

# Running on Empty

By CAT THOMPSON

IT'S GREAT TO BE GENEROUS, BUT DO YOU KNOW HOW TO SHARE WITHOUT RUNNING EMPTY? HERE'S HOW TO GIVE FREELY WHILE SAFEGUARDING THE RESOURCES YOU NEED TO THRIVE, GROW AND CHANGE.

**F**all is the season when many of us are harvesting the fruits of our labors. With this energy of abundance in the harvest season, we are likely to find ourselves wanting to share generously with the people around us. That's a healthy instinct — as long as it's in balance with what we have in reserve.

The urge to share and spread our wealth is part of the annual cycle of energy. In the Chinese Five Element tradition, autumn begins August 5. That's when we start to clean closets, harvest the garden and share the fruits of our projects. In doing so, we create room for new seeds to take hold over the cold, dark months ahead. If your garden is overflowing with surplus, it will be difficult for anything new to grow in the springtime. In our personal lives, it works much the same way: This is traditionally the time when we are supposed to be opening space for a winter of dreaming and imagining.

Giving from a place of plenty feels satisfying and right, because it creates a natural flow and opens up more space for new and exciting things to take shape. But what happens when we are too generous, when we commit to more than we can follow through on, or distribute more than we afford? What happens when we find we have given away too much and now lack the resources needed to carry us through winter?

When we give to the point of depletion, we give away a measure of our power, including our ability to produce, to maintain and repair our own systems. When we let too much go, we might get physically run down or emotionally worn out. We might start overeating as a way of "filling ourselves back up." Or we may start taking on financial debt, all in an effort to be generous with or take care of other people. But in doing so, we substantially reduce our own capacity for future generosity. We endanger the sustainability of our own energy production.

## KNOWING YOUR LIMITS

Is it really possible to share too much? Can we be too generous? These are challenging concepts for most of us to entertain, in part because so many of us fear we are selfish at heart. And in many ways, we are. The problem is, most of us have been taught an imbalanced approach to giving: We give from a place of obligation or guilt as opposed to giving from a place of plenty and joy. We give because we "should," not because we have an authentic desire to do so. And giving from "should" very often leads to miserliness, regret, resentment and selfishness.

There are some very deep and confused imprints about sharing buried in the psyche of most Americans. We may tell ourselves, "It is more spiritual to give than to receive. My generosity will prove that I am a loving person. If I don't help another person, it will prove that I am selfish." But when we give more than we can authentically afford, we are likely to end up feeling fearful, weakened — and as a result, we are likely to rescind and withhold ourselves in ways that more than outweigh our original gifts.

Obviously, generosity is a wonderful characteristic, and when offered in the right spirit, it makes the world a better, more beautiful place: It strengthens

and ennobles both the giver and the recipient. But the kind of generosity that depletes the giver is unlikely to do anyone much good in the long term. Ironically, instead of creating greater abundance, it tends to ingrain patterns of scarcity.

### GIVING GONE WRONG

Why are we sometimes tempted to give away an excess of our personal resources? There are lots of reasons, but here are three of the most common ones I encounter.

**WE GET CARRIED AWAY.** We may be so excited about a sudden sense of abundance and so enthused about the idea of sharing our bounty with others that we launch into a frenzy of giving and just don't know when to stop. We don't always notice when we are near the point of depletion, particularly at harvest time. But then, sure enough, we start to run out: of time, energy, ideas, emotional strength — whatever it is that we felt we had an abundance of. Before long, winter comes along (November 6 in the Chinese Five Element calendar), and with it, the natural time of conserving resources. If we've given away too much, we will find ourselves entering winter feeling depleted, snappish, perhaps even a bit hopeless and depressed.

The caution here: Be aware of your habits during harvest season and other times of plenty, when it is easy to overcommit and be too generous. If you realize you have a longstanding pattern of running out of the resources you need to function at your best, it may be that you haven't learned the life skill of responsibly monitoring and maintaining your own energy stores. Make that a priority: Without that mastery, you are unlikely to achieve a fraction of your potential, for giving or anything else.

**WE GIVE TO SABOTAGE OUR OWN SUCCESS.** I once read that most failures happen on the verge of success. It seems that when we are closest to achieving some life dream, we are also closest to the feelings and belief systems that run counter to it.

Very often, the voices that say, "Who do you think you are? You can't do this! You don't deserve this!" become louder and more intimidating the closer we get to our dream's completion. If we do not understand the unconscious beliefs behind these feelings, we may start frittering away our time and energy at the very moment it is required in order to achieve our own success. The feeling of depletion is simply more familiar, and thus more comfortable, than the new development or identity that will come with the success.

So, if you find yourself heading into a time of harvest (whether on a goal, deal, project or idea), watch out for premature "generosity opportunities" that are really success detours. Remember that you will have much more to offer others when you reach satisfaction and get that "cup-runneth-over" feeling that results from collecting on your matured personal investments.

**WE GIVE TO GET.** Whether or not we realize it, we may give away our resources because we're expecting something in return, whether it's appreciation, affection, respect or some other quid pro quo. Instead of being direct about it and saying, "This is what I want" — we just give and give and give, vainly hoping that at some point someone will feel compelled to return the favor.

No matter how good our intentions, this mode of giving usually breaks down into manipulation and martyrdom. It also tends to make one bitter and resentful, because instead of being rewarded for their selfless efforts, martyrs, over time, are likely to be appreciated less and less.

For one thing, receiving from a martyr never feels very good. Martyrs almost always keep score and can tell who owes what to whom. And, as martyrs often discover, no one values them because they don't value themselves: If a martyr is always willing to give up his or her own time and energy for others, why would anyone consider the martyr's time special enough to appreciate it?

If you suspect you might be playing the martyr, if you're giving in order to get something in return or to elicit a particular response, consider being more direct with your requests: Experiment with asking for what you want and need and try sharing only when you are truly inspired to share. You may be amazed at how much more pleasure and pride authentic generosity brings, and how much more good your gifts do when they come from a place of strength, with no strings attached.

### SETTING AN EXAMPLE

Devoted parents are often classic over-givers. So are "always there for you" friends. But we can be much better examples to our children, and much more helpful to our friends, if we stay self-focused enough to make our own dreams blossom, and then share the resulting abundance of that success.

Remember, "self-centered" just means "centered in your self." This doesn't necessarily equate to being self-absorbed or excessively selfish. If you value yourself enough to hold back when you need to and give when you can, you will increase your self-worth, and thus the bounty you can share.

I remember making this discovery myself as a young parent. As a single mom, I wanted to do everything I could to give my daughter a good life. So I sacrificed my own happiness and highest choices a lot of the time. Then I realized that my behavior was sending my daughter the message that I did not think I was worthy of care, or of having a big dream. →





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## INSIGHT [Wisdom/Introspection]

What she witnessed instead was that I constantly gave my energy away until I had nothing left. When it occurred to me that she might grow up to imitate my pattern, I began making a conscious effort to become more balanced and thoughtful about what I gave, when, and what I kept in reserve.

What would it look like, I wondered, if I kept more energy to myself, enough to stay strong and healthy and support my dreams to fruition? Naturally, I feared that such actions would appear selfish and unparentlike. But what really happened was that I became a kinder and more compassionate parent — because I was creating so much more satisfaction and sustainability in my own life.

That was an important lesson for me, and I began applying it in other relationships as well. Instead of automatically giving my energy away, I learned how to share with other people in ways that benefited us all. I stopped being a martyr and learned to be a responsible steward of my own resources and gifts. This, I think, is the best example we can set for our children, and each other.

So, as you enjoy these beautiful, abundant days of autumn, think about how much of your harvest you can share with friends and family, how much you are able to enjoy right now, and how much you need to set aside — for yourself, and for the seasons to come. ●

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## ASSESS YOUR ENERGY ACCOUNT

**BEEN FEELING A BIT OVERDRAWN LATELY? HERE'S HOW TO TELL IF YOU ARE GIVING AWAY MORE THAN YOU CAN AFFORD.**

- **ARE YOU THE PERSON EVERYONE** (or certain people) always call for help? If you repeatedly get called to assist with projects big and small, and particularly if you tend to say yes even when you don't feel energized to do so, you may need to reconsider the value of your own time. Don't be so available for "should" projects. Also ask yourself why people might be inclined to see you as such a helper, and whether you should strengthen your boundaries.
- **ARE YOU EXHAUSTED** at the end of the week and overwhelmed by how much you still have on your plate? You need to recharge. For exactly three months, say no to outside requests and make your own life top priority. Don't offer to help, and decline any weekend invitations that require advance scheduling. Beg off any commitments that drain you, trusting that when your energy account is full again you'll be in a much better position to share.
- **DO YOUR RELATIONSHIPS AND ACTIVITIES** leave you feeling down and out? Do a quick scan of your life, noting which interactions and relationships give you energy and which ones deplete it. For one week, try cutting back by 50 percent on the interactions that drain your energy. Do not phone-counsel your friends or agree to listen to long stories about other people's acquaintances. As you start plugging up leaks and drains, look for ways to spend more time with people who are like fountains, always pulsing with energy and enthusiasm without depleting other people's resources or running dry themselves. See if you can learn anything from their example. You might even ask them for a few tips. Then apply what you learn. Keep adjusting the flow in your own life until you feel your positive energy returning, then sit back and enjoy the feeling of plenty.

