

My kidney is stonewalled

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Several months ago I offered a kidney to a very old friend who... has refused to speak to me for 20 years.

It's a little complicated.

My wife, who has expressed a sudden and unexpected fondness for my kidneys, was not pleased. First, she was not pleased that she valued one of them more than I did. Second, she was not pleased that I offered to part with the one she liked best without talking it over with her. Third, she was not pleased by the risks presented by a one-kidney husband who might give the other away at the drop of a hat. And, finally, she was not pleased that I made this offer to a person who has been absent from our lives for two decades.

Her position is entirely reasonable. I would embrace it myself if our roles were reversed.

It's fair to mention, however, that a close-to-67-year-old kidney is no spring chicken, measured by either seasonality or tenderness. In its defense, I can say that my kidneys have performed their jobs as bouncers competently and without the commotion that usually accompanies ejections of obnoxious visitors. It's not like I was trying to palm off a bad knee to the first sucker who came down the pike.

I should also point out that I don't go around offering spare body parts to every Tom, Dick and Harry or even every Trix, Doe and Hattie. Even something like my ear lobes, which do nothing these days except provide habitat to rogue hair sprouts, have never been put on the market, let alone consigned to a rummage sale.

My offer was not prompted by innate generosity. I'm innately stingy, especially when it comes to giving money to causes both worthy and unworthy. I am, however, gushingly generous in providing sound guidance to my wife and daughter who inexplicably fight it as if it were a flesh-eating microbe from the bad side of town.

I'm not sure that conventional friendship prompted my offer since we no longer have a conventional friendship. We don't even have a nodding acquaintance anymore. (I'm not counting a letter that appeared 15 years ago suggesting that we both join the French Foreign Legion as either communication or a sign of conventional anything.)

The reasons for our breach have never been discussed directly, but I'm certain it's all my fault.

My kidney was not part of a scheme to put things back the way they had once been. I didn't expect anything in return, certainly not payment. My motivation was simple: I didn't want him to face life dominated by dialysis.

I confess that I never actually thought much about the implications of my offer. It was something I thought I should do even though it might be considered self-indulgent. I admit that it put at risk a certain resident party who prefers that I continue to run around in a state of renal redundancy.

He did not reply to my email offer, which did not surprise me.

The anonymous party referred to above did not appreciate his lack of response. When she threatened to give him a piece of her mind, I suggested that the three of us would be better off if she kept her mind intact. If he rejected a kidney, I didn't see him embracing a hunk of her hostile grey matter.

So why would a person in need refuse a kidney that would make his life easier?

Well, for one thing, this guy has always chosen life's harder choices. With little effort and some compromising, he could have been elected a U.S. Senator from his native state. Instead, he chose to be a community organizer, working with the poor and powerless.

For another, he's inclined to play a bad hand on his own.

For a third, my guess is that he doesn't want to be saved when others similarly situated may be denied dialysis owing to budget cuts in his adopted state's health-care program. Community organizers may be at their best when their own skin is in the game. It won't be hard to put a human face wearing a death mask on legislation cutting out dialysis.

For a fourth, he probably doesn't want to put me or Ms. Anonymous at risk.

Finally, he and I are in a messy situation that was put on our back burner long ago. Maybe we should just leave it there, unheated and unstirred. Maybe he thinks a free kidney will cost too much out of his emotional wallet.

I've been down similar roads with him before. I once offered him a job as the director of a college-based urban affairs center. In response, he wrote me a 10-page, single-spaced letter explaining why the position was too morally complicated for him to accept. If *that* was morally complicated, imagine the moral complications of accepting a kidney when others are left to die!

Were the situation reversed, I would have at least offered a reply in return. A sentence or two, not pages. Thanks, but no thanks. (I should mention that his kidney is four years older and now no good to boot.)

Still, there's no getting around the obvious: No reply is a very loud reply.

I don't know whether other adults find themselves stuck in odd tangles that seem readily fixable but never are. Maybe it's a routine part of getting older. It feels like unfinished business that's finished, and shouldn't be.

Over the years, I've found that friendships that become layered with money, politics or personal complications blow up more frequently than they last. Maybe I should limit myself to one-dimensional relationships.

I need to learn to live with complexity rather than solve it.

Maybe I need two brains to figure things out. I will consider donations from good homes.

I take small comfort in the old proverb: A penny spurned is a penny saved.

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