

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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Love & Enabling

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There's a fine line between love and enabling.

"Love," in most of its forms, is a decision to set aside your own needs and focus on someone else's. This can be romantic love, maternal love, love for your country or love for any creature weaker than you who seems to need your protection. Love is noble in itself. At some point in our lives, we have to look outside ourselves for meaning and satisfaction.

But love is risky. Whenever you lower your defenses, there's a chance you will be abused or imprisoned. It is also possible your well-intentioned actions may be counterproductive and end up hurting the one you wanted to help.

"Enabling," in its negative connotation, is reinforcing someone's dysfunctional behavior by providing an environment in which it can continue. We may speak of an alcoholic being enabled by their well-meaning spouse who cleans up their messes and protects them from the hardest consequences of their actions. The alcoholic does the drinking, but the spouse provides the safe environment in which it can take place.

Love and enabling form a Yin and Yang. Whenever you engage in the former, you must also grapple with the latter.

The simplest example of love is a parent's care for their child. No one would question the need to protect a toddler from the dangers of the world; yet, in doing so the parent is creating an artificial environment that quickly becomes addictive. One of the universal traumas of human existence is escaping

from the bubble of childhood into a "real" world that is vastly different.

Every gift you give has a cost. Any charity given without strings can quickly become an entitlement, where the recipient feels he deserves the support without having to win it himself. This only heightens the trauma when the subject eventually has to deal with reality in its unbuffered form.

We all know it would be cruel to raise a dog or cat in a comfortable home then dump it in the wild to fend for itself, yet people who have the resources routinely set their children up for a similar trauma. If you raise a kid in an environment of relative wealth and privilege—filled with Santa Clauses and Easter Bunnies and magical parents who provide everything—how will he ever adapt to a world without magic?

Romantic relationships are no less risky. When you fall in love, you inevitably want to share resources, which becomes routine and expected after a while. The couple's assets—both tangible and emotional—start going into a big pot. The creeping danger, over time, is that one party starts drawing from the pot more than he is putting in.

This is the danger of any communistic system: "From each according to his abilities; to each according his needs." With both parties buffered by the apparent security of the commune, how are needs and abilities going to be enforced?

An ideal romantic relationship is one of equality, where both parties have something valuable to give and the exchange of services is nearly even, but this is a difficult condition to maintain. Look at the marriages and other adult relationships you see around you. Isn't

the usual condition something less than equal? Gay or straight, doesn't one partner often become the "provider" while the other grows increasingly needy and dependent?

Things may seem stable when resources are plentiful and neither party has any reason to change. The system breaks down, however, when one party's dysfunction clashes with the demands of the outside world. When their choice is between changing their behavior or drawing on the common pot, the pot seems so much easier.

We all have our addictions—if not alcoholism then some misperception of the world based on our own emotional needs. The main thing that keeps this dysfunction in check is unprotected interaction with the outside world, which gives us hard, undeniable feedback whenever we misjudge it. When love provides a buffer between us and outside reality, regulation becomes much more difficult. Now we are trying to change our loved one's behavior using words alone, which are weak weapons against addiction.

Love is not just love. It is also war. At some point, the person you love is also going to be your opponent. Protection is going morph into enabling, and you're going to have to find a way to withdraw it—for the other person's good as well as your own.

Yes, a toddler needs protection, but only up to a point. If the ultimate goal is full exposure to reality, you have to let as much of it in as possible. A lesson with words is nowhere near as effective as a sunburn or a pinched finger justly earned.

Whenever you love, you need to know your boundaries and retain control over your own resources. Love may be unconditional, but giving shouldn't be.

—G.C.

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