

Giving and Loving, or What's the Most Important Thing?

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Ginger Rogers once said that the “most important thing in anyone’s life is to be giving something.” For her, this meant giving “joy and happiness” to others through her work as an actress and dancer. But giving is itself a source of joy and happiness to the giver. That is why it is such an important thing in anyone’s life, although we might wonder whether it is really the most important.

Much of contemporary culture tells us that the most important thing in anyone’s life is finding true love: not giving something, but loving someone... That special someone, Mr. or Ms. Right, who was created to be the perfect mate for you. In Hollywood love stories, there are always obstacles and misunderstandings to be overcome before both parties realize that, yes, they were made for each other – at which point the music soars to a crescendo and the movie ends.

In real life, of course, this is where the biggest adventure begins. The two lovers can’t spend the rest of their lives gazing into each other’s eyes. They will quickly discover that, as with anything worthwhile, it requires a lot of effort and dedication to keep a relationship going. You can’t live with someone without giving something.

Now we’re back where we began. If Ginger Rogers is right, to be giving something is the most important thing in anyone’s life. Maybe that’s why finding true love is so important in the first place. It doesn’t mean acquiring the perfect mate. It means finding someone to whom we can give freely and keep giving for the rest of our lives. As Suzanne Ross writes, “when we are seeking to possess a lover, love will forever slip through our fingers. But when we seek to give rather than get, we will find the road to true love open up before us.”

Finding someone to whom we can give entails finding someone who’s capable of receiving. Some people are afraid to receive because that would threaten the fragile sense of autonomy and self-possession to which they cling. But there are also people who seek *only* to receive. They are too wrapped up in themselves to be able to give. The road to true love should not be a one-way street. The person to whom we give must be capable not only of receiving but also of giving to us in return.

In the early stages of a relationship, both parties are often wary about giving too much. If one person gave too freely, the other could take advantage by not reciprocating, and that would undermine the relationship. As a result, there is a tendency for each party to keep track of who does what for the other. But maintaining the proper balance turns out to be trickier than it sounds. The reason is that keeping a running balance of who-does-what can also undermine a relationship. Balance sheets work better in business than in love. And yet, even true love will founder if the giving is overly one-sided. Is there a way out of this dilemma?

The solution lies in recognizing the transcendent status of the couple itself as an independent entity. A couple is greater than the sum of its parts. It is greater than what each person puts into it. Indeed, that is perhaps the deepest reason everyone wants to form a couple: the most important thing in anyone's life is to be part of something greater than themselves. To be part of a successful couple is one of the most rewarding things that exist. So rewarding, in fact, that if we keep giving to keep the couple going, we are sure to receive even more in return – more than we could ever tally up on a balance sheet.

If I give something to you because I am looking to you to give something to me, then I'm not experiencing the full joy of giving. But if I give for the sake of the couple, I don't need to look in your direction to get something back, and if you give for the sake of the couple, you don't need to look in mine: we both look in the direction of the couple as the source of joy and happiness that comes from giving to something greater than ourselves.

Perhaps Ginger Rogers understood this. "When two people love each other," she said, "they don't look at each other; they look in the same direction."