

Give away; no obligations

By Ruth Ostrow

THE room is filled with bales of hay and smoke from burning sausages. People in jeans and chequered shirts are sitting on the hay, while children in cowboy hats are running about squealing with joy.

Suddenly the music begins and everyone is off their hay and into the centre of the room. They form nice, neat lines and begin performing funny steps and hand movements, clapping and stomping their feet in what the host calls linedancing. Someone lets out an "Eeeehaaa" and I fall back in shock.

This is my first barn dance. Probably my last. Not that it isn't fun, but I'm from different genetic stock. Unlike a lot of people of Irish or Celtic heritage who understand about dancing in pairs or lines, I come from central European stock where we prefer circles.

After making a mess of it all, I retreat to the hay where country folk are huddled with straw in their mouths, looking like characters out of a movie, and I sit back to enjoy my daughter doing her thing.

Which is the reason I'm here. To make her happy. To watch her linedancing, which she has been practising all month at school. We have given up our regular Saturday night partying to sit in a cold hall, listening to such great classics as The Old Grey Mare, She Ain't What She Used to Be and She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain When She Comes while slapping our thighs.

And it got me thinking about the concept of sacrifice and the sorts of things we are prepared to do for people we love. Not just children but our ageing parents, our partners and our friends.

I've watched girlfriends do things for their mates that make my hair stand on end. For years one friend has been letting her partner wake her at least three times during the night for sex that she doesn't want. A male friend has fathered two more children than he really wanted in order to satiate the biological clocks of his women.

And, of course, we all have friends for whom we've dropped everything in order to navigate them through their latest crisis. Or worse, to listen to their wild sexual exploits as we mash cauliflower for our screaming children.

Meanwhile, many parents I know are stuck on the exhausting children's party circuit owing to the hideous new trend of everyone in the class inviting everyone else in the class to everything. These martyrs stand about each weekend with people they don't know or like, so that little Johnny can consume copious amounts of cake and lemonade.

I think a question that most interests me at this stage of my life is how much of what we do is genuine giving -- from the heart, without hooks -- and how much is done from a sense of duty, obligation, compromise, necessity, or simple tit-for-tat. In other words, is there such a thing as unconditional giving? True, essential giving without a subconscious or conscious motive? And do our motives make any difference, as long as we give?

I think the answer has to be a resounding yes to all these questions. It is possible to give out of pure care, to give because the other person's needs genuinely matter as much as, or more than, our own. And yes, it definitely matters where you come from when you sacrifice. Giving that comes from a sense of duty, obligation or neediness has expectation built in, and always includes an unseen price.

Growing up in a community of postwar European immigrants, I found that so many of my friends had the archetypal, martyrish Jewish, Greek or Italian mothers and fathers with their universal mantra: "I did this for you."

They sent my friends to the best schools, worked their fingers to the bone in order to provide the best education, food, family life. With one small catch. The nurturing came with an "I owe you" at the end.

This little, insignificant IOU, in order to balance the ledger, was that the children had to ring their parents every day forever, marry someone whom their parents would have wanted to have married, produce unnatural amounts of grandchildren and, most onerous of all, be obliged to eat their mothers' inedible cooking, always asking for second helpings at least.

Sacrifice came with hooks and it taught so many of my friends that giving always had a cost -- and should continue to have a cost when they themselves entered relationships.

Many went on to structure their marriages and friendships on guilt. And they continued this obligatory giving, as I call it, with their children. One girlfriend, on taking her eight-year-old son to see a production that she hated, said to me: "I hope he remembers I did this for him when he gets older."

"And that he therefore won't put you in a nursing home," I retorted with a grin. Which goes through my mind, sitting here now amid the billowing smoke and all that thigh slappin'. I can see my daughter pushing her 80-year-old mum around in a wheelchair, while I push her guilt buttons, singing Comin' Round the Mountain.

But I feel great pleasure in giving her pleasure and I think therein lies the difference. Obligation givers will often be seething with resentment underneath their smiles, and will harbour expectations. The friends who listen out of duty will expect you to drop everything the minute they call. The mother who reluctantly sacrifices her career or time for her children will expect sacrifices of equal magnitude. The obliging husband will expect sex at 4am, and sulk if he doesn't get it.

One friend seems to have it right. Too selfish to be an obligation giver, she only ever does what she wants to do. Although she never gives as much or as often as some of my other girlfriends, when she does give it's powerful and very generous, and it tends to be without a terrible price attached.

Which can't be such a bad thing. At the end of the day I think there is integrity and genuineness in the word "no", in not falling for too many "musts" and "shoulds" but, rather, acting from the heart.

Only in that way can we find the joy and reward that comes not from dodging the nursing home but in looking at the glee on a little girl's face as she spins around, in the middle of a barn, singing: "Ya, ya, yippee, yippee ya."

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