those around me. But what if I were to truly recognize another person’s experience as real and important? What if I were to truly enter into their experience? Would I not be moved to rejoice when they are rejoicing? Would I not long to alleviate their suffering if possible? Could it be that we as humans find altruism difficult because we find empathy difficult?

Jeremy Rifkin would argue that we are naturally empathetic creatures. In an adaptation of his book, *The Empathic Civilization*, he points to recent discoveries of mirror-neurons and “empathy neurons” in the brain. These neurons “allow human beings and other species to feel and experience another’s situation as if it were one’s own” (Rifkin). Rifkin argues that our capacity to empathize has grown as our means of communication have grown. As we communicate and interact with a wider range of people around the world, our capacity to empathize with these people grows. As the key to altruistic action, Rifkin suggests that empathy is the key to humanity’s

survival. He states that “if we can harness our empathic sensibility to establish a new global ethic that recognizes and acts to harmonize the many relationships that make up the life-sustaining forces of the planet, we will have moved beyond the detached, self-interested and utilitarian philosophical assumptions that accompanied national markets and nation state governance and into a new era of biosphere consciousness” (Rifkin). He claims that this new type of consciousness will cause us to solve the problems of global climate change because if we see how we are all connected, we will act to preserve not only our own well-being, but also the well-being of every other organism on the planet.

Midnight in Davao City. The rain giggled on the metal roof. No honking horns or karaoke singers. Just rain. I bent over and wiped the blood off of the vinyl mattress cover. A middle-aged woman gazed quietly at me as she held her newborn grandbaby. In that moment of peaceful humility, I was struck by the feeling that there was something redemptive in my presence. I thought that maybe my greatest impact in the Philippines would come down to moments like this; moments when, instead of playing the dominant white colonialist, I was just silently wiping away blood and serving people as selflessly as I could. I thought maybe this could change what the Filipinos thought of Westerners. I thought that maybe I could in some way redeem the colonialist acts of my peers and ancestors by my simple acts of service. The desire to be a heroine and the desire to serve intermingled freely in that moment. The irony of thinking I could redeem the world by wiping away blood is not lost on me, but I still wonder if that moment revealed a glimpse of truth and beauty.

Perhaps altruism can never fully be separated from selfishness. Motives are complex and maybe it's possible that not all selfish motives are bad or all altruistic motives good. Perhaps being honest with myself about my own motives and pushing towards selflessness is the best I can do.

Maybe it's ok to prioritize the well-being of those close to me, while at the same time recognizing that I am intimately connected with the whole of humanity as well. I still desire to serve the poor, but I now see this desire as a commingling of selfishness and altruism. I don't always know if my actions provide legitimate benefit for others, but I am still compelled to try. Perhaps I am still just a foolish, naïve girl diving off the cold cliffs of reason, clinging to the parachute of hope. Perhaps I am just trying to learn altruism in an egoist's world.

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