

The Shadow Side of Autonomy

With Rachele Lamb

Autonomy .. it's a word that carries a lot of currency. And certainly in the part of the world where I live (North America), it's considered both an inalienable right and a sign of achievement if a person is living a self-designed life.

I have always loved etymology for what it reveals to us about the language that shapes our speech and thought. Here then is the etymology of "autonomy"...

Autonomy (n.) "autonomous condition, power or right of self-government," 1620s, of states, from Greek *autonomia* "independence," abstract noun from *autonomos* "independent, living by one's own laws," from *autos* "self" + *nomos* "custom, law" (from PIE root *nem-* "assign, allot; take"). Of persons, from 1803. In Kantian metaphysics, "doctrine" of the Will giving itself its own law, based on conscience."

While it may be appealing, at least theoretically, as well as seductive to get on board with the desire to make choices in accordance with one's beliefs, proclivities, wishes or desires, I can't help but wonder about how autonomy came to acquire the status that it currently holds. What is the consequence, for instance, of people either individually or collectively pursuing happiness if that pursuit doesn't also take into account the finiteness of the world we live in and the impact that our pursuit and its associated actions and behaviours have on others and the planet?

Where did we actually come up with the idea that "living by one's **own** laws" is entirely sound? How is it life-serving? How can I possibly trust myself to take the bigger picture into consideration when I have been so thoroughly indoctrinated by my culture to dream big and take care of my needs before anything else.

Marshall Rosenberg often spoke about how people regularly confuse needs with things that are not actually needs: "I'd say we teach people to misrepresent their needs. Rather than educating people to be conscious of their needs, we teach them to become addicted to ineffective strategies for meeting them. "

In the same interview, he says, "Our survival as a species depends on our ability to recognize that our well-being and the well-being of others are, in fact, one and the same. The problem is that we are taught behaviours that disconnect us from this natural awareness."

And so when it comes to personal choice and autonomy, we could do well to err on the side of humility and caution rather than believing that we know with absolute certainty who we are and what's best for us. Maybe we have no idea what we need. Maybe we have no idea how to effectively approach our needs and the needs of the planet from the context of deep abiding interrelatedness. How else to explain the threat that human life, in particular, the western lifestyle, has become to the health of the planet and to itself? What has it cost us to assign so much power to personal autonomy in our time?

If respecting a person's need for autonomy includes acquiescing to their choice to **not** concern themselves with the health of the planet nor with the health systems to which **ALL LIFE** is tethered, then do I not unwittingly become an accomplice to the compromised health of the world and community in which I live? It's painful to reflect on this question.

It's a hazardous thing in a time of malignant growth and consumption to espouse the belief that each person is entitled to do as they choose and "follow their own path". If I am encouraged to unilaterally

respect another person's autonomy without question when the reality is that no behaviour or action is without impact, then what is my understanding of kinship, citizenship and responsibility?

When personal comfort and autonomy become the lynchpin upon which people decide if something has merit or not, or whether it is NVC or not (I have a need for autonomy so therefore and if you don't empathize with my need and respect it, you're not practicing NVC), I fear for our collective future. What has happened to us as human beings that we would allow our personal autonomy to override the needs of life itself? How did we come to separate ourselves from life and its non-negotiable laws of reciprocity to such an extent that we no longer recognize that our primary concern must be for life itself and not, as is so routinely expressed, for "what works for me personally"?

The self-help industry has given so much attention to enshrining the "self" that the mere suggestion that we might be better served to bring our attention to our earth and our communities is considered an offense to some, an infringement and assault to personal freedom, especially in circles where the words freedom and autonomy are prominently and defensively guarded as the primary and salient feature of healthy living. I find that very frightening .. and I don't believe that's what Marshall Rosenberg had in mind when he spoke of attending to needs.

What I'm offering here is not an indictment against autonomy per se but an invitation for a sober appraisal of its hold on us and a plea for its judicious use.

Few of us would be surprised by a toddler's assertion of autonomy. "No, I don't want to leave the playground!" "No, I don't want to go to bed!" But nor are we concerned that the child's objections are a threat to the collective whole. They are in fact a healthy way for a child to learn the world and to learn their relationship to everything and everyone around them. Fast forward 20, 30, 40 years to the adult saying "make American great again!" On the surface,

it can appear positive to want things to be better. But a closer examination reveals a strong and unchecked affiliation with an unhealthy self .. one that does not display a matured and discerning appreciation for how everything in life is interconnected.

An adult self who does not perceive themselves to be bound to the whole can be a very dangerous force in the world. Our autonomy exists within a much larger aggregate of laws that have long pre-existed our arrival on the scene. Trees supply oxygen. That's the law. We can't live without oxygen. That's the law. Our lives are interwoven. That's the law. Every action has an impact. That's the law. We need each other. That's the law. Our personal health is dependent on the health of the whole. That's the law.

When humans start creating their own laws without deep attention to these pre-existing laws, the vitality of the natural infrastructure of life and its ability to be sustaining becomes compromised. At some point, the accumulating consequences begin to surface, at first subtly and eventually glaringly. One can only disregard natural laws for so long before the impact of that disregard shows up.

Marshall Rosenberg cared enormously about the state of the world. He was not, as I understood him in the time I was privileged to spend with him, focused on the development of the self. I would not say he was opposed to it either .. simply that it was not his primary focus. Social change was his primary focus.

A healthy autonomous self exists within the body of an equally healthy community and world. It assumes the mantle of I/Thou consciousness and holds life and inter-relatedness as central, not the self.

Anyone who has ever walked through a forest knows that no two trees are alike. In that sense, each tree has its individual "selfness" by which it can be recognized. As long as the tree is healthy and the forest is healthy, the tree stands vibrantly for "treeness". Might we remember as we embark on our personal paths, that we too are rooted and bound to a web that is much larger than us? As we stand in our personal autonomy, might we also stand vibrantly for "humanness"?

A message that might be good to share: Yes you CAN follow your own path .. but there are conditions to your autonomy in a finite world. Please recognize your existing connection and interdependence with ALL of life. Please recognize that human well-being depends on the health and vitality of the land and community to which you belong. Please recognize that your attitude and actions impact the Whole. Please recognize that how you live today impacts the lives of future generations. Please remember these things as you follow your path .. then maybe this fragile and beautiful world might have a chance.

And lastly, a poem that I wrote regarding the pervasive question "who am I?" around which our autonomy revolves. It may be that who we believe ourselves to be is nowhere near as fixed as we sometimes imagine...

Who is this I?

This I...
a sprinkling of
stardust, a film reel spinning for
a brief moment in time, the silverscreen writing
my life, a 2-way transmission point between heaven and earth, a shard
from the great mystery catching the morning sun, a string from one of Her prized musical
instruments, the trailing song of my ancestors, the memory of those yet
to be carried to these shores, the howl of childbirth,
the exhale of summer, the daisies
where my bones lie
quiet

Not forever this carving named I
but the way the Gods
breathe

Rachelle Lamb's lifelong interest in human development, relationship dynamics and the roles that culture and ecology play in people's lives, along with her ability to skillfully pave the way for transformational dialogue between people consistently produces powerful learning experiences for individuals and audiences. Learn more about her at www.RachelleLamb.com