Releasing Contracts That Block Joy and False Bodhisattva Vows: Embracing Self-Warmth and Joy

by Sarah Peyton

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The stakes are so high.

Self-warmth makes everything better: our health, our immune system, our life decisions, our sense of meaning, our capacity for engagement, our effectiveness, and our intimate connections with others.

But we may have agreements with ourselves, agreements we don’t even know about, to NOT be warm with ourselves. We may have contracts to not like ourselves, to be indifferent, even to hate and be cruel to ourselves. (And others.) Without knowing it, we make these self-agreements in order to leverage our nervous systems to take care of the people around us. For example, we may make sure we are never sad so that things are easier for our families. The long-term results for our bodies, minds and nervous systems can be tragic, even though we originally wanted to do the best thing for everyone.

These contracts are often made before we can talk. The only thing a baby has to contribute to balancing a family is that baby’s own nervous system.

“When my mother is sad, I will be happy in order to cheer her up.”

“When my father is depressed, I’ll be angry in order to bring him back to life.”

“When my siblings are fighting I will get sick in order to change the violence.”

“I will hate myself in order to atone for being a burden on my mother.”

When people have these contracts, it doesn’t matter how much they practice liking themselves or do meditations to increase self-warmth and joy. These contracts are the ground on which everything else is built and so they create persistent stories about the self: I am not worthy of love. I am an angry person. I am never sad. I always get sick. My needs don’t matter. When these contracts and stories are present, they turn to stone inside a person, preventing the emergence of the organic, growing self that is supposed to be the heart of everyone’s life journey.
I began this journey of discovery of our unconscious contracts by looking at my own blocks to self-warmth and joy. (And believe me, even though I wrote the book Your Resonant Self, I still have plenty of these blocks.) I started to look at one puzzling way that I was sabotaging myself: I found it extremely difficult to take a room’s attention when I was with women older than myself. If I had a good reason to collapse, what might it be? How could I discover it? It felt like this pattern of sabotaging myself was an iron-clad contract, and so I thought the right language might help me understand what was happening.

First of all, since it was gender specific, I had a guess that it was about my mother. I gave it a try: “I, Sarah, promise myself that I will not take up space when I am with my mother…” I stopped and felt deep into my own body, almost asking my belly about this way of being, and my belly answered me: “...in order to make sure that my mother receives enough attention to survive.”

“Oh, dear,” I thought. “What a loving but absurd vow.” I was reminded of being a small child, seeing with such tenderness my mother’s awkwardness in the world, and wanting so much for her to have a sense of her absolute belonging. Here I was, a helpless child, leveraging the only thing I had, my own nervous system, to create the world I wanted to live in.

I decided to follow along with this process that was creating itself. What was the next logical step in working with the contract? Somehow the way that I had begun the wording, it sounded so legal and contingent, and the ritual unbinding of contracts came into my head. Since every contract has at least two parties, I imagined myself to be two different selves, my forever existing essential self, and the part of me who might originally have made this contract, and started a dialogue between them to see if both parties still wanted to keep this ancient agreement:

“Sarah’s essential self, did you hear the vow that Sarah made to you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Do you still want this contract?”

“No, this is a silly contract. Sarah, I release you from this contract and I revoke this vow.”
To my surprise, I took a full breath and felt my whole body relax. I revisited my idea of not taking up space. Though before I began this piece of work, I had been utterly convinced that I could not take up space, the idea now seemed immaterial. It had nothing to do with me. If I had had such a contract, which had been structuring the way I defined myself, maybe other people also had these contracts, these old agreements made even before they had language, that gave them very good reasons for self-sabotaging behaviors like self-hate, rabid self-criticism, procrastination, an inability to try, lack of trust in self and others, and so on.

There is one more type of contract that I would like to mention. It is one that keeps us working and worrying so hard that we don’t get to relax into play, laughter and joy very often. We can call this type of contract, “the false Boddhisatva vow,” because we make it when we are about nine years old, when our brain development lets us begin to notice the trouble the world is in, but we are still too little to do anything about it. The contract is essentially “Universe, I swear to you that I will love the world so much that I will help all this pain, because there’s nothing else I can do, no matter the cost to myself.” The child commits to making a better world, or to saving the world no matter the cost.

Commitment and contribution are very important and life serving when they do not cost us everything. The adult, carrying this vow, is driven by a sense of mission so great that everything else is sacrificed to it -- health, family, creativity, and especially joy. There is no reason to release a contract if there isn’t a cost, but if the cost is too great, you might want to consider stepping into the role of the Universe and looking back at yourself, and asking, “Universe, do you like this vow?” The Universe most often replies, “That’s a very big vow for such a little person. I release this vow and I revoke this contract. Live your own life, and do what you can to make the world a better place, but not at the cost of your joy. The Universe needs your joy, too.”

More than for any other reason, I teach about language’s ability to heal trauma, and our enormous need for accompaniment and resonance, in order to see people’s faces lift, and their smiles come more easily, as they release their contracts and step into the expansiveness which is the birthright of us all. We need everyone’s joy in order to be able to transform our world into a relational place, where we notice and act swiftly, both personally and systemically, to right wrongs, to change systems, and to save and restore our beautiful planet and ecosystems.

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For more inspiration, join a workshop with Sarah Peyton this Saturday! More details and RSVP info here.