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We Need to Talk About 'The Giving Tree'

Kids — and parents — need to understand that there's a big difference between selflessness and generosity.

By Adam Grant and Allison Sweet Grant

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Like many new parents, when our first child was born, we were delighted to receive gift boxes of tiny pajama sets, monogrammed baby blankets, and lots and lots of children's books. We received seven copies of "Goodnight Moon" alone. By the time our second and third children arrived, we were proud owners of multiple copies of "The Giving Tree." The Shel Silverstein book is a classic, and we were excited to share it with our kids — we thought it would be like revisiting an old friend from our own childhoods. But when we read it, something felt wrong.

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If you're rusty on the story, it's about a boy who loves a tree. As he grows up, he visits her repeatedly. He takes her apples and sells them for personal profit, removes her branches so he can build a house, and chops down her trunk so he can build a boat and sail away. In the end, the tree has nothing left to give and is reduced to a stump. It wasn't the warm, fuzzy, heartwarming story we thought we remembered. Despite being poignant and beautifully written, it was kind of depressing.

If you ask parents to think of a children's book about generosity, "The Giving Tree" is usually the first — and often the only — one they can name. But here's the thing: It's not really about generosity. It's a book about self-sacrifice — and those are two very different things.

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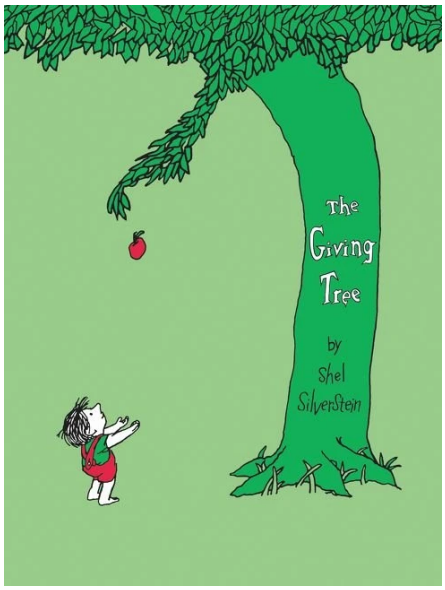

To some readers, the tree's act of sacrifice seems noble, like the unconditional love a parent gives to a child. But if you assume the story is about generosity, it's easy to learn the wrong lessons: that it's O.K. for a child to take selfishly, and that adults should give until it hurts — and keep giving until they literally have nothing left to offer. That's a recipe for trouble.

Self-sacrifice is not sustainable, and it isn't healthy either. Research shows that people who care about others and neglect themselves are more likely to become anxious and depressed. They're also less effective: When teachers give up their nights and weekends to help individual students, their classes do significantly worse on standardized tests. Similarly, selfless students see their grades falter — they're so busy solving their friends' problems that they skip their own classes and fail to study for their own exams. Self-sacrifice is a risk factor for burnout and declining productivity. For example, selflessness predicts emotional exhaustion among nurses and low productivity among engineers.

Generosity is not about sacrificing yourself for others — it's about helping others without harming yourself. It's not about giving to takers — it is giving in ways that nurture more givers. It's not about dropping everything any time someone needs you — it is prioritizing your needs along with theirs. A study of the recipients of Canada's highest honor for giving showed that they didn't just score higher than their peers on concern for others. They scored higher on concern for themselves, too. Paradoxically, being less selfless actually allows you to give more: Instead of letting other people sap your energy, you maintain your motivation.

We don't know what motivated Shel Silverstein to write "The Giving Tree." In a rare interview, he said it was about "a relationship between two people; one gives and the other takes." But we think it's best read as a cautionary tale about love. Although the tree seems to take joy in giving to the boy, their relationship is entirely one-sided. The tree is perfectly happy to destroy herself under the guise of "love" for the boy. That's not love; it's abuse. Even an editor of the book, Phyllis Fogelman, felt that way. "I have had qualms about my part in the publication of 'The Giving Tree,' which conveys a message with which I don't agree," she said in an interview. "I think it is basically a book about a sadomasochistic relationship."

If you take the book at face value, you're missing the point. If you finish reading it to your children and then just close the book and say good night, you're doing them a disservice. If you praise the tree — "she really loved the boy" — you're teaching them the wrong lesson. Instead, this book should be used as a starting point for conversations about healthy behavior and healthy relationships.

In a healthy family, giving is not one-sided. Of course parents make many sacrifices for their children, and they should. But the boy in "The Giving Tree" is completely selfish. He doesn't just take from the tree; he does it in an ungrateful, thankless way. In each scene, we find out that taking from the tree makes the boy happy. No one shows disapproval for the boy's behavior, let alone teaches him to respond to the tree's plight with compassion or even a shred of decency. No, the boy shouldn't have selfishly taken all of the tree's apples, but moreover, the tree shouldn't have let him. The tree has mastered the formula for raising a spoiled child.

The values of "The Giving Tree" lie beneath its surface. Neither the boy nor the tree are good role models for our children, but their mistakes are lessons that we can use. The book was written in a different era, when etiquette and manners were often a focus of child-rearing. Half a century ago, parents were less worried about their children becoming self-centered. Today we live in an age of immediate gratification and filtered selfies. In a world where there is cause for concern that children are growing more entitled, we need better role models for generosity.

Research suggests that the role models in the stories we read to our children can have a lasting impact. Reading "Harry Potter" has been shown to reduce prejudice among elementary schoolers. And when children as young as 4 pretend to be strong-willed characters like Batman or Rapunzel, they focus better on boring tasks. A children's book that implicitly endorses selfishness may lead to a world full of Gordon Gekkos believing that "greed is good."

Here's a conversation you might consider having with your children after reading "The Giving Tree." Imagine that the boy were not so selfish and the tree not so selfless. Imagine that the boy hadn't so quickly and completely discarded the apples, but rather, had planted their seeds. Imagine the tree had not been reduced to a lonely stump, but had been surrounded by a whole forest of other trees. Imagine a different ending where the boy, now grown, returned with his own children to visit the tree. Imagine a new generation of children swinging from the branches and resting in its shade. Part of the power of "The Giving Tree" is experiencing the passage of time. Imagine the kind of lesson that would be.

That's a message we want to share with our children. Giving doesn't have to be a sad act of sacrifice — something you *have* to do at your own expense. It can be a joy — something you *choose* to do for the benefit of others.

Adam Grant and Allison Sweet Grant are the authors of a new children's book on generosity, "The Gift Inside the Box."