

SELF-CARE AS RELIGIOUS IMPERATIVE

Here's how I see it. If we ignore our spirit or ravage our body, enslave our heart or vacate our mind, avoid our conscience or forfeit our soul...if we do any of that, we're literally abusing the singular gift of creation that is you, that is I. Our very being is God's gift to us. Self-care is our best way of saying thank you.

Now, self-care isn't equivalent to being stuck on your self. The extremes of narcissism and neglect are both dead-ends, whereas self-fulfillment is a central mark of being religious. In quoting his Hebrew lineage, Jesus put it succinctly: "Love thy neighbor *as* thyself." Not more than, nor less than, but the same as. There's an implied equal sign in Jesus' commandment. For unless we take good and continuing care of the beings we are, then sooner or later, our effectiveness as professionals, as partners, as parents, as patriots, and as spiritual pilgrims will suffer as well.

Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree. "What are you doing?" you might ask. "Can't you see?" comes the impatient reply. "I'm sawing down this tree." "Well, you look exhausted, how long have you been at it?" you reply. "Over five hours, and you're right, I'm beat! This is hard work." "My goodness, why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw? I'm sure it'd go a lot faster." "What do you mean? I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the person says emphatically, "I'm too busy sawing!"

Well, that's the point. If we fail to take time out to sharpen our tools, those same tools are bound to break down. If we fail to take healthy and holy breaks amid the hecticness of our days, then our bodies and spirits will soon break down. As the rabbinical

saying goes: “A human being who has not a single hour for their own every day is no human being!”

Folks, the major dis-ease of contemporary American culture is being worn-out, whether it comes from physical exhaustion, emotional stress, compassion-fatigue, or a worldview of cynicism. The gauge, for too many high-achieving and deeply-caring people, reads “nearly empty”—empty of passion, zest, spirit.

To make matters worse, those who work themselves to the bone nowadays are often accorded more rewards and esteem than those seeking a balanced life. Some analysts even view the new heightened desire for work as something ultimately insatiable, a drive having less to do with money and status than with some mysterious urge to self-destruct, albeit in glorious fashion.

Now let me be clear at the outset. I believe that some burnout comes with the territory of being a morally sensitive and courageous person. There exists in the robust religious life both what Hans Selye calls *eustress* (good stress) and *distress* (unhealthy stress). The art of balanced self-care is simply to embrace the former and diminish the latter.

For, as we all know, unless there’s some tension in the strings, the violin simply can’t play. So, stress or tension is a precondition for growth. Therefore, we Unitarian Universalists seek a life of peace and unrest, serenity and struggle. Remember that Jeremiah in the Hebrew scriptures warned the religious pilgrim that there exist any number of false prophets running around “healing the wounds lightly” and preaching “peace, peace, when there is no peace.”

Today is no different. There are false prophets peddling literature and pushing groups on how to lead semi-tranquilized lives. Well, I don't want nor do I recommend a worry-free existence. Being spiritually awake means living with abundant concerns, both local and global, weighing upon our very hearts. Those who systematically skirt all anguish or unease quickly turn into zombies.

Furthermore, we don't ever find inner peace. For peace is a gift. Peace is the by-product of living life deeply and well. And living well starts with a commitment to regularly scheduled Sabbaths. The fourth commandment, "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy", is an essential starting place for any healthcare regimen.

And, I'm biased, but attending Sunday worship affords us some Sabbath time, full of rejoicing and renewal, helping us to focus upon and serve what is of ultimate worth in our journey. Sabbath literally means to draw a deep breath, without which our lives quickly succumb to frantic swirling.

Someone once inquired of a Zen master, who seemed to possess composure no matter what pressures he faced: "How do you maintain such serenity and peace?" The master replied, "I never leave my place of meditation!" You see, he meditated early in the morning, and for the rest of the day the roshi carried the peace of those moments in his mind and heart. Running, walking, doing yoga, chanting, tai chi, just sitting quietly in a corner of your house...you and I must find the ways to launch our day so that we might stay centered while moving, grounded while soaring, for the remaining hours.

Another governing principle of good self-care is to start right where we are. I like Ashley Brilliant's comic line: "I may not be totally perfect, but parts of me are excellent." You and I have everything we need, internally and externally, all the necessary resources,

to lead fulfilled, not perfect, lives. Of course, we have to tweak here and there, but ultimately, we must make peace with the body and mind and soul with which we've been graced since birth and simply make the most of who we are as unique beings progressing toward whom we choose to become

Remember that according to the Genesis story of Creation, when finished, Yahweh said that "it was good, very good." And that pronouncement included us frail, imperfect humans. Yes, we're good, very good. Indeed good enough and absolutely adequate for what will be required during our earthly sojourn. We possess defects, all of us, but we're not defective persons. We're products of the evolutionary process, gifted with enlarged brains that make it possible for us to understand an orderly universe and to honor its laws.

One more caution before I briefly outline a self-care flow that has served me well. Being a highly disciplined guy, I have to be careful, maybe you do too, that my pursuit of self-care doesn't merely add to my stress level. You and I can become frustrated by the very disciplines we seek to bring some refreshment, right? As one sage remarked: "Stress, in addition to being itself, and the result of itself, is also the cause of itself." What a convoluted, tormenting process is this adventure we call life. And how challenging it is to fine-tune the human instrument with which we've been blessed.

Furthermore, no single self-care program will work for everyone. We're each different, and disciplines that work for you won't necessarily bring me growth. And, remember, the paths toward self-nourishment are countless: songs, play, walking, silence, guided imagery, prayer or meditation, knitting, deep conversation, reading, mastering magic tricks, dancing, writing, on and on. You and I can learn from mentors and buddies,

but ultimately we're accountable for finding, then tailoring, the disciplines that will nudge our peculiar being into healthier shape.

The single recommendation that I offer today is to remember that Unitarian Universalism is a holistic religion, and, as such, we're called to shepherd our *whole* beings. We have bodies, spirits, minds, hearts, souls, and consciences and each of these distinct realms of the Self must be nourished daily in one way or another. But there's no hierarchy of regions: the soul's no more important than the mind, nor the heart than the body. They're equally crucial. In fact, the zone that's most important is usually the one we're neglecting.

Some brief comments on each area of self-care.

The *body*.

In a James Joyce novel, one of the characters, Mr. Duffy, is caricatured as a person "who lives a few blocks away from his body." Oh, does that image sting for those in our midst who are regularly out-of-touch with our bodies. Our body is flawed to be sure, but it's ours, the only one we'll ever have. So let's pledge to feed it, exercise it, and caress it with utmost care. Let's treat our bodies as sacred temples rather than temporary dwellings or disposable commodities. And we don't just have bodies. We *are* our bodies. We are what we eat, and we are how we exercise.

When I spent a month alone in the woods some years ago, I tentatively learned the practice of self-massage, lightly caressing my own skin, for five or so minutes a day. That's about all this shy guy could handle. It was really difficult to affirm my body, upclose, with my own hands, but, after all, as I grew to understand, my body's mine, and

it likes to be touched, especially by its owner. Plus I'm the most convenient person around.

Now, I ask you, is some direct physical self-care too much for you and me to experience daily? I don't think so. Unquestionably, humankind would be healthier and holier, if we practiced more self-massage rather than pining away for others to always meet our sensual needs.

Spirit.

Self-care would have us ponder, ingest, and heed the first Beatitude: "Blessed are they who are at home in the spirit." And might we not begin to engage one another daily with the traditional Quaker greeting: "How goes it with thy Spirit? "

At core, the spiritual journey begins with our paying attention to our basic breathing. As Thich Nhat Hanh says: "Breathing in, I calm my body and spirit. Breathing out, I smile." Or I breathe in hope and love; I breathe out hurt and bitterness. As near as breath itself, is the Eternal. Moving in and out of us as we breathe is the One, the Holy, the Spirit.

Remember: we travel toward our common center along different spokes of the sacred wheel of life. Some reach the core of our Spirit through meditation, others through prayer, still others like myself through chanting: OM NAMA SHIVA. A chant takes a basic simple truth and anchors it through repetition. Chants are so versatile. You can chant while walking or sitting in your office. Chants can be learned in a minute. But let me reiterate, there's no single way, let alone one right way, to stretch or anchor your spirit. There's your way. Find it, then practice it.

Heart.

For me heart-work has to do with nurturing all my relationships. Noting that our word courage comes from the French word for heart (*coeur*), I aspire, nay struggle, to be an open-hearted, strong-hearted, clear-hearted, and full-hearted person in all my ties with humans and animals and deities. I resonate daily with Carlos Castenada's query: "Does this path have a heart?" The heart has everything to do with empathy, compassion, and joy, and the primal heart-bond of my existence is my marriage, which needs gentle, firm tending day in and day out. Where is your heart sourced and resourced?

Are your bonds of intimacy current and caring?

Mind.

Our intellect is a gift of the creation, and we must cultivate it carefully. As religious forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson noted, "too many religions impel us to leave our mind outside the church when we enter!" On the contrary, Unitarian Universalism makes sure that you employ your mind fully whether you're inside or outside the sanctuary. And our mind isn't just for gathering information or even garnering knowledge so much as receiving and sharing wisdom on the quest toward becoming sages and crones during our earthly stay.

Our mission is to foster a reasonable faith. I personally expand my mind through journaling, through mastering magic tricks, through the recitation of poetry, primarily outloud to myself, and through writing books. How do you stretch your mind as a means of intentional self-care?

Soul.

If the spirit has to do with making intuitive and transcendent connections, soul-work for me, along with the Jungians, has to do with depth work, raking the ashes, confronting the shadowed underbelly of existence where anger, anguish and angst abound. As we all know, it's tempting to avoid dealing with our rage, our fear, and our sorrow, but any self-care regimen worth its weight must face squarely the uncomfortable regions of our netherworld.

The sixth self-care zone, not in hierarchical order, is our *conscience*, which often goes unmentioned in standard self-care programs. Why? Because it's tempting to forget that taking good care of ourselves is inextricably linked with showing compassion toward our neighbors and displaying respect for the earth. Our Fellowship Aspiration is unmistakably clear in its mandate when we say: "and service is our prayer." UU minister, Stephen Fritchman adds a powerful insight:

Surgeons can today transplant hearts, kidneys and other human organs, but no one in the health sciences can yet transplant a conscience. So feed and care for your conscience as you do your brain; neither can be replaced.

So I challenge you and me to take good, full care of ourselves, starting here and starting today, because doing so may prove to be our steadiest resource and our greatest accomplishment. Through persistent self-care we not only say thank you to the Creation, but our very lives resound with joy. We may not gain any more time for living through rigorous and comprehensive self-care, but we will live a lot more, because our senses will be more alive and open to the entire universe.

Every day let us stretch our minds with a fresh notion. Every day let us warm our hearts by touching the being of another. Every day let us stir our consciences by doing

something, however minor, to make our globe more safe or sane. Every day let us lift our spirits by sitting still or exploring natural beauty. Every day let us ground our souls by facing a fear, unearthing some hurt, and showing a bit of righteous rage. And every day let us feed our bodies with healthy nutrients, keeping our temples fit and energized.

But, most of all, let's be kind to ourselves. For there's no way we'll ever accomplish full self-care, but Unitarian Universalism, our chosen faith, encourages us to be pulled by our aspirations rather than resting on our achievements. So, we plod, we persist, we keep our eyes on the prize. We say thank you to the Creation by taking good, not perfect, care of our whole beings.

And that will prove enough, yes, that will be enough...for this one, precious lifetime.

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