

## The Fine Art of Asking

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.* (Matthew 7:7-8 NIV)

In spite of Jesus's encouragement to ask, seek, and knock, many of us sometimes refrain from asking God or our fellow human beings for what we want or need because we believe asking would be fruitless or somehow wrong. Many of us have been raised to believe that it is selfish to want or ask for anything for ourselves. Sometimes we talk ourselves out of making even reasonable requests because we fear being turned down. Sometimes we sabotage ourselves by asking in a way that makes it less likely we will get a positive response. Our unfulfilled longings may cause festering resentment and poison our relationships. How can we help people learn to ask for what they want and need in ways that increase personal fulfillment and strengthen relationships?

Most people feel good when they do something that pleases others. Even seemingly selfish husbands, wives, parents, children, siblings, partners, work associates, or neighbors may respond positively to the realization that they have done something good for someone else. When we make a request in a way that does not create reactivity or uncomfortable feelings, we have a good chance of getting a positive response. If we phrase a request as a complaint, however, triggering guilt and resentment, we are less likely to get what we want. If we ask for what we want with a negative expectation, assuming our need will not be met, that may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Who wants to give when a request is steeped in negativity or blame? Instead of complaining, try expressing your desire as a wish.<sup>1</sup>

In a healthy relationship, partners feel free to say, "I would really love to..." John Gray, in a website article titled "How to Ask for Support" provides three tips for effective asking, which I think apply whatever the nature of a request:

- 1) Use good timing; ask when you have the other person's full attention.
- 2) Be brief: Don't list reasons why your request should be fulfilled. Such a list may trigger resistance; just assume the other person will want to help.
- 3) Be direct; describe clearly exactly what you want. Don't just state a problem and expect the other person to know what you want done about it.<sup>2</sup>

Asking, of course, must respect the freedom of the other person to say "no." Marshall Rosenberg, in his Nonviolent Communication teachings, suggests making a simple statement of your need, followed by the phrase, "Would you be willing to..." as a way of differentiating between a request and a demand.<sup>3</sup> If "no" is the answer, stay calm and centered and assume the other person has good reasons. Be curious, but don't ask "why," because that might put him or her on the defensive. Invite the other person to tell you more, to help you understand his or her response, to explore with you other options for meeting your need. If I am clear about the real need behind a request, I can often come up with other ways of meeting it than what I suggested first. Such nonreactive behavior requires being fully in touch with my inner child. One time, for example, I was feeling upset about the condition of a hotel in which we were staying. After some exploration of my feelings, I realized that although the conditions were not overwhelmingly

