

Codependence and the Power of Detachment: How to Set Boundaries and Make Your Life Your Own

Karen Casey

Conari Press (September 2008)

Softcover \$14.95 (176pp)

978-1-57324-362-9

Close relationships require a measure of objectivity to balance emotional intensity and dependence. “Enmeshed,” a term used by family therapists, is the opposite of detachment and is the target of Casey’s probe. “Detachment is the ability to care deeply about a situation or another person from an objective point of view...It is neither kind nor unkind to be detached.” Enmeshment, however, refers to involvement that makes the subject a small cog in the wheel of relationship, the wheel that has its hub in the early years of family life. Enmeshed people get satisfaction only when those upon whom they depend appear happy; the former spend their energy and emotion in hapless pursuit of the latter’s approval or submission.

A prolific and successful writer—she now has twenty books, starting with *Each Day a New Beginning* (1982)—Casey blends anecdotes with psychology in a context of encouragement and faith. She came to her insights the hard way, from a harsh upbringing through a bad marriage to Al-Anon (for families of alcoholics) and AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). Eventually she got her Ph.D., achieved a good marriage, and now enjoys success as an inspirational writer and lecturer. Her writing skills combine seemingly effortless narrative with clear formulations and straightforward advice.

The book consists of twenty-two chapters, most based on interviews with people helped by Al-Anon and/or AA. The ratio of women to men represented here is about five to one, suggesting that women are more frequently caught in the codependence trap. Although the book focuses on alcohol, the addiction paradigm extends to other substances and behaviors, including the attachment syndrome itself. Emphasized, and well-explained, the Twelve Steps of AA structure the author’s approach which, though religious, is non-parochial. Skeptics too can benefit from her insights. The value of group support and the perspective of a teacher who has been though it all can be recognized by anyone. As Casey writes, “the greatest gift we can give another person is our rapt attention as our stories are shared.”

E. JAMES LIEBERMAN (August 15, 2008)

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