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Lessons from the Giving Tree

by: Becky Haddad

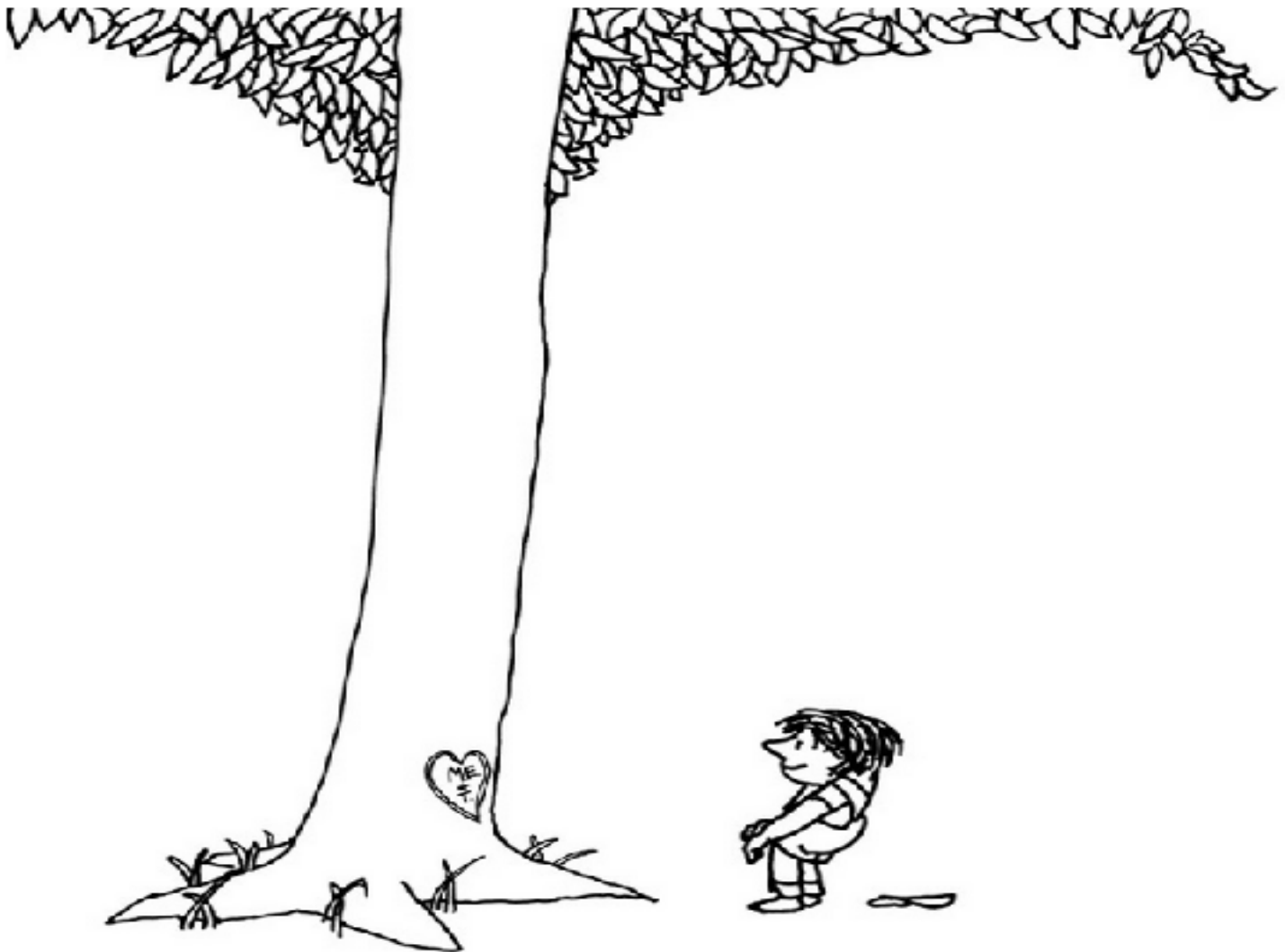
“

And the tree was happy...but not really.”

We probably know the story--in fact, *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein is one of my husband's favorite books from his childhood. Shel Silverstein was one of my favorite childhood authors too. I recently came across an insert for this book that focused on the tree setting boundaries. The tree said, “no,” and told the boy to find his own way. Of course, *The Giving Tree* fans will tell you that isn't the message of the story. Shel Silverstein didn't really do interviews, but the general

consensus is the book is about the boy's selfishness, and the tree's selfless giving. Throughout the book, the boy was selfish. And for most of the book, the tree was happy. Until she wasn't.

How often do we see *The Giving Tree* play out in our own lives? We're happy to give, until we're not. We give our students our time, our talent, sometimes even our families, and we find joy in these things. One of the most beautiful things about a teaching career is how much of ourselves we have the opportunity to share with



our students. Barnes and Noble offered ten lessons from *The Giving Tree*, and among my favorite are these three:

- Focus more on what you need than what you want
- Just be there
- Let love rule

Throughout the story, the boy focuses on what he wants: money, a house, a boat, a quiet place to rest. And for most of the story, the tree gives what she has, even if she doesn't have what the boy wants. In doing so, she loses what she needs--her leaves for photosynthesis, her limbs to provide shade, and even the trunk that sets her apart as a tree. In return, the boy doesn't really get what he needs. A temporary want is fulfilled, but the deeper need remains unsatisfied until the tree is almost gone. Neither in this story truly focuses on what they need, but what they want: The tree wants to make the boy happy, but loses herself in the process. The boy wants material things, and ends up nearly losing the tree.

But that isn't the only lesson in this story. The tree was there for the boy. There couldn't be a more fitting analogy for a teacher and their students. We want to be there for our students. We might even consider it inappropriate to expect something in return. We are overjoyed when that one student sends a note of thanks or stops by our room years later. And often, that little moment is what powers us through until the next. It doesn't make it less wonderful when a student comes back. In many ways, that is what the relationship is supposed to be.

Even as a stump, the tree loved the boy. And the tree could have continued to be there

for others had she saved some of herself. But she wasn't concerned about others. She was concerned about the boy. "She loved the boy, even more than she loved herself." For most of us though, we don't have just one "boy" in our lives. "Loving" doesn't have to mean completely losing yourself, but no one else can define what love will look like from you. And that, my friends, is why it is so important to communicate how you're able to share your love. That, in essence, is the definition of a boundary.

What can be a tale of self-sacrifice and selfishness or generosity and love, likely depends heavily on your own experience with boundaries. I recently heard a speaker in my class say, "Being generous means you have something to give." It is my sincere hope that you find these pages full of stories and advice that connect you to the generosity found in setting, maintaining, and owning the professional fence that is your boundaries. I desire nothing more for you than to communicate your boundaries in ways that allow you to give of yourself generously without running out. I hope you can reclaim your boundaries in fulfilling ways that lead to your ability to provide personal and professional shade to others. Dear tree, it's okay to say "no" so you can own your "yes."



Becky Haddad is a wife, mom of two, learner, and teacher educator currently serving as a Lecturer at the University of Minnesota.

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