



by Jerry Lazarus

Emily is in her late twenties, bright and attractive, and just finishing graduate school. One issue troubled her—why hasn't she found her life partner? Confused and overcome, she sought out her friend, Samuel. They have had many meaningful conversations over the years and she wanted his thoughtful, male perspective.

Samuel asked about her past relationships, and specifically pressed her to elaborate on her most recent one. Emily confided that the man had been abusive—mentally and emotionally, and occasionally, physically. She felt anger and resentment towards him for the way he had treated her. It has been nearly two years since the end of that relationship, and she hadn't dated anyone. As the two friends talked, Samuel honed in on the power and importance of forgiveness. Let's listen in on their conversation.

*Emily:* "Forgiveness? I don't know how to forgive. And why should I? He hurt me."

*Samuel:* "Forgiveness is your only way out. Feelings of resentment have to be replaced by more positive thinking, and in doing so we learn to overcome our ego."

*Emily:* "Ego? What ego? What's ego got to do with it?"

*Samuel:* "A lot! From a spiritual viewpoint, ego is the result of our separation from the original source—God. It is part of the human experience. And as a part of

## What's Ego Got to Do with It?

this journey, we step into the role of the prodigal. Just as the prodigal son eventually returned home, our whole purpose in life is to find our way back home, to our creator.

"Our everyday life experiences, such as this relationship issue, are a means to that end. They provide us with opportunities to look at ourselves and make necessary changes. To do so we must be willing to overcome our ego. If we act from our ego, we are bound by its effects. If we learn to overcome ourselves, we come into a greater understanding, a more peaceful state of consciousness."

*Emily:* "How do I know when I am acting from my ego?"

*Samuel:* "When we act from our ego, there is envy, strife, anger, contention, resentment, selfishness, jealousy, avarice, and even war. Ego broods upon the senses. It lives within its own limited, carnal, self-deluded reality and knows nothing more. Ego is constantly trying to exert itself, and once these 'ego emotions' are active in our lives, we find it hard to forgive, as you are experiencing now. We keep these emotions alive by feeding them with the substance of our thoughts."

*Emily:* "Are you saying that resentment is an emotion that we entertain when we act from the ego?"

*Samuel:* "Yes, that's the idea! Once hatred, anger and such negative emotions are active in our lives, we experience fear, anxiety, stress, confusion, unhappiness, lack, illness, and even relationship difficulties."

*Emily:* "But I am not the one who caused this situation. Don't

forget Samuel, I am the victim here!"

*Samuel:* "Surely you are the victim. But inadvertently you've made yourself a victim a second time by your resentment. In your current struggle, you are not meeting the man who hurt you, you are meeting yourself. Resentment creates blocks within you. It has truly been said that 'You are your own best friend and your own worst foe.' In the end, it does not matter who did what to whom when. What really matters is how we handle each situation. Our external affairs—good or bad—are a reflection of our internal state. If we continue on our path of the ego, we will continue to stumble upon ourselves. Our outer affairs will be in disarray—we experience problems in the areas where our ego is active. We must learn to overcome our ego."

*Emily:* "What are the ways to overcome ego?"

*Samuel:* "At some point, when things are not going so well for us, we begin to search for answers. Eventually we learn to turn to our spiritual source, and the only way to reach that source is to practice spiritual principles such as love, forgiveness, compassion, humility, non-judgment, and patience. These bring us strength, peace, healing, happiness, purpose, laughter, and all manner of supply. By practicing these principles, we are able to overcome our ego, and we begin to realize our oneness with the universe, with nature, with our fellow travelers. We realize we are spirit and an expression of the Great Spirit.

"The teachings in the Indian scriptures tell us that the ego is

maya, illusion. Caught in the illusion of ego, we constantly fall prey to our own follies. As Mahatma Gandhi put it, ‘The only devils there are, are the ones that are running around in our own hearts, and that is where we ought to fight all our battles.’ This is the battle of the ego. It wants to justify and magnify itself, without regard for others. Once we practice the spiritual principles, the veil of maya begins to lift, showing us our true nature, and the true nature of all things. However, ego is ever trying to establish itself. We must always be vigilant against the snares of the ego.”

*Emily:* “How can we be vigilant? How can forgiveness be practiced?”

*Samuel:* “Through such spiritual disciplines as service, prayer, and meditation, guided by principles such as forgiveness, honesty, kindness, and patience. By practicing the spiritual principles we set straight the intent and purpose of our hearts. Selfishness is the birth child of ego. We surmount it through selfless service. Many of our problems are resolved when we actively try to help someone. When we focus too much on ourselves, we are keeping our problems alive. There are many opportunities to serve, but we have to make the choice to do so. We can provide great service through small ways—being kind to others, listening to those who are in distress, lending a helping hand, praying for the sick, showing gratitude for the help we have received, taking time to teach someone a new skill, being patient with people and processes, and myriad others. If we are too busy, living fully from our ego, then we are not going to find much time for

serving. Thus we stop the good that may otherwise flow to us. No one is an island unto himself. We are all interconnected and we have to help one another in order to overcome ourselves.

“Without the element of service, prayer and meditation mean little. Prayer will help us keep our mind attuned to our spiritual nature, and meditation will bring the spiritual influences to bear upon our life. Thus these great disciplines help us to overcome our ego and find our true nature.”

*Emily:* “Without ego, where is confidence? Where is strength?”

*Samuel:* “False-pride, self-importance, self-exaltation—these are often mistaken for confidence. There is a greater confidence born out of our faith in the Spirit. Such people do not impose upon others. They do not use fear, power, manipulation, or position to achieve anything. In fact, they have nothing to achieve other than finding their spiritual nature, their oneness with God. The effect of which provides all needs of life. They do not work to live, but they live to bring joy into everyone’s life because they have found joy themselves—the true joy that proceeds from the heart and not from one’s possessions, power or position. They are pleasant to be around and our lives become better for having known them.

“Those who have overcome their ego are not weaklings, but they have true strength. It takes great courage and strength to love our enemies, give up our selfish interests, serve others, and stand up for what we believe in. No, ego does not strengthen us. It only

seems so. If anything, it weakens us. He who conquers a city or a country does so by his ego, and he who conquers himself (his ego-self) does so by the Spirit. The gates of joy stand open for him who is on the path of overcoming his own ego! Mystics of all ages have known this truth and yogis call this discipline ‘renunciation’. It is truly the renunciation or fasting of the ego that sets us free.

“I leave you with a final word. The things of the ego are perishable while the things of the Spirit are everlasting. At some point in our journey, the ego must be crucified at the altar of the Spirit. Emily, be intent on the things of the Spirit. Our real ego is the Spirit within us—the I AM.”

In the subsequent weeks, Emily learned how to pray and she began to forgive. Later she told Samuel, “I have now reached a point that if I see the man who hurt me, I will run up to him, hug him, and forgive him. All resentment has gone from my heart.” In less than three months, Emily met a man with whom she fell in love.

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