



**YOUR  
LIFE  
ISN'T  
FOR YOU**

**A SELFISH PERSON'S  
GUIDE TO BEING  
SELFLESS**

**SETH ADAM SMITH**

*Author of **Marriage Isn't for You***

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## **More Praise for *Your Life Isn't for You***

"A brilliantly written and insightful book. Seth's vulnerability and honesty are irresistible—pulling you in and opening your heart to the possibility of a life without walls."

—**Michael J. Merchant, President, ANASAZI Foundation**

"Weaving his own personal story into Oscar Wilde's great story 'The Selfish Giant,' Seth manages to take profound ideas from moral philosophy and make them accessible to his reader. Those who have found themselves in the dark of this metaphorical winter will find a guide in Seth as he helps show all of us the way out through love."

—**Matthew Whoolery, PhD, psychologist and Fulbright Scholar**

"Seth's amazing book illustrates a powerful and proven path to happiness and gently reminds us how easily we forget this profound truth: focusing on others brings the deepest joy. Seth's earnestness, humility, and candor capture the essence of what it means to love. I believe it is one of the most important books I have ever read."

—**Lindsay Hadley, CEO, Hadley Impact Consulting**

"A lot of truth and wisdom in this little book! Seth shares life lessons in a succinct and powerful manner, with a humor that is both entertaining and instructive."

—**Sterling C. Tanner, President and Executive Director, Forever Young Foundation**

"In a society that seems to be terminally darkened by obsession with one's self, this book shines a quiet light on a profound paradox that is not only a key to finding happiness but a key to truly thriving."

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“Seth Adam Smith generously shares his thoughts, feelings, and philosophies with unreserved friendliness toward the reader. It’s no wonder that Seth continues to gain significant audience interest. His writing is authentic and honest and contains universal truths that initiate positive change in his individual readers.”

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“*Your Life Isn’t for You* achieves a rare feat: it manages to preach without being preachy and it offers a trove of spiritual lessons that don’t require the reader to be ‘spiritual.’ There’s a reason Seth Adam Smith’s writing went viral. It’s clear and sharp, and maybe most importantly, it asks the big questions about how we can better serve ourselves by serving others.”

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*Huffington Post*

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—**Angela Johnson, sculptor of The Light of the World Garden**

“A realistic look at the power of selflessness. Smith’s lighthearted language makes the heavy message not just palatable but tasty.”

—**Meg Johnson, motivational speaker, author, and cofounder of Ms.**  
*Wheelchair Utah*

“*Your Life Isn’t For You* speaks with a simple, practical wisdom born not of academic study, but of richly layered life experience. Seth Adam Smith writes with compassion, authority, and insight, and his style is fresh, humorous, and engaging. His message is relevant to anyone who’s ever had a depressing thought—which is all of us.”

—**Carrie Maxwell Wrigley, LCSW, Morning Light Counseling**

Your Life  
Isn't for You

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Other Books by Seth Adam Smith

*Marriage Isn't for You*



# Your Life Isn't for You

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A Selfish Person's Guide to Being Selfless



Seth Adam Smith



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
San Francisco  
*a BK Life book*

# Your Life Isn't for You

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*Your Life Isn't for You* is a book  
about me learning that my life  
isn't for me, it's for others.

So, I guess this book is for you?

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## Disclaimer



**Y**our life isn't for you.  
Really. It's not. Your life isn't for you and my life isn't for me. The truth is that nature didn't design us to find fulfillment in living for ourselves. We can achieve the fullest measure of life only by living it for others.

Sucks, doesn't it?

Well, I think it does. But maybe that's because I am not what you would call a people person. To be perfectly honest, people annoy me. I would much rather work alone in my garden than spend an hour or two socializing. So in a twist of irony, the philosophy I'm about to describe to you—this idea of living your life for others—is one that goes against the flow of my personality. If I were to have it my way, I never would have written a book like this. In fact, I'd probably be

living in a cabin in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness with a pack of domesticated wolves trained to keep the humans away.

But I have learned—through sad and brutal experience—the dangers of taking my preference for solitude to extremes. Instead of my introversion being a healthy need for boundaries and personal reflection, it became an obsessive demand for control and isolation. I began to selfishly live my life purely for myself, and it nearly cost me everything. It was only after I nearly succeeded in taking my life, through an attempted suicide, that I stumbled across this life-giving philosophy about selflessness.

Now I need to pause here and define what being selfless means, because it's probably conjuring up images of building orphanages, donating your money and possessions to charity, and performing humanitarian efforts under extreme conditions.

But that's not what being selfless really means—not exactly, anyway. While those things can certainly be selfless actions, they are just that: actions. Actions and behaviors can be mimicked or faked for selfish purposes. A person can travel to another country and do humanitarian work for a photo op or publicity, while others can perform lifesaving services for money, connections, or other ulterior motives.

Honest selflessness is much deeper than our actions—it's a condition of our heart. Being selfless is about opening yourself up to others and learning how to receive life from them and give life back to them. True selflessness is perhaps one of the most paradoxical things in nature: You don't lose yourself for being selfless—you find yourself. You don't lose everything

## Disclaimer

for being selfless—you gain everything. Your life doesn't diminish as you live it for others—it expands.

In short: to give life is to truly live life. This book offers a philosophy of how that can be done.

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## Introduction



**T**wo million views. I stared at my smartphone in shock. My article “Marriage Isn’t for You” was going viral.

It was November 3, 2013. I had been visiting my family in Utah for Halloween and was on a flight back to my home in Florida. My transfer flight had just landed in Baltimore. As soon as the flight attendant gave the OK, I turned on my phone and immediately saw that my blog had received nearly 2.2 million views in thirty-six hours. Every time I refreshed the screen, the stats had gone up not by hundreds but by thousands—tens of thousands.

In three days, the article received a staggering twenty-four million views. It was reprinted in the *Huffington Post* and was prominently featured and discussed on the *Today* show, BuzzFeed.com, *Daily Mail*, *Cosmopolitan*, MSN Living, Yahoo,

*Deseret News*, Today.com, KSL News, TheBlaze.com, HuffPost Live, HLN, and numerous radio programs.

On top of all that, Kim, my wife, joined me for national television interviews with *Fox & Friends* and *Good Morning America*.

The article has been translated—by volunteers—into more than twenty languages and has gone viral (one hundred thousand views) in the German, Slovak, Czech, Portuguese, and Spanish languages. As of the spring of 2014, with all the reprints and translations, “Marriage Isn’t for You” had well over thirty million hits.

But why? What was it about the message that transcended cultural differences and resonated with millions of people around the world? Why did my article go viral?

Well, first of all, it wasn’t really my article that went viral because it wasn’t really my message. It was my dad’s.

It was counsel given to me in a moment of indecision—at a time when I was debating whether or not I should marry Kim. Was she the right person to marry? Would she make me happy?

My father answered these questions with the advice that has gone viral: “Seth, you’re being totally selfish. So I’m going to make this really simple: Marriage isn’t for you. You don’t marry to make yourself happy, you marry to make someone else happy. . . . It’s not about you. Marriage is about the person you married.”

His counsel was life changing. It went completely against the grain of my selfish fears. Perhaps that’s why his advice resonated with so many people. Because I think we all recognize—

## Introduction

on some level—that selflessly loving others is the right thing to do.

Yes, my dad’s advice saved me from selfishness, but it wasn’t the first time that he had done so. Five years earlier, my dad had pulled me from a car and dialed 911. When the ambulance arrived at my house, the EMTs immediately began the process of emptying my stomach. I had swallowed a full bottle of sleeping pills and half a bottle of painkillers. I had just tried to take my life.

Before that day, I had been living a life of abject selfishness. I thought only about myself, my wants, my feelings, and my problems. My selfishness was a downward spiral that led to a veritable prison of isolation and despair. Unable to find my way out of the darkness and depression, I decided to end the pain and kill myself.

When I woke up in the hospital the next morning, I was surrounded by my family members. Brokenhearted as they were, and unsure and untrained in how to respond, they nevertheless rallied to support me as best they could.

I had become so self-absorbed that I had walled myself off to everyone and eventually tried to take my life. But standing outside those walls of my selfishness were people willing to give their time, energy, and lives to preserve mine. Although it was incomprehensible to me at the time, my life somehow meant something to other people. My life wasn’t for me—it belonged to other people as well. If I was to truly recover from trying to take my life, I needed to learn how to give my life away.

But how? How do selfish people (like me) move from selfishness to selflessness? For one thing, it's not an event—it's a journey. And while I'm certainly not the shining example of selflessness, my experiences have brought me in contact with the lives and literature of those who are. Their examples have been like the Northern Lights in my life—they have lit my path and guided me forward.

So even though I will share many of my own personal experiences, this book really isn't about me. It's about the people, literature, and events that have taught me this life-giving philosophy.

But before I get into that, I feel compelled to address a few things. First, in this book I will talk about serious matters such as depression and suicide. What I share, I share from experience and not from professional training. If you or someone you know is suffering from depression or suicidal thoughts, this book and the principles it espouses are not intended to be used as substitutes for professional medical help. Many of the things I share in this book are things I learned while I was receiving proper medical attention. If you are struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts, I strongly urge you to reach out to trusted friends and seek professional help.

Second, it must be understood that I'm a very selfish person, which is probably why my editors chose the subtitle that they did.<sup>1</sup> But remember, it was not *my* advice but my father's advice that went viral. In like manner, it is not my actions that

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1. After reviewing this line, my editor, Neal, confirmed it by saying "Guilty!"

## Introduction

are exemplary but the actions of others. It is through them that I have learned these principles, and it is my experiences with them that I will share with you.

Finally, not only am I a very selfish person, but also I'm a very sarcastic person. And although I fully believe in this philosophy that I'm about to share with you, it doesn't change the fact that it sometimes sounds a little too peace-love-hippie-happy, even for me. So, my publisher has graciously agreed to give me space in the footnotes to add my occasional . . . commentary.

All right! I think that's everything. Ready to lose your life?<sup>2</sup> Let's begin!

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2. My editors want me to make it clear that I'm not threatening you. It's a play on the title. The first of many. Buckle up.

Your Life  
Isn't for You

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# 1

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## The Selfish Giant



In one degree or another we all struggle with selfishness. Since it is so common, why worry about selfishness anyway? Because selfishness is really self-destruction in slow motion.

—NEAL A. MAXWELL, AUTHOR

I was born with a frighteningly large head.

Seriously. It scared the nurse.

Not long after my grand entrance, she measured my head and whispered, “No, that can’t be right.”

She measured it again. “It’s not possible.”

She measured it a third time and then looked up at the doctor. “Do you realize that this boy has the biggest head I have ever measured?”<sup>3</sup>

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3. In the background, my poor mother (who gave birth to me without any sort of painkillers) deliriously shouted, “Tell me about it!”



It was a symbol of things to come. From ill-conceived notions in my six-year-old brain about my ability to create and control a bonfire behind my house to fanciful ideas that made me think I could befriend particularly aggressive wildlife,<sup>4</sup> my big, egotistical head was always getting me into disastrous trouble.

Yes, my giant head was always getting me into trouble. But luckily, my family was always there to bail me out.

I think my father realized that if he didn't do something (beyond the usual punishments), then his son's self-centered ideas could very well lead to self-destruction. My dad needed something that could possibly rewire his child's brain—something that would definitively teach the child: Selfishness, bad. Selflessness, good.

But what? Clearly, his child didn't understand physical punishment, nor did he seem to understand words like "No!" "Stop!" or "You're going to burn the house down!"

No, my dad needed a different, more covert approach. He needed to teach me virtues without my knowledge. That's when it hit him: what better way to teach virtues than to read from *The Book of Virtues*? Surely this eight-hundred-page monstrosity contained the remedy for even the most obstinate of children.

And so, for the one and only time that I can remember, my dad sat down and read a bedtime story to my sister Jaimie and me.

The story was "The Selfish Giant," and it was written by the Irish author Oscar Wilde. Now, I'm a lover of literature. I love

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4. I tried to feed a bull moose some apples. Incidentally, I once believed that moose were gentle giants. They are not. They are lawless animals.

## The Selfish Giant

all kinds of stories, novels, and works of nonfiction. But looking back, I don't think that any other story has had more of an impact on my life.

The story is about a Giant with a large, beautiful garden. While the Giant was away, the local children would gather in his garden and play. "How happy we are here!" they cried to each other.

One day, the Giant came back. "What are you doing here?" said the Giant angrily, and the children ran away. He built a high wall around his garden to keep out any would-be trespassers. In time, the Giant decided to tear down the wall.

As my dad continued to read the story, it soon became apparent that he had never actually read it for himself. I knew this because as he reached the end, he started to get choked up.

Jaimie and I exchanged nervous glances. What was happening to Dad? Seriously. Our dad was the Stonewall Jackson of emotion. He had served in the Marine Corps and worked in the Criminal Investigation Division (CID). He carried out drug busts with a German shepherd named Happy.<sup>5</sup> My dad had seen some crazy stuff and rarely showed his emotion. Getting choked up over a children's story? Something was clearly wrong.

"Uh, Dad?" asked Jaimie. "Is everything OK?"

"I'm fine," my dad replied. He hurriedly finished the story and closed the book. "Good night."

Whatever lesson my dad had tried to teach was tossed aside as we grappled with the fact that our ex-Marine father was

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5. The irony of the name was intentional, because working in the CID wasn't like working for Willie Wonka.

probably having an emotional breakdown. We sat in silence, staring at *The Book of Virtues* as though it were the *Book of the Dead*.

It seemed to stare back at us.

"The book broke Dad," Jaimie whispered.

We agreed that the book was evil and resolved to never read from its dark pages. Which is partly why I've carried it with me ever since.<sup>6</sup>

But apart from the very real possibility that the book has dark, magical powers, there is another reason why I've held on to it for all these years. You see, as strange as it was to see my dad get choked up over a children's story, it wasn't the first time I had seen him express emotion. The first time had been a couple of years earlier. Actually, I can give you the exact date.

November 9, 1989.

I was absently playing with my toys when I wandered into my parents' room and found my dad sitting in his chair, positively glued to the TV.

I followed his gaze. What I saw confused me. It was a news report from a foreign country; despite the weather being overcast, cold, and gray, a crowd of people were laughing, smiling, and dancing. The reporter was saying things like "this is truly amazing," "a new beginning," and "a great day."

"What's happening, Dad?" I asked.

"They're tearing it down," he said, his voice heavy with emotion.

I looked back at the screen and saw it: a wall.

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6. True story. The book is currently on the corner of my writing desk.

## The Selfish Giant

### The Berlin Wall.

Years later, I would learn the significance of the Berlin Wall. It was built at the height of the Cold War, a forty-year period of icy relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. The Soviets had built the wall to keep East Berlin (occupied by the Soviet Union) separate from West Berlin (occupied by England, France, and the United States). The wall quickly became a hated symbol of the political tensions between the Soviet Union and the West.

After living in Berlin for two years (1966–1968), my dad had become well acquainted with those political tensions. He firmly believed that the United States and Soviet Union would never see eye-to-eye. In his mind, the only way that wall would come down would be through all-out war. So when he saw images of West Berliners helping East Berliners tear down the wall, he almost couldn't believe it.

"The war is over," he whispered.

Ultimately, my dad's inexplicable emotion over these two walls is what prompted me to hold on to the story of "The Selfish Giant." I wanted to know why. Why did a children's story about a giant knocking down a wall mean so much to my dad? Why did a news report about people tearing down a real wall make him shed tears?

The answers to these questions didn't come until almost fifteen years later—when I suddenly and painfully realized that I had been living the story of "The Selfish Giant."

Thank You For Reading

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