

TIME TO REPEAL THOSE UNHEALTHY VOWS!

BY ELLY V. DARWIN

A vow is a serious promise, and we usually think of it as a wonderful, positive thing. It's hard to hear the word without thinking of loving words exchanged at a wedding ceremony.

But when we experience deep emotional pain or trauma, we sometimes make unhealthy promises to ourselves. These vows might be actively and consciously thought out, perhaps to get even or seek revenge. They might begin with, "I'll show *him*," or "Just you wait." Those kinds of vows have energy behind them. They fire up our anger and our sense of justice—and if handled responsibly are not necessarily all bad.

How could such an active vow be beneficial? Well, maybe a teacher or a boss embarrassed you by accusing you of being stupid or incompetent. You promise to kick it into high gear on the next opportunity, work hard, and ace the exam or impress the higher-ups on your department's next project. "Just you wait" pays off and you do show him or her. You've elevated your self-esteem and, with a little luck, maybe even changed that person's original opinion of your intelligence and competence. That's a good thing!

However, vows of revenge that lead to destructive behavior or

elevate mutual anger and retaliation are obviously undesirable. They don't solve anything in the long run and can even get you into more trouble. How satisfying is revenge if it leaves you looking over your shoulder?

This article is about a different kind of promise we make to ourselves. It's what I call a

defensive or protective vow. These "negative" vows are created to protect ourselves from future pain and anguish. Sometimes we're not even aware we make them. They are deep seated, and they can last for years or even a lifetime. Whereas active vows energize and motivate us, protective vows sap our emotional

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(and even physical) vitality.

Protective vows might begin with, "Never again," or "I'll never." Active vows fire us up; protective vows shut us down.

The self-message in a protective vow is, "I won't put myself in a position to be hurt again." In some cases, protecting ourselves is not only a good thing, it's vital for our survival. We get hurt or have a dangerous near miss. We make sure we never repeat the same mistake.

A Major Misstep

As a young woman, I was nearly hit by a speeding taxi by blithely stepping off the curb into a crosswalk in Mexico City. Having lived my entire life up to that time in suburban Southern California, where the pedestrian always has the right-of-way, I assumed that stepping off the curb would signal any oncoming cars to come to a stop. Instead, a taxi suddenly veered into the shoulder to zip past a car in the right lane. I jumped back onto the sidewalk just in the nick of time and almost literally within an inch of my life.

In that instant I learned that lanes, crosswalks, and pedestrian right-of-way meant nothing in that environment. To this day nearly 50 years later, I'm extremely

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careful about stepping off a curb, regardless of where I am or what the laws are. That's a deep-seated protection I subconsciously call upon, even on a quiet residential road that may see only a few cars in a day.

Another characteristic of protective vows is that we globalize them. That's a term psychologists use when we expand attitudes and beliefs learned in one environment to our larger realm of experience. Without ever thinking about it, I have globalized my Mexico City misstep to uber caution on any street, anywhere, anytime. I've never told myself, "Now, remember that day in Mexico when you nearly got hit." I never had to; my subconscious self-preservation automatically rises to the occasion, whether I need it or not.

The same protective mechanism that has kept me wary of traffic all these years also kicks in to fend off the potential for future emotional pain after we've experienced emotional difficulties or trauma. It's human nature. We make a conscious decision or subconsciously remember certain threatening events to avoid repeating them, and then we globalize them. It's our brain's way of saying, "just to be sure."

Anytime you hear someone say something like, "Women (or men) are no good," or "I never trust" people of [fill in the blank: this-or-that nationality, race, religion, etc.], you can bet that past pain has occurred or has been taught by another, and globalization has resulted. Are all women bad? Of course not, but people who hold that kind of belief have been hurt by a woman (or women) strongly enough that the guard goes up and future messages to self are, "Stay away. Don't go there. Don't get hurt again."

Negative vows hit at the root of our basic fears. They are often based around things like safety, love, trust, abandonment, adequacy, and so forth. The problem with these kinds of vows

is that they prevent future joy—even more so when they are globalized. (Gender is a pretty broad category. So if we tell ourselves not to trust anyone belonging to a particular gender, we're cutting ourselves off from the possibility of having positive relationships with approximately half the population!)

A Vow About Friendship

Several years ago I went through a terrible crisis. I worked for a meanspirited boss of the divide-and-conquer sort. You were either with her (and her unscrupulous ways), or she deemed you to be an enemy that must be destroyed. Through the painful process of trying to survive—and then realizing I couldn't—I assumed that certain people with whom I'd enjoyed a positive working relationship would be on my side, or at least sympathetic and supportive, when things came to a head. They were not. No one stood up for me, and a few even turned against me.

I understood their reactions. Everyone was afraid of her; it was safer for them to keep their heads down and protect their own jobs. And yet, the fact that I had known some of those people for a long time and had grown to consider some of them friends made the pain even worse. I not only suffered at the hands of my boss, I felt betrayed by those I had defended from her wrath in the past and whom I assumed would be reciprocally supportive.

In the aftermath, I made a conscious vow: "Be friendly with everyone but friends with no one." A defensive, protective vow if ever there was one! It meant I would seem friendly on the surface but would not trust anyone to cross the boundary beyond superficial interaction. It took a few years—and a move to another state—to feel safe enough to wade into those waters again, but I'm glad I did. Holding everyone at arm's length is against my nature, and I've been blessed with some wonderful friends since then.

It brings up an important point: We are in control of our lives, and although it may take some soul searching and perhaps some inner work, we can overcome the trauma that caused us to create a negative vow at any time—if we're

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aware it's there. Once aware of its presence and why we created it, we can repeal it.

Marco

Marco was a normal, happy eight-year-old boy—until the day his mother said, “Remember I’ll always love you,” as he trotted off to school. He had no idea those words were her permanent goodbye. Without warning she returned to her native country and abandoned the family forever.

In the aftermath Marco not only felt intense bewilderment and grief, but as the older of two boys, he also tried to comfort his father’s lengthy, deep depression and help be a father to his younger brother. As an adult looking back, Marco confessed that, for many years, he suffered from separation anxiety.

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Through his religion Marco eventually found strength to come to grips with his past and to see that his separation anxiety was a vestige of that painful day when he came home from school to a house with no mom there ever again. He came to understand that his anxiety about being away from his dad and brother was rooted in the experience of losing his mother and feeling responsible for his family’s wellbeing.

He also realized that his vow to stay physically close at all times was keeping him from seeking adventures and living a normal, healthy young man’s life. He found the courage to repeal the vows he made about never getting too far away from his family and began to venture out and make his way in the world.

Marco is now a loving husband and father. He keeps in regular touch with his brother and father but is comfortable living some distance away from them. Much to his credit, he pursued—and excels in—a profession that fulfills a dream he has had since childhood. It’s a profession that, ironically, requires regular travel away from home, a dream he never would have been able to pursue if consumed with

separation anxiety. When away, he video chats with his wife and children every day and assures them he can’t wait to come home to them. And because of his past, there is little worry that he would ever abandon them.

Repeal an Unhealthy Vow: 5 Steps

Defensive or protective vows can indeed keep us from living full lives. But the good news is that we’re not stuck with them forever. Here are five steps for overcoming them:

1. Discover it.

You cannot do anything about a negative vow if you don’t know it’s there. Sometimes it simply reveals itself out of the blue. But often, since many of our most protective vows are lodged in the subconscious, it might take a little digging to discover them. But it can be done. I’ve found that journaling often reveals useful insights, particularly when a certain behavior seems unnecessary or even a bit irrational. Simply stating a question such as, “Why do I...?” and then letting your writing go where it wants to, can reveal answers—or at least starting points for deeper exploration.

2. Identify it.

Identifying it is closely related to discovering it but not exactly the same. During the California Gold Rush of the mid-1800s, several miners discovered shiny gold rocks and pebbles. What they mistakenly thought was gold turned out to be pyrite, which came to be nicknamed “fool’s gold” because it wasn’t the real deal.

But you’ll know you’ve correctly identified a protective or defensive vow. The link to its cause will suddenly make sense, and you’ll experience that *ah-ha* moment—or as the ‘49ers of the Gold Rush exclaimed, “*Eureka!*” (meaning “I have found it”).

3. Heal it.

My misstep in Mexico was a “teachable moment” that caused no emotional trauma. It merely imbedded in my psyche an urge to be extra careful from that moment on. However, identifying a behavior tied to past trauma—especially when it’s been hidden—may call for more specific healing. Although some psychotherapy may help, that’s not necessarily

the only way to heal. Depending on your individual situation, your newfound awareness may be enough to trigger a simple healing on its own. You might also find healing through some personal journaling, meditation, reading, talking with a friend or family member, or joining a support group. The important thing, though, is to follow through with the healing. Merely identifying it is not enough. That's just the point where the door is opened. It's up to you to walk through.

4. Repeal it.

This is where you turn the corner! It is the point in your life where you declare, "I don't need this anymore. It is keeping me from being fully happy and living the life I was meant to live, and it's time to relinquish its grip on me." Some people create an actual ritual to show themselves that they have "officially" let it go.

I've known people to write down the old useless vow and then tear it up and toss it into the trash or throw it into the fireplace. I know of a woman who took a stick to the beach at sunset. She wrote the old vow into the wet sand with the stick and stood and watched as the tide came up, washing away the words with each new wave until they were all carried out to sea. This kind of ritual can be performed as a visualization just as well as physically doing the act. It can also be spoken out loud, ending with words such as, "I now repeal the vow that [fill in whatever the vow was]."

5. Replace it.

This final step is important and should not be left undone: Replace the old unhealthy vow with a healthy new one! You don't want to repeal the

old vow and then leave a void or vacuum where it can rush right back in. That would be like throwing out all your old clothes without getting any new ones. What would you do? Grab some of those old ones and quickly put them back on so you're not standing there naked! Don't leave a void. Fill it.

With your new awareness, and having repealed the old vow, you are free to fill that empty space with new affirmative vows that bring you peace and propel you forward. A guy like Marco might create a vow something like, "I will go confidently wherever life takes me." I told myself, "I welcome wonderful new friends into my life." The possibilities are limitless. But it is important that a new vow is put into place as soon as the old one is repealed.

New Year's resolutions are fun and positive, whether or not they're taken seriously or kept throughout the year. Wedding vows are precious and loving and can last a lifetime. But one of the best vows we can make is the vow to ourselves to repeal those old, useless, defensive vows and replace them with healthy new ones.



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