



Purposeful Wanderings

A Monthly Newsletter for Clients and Friends of **The Road Not Taken**

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Self-Care is not Self-ish

“When you make a world tolerable for yourself, you make a world tolerable for others.” – Anaïs Nin

You matter. Your life matters. You are here for a reason. You can't *be* that reason if you're being someone else's. If you are to manifest your own potential, you need to build a foundation strong enough to support it. That foundation is a strong, healthy *self*. We've been taught a lot of bad lessons over the course of our lives. Two stand out here: (1) take care of others first, (2) taking care of yourself means you're *self-ish*. Both are nonsense. If you don't care for yourself, how can you sustain the energy to live your own true purpose *or* care for others? You can't give what you don't have.

First a definition: Self-care means doing for yourself in a way that you *and* others benefit. Selfish means doing for yourself in a way that *you* benefit while *others* are diminished. They are fundamentally different things.

I understand first-hand the dilemma here. I lived many years believing self-care was selfish. (Old lessons create long-lived habits.) I obsessed for years over a job that paid well but left me starving; I “tried” to do right by my family; but they came in second. *I*, therefore, came in third; the result was burnout. The shift came for me in a most unlikely way. Traveling a lot for business, I listened flight after flight to the safety briefing, wondering each time how I could possibly put on my own oxygen mask *before* I helped my children with theirs. On one such flight, for no [apparent] reason whatsoever, it dawned on me. If I couldn't breathe, I'd be of limited value to my sons. By this time they were old enough to put on their *own* masks, but I was just catching on. That simple awareness, combined with my innate curiosity helped me begin an inquiry into the topic of self-care. The inquiry led down some fascinating back roads and scenic by-ways, but the summary of my learning is this: when you fill yourself to the brim with exquisite care for every dimension of your being, you create a sustainable process that *produces its own energy*, energy that powers a great life.

Here's how this becomes a miraculous opportunity. Filling yourself with love and care is like filling a water bucket. When a bucket is full, it overflows. When *you're* full with self-care, *you* overflow, too. The opportunity: Keep filling. The *overflow* becomes fuel that powers your life, your gift to the world. Amazingly, this energy is available for *free*; it's overflow. Never feel drained again. You've created a powerful machine – your presence – powered by the idea that self-care matters, which is powered by the idea that *you* matter. *You can't sustain a life of meaning and purpose if your bucket is empty, no matter how caring you may be.*

I've had clients in the helping professions who are burned out from caring for others. They're convinced (rightfully so) that a life in service of others should or could be a life of meaning, yet they feel very much the opposite. All had been trapped in the dilemma outlined above. Having been brought up to care for others first, they've devoted their lives to doing just that. By not caring for themselves, however, there is no “self” left to *do* the caring. So then, how can they do the beautiful work the world so dearly needs if they no longer have the energy to do it? They can't.

We humans are multi-dimensional beings, all at the same time a balance of *mental, physical, emotional, relational, soulful, and spiritual*. The true self knows that living fully means experiencing life in *all six* dimensions. Lessons from the external world, however, tell us to rely more on the mental dimension (know/try/do). We pay a price for listening. Other dimensions thrive on quiet reflection, noticeably absent from the life of the rational mind. Yet here in these quiet spaces lives your unique, creative essence. You find your sense of place in life – who you are, and what matters most – by adopting practices that honor all aspects of your humanness. Self-care leads to meaning.

There's no “one right way” to do this. Each of us is different, having developed in response to different lessons and experiences. You might think of your own development as a wheel with six spokes, each of different length, corresponding to your experience in that dimension. Life may have left your wheel seriously out of round. Choose from the suggested practices based on where you feel the greatest need or lack (not based on quick response to old lessons).

Yes, you matter. Yes, your life matters. Yes, you are here for a reason. You offer no greater service – to yourself *and* to others – than to respect yourself enough to keep your bucket full. You can't give what you don't have.

Exercise: A Practice of Self-Care: Caring for your many dimensions gives you access to somatic wisdom of your body, emotional wisdom of your heart, depth and wonder of your soul, and joy of your spiritual connection to a reality bigger than yourself. These messages, although always present, may have become hidden, courtesy of the voices in your head. With silence, however, you'll begin to hear, then come to trust, the greatest certainty life offers – wisdom of your inner truth. Yes, your head will still tell you to be like everyone else. But you're not. You are unique. An invitation to each dimension of your humanness:

Mental: the thinking mind (intellect, reason, cognitive understanding) wants creative stimulation, which is found in reading, learning, writing, problem solving, managing life's affairs, envisioning positive futures, personal awareness.

Emotional: the heart knows only love and wants to both give and receive love, which can be found in the pursuit of creativity, being in nature, connecting more deeply with the emotional reality of others (empathy and compassion).

Physical: the body wants to be healthy; it's both the vehicle for doing your work in the world and a source of wisdom, which you find by listening to it and caring for it, through exercise, nutrition, and healthy living environments.

Relational: we thrive on belonging; healthy relationships are chosen, not given, and require nurture, whether with family, friends, clients, community or planet. Living with respect, reverence and compassion is to give *and* receive.

Soulful: your soul represents your uniqueness and creative essence, and wants to express itself in how you live (if only your head would stop saying 'no'). The soul speaks indirectly, so you need quiet reflection in order to hear it.

Spiritual: your spirit helps you feel a part of something far bigger than self, your connection to the divine, sacred, life's unity, a higher power. Rarely showing up in the rational mind, it may best be found connecting with nature.

And ... you'll find a rather comprehensive guide to practices for self-care here: [PDF](#) format or website ([blog](#)) format.

Despite its bad rap in our world, a regular practice of quiet reflection and self-care:

- calms your mind (the voices in your head lose interest when you stop listening to them)
- focuses your mind on the *present* moment (that's the moment you miss as you worry about the *next* moment instead)
- allows you to know your thoughts (especially the unconscious ones that deny you the felt experience of yourself)
- allows you to trace those thoughts back to the often-unconscious beliefs that created them (freeing you from them)
- creates spaces *between* thoughts, so the limitless possibility that has always been there can fill the void
- improves your productivity and sense of meaning (you *do* more, and life *means* more, when you don't *miss* so much)
- opens you to discovering your unique personal truth (almost always a beautiful balance among all six dimensions)
- reconnects you with your deepest longing (which exists in the *depth* of each moment, not in a race to the next one)
- opens you to *felt experience*, life's most valid "way of knowing" (vs. our common, rational-only way of knowing)
- connects you with your authentic self ... and with soul, spirit, life's unity, and a higher power (all without "trying")
- restores life balance, naturally (without force, goals or stress), as you listen to the voice of your inner truth
- encourage you to favor a life of personal authenticity over one of social acceptance

Life lessons from nature: We're often taught that being silent means we're unproductive, so we fill our lives with noise, then wonder why we feel so uncomfortable being alone with our own thoughts. Nature, by contrast, exists against a backdrop of silence. Despite the noise a crow can make, it is silent most of the time. A noisy bobcat would fail as a hunter. Trees make little noise as they grow or as they shed their leaves. Although opposite the model we follow, nature displays much of what we'd love – resilience, balance, peace, integrity, productivity. You are inseparable from that. Reconnect yourself with this deepest part of you.



Book of the month: *A Religion of One's Own*, by Thomas Moore. A book of uncommon wisdom and depth, about finding and living the sacred in all aspects of everyday life, not just beliefs or dogma. Personal religion is created, not followed; it leads to wholeness. "The Lord is my shepherd" is a beautiful psalm, but people are tired of being sheep." And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985