



Self Care

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“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”
Howard Thurman

In his book *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance of Effective Ministry*, Roy Oswald defines self care as “being a steward of some rather special gifts – a physical body with its enormous resilience and beauty, the capacity to nurture others and be nurtured in return, the capacity to be aware of our lives as we are living them, and the capacity to enjoy immense sensual pleasure.” Oswald notes that there are four recognized areas for self care; mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. Self care involves cultivation of the self to find out what makes you come alive.

I have come to the conclusion that most of us are not good at cultivating or caring for ourselves. Most of us have breakdowns in multiple realms and we are notably good at ignoring the problems that come along with these breakdowns (untreated depression, substance abuse, no physical exercise, lack of sleep, marital strain, etc.). I read results from studies that alarm me. A significant majority of mothers do not go to the doctor and have not broken an extended sweat in over a year. Many Americans don’t have living wills. Multiple sectors of the population refuse to get mental health care even when needed.

And yet, as every flight attendant everywhere knows, you must put a breathing mask on yourself before you help anyone else, including your children. Ten years ago I heard the Dalai Lama speak and I found him riveting in his wisdom. At the lecture I attended he said “At sixteen years old I lost my freedom. At age 24 I lost my country.

The last 40 years I am a refugee. The last forty to fifty years many, many difficult years. I learned one thing – one’s own mental state is crucial to peace.” When asked about the purpose of life he responded “It is happiness, no doubt.” When asked about the root of unhappiness he spoke about hostility to other noting “the real destroyer of peace of mind is our inner anger.”

I have been mulling over the Dalai Lama’s vision for the last decade. Here is a man, a religious leader who has lost much, who daily hears about the suffering of his people and watches the culture, language, and country of Tibet disappear, literally being rewritten by the Chinese to the point of disappearing, forever. What has he learned watching this tragedy unfold for five decades, one’s mental state is crucial to peace. And he believes that the purpose of life is happiness. I just wasn’t expecting a fifty year exile say that happiness was the purpose of life.

I am not saying that the former Tibetan religious oligarchy, now toppled by the Chinese, was perfect. Nor am I saying that the Chinese have done the Tibetans any favors. What I am saying is that the Dalai Lama is a model of self care for all of us. For fifty years he has lived with loss, motivated followers and supporters, retained his integrity and faith, and he has done it through caring for himself first. This intrigues me because it is an unusual model of ministry. It is unusual because it is balanced and healthy. It is unusual because it is premised on the Dalai Lama’s realization that he is not in control, even over personal life and death matters. He must experience great pain over what has happened to monasteries and religious orders in Tibet (as well as to the people) and he knows he is not in control and he has remained engaged. The Dalai Lama has cared for and about issues on the world stage by caring for himself first – maintaining his balance of self care, first.

My epiphany on self care came this summer when I realized that for the first time in my 13 years of ministry I was hovering near burnout. Burnout, as defined by Roy Oswald in his book *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry*, is different than stress. Burnout is being overwhelmed to the point of not caring. Not caring. Stress is having so many change units (“good” like a marriage or “bad” like a death) that one can’t keep up. So burnout and stress are related, but different. Warning symptoms for both of them are a lack of self care leading to significant or chronic problems. Solutions for both of them are self care, leading to balanced health (which every person defines somewhat differently) and wholeness. Balanced self-care is a matrix that helps every person positively function.

Most of us attempt to live in a world where we ignore, or side bar self care, and attempt to control others. It is such a set up for failure. A lesson I have been imparting on my son since he could think for himself is “The only person you can control is yourself.” That’s it. You are the extent of your domain for your control.

We don't control each other. If I attempt to experience success by controlling you, it won't work. There can be the illusion of success, but it is just an illusion.

As we learned last week, "life in a human body offers extraordinary opportunities for personal transformation." You can control yourself. You can be honest about where you have succeeded in self care and where you have failed and you can take positive steps to find a healthier balance. There is no perfect, permanent landing place on self care; there is a continuing reshuffling of balance. Roy Oswald writes

Health is not the opposite of sickness. Health is the ability to deal creatively with the problems of life – to confront them, withstand them, cope with them, grow from them. We are healthy when we are able to cope with the problems and flux of life in responsible ways. Thus health is a positive force rather than the absence of illness.

So take a minute for personal inventory. What is your state of mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual health? I want you to be honest with yourself. Are you struggling with an addiction? Are you happy? Do you have time to read anything of personal interest? Have you tried something new in the last year? Do you get any physical exercise? Have you been to see a doctor in the past year? Have you been to the dentist? If you are of a certain age, have you had a mammography, cholesterol screening, colonoscopy? If you are struggling with issues or avoiding physical care, why are you doing it? Why are you denying yourself the blessing of a cared for life? And how might you creatively make a change towards wholeness.

Part of my creative change this summer including talking honestly with the Board about the burdens of being a single minister in this growing congregation. The professional ministry of this congregation is now too much for one minister. I/we need help. I began to meditate, and continue with it, relishing the fact that I really don't know how to do it very well. I am enjoying being "lost" in meditation. Although I want to get to the gym more often, I am not making it (remember this is a balance), but I try to walk more often. I take more naps. Yes, it's true, less work, more naps. Sleeping helps me recover. I am attending more collegial events, for the support and growth. This has made a positive difference for me in just three months. I actually feel more creative and energized again.

As Unitarian Universalists we have all these great plans for creating a better world, sometimes at the cost of ourselves. This is a shadow side to our faith and I don't like it. I made a promise to myself when I entered ministry, that if any member came to me and told me that they could no longer do something I would respond "Please go take care of yourself. You are not called to exhaust yourself here." I think I have stuck to this. I don't think I have strong armed anyone in my 13 years (though I

might have repressed such a memory, and I apologize if I did such a thing to you). I don't think we are called to exhaust ourselves as clergy, or Unitarian Universalists. I would rather have a program fail and do some creative thinking around it, than exhaust anyone.

Thomas Moore writes that

Doing work that has no soul is the great hidden malady of our time. Clearly, it would be worth our while as individuals and as a society to address unhappiness at work and discover the deep roots of our discontent . . . Pay attention to your deep and complex inner life, become more sensitive about your relationships, consider your past thoughtfully, and use your imagination at its full power.

I have deeply appreciated the work of Reverend Foerster here in the past year and a half, not only because it has shared the wealth of professional ministry here, but because an area of focus for her has been "shared ministry." That is, helping members and friends discern how they would like to grow in personal ministry and share it here in our congregation (rather than doing work that has no soul). To help people make sure personal decisions she has helped multiple committees improve their training programs, and create job descriptions so that people know what is being asked and if it is a good fit for them and their desire for ministry now.

We do have some on-going issues here and we need to ask ourselves deeper questions about them. We continue to struggle to recruit enough volunteers for our religious education program. Do volunteers feel a transformative ministry in their time spent with our children, or does it feel like another obligation with no soul? How can we make it a joyful ministry?

Several of our committees, including the Board, Personnel, and RE repeatedly wear out talented, giving members. How is our system supporting these areas (or not) and how can we make these areas joyful ministries for our volunteers? And it really is a royal "WE" because our system at First is about all of us, all of us. Finally, how can we create effective, long term, social justice programs that rely on joyful ministry rather than guilt? Most of us, myself included, use guilt as a personal or community social justice motivator and it doesn't work in the long run. James Wind, in the most recent issue of *Congregations*, notes that congregations struggle to stay focused on a single project. He notes that congregations spring without seeing the marathon they are running. At times we do this as well.

It is all related to self care, beginning with our personal lives and extending out to our families, neighborhoods, work places, and congregations. Did we get our breathing

mask on in Step A, or are we working on fumes, and if so why? Why do we personally rate such little care?

Oswald says we need to rework our personal theology, and I agree. He writes

When out of my own human resources I attempt to meet this sea of human need around me, I am saying that I'm both omnipotent and omnipresent. These are characteristics of Gods, not humans . . . My first call is to be a liberated, whole human being. My first responsibility to my congregation is to be a joyful, redeemed human being. This works only if ministry is viewed as a communal activity with people in mission. We are who we are related to. We cannot maintain our health and wholeness unless there is support for this among our people.

This is a mandate for all of us, members, staff, friends, and clergy. We are called to “follow our bliss” amidst the transformational opportunities of community, not deplete ourselves. If this service today has made you think about self care for yourself, do it. Take the time to do it and do it well so you have more to offer yourself, then others (including First Church). If a program needs to find new leadership so you can rest, do it. If you need help, ask for it. I began by asking the Board and talking to my colleagues, now I am telling you. We do this together. And we do no favors to ourselves or others by masking our problems. We actually make them harder to solve because the truth has been obscured. So go ahead, speak in a committee meeting and say “I can't do this alone” or “that is a great idea but we don't currently have the resources” or “we are sprinting too fast” or “I need help” or “this isn't going as I planned” or “I have a family emergency” or “I need some respite.” And other people don't leap on these comments. Express interest, listen, and explore more. Often a comment like “we don't have the resources to do this,” if teased out, can lead to a conversation about if something matters, and if it does, a way will be found, maybe not now, but in the future, or maybe now because there is another way.

I have three goals for the year. One is to build staff community here. The other two I wanted to try together because they provide such a challenging opportunity; self care for me and our members and friends as well as increased engagement in Avondale. I am attempting to model Oswald's definition of self-care “the capacity to nurture others and be nurtured in return, the capacity to be aware of our lives as we are living them, and the capacity to enjoy immense sensual pleasure.” So I am also mediating and napping and preaching, and marginally walking, and spending time in Avondale. Do you understand how this works? I hope you will try this in your own lives with me – to find your own balance of self care. Amen.

