

We Are the Fire Keepers

By Anita Roberts

As girls we are taught that being “nice” is paramount. We are rewarded for selfless behaviours, obedience, and helping actions. The rewards aren’t large or even concrete: an approving nod, a smile, or the encouraging phrase, “good *girl!*” Often, as we get older, the rewards get fewer and farther between. Our “good girl” behaviours are taken for granted. It’s our nature after all.

It’s true. Females are hormonally-wired to nurture life. That’s simple science. This combination of socialization and biology create a gender which puts others needs before its own and beings who have become so sensitized to what others need, we feel guilty when our own needs are being met. What about all the starving children after all!

And so we give. And give and give.

We are the primary caregivers of the children and the elders. We may begin to identify as “giver,” as “strong one”. We may feel a sense of power and control when we give. Or do we feel we are “putting something in the bank so if we ever (heaven forbid) fall apart, someone will be there for us? When we do need something, and the people we’ve given to don’t step up, we may hear an all too familiar refrain in our heads, “...after all I’ve done for you!”

When we take a closer look at the nurturing imbalance in our relationships, we may discover an underlying fear. Fear of abandonment. Fear of loss. And this fear makes us want to control. The other pitfall is that, when we over-give consistently, we are creating dependency in those we give to. On some level we may believe that we are making ourselves indispensable. The underlying belief is, “If my partner/ children/ friends really need me, I will never be left.” In truth, our “dependents” will need to leave us to feel their own power, and they often end up pushing us away – and resenting us for their feelings of dependency.

And so, as mothers, lovers, sisters and daughters, we risk giving until we have nothing left. And then we give some more. All mothers know this feeling. No matter how tired, how busy, how sad...when the children cry we get up and tend to them. Of course, when young children are involved, we must tend to them, regardless of how we feel. But why do we continue to be the one to do it, even when there are other people around who are perfectly capable of stepping in? Perhaps we don’t feel the others will do it right? Once again we see the connection between giving and control.

When we give past what we have, we begin to resource our very bones. We give from our marrow. Once we have depleted even that, we become hollow, empty. We have manifested,

Emotional Osteoporosis - and just like the bone disease, we become brittle...so fragile that one mis-step and we can be broken.

So we must learn to listen...listen to the body. Listen to the breath. And listen to the voice of wisdom, which will tell us when to say, *no*. And we must learn to direct some of the giving energy inward.

In the time of cave dwelling and mammoth hunting, when tribes followed the seasons, wandering in search of game and shelter, the family groups would assign a Fire-Keeper. This person's sacred task was to keep the embers of the tribal fire going. The Fire Keeper held great status and carried great responsibility. To let the fire go out could mean death to the tribe.

If we let our inner fire go out, not only will we let down the tribe...we will not survive. The irony is that the well-being of the ones that need us depends entirely on how well we nurture ourselves. If we truly do not want to abandon our loved ones, we must take care of ourselves first. This is such a simple equation with such an obvious outcome. And yet, time and again, women are debilitated by depression, anxiety, mental illness and physical diseases, which are linked to over-giving, Breast Cancer, M.S., Ovarian Cancer, Heart disease... and of course, Osteoporosis.

What does it take for woman to stop, take time to re-fuel, say, "no"? Why is it so difficult? In a world that sees girls and women as secondary, dispensable...or doesn't see them at all, is it really surprising that we cannot see ourselves as valuable?

We are our own fire-keepers. We must learn to generate our own light, maintain our own fire. Even in trying times, when others are calling on us, we must save some fuel and keep the embers warm and dry. We have to nurture and protect our own fires with all the fierceness and love we spend so freely on others.

It is our most sacred task.

"As women, we must learn how to pour ourselves into ourselves with all the fierceness and love we spend so freely on others."

- Anita Roberts