A Letter About Trust Essay, Research Paper

Sam Vaknin’s Psychology, Philosophy, Economics and Foreign Affairs Web SitesThe Narcissistic condition emanates from a seismic break of trust, a tectonic shift of what should have been a healthy relationship with his “primary objects” and the transformation of his self into the subject of love. Some of these bad feelings are the result of deeply entrenched misunderstandings regarding the nature of trust and the continuous act of trusting.

For millions of years nature embedded in us the notion that the past can teach us a lot about the future. This is very useful for survival. And it is also mostly true with inanimate objects. With humans the story is somewhat different: it is reasonable to learn from someone’s past behaviour about his future behaviour (even though this proves erroneous most of the time). But it is mistaken to learn from someone’s behaviour about other people’s. Actually, most psychotherapy is nothing but the effort to disentangle past from present, to teach the patient that the past is gone and has no reign over him anymore, unless the patient lets it to.

Our natural tendency is to trust, because we trust our parents. It feels good to really trust. It is also an essential component of love and an important test. Love without trust is dependence masquerading as love. We must trust, it is almost biological. Most of the time, we do trust. We trust the Universe to behave itself according to the laws of physics, our army not to go mad and shoot us all, our nearest and dearest not to betray us. When trust is broken, the feeling is that a part of us dies, is hollowed out. Not to trust is abnormal and is the natural result of bitter or even traumatic life experiences. Mistrust or distrust are induced not by our own thoughts, nor by some device or machination of ours – but by life’s sad circumstances. To continue not to trust is to reward the people who wronged us and made us distrustful in the first place. These people have long abandoned us and still they have a great, malignant, influence on our lives. This is the irony of the lack of trust.

So, some of us prefer not to experience this sinking feeling: not to trust and not to be disappointed. This is both a fallacy and a folly. Trusting releases enormous amounts of mental energy, which could be better invested elsewhere. Naturally trust – like knives – can be dangerous to your health if used improperly.

You have to know WHO to trust, you have to know HOW to trust and you have to know HOW to CONFIRM the existence of a functioning trust.

First let me state clearly: people often disappoint and are not worthy of trust. They are often arbitrary, treacherous and vicious, or, worse, offhanded. You have to select your targets carefully. He who has the most common interests with you, who is investing in you for the long term, who is incapable of breaching trust (”a good person”), who doesn’t have much to gain from betraying you – is not likely to mislead you. These people you can trust.

You should not trust indiscriminately. No one is completely trustworthy in all areas of life. Most often our disappointments stem from our inability to separate one area of life from another. A person could be sexually loyal – but an utter danger when it comes to money (for instance, a gambler). Or a good, reliable father – but a womanizer. You can trust someone to carry out some types of activities – but not others, because they are more complicated, more boring, or do not appeal to his conscience. We should distinguish between people and allocate our trust accordingly. Then, we are not likely to be disappointed. We should not trust with reservations – this is the kind of “trust” that is common in business and among criminals and its source is rational. Game Theory in Mathematics deals with questions of calculated trust. We should trust wholeheartedly but know who to trust in which field. Then we will be rarely disappointed.

As opposed to popular opinion, trust must be put to the test, lest it goes stale and staid. We are all somewhat paranoid. The world around us is so complex, so inexplicable, so overwhelming – that we find refuge in the invention of superior forces. Some forces are benign (God) – some arbitrarily conspiratorial in nature. There must be an explanation, we feel, to all these amazing coincidences, to us, to events. This tendency to introduce external powers and ulterior motives permeates human relations, as well. We gradually grow suspicious, inadvertently hunt for clues of infidelity or worse, masochistically relieved, even happy when we find some. The more tested, the stronger our pattern-prone brain will embrace the trust established. Constantly in a precarious balance, our brain needs and devours reinforcements. Such testing should not be explicit – it should be deduced from circumstances. My husband could easily have had a mistress or my partner could easily have stolen our money – and, behold, they haven’t.

Trust is based on the ability to predict the future. It is not so much the act of betrayal that we react to – as it is the feeling that the very foundations of the world are shaking, that it is no longer safe because it is no longer predictable. These are the throes of death of one theory – and the birth of another, as yet untested.

Here is another important lesson: whatever the act of betrayal (with the exception of grave criminal corporeal acts) – it is always limited, confined, negligible. Naturally, we tend to exaggerate the importance of the event. This serves a double purpose: indirectly it aggrandizes us. If we were “worthy” of such an unprecedented, unheard of, major betrayal – we must be worthy, period. The magnitude of the betrayal reflects on us and reestablishes the fragile balance of powers between us and the universe. The second purpose is simply to gain sympathy and empathy – mainly from ourselves, but also from our human environment. Catastrophes are a dozen a dime and in today’s world it is difficult to provoke anyone to regard your personal disaster as anything exceptional. Amplifying the event has, therefore, some very utilitarian purposes. But, finally, the emotional lie is absorbed by the very liar and poisons his mental circulation. Re-proportioning, reordering and putting the event in perspective will go a long way towards the commencement of a healing process. No betrayal stamps the world irreversibly or eliminates other possibilities, opportunities, chances and people. Time goes on, people meet and part, lovers quarrel and make love, dear ones live and die. It is the very essence of time that it erodes us all to the finest dust. Our only weapon – however crude and maybe unwise – against this unstoppable process is to trust each other.