



## first person essay: mine! mine! mine!

### Forget everything you learned in kindergarten or from happy-go-lucky Muppets. In real life sharing your stuff is anything but simple

By Nicole Beland

Last month my friend Alli called and asked if she could raid my closet for something to wear to a wedding. Without skipping a beat, I said, "sure," but my palms began to sweat. I already knew which dress she would pick — a jewel-toned, floor-length silk gown with an empire waist and halter straps. Not only is it gorgeous and one of a kind, it has the magical effect of making whoever wears it look 5 pounds thinner and 1 cup fuller.

She tried on half a dozen dresses before she spied it hanging in the back of the closet and gasped as she put it on. The bias-cut silk hugged her curves like frosting on cake. In a flash I pictured my prized dress jammed into a weekend bag, splashed with wine at the reception, and left in a heap on the hotel floor. My stomach backflipped as she begged to borrow it. I wanted to say, "No, not that one! It's my favorite!" But, again, the only word that came out of my mouth was "sure."

As you've no doubt already guessed, my dirty little secret is that I hate to share, even with people I adore. When I'm out to eat with my family and someone suggests we "order a few dishes and split them," I groan under my breath. I never want what they order. I want what I order, and I want all of it. That's why I eat at restaurants, not communes. This "what's mine is mine" attitude isn't limited to clothes and food, either. My boyfriend and I just moved in together, and I find myself flashing him dirty looks whenever he sets foot in my office. The idea of sharing a bank account? Are you crazy? At least it's comforting to know that other people, um, share my stingy perspective. According to a recent survey of 1,200 households by Raddon Financial Group, a surprising 48 percent of couples keep separate bank accounts.

On the one hand, I feel like it's my right to call the shots when it comes to my stuff and my space. But on the other, exercising that right instantly makes me feel like the bad guy. As kids we're taught that sharing, like saying please and thank you, is indisputably good. Big Bird shares. Mr. Rogers shares. The Care Bears share. It's the kind of behavior endorsed by everyone from Gandhi to Oprah. So what's a person supposed to do if her inner brat would like nothing more than to strangle her inner Care Bear?

#### Chicken Soup for the Selfish

To my surprise most psychologists agree that running your personal life as if you lived on Sesame Street isn't as sweet or as healthy as it sounds. "In the grown-up world, sharing is much more complicated than it was when we were kids," says Noelle Nelson, Ph.D., a psychologist and author of *The Power of Appreciation*. Sharing involves negotiating what will be divvied up and how. It means limiting your own comfort and/or convenience — when splitting a plate of nachos, you can't just eat with abandon. And it involves trusting the other person to hold up his or her end of the bargain. That's a lot to deal with.

If you feel reluctant to share, it may be because, like me, you prefer to keep things easy and simple. Sometimes two plates of nachos are more likely to make everyone happy than one. It may also be because, like me, you've had negative experiences (like when I let my college roommate borrow my Mac Classic II and she ended up spilling Ramen on the keyboard). Been burned by a borrower? Then say so. "Explaining why you're not into sharing will let other people know not to take your refusal personally," Dr. Nelson says.

The pressure most of us feel to share may have as much to do with our gender as it does the lessons we learned in kindergarten. "Women, more so than men, get positive feedback for being nice and for sacrificing their own needs for

the sake of relationships," says Olivia Mellan, a psychotherapist, money coach, and author of *Money Harmony*. "But healthy relationships require some amount of autonomy, some separateness." Sharing everything isn't love, it's codependency gone amok. Take money, for example.

"I don't just tell my married female clients that they should keep some of their money separate — I tell them they absolutely have to," Mellan says. By maintaining a personal bank account or protecting your favorite dress, you're taking care of yourself — something women often need to be reminded to do.

### **Drawing Lines, Erasing Others**

Although I would prefer not to bring it up, there's no getting around the fact that sharing in close relationships is also about intimacy — and avoidance of intimacy. "By definition love and friendship require us to care for and share ourselves at a high level with another person," says Wylie Goodman, Ph.D., a psychologist in New York. While it's wise to claim a few things, experiences, or places just for you, it's also possible to share too little. "If you're consistently unwilling to share and it conflicts with the other person's desire to feel trusted and respected, then you're going to have a problem," Dr. Goodman says.

The best solution, short of a dozen therapy sessions, is to examine your share-phobia on a case-by-case basis. "Ask yourself what the worst-case scenario would be if you were to share, what the odds of that happening are, and how you would feel if it did," Dr. Goodman says. In theory the answers to those questions will provide some perspective and make saying yes (or no) easier. In practice: The worst-case scenario if I chose to share my office with my boyfriend would be that I wouldn't have a quiet, private place to work, which would make my job a lot harder. The odds of that happening are high, and I would be miserable if it did. So my answer to whether or not I want us both to have access to that space is a big, fat, perfectly reasonable no. But if I shared my car with him? The worst thing that could happen is that I might have to call a cab from time to time and we'd have to negotiate who pays for gas and repairs. So, I suppose it makes sense to say yes.

That bit about negotiating is really crucial. "Whether what you're sharing is as small as a shrimp cocktail or as big as a bank account, you need to let each other know your concerns and expectations ahead of time," Mellan says. Maybe that means announcing that you're really hungry, so you'd like to eat four jumbo prawns instead of two. Or maybe it means sitting down together and going over every expense and figuring out who's going to pay for what. "If you disagree, you have a chance to work things out and reach a place where you both feel satisfied, comfortable, and cared for, which is much better than ending up irritated and resentful after the fact," Mellan says.

When I confessed my sharing aversion to my boyfriend and friends, they did two things. First they made fun of me. Then they started being incredibly patient and sweet — Sesame Street sweet — about asking when and how they could use my stuff. Whenever necessary, we take Mellan's advice and hash out terms we're both comfortable with, and when I say no to a request, they're neither surprised nor offended. The funny thing is, now that my sharing issues are out in the open, they seem to be fading. Maybe it's because the most important things — my silk dress, my office, and my sushi — have been made officially off-limits to anyone but me. Knowing that they're mine, mine, mine whenever I want them makes me suddenly more willing to share everything else.

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