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We Cannot Give If We Do Not Have

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Our Lord speaks to us in Matthew's gospel of love: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39).¹ As spiritual caregivers to neighbors, we offer a safe place to fall, an ear that receives with nonjudgmental confidence, and an active advocacy toward healing, all while working in endless, health-giving creative ways.

To be able to give we must have. In the challenging and rewarding world of a female spiritual caregiver, how do we care for ourselves? In what ways can we offer ourselves the spiritual care we need so we can continue to care for others? It is a most important task, for if we do not take good care of ourselves, we do a great disservice to our spirits, minds, and bodies. This disservice can easily lead to burnout. Psychologist Christina Maslach defines burnout as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind."²

Spiritual care is not only "people work," but is also God's work. If we do not offer ourselves proper self-care, this can accentuate a deeper level to the burnout experienced. I know firsthand the work it takes to find that necessary self-care. When I was training to become a chaplain, I thought I was doing "just fine" day after day witnessing loss, pain, and suffering. I thought the cases that turned out well were enough to balance the residual hurt I felt from the others. Well, after gaining ten pounds, discovering my hair was falling out, and experiencing bouts of insomnia, I frequently began to isolate myself. Eventually, I found myself on my knees asking God to strengthen me so I could continue to do his work. The problem with my request was that I did not realize that I played a huge part in strengthening myself. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Action springs not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility."³ God is there as my partner in self-care, offering many tools, but just as I must be willing to receive his grace to do spiritual care, I have to be willing

to receive his tools. In other words, he asked me to pitch in—and I did!

Returning to Matthew's gospel, we can find the first step toward self-care. When I take these words into myself, my integrated self, and reflect further on them using *lectio divina*, a message of loving kindness comes through. *Lectio divina* can be a conduit through which scriptural passages can become truly one's own. For me, thoughts of equality also come up, equality of honor and need between the love I offer others and the love I offer myself. What I heard was that I needed to offer myself loving kindness. *Lectio divina* is a practice we can all use in spiritual care for ourselves. Inviting *lectio divina* into our self-care can help shape the mind as it offers food for prayer.

Let's Feast!

As Christian women, we base our practice of spiritual care on our faith in and love for Christ and his teachings. Basing our work in spiritual care on Christ and the belief in his promise of his kingdom, we can turn to him with our questions of self-care. If we feel called to imitate Christ in our service to others, it only makes sense to try to imitate him in our self-care. What spiritual care did Christ offer himself during his ministry? One thing I know is Christ feasted during his mission—Christ was a feaster! Jesus went to parties, weddings, feasts, and celebrations—even graciously turning water into wine, ensuring the feast could continue. This may seem a too literal or simple version of this miracle, but Christ enjoying himself while sipping the superior wine is a token of loving kindness, not only for the guests, but also for himself. A feast can be a wonderful way to rejuvenate our mind, body, and spirit after we feel taxed from work and giving. Feasting allows us to "take in," to enjoy a healthy indulgence of the gifts of food, wine, fellowship, and pleasure. There is a spiritual significance to food. At the Lord's table, the joyful feast nourishes us, and it is a meal of renewal. Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food" (1 Cor 6:13). In our feasting, when we enjoy and relish how our food and drink taste and how they nourish us, we say "yum" with gratitude for the God-given gift of the senses, all while being present to our humanness.

¹ All Scripture references are taken from the NAB.

² Christina Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring* (Mahwah, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 3.

³ Geoffrey B. Kelly and Nelson F. Burton, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1990).

Feasting is not simply what we take into our bodies but also what we take into our minds, hearts, eyes, ears, and the entirety of our beings. Feasting on the arts is a wonderful feast for healing and self-care. The art to which I refer is both art of the created world and art humans create. Using *visio divina*—focusing our eyes on art to see God—is a piece of self care, a piece of feasting that can slow us down, calm our spirits, and bring the compassion of Christ we dearly need in front of us, whether our focus is on a sunset or a sculpture. One of my favorite pieces of art to feast on while using *visio divina* is an oil painting by Thomas Carey, OSB, titled “Mary Magdalen Washing the Feet.” This piece depicts the ease and truth of Mary’s choice to love Christ, giving what she had of herself to let him know how much she loved him. She has a serene look on her face and places a gentle touch to his feet. We only see Christ’s feet; this tells me that just this much of him, just a foot is enough for her to remain in his love. For me, being a woman in service to Christ, this piece has been of great comfort to me. I encourage you to welcome feasts into your self-care plan. Mother Teresa believed, “We must feed ourselves. We can die from spiritual starvation. We must be filled continually like a machine. When one little thing in the machine is not working, then the whole machine is not working properly.”⁴ Christ encouraged all to come to the feast; he excluded no one. The only time we are excluded is when we choose to exclude ourselves, when we do not feel worthy and grateful to accept God’s generosity. Graciously accepting this generosity imitates Christ and brings us closer to him as we care for ourselves.

Honoring Our Bodies

The female body is a wonderfully complicated gift, sometimes overutilized in our service of spiritual care. Being a true listener is part of our work as spiritual caregivers. Our bodies try to talk to us all the time: “I’m thirsty. I need a bite. I am wiped out. My feet hurt, etc.” These simple physical needs, if not met can aid burnout’s arrival. There are serious physical side effects of burnout: migraines, muscle tension, belly problems, sleeplessness. Psalm 127:2 gives us some direction on how to honor the holy mystery that is our bodies: “It is vain for you to rise early / and put off your rest at night, / To eat bread

⁴ Mother Teresa, *Everything Starts with Prayer: Mother Teresa’s Meditations on Spiritual Life for People of All Faiths* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1998), 14.

earned by hard toil— / all this God gives to his beloved in sleep.” Jesus in Mark’s gospel, after his apostles tell him about all the work they have done for him, instructs them to rest, go somewhere quiet, and rest. Jesus recognized the burden of physical stress and its need to be lightened so that our bodies can begin to recover.

Psychology and Spiritual Direction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “To endure the cross is not tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ.”⁵ There are times when experiences in our ministry can be profoundly painful and gruesome to witness on many levels. Walking with God in the moment of these painful experiences offers great strength and support, but we may need to take a second walk so we are able to process the pain we witness. Sitting at the foot of the cross of suffering and death is a privilege that language cannot express. When we walk with those being brought home to Christ, witness them seeing Christ, it can leave us in complete humility, landing us completely in our true self, which can be haunting. This haunting can be beautiful and terrifying all at once, affecting our entire being. These experiences can be self-transcending. Dr. Don Saliers has said that “a sense of transcendence in and through the finitude of the world will appear, if at all, precisely amid the contrasts and the connections between terror and beauty.”⁶

Self-transcendence is the raw material through which the Holy Spirit works. The beginning of our spiritual self-care requires us to attend to the rawness of what we were present to. Profound moments in my own ministry have called me, not only to marinate in the grace of them, but also to share them, to tell my story, to transcend them. The more we walk and share what we witness with Christ and others, we can rejuvenate our work with hope and make peace with a memory that haunts us.

The combination of psychology and spiritual direction in our self-care plan can be wonderfully complimentary, addressing the whole that we are. It offers us a chance to look both ways at our human journey; our secular side and our base of faith come together in this dual care to be served.

⁵ Kelly and Burton, *A Testament to Freedom*.

⁶ Don E. Saliers, “Where beauty and terror lie: the poetics of everyday life,” class lecture, Saint John’s University, Colleagueville, MN (November 13, 2008).

This combo approach to self-care addresses the apophatic and cataphatic pieces of our work. Apophatically we dig in and learn to accept and embrace what we are not, what our limits are as caregivers. Then there are also moments of cataphatic knowing, learning what the team of God and us can do. Ultimately, this leads to the realization and the comfort that God is in charge.

We receive spiritual care in hopes to know and be known. Integrating psychology and theology, by seeing them as two complementary interpretations of this hope (which is a radical drive of the human spirit), they become a collective care approach, not a dual one. By moving beyond ourselves in creative understanding, realistic judgment, responsible decisions, and generous loving kindness, we both realize our authentic being (true self) and our ability to respond to Matthew's gospel call to loving service of the neighbor. If you find a psychologist who understands therapy (self-realization) as self-transcendence and a spiritual director who recognizes the gospel as also a call to self-transcendence, your care will not require a connecting bridge. The only requirement needed will be *our* discovery and acceptance of their intrinsic unity as our same fundamental human drive (hope) for self-transcendence.

Embracing the Wisdom in our Anger

Sophia Wisdom is the personification of the divine feminine and has been depicted as sister, mother, lover, chef and hostess, preacher, judge, liberator, and establisher of justice. This is a very strong list of what female spiritual caregivers are called to be and this list is by no means exhaustive. Sophia brings power to women when we invite her symbolism into ourselves and experience affirmation of every aspect of our being. Through Sophia, we can claim power as our right, exercise it creatively, share it, and be sustained by its growth. As creator, as respected nurturer, as a strong, angry, assertive, and sometimes prophetic woman, Sophia provides us with an alternative to the traditional behaviors into which many of us have been socialized.

I am sure I am not alone in the telling of a piece of my story. When I was a girl, I was told that anger was not okay to feel and the expression of it was not an okay behavior because anger was the opposite of love. Working in spiritual care, we are witnesses to much injustice and abuse. If we suppress the legitimate feeling of anger that arises when we are present to injustice and wrongdoing, it can lead to

compassion burnout. Detachment and cynicism are symptoms that present themselves when we begin to move toward this state.

I believe we need to relearn our views on anger. Anger can be a gift. If we learn how to use it in a healthy way, it can be a form of self-healing and healing for others. Jesus was a healer, but he spoke up when he witnessed injustice. Jesus did not withdraw or make false peace; he pushed to be heard and to bring justice to people who suffered. Jesus has shown us that anger is not the opposite of love, but anger may be required of us to love our neighbors and ourselves. It can also be a conduit to get to that love.

To use anger constructively, we need to be able to utilize other aspects of self-care. Feasting can give us a break from anger. Therapy and spiritual care can be a safe place to bring and sit with anger. Trusting we have the strength of Sophia Wisdom, we can take action that is productive. Anger reveals to us that something is wrong in our world and it needs to be examined. Anger calls for change—social and individual.

The Little and the Fun

I end my encouragements for self-care with “the little and the fun.” There is no such thing as a small gesture that does not have meaning. So many little things we do in our lives can be forms of self-care when done with loving kindness. Being a spiritual caregiver asks much from us and often gives more than what is asked. Remembering these gifts can be a wonderful way to care for our souls. I frequently write down memories from my ministry, little moments in time I want to remember. I write down quotes from patients, friends, a cashier at the grocery store, and the words I want to remember.

Loving the little things in our lives includes loving the child inside us, that little one that walks with us even as we walk home to God. Mother Teresa has a wonderful view of the power of little children: “You should go to God like a little child. A child has no difficulty expressing his/her mind in simple words that say so much.”⁷ Letting the child in you become a part of your self-care means seeing God in all little things, from a french fry to a sunset. It also means letting “the fun” be a big part of your life. Laughter and silliness can only serve you, lift you, and heal you in the challenging work of spiritual care. The Old Testament reveals, “A cheerful glance brings joy to

⁷ Mother Teresa, *Everything Starts with Prayer*, 38.

the heart; good news invigorates the bones” (Prov 15:30). Welcoming the child in your heart to laugh and be silly means welcoming the child too young to self-judge, the child that is so rawly present that pure joy feels free to surround her. Honor that little girl that chased butterflies for a second look because they were too pretty to look at only once. Welcome back the little girl that looked in the mirror dreaming about how beautiful she would be someday, because now you are that dream.

Offering ourselves self-care based in loving kindness is a core need in our work as spiritual caregivers. Many factors of our work may lead to burnout when we do not address the needs of our whole integrated selves, bodies, souls, and hearts. We are creative and gifted daughters of God, lifting ourselves up to the light of grace, so it illuminates every part of our being, imitating Christ’s life and mission. We choose to serve God because we love him; honoring ourselves is a beautiful healing way to show that love in action. We cannot give if we do not have, so allow yourself to indulge, feast, and love!

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Companions

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