

(This collection of practices is intended as a companion to my October 2018 Newsletter: “Self-Care is not Self-ish”)

Below is a large collection of practices from which you can choose as a way to care more fully for the true *self* you are. A practice is an exercise you adopt and do regularly so as to gain *felt experience* of an idea. *Knowing* something new is helpful, but only felt experience of that knowing will change you. *Experience* opens you to new ways of *seeing*, and *repetition* allows new ways of seeing to become integrated as habits. In this way, you actually rewire your brain’s neural pathways, making “lasting change” possible. (Analogy: If “knowing” by itself could change you, you could learn to ski by reading books. But you actually have to come down the mountain. Experience of the mountain teaches you.)

How life changes depends on how *purposefully* you incorporate some/all of these practices into your *regular* daily life. Begin with “Practice of Silence.” Many other practices depend on your comfort with silence. Then adopt “Get to Know Your Thoughts.” Get used to both. After, choose a practice that catches you in some way. This will encourage you to add others each week. Keep building. You needn’t take more than an hour a day total for your self-care practice.

The Practice of Silence: We seem to have a curious relationship with silence. On one hand, we say we long for it. Yet when we experience even a glimpse of it, we seem to retreat (quickly, and often unconsciously) to the constant background noise to which we’ve become so accustomed. Why is it we feel more comfortable around noise than we do around silence? As you become silent, your mind calms, and you begin to notice things ... parts of yourself that have been there all along, but may have become lost in the din of everyday noise. In silence, you notice the quiet pull of your unique inner truth, asking you to listen. It may be the smile on your face when something about life inspires. It may be getting so lost in something you love that you lose all track of time. Or, it may be the twinge you feel when you know something just isn’t right. In a constant state of busyness, you’ll likely miss, or deny, these messages. You discover your truth by *noticing* it – just what those voices in your head tell you *not* to do! The problem is that, most of the time, you listen to the *voices* and not your *truth*. In silence, you discover that!! **Being Silent:** For 20 - 30 minutes *each day*, sit alone in a place free from distraction, ideally a place in nature, a place you can revisit so as to call it your own. Relax your body, take a few deep breaths. Close your eyes; or focus on a simple object in your view. Breathe purposefully; do nothing. That’s it. Simply be present for the time you choose; no right or wrong. As you sit, however, you may experience no *silence* at all, but rather all the voices in your head, chatter that runs continually, telling you all the things you need to be doing, changing, judging and fixing. Although they’re only thoughts, you can’t just stop them; but you can learn not to engage with them. As a way to detach, you might view such thoughts as clouds; watch each one as it passes by; then let it go. If you need a sense of achievement, success is just being true to your intention – a very simple intention: show up, shut up, listen, learn. The silence your mind fights off is the silence your inner self longs for.

Get to Know Your Thoughts: Your thinking determines your reality. If you’re not aware of your thinking, your life is probably driven by an incessant flow of unconscious voices you *think* is thinking. Only by interrupting this flow will you know your truth. As an *observer* of your thoughts, you gain a perspective on your consciousness you’d never get as a *participant* alone. When you see your thoughts at work, you notice those that protect your edges, keeping your life small. *Stop* what you’re doing three or four times a day. During a few moments of quiet reflection, replay in your mind thoughts you’ve had since the last replay, as if a movie with you as its audience. **Listen** to what they tell you. Resist judging or trying to change them. Just notice. Become a student of your thinking, with greater depth and clarity than you can imagine now. Having experience with silence will help here, because you’ve already noticed the voices in your head – they’re thoughts. Now you can get to know them. See if you can name recurring voices; common ones include the victim (why me?), the judge (I’m not), the saboteur (I can’t), the child (I won’t), the martyr (woe is me), the poet (I wonder), etc. Get to know them, objectively; they just *are*.

Journal Your Thoughts and Feelings: A daily practice of writing shifts thoughts and feelings from inside you to outside you where you can better *observe* them. This reduces the risk that you *become* them. It doesn’t matter if you think you have anything to say. Write anyway. If you struggle, pick a word each day that draws you and write about whatever comes up. If you need help, try words such as peace, freedom, soul, wisdom, creativity. Or, you might create a Gratitude Journal; it’s simple, yet amazingly effective at changing the way you see yourself and your life. Using perhaps a dated journal or desk calendar, note each evening before you go to sleep three things for which you are grateful that day. They needn’t be big things; they might include noticing the smell of the flowers, how someone said thank you to you, your own health, a call from a friend, etc. This seemingly trivial act has amazing power to shift your awareness, both into the present moment and also into an attitude of gratitude for the beauty in your life.

Create a “Journal of You”: In addition to writing thoughts, feelings, and/or gratitudes, you might create a book that honors that which you hold as meaningful. You could start with a blank journal book or a loose-leaf notebook, then write, draw, copy or collage a collection of images, thoughts, quotes, articles and ideas that evoke deep meaning for you. Ideas: include a picture of you as a baby or young child to celebrate the sense of wonder and curiosity you may want now to embody in your journey; keep a written collection of thoughts and ideas that inspire you, guides for you journey; include photographs from a favorite place or of special people in your life. Review your book regularly; add to it as you feel moved to do so. This practice is about developing conscious awareness and acceptance that you matter. You do that by creating a vision of a life you’d love to live, the “you” you want to become and honor. You may just discover your own unique, creative essence, the “why” of your life. You’re in this world for a reason. Discover the reason and design your life around its fulfillment. When your external identity matches your internal truth, life is pure freedom.

Go for a Walk: Your body wants and needs exercise. Your mind needs clearing out the cobwebs. Your emotions need a break. Your relationships need to include one with yourself. Your soul needs quiet time. Your spirit needs connection to nature. Walking does *all* of these. It’s something you can do regardless of weather or age (if you make the choice to do so). So get out and walk; 45 minutes every day is a good start. That’s three miles if you get into it. It’s a mile if you want to just absorb. Either way, it’s a most significant piece of self-care. Actively notice the sights and sounds of nature; tune out whatever humanity you must deal with. A few conditions, however. Walk in silence, even if you choose to walk with a friend. View the time as purposeful self-care, resisting the temptation to think about all you need to be doing instead.

Do Yoga: In addition to motion, your body and mind also want to be flexible, and to be connected with each other. Yoga is perhaps the best way to do both. Sign up for a weekly yoga class if you’re a novice. Then take 15 - 20 minutes each day and do as much as you can remember from the class. Over time, your memory and practice will improve. Yoga is not about perfect poses; it’s about presence, practice and integration. Make it fun.

Time in Nature: You are part of nature. Nature renews and refreshes. She also nurtures and embraces your inner self. Denying the experience of that primal connection is one of the causes for the personal and societal malaise, depression, stress, and loss of spirit we experience in this country. Break the indoor habit. For an hour or so twice a week, just be outdoors. Don’t “do” anything; just experience the gifts nature offers. Ideally you might find a special location, one you could think of as your own, so as you return to it over and over, you get to know the place in a special way. Being in nature doesn’t mean sitting under a tree and talking politics with a friend; and it doesn’t mean taking the back road to the mall. It means purposeful, quiet, reflective time alone in the natural world. Nature’s way is one of order and flow; immersing yourself in that flow has a way of nudging you toward joining it rather than fighting it. While you’re noticing nature’s wisdom, you might ask yourself what your life might be like if it embodied the same resilience, balance, creativity, reverence and flow you experience here. After all, that’s just a question, right? You don’t need to move to the woods or hug trees if you don’t want to (although both might help).

Listen to Inspiring Music: Music takes you out of your everyday thinking, and opens you to your imagination, spirit and intuition. Like all the others, this practice is intended to be purposeful – not something you just do while busy with daily life. Listening to the car radio on your way to work doesn’t count. Nor do rock or rap music. It’s best if the music doesn’t have words, as words tend to distract you into thinking. Sit quietly for a bit; just listen.

Watch a Sunrise: Once a week, find a place you love and watch the sun rise. This ritual not only breaks your everyday routine but it also opens you to the regular celebration of new beginnings as well as an awareness of the continual rhythms in nature. There’s a reason that, for millennia, human rituals have included sunrise. Ideally, you’ll find a place to which you return each week, thereby gaining an awareness of seasonal rhythms as well. By the way, it doesn’t count to watch the sun rise from traffic on your way to work, nor on your way home from an all-night party.

Have Fresh Flowers in Your Home: Pick or buy flowers for your home regularly. Flowers not only touch emotions, they also remind you of the fragility and impermanence of all of life’s phenomena, inviting you to appreciate and be present for each moment. Thank them for their gifts – beauty, fragrance, connection, rhythms, this moment. Native Hawaiians celebrate flowers as a metaphor for life – we are here for only a brief moment; there’s no time for anything but love. When it’s time to part with your flowers, “*honi ka ua,*” as Hawaiians say; “kiss them.” Say thank you.

Eat Healthfully: How you treat your body is a reflection of how you view life and the possibility it holds. Figure out what “healthfully” means for you, (there are plenty of good sources, and each of us is different), then make it practice to honor your body with good nutrition. Your body is your vehicle for the work you do in the world.

Say “No”: Under the guise of old lessons about “being nice,” we’ve learned to say “yes” to things in life that really don’t serve us well – friends who aren’t friends, family that isn’t family, managers who are less than human, tradition, duty, obligation, and even things we do just because others do them. Learn to say “no.” OK, say “no, thank you.” Make “no” one of your best friends. Reserve “yes” for choices that take you where you want to go in life, not down another dead-end street (or relationship). Be vigilant here. Learning to say “no” is a way to learn the value of personal authenticity over social acceptance.

Build or Join a Community: Communities are groups of individuals united by a common thread. The thread may be love, friendship, a mission, a passion, faith, mutual support, common inspiration, or family. Healthy communities energize both the individual and the collective. As you connect with others, be aware of how the community moves you forward, and how your presence helps move the community toward a shared vision of the future. Be connected. (Note: be wary here of communities designed around the common thread of complaint, or the question “what’s wrong?” To immerse yourself in negative energy is the opposite of the kind of community that inspires self-care.)

Simplify Your Life: Creating space in your outer world creates more space in your inner world, space for *you* to grow. It’s like “quiet time” for your outer world! Clean up your “*stuff*,” you likely have far more than you need. Clean up your *time*; get a sense of what matters most to you and hire out the rest. Clean up your *relationships*; keep the ones that serve you. Clean up your *finances*; pay cash (or at least know where it’s all going!) List all of life’s *complications*; you may have hundreds; kill one each week.

Find Patterns: The meaning your life holds is not found in its events, but in the patterns those events create over the course of time. It’s not often easy to be aware of life’s patterns. First, you may get so caught up in each event that you fail to notice. Second, patterns operate over periods of time that defy noticing, or with a rhythm so subtle that it may escape your diffuse awareness. Step back from each event; see if you can discover the pattern(s) of which the event is a part. Stepping back also releases you from judgment, as you see life’s events with greater objectivity and clarity. Nature’s rhythms are her source of renewal – tides, seasons, days, volcanics, weather. Without rhythms, there’d be nothing new.

Adopt a Sport or Hobby: Any regular “activity,” such as playing a sport or engaging in a hobby, connects you with parts of yourself other than your rational mind. If it’s something you truly love, it may connect you with heart, soul and spirit. It may connect you with your body, and the activity may be done in relationship with others. Your mind may come into play, but in a sport or hobby, the mind is in service of the activity, not in service of itself.

Have Some Fun: Fun is part of life. When was the last time you had any? Here’s an idea: do something outrageously fun for yourself for less than \$20. It’s a great way to discover aspects of your inner truth. Only you know what would be “outrageously fun” for you. But in the doing of it, you open yourself to your childlike innocence and wonder.

Clear Up the Past: Make peace with one person from the past. Most of us have at least one person with whom we continue to feel tension, upset, guilt, resentment or even anger. Time to make peace. Although it would help to connect with the other person, it’s not required. This is not about making the other person (or you) wrong; it’s about letting go of the energy drain you experience by carrying around negative emotions. You’re only one *thought* away from peace. A new thought might be that you choose to release yourself from any judgment whatsoever about the other person. And the other person need not go along, be present, or even know. Forgiveness is about you, not them.

Assume Personal Responsibility: What if, instead of making yourself or others wrong, taking things personally, worrying about how others see you, and even taking yourself so seriously, you instead chose to take full responsibility for the life you’re creating? Taking personal responsibility is not about the judgments of blame or fault. It’s about consciously accepting that because you are part of all you touch, you can exercise personal responsibility for how it all goes. You will not “control every outcome;” that, too, is another fallacy. You do, however, control the choices you make in life as to how you respond to life, how you relate to others, and who you choose to be, even in times of trial.

Take a risk: Life is uncertain. Despite all our old lessons to avoid mistakes, to look good, and to be concerned about what others think, we have little control over those things. What if, just as an experiment, you could hold those fears in abeyance for a day and try something you see as risky. If it’s an experiment, it wouldn’t even matter if it went wrong. Yet the big question isn’t, “what if it didn’t work?” but “what if it *did*?” Think of something you’ve both always wanted and always feared. Do it. You only *think* you control what happens in life. You control only how you *respond* to life. Let go of the fight. Experience what is, and live the *process* of life. Labeling something as a game or as an experiment gives your mind the freedom to “try it anyway.” Yet the *felt experience* of it is real, and herein lies its potential.

Adopt a Culture of Learning: What if life were more about learning than about achieving? What if mistakes were about learning, not about failing? What if emotions were teachers? What if stress were a signal and not a problem? Each of us tends unconsciously to see life through a *prevailing question*. In your practices to date, you may have already discovered this. For many, the question is of the form, “what’s wrong?” When we see this way, the world becomes a problem to be solved. If instead we *chose* a new question, perhaps “what can I *learn* here?,” possibility would open instantly. When you *look* for possibility instead of a problem, you *find* possibility instead of a problem! As you notice your own prevailing question in any of life’s situations, see if you can consciously choose a new one. As you do, you begin to see your life as a learning opportunity instead of a problem. A few “possibility” questions as companions on your journey: What’s the greatest potential this situation holds for me? How many “right” answers might I find in this situation? How might I respond to life from the perspective of my own truth? How does my life go when I listen to my intuition and heart, compared to how my life goes when I listen to the voices in my head?

Stop Wanting So Much: The energy fueling your life is very likely the energy of *wanting*. It’s how most of us were brought up. we’re taught *having* more is key to being happy. As you go through your day, stop now and then to notice your “wanting.” Just notice; no need to fight it off. You’ll soon begin to see how much you already have, the person you already are, and the energy you create just by being that person. *Noticing* is the beginning of letting go of wanting. I heard this once stated this way: We learn we need to *have* stuff in order to *do* stuff in order to *be* something or somebody (or happy). It’s really the other way around. When we can *be* someone (or happy) then we can *do* just about anything which lets us *have* all we want. *Have/do/be* transforms into *be/do/have*. Be someone, maybe who you really are!

Feel the Feelings: No matter how much emphasis you place on creating a positive tomorrow, feelings about the past will resurface. I include this topic so you may begin honoring your feelings constructively, as an act of self-care, and not, as is so common, either become *consumed* by them or *deny* them altogether. It’s also a wonderful exercise in self-awareness, key to all the practices here. You may do this exercise any time you notice a feeling creeping into your life in an uncomfortable way (guilt, shame, worry, anger, resentment, anxiety, dread, etc.). Feelings take you back to the place where the unresolved stuff of life has taken up residence in your body. Here’s a path out. It depends on first seeing this as a recurring pattern, not just a one-time event. Now you can act on the *pattern*, not the *event* itself. Whenever you have an uncomfortable feeling, stop ... then:

- *Feel* the feeling; don’t hide from it; don’t think; don’t try to deny or change anything; just notice the feeling.
- Discover where in your *body* the feeling shows up. Name where.
- Ask (and listen for an answer) *when* you felt this same feeling last. (Not the last time the same event occurred, but the last time the same *feeling* showed up in your body the same way)
- Ask what that feeling *reminds* you of (perhaps the first time, somewhere in the distant past, when that same feeling occurred – note again that it didn’t have to be a result of the same event at all).
- Go back to that time. Replay the events and feelings of that first time. Discover what was happening for you that may have cemented inside you the reason you hide from the feeling today. Allow yourself to *feel* this.
- Now, name the *thought* that holds this feeling together *in the present*. Most feelings such as these are manifestations of thoughts. For many of life’s “uneasy” feelings, the thought that created them centers on some version of “I’m not good enough.” You might then ask if you have hard evidence today that this thought is true ... today. (Clue: It isn’t.)

Look in the Mirror: We generally don’t like looking at ourselves in the mirror. It may be a manifestation of the “I’m not good enough” story from the practice above. Once you know you *are* good enough, however, it is easier to learn to celebrate the “you” that brought you to this point, the “you” you are today, and the “you” you continue to become. Invite him or her along for the next chapter of your journey. Say, “Thank you.” Say, “I love you.”

Create a Ritual: Last, but certainly not least, create your own practice, in the form of a personal ritual that has meaning and significance to you. It doesn’t matter whether it’s big or small, or what its frequency is. It could be very simple: always say “thank you” for everything. It could be more detailed: design a personal “altar” with candles and objects that hold meaning for you and then be in its presence, in reverent silence, for a few minutes each day. It could be big: go to Hawaii every year to absorb its life-giving energy. Only you know what offers meaning for you. If you don’t know, one of the other “quiet space” practices will evoke something for you as you do it. Listen to its message and follow where it may lead. You will know what to do when you get there. Personal rituals create solid places to stand in the midst of a world that would appear determined to knock you off your feet.

Benefits

Despite the bad rap that quiet self-reflection and self-care may have in our world, their benefits are huge. You'll find that the regular practice of 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 generally 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 and of this moment)
- allows you to trace those thoughts back to the often-unconscious beliefs that created them (which frees you from their constricting grasp)
- 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
- reconnects you with your deepest longing (an experience that exists in the *depth* of each moment, not in a race to get to the next one)
- opens you to *felt experience*, the most valid "way of knowing" there is (as opposed to our more common, rational-only way of knowing)
- connects you with your authentic self, as well as with your 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

And a reminder: We are multi-dimensional beings: *mental, physical, emotional, relational, soulful, spiritual*, at the same time. Living fully means experiencing life in *all six* dimensions. Although the inner self wants balance among these, lessons from the external world tell us to rely more on the mental dimension (know/try/do). We pay a price for listening, however. The other dimensions thrive on quiet reflection, noticeably absent from our lives. Yet in those dimensions 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:

Mental: the thinking mind, intellect, reason, cognitive understanding. Your mind wants creative stimulation, which can be found in reading, learning, writing, problem solving, managing life's affairs, envisioning a positive future, personal awareness and self-observation.

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, giving to and receiving from others, and in connecting more deeply with the emotional reality of others (empathy and compassion).

Physical: the body wants to be vigorous and healthy; it's the vehicle for doing your work in the world. Your body is a source of great wisdom; it stores all of your memories in its cells. You open yourself to this wisdom by listening to it, and by taking good care of it, through exercise, nutrition, and offering a healthy environment for it to live in.

Relational: humans thrive on a sense of belonging, not only on the connection with others, but also on the energy of the collaborative – community. 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 both give and receive.

Soulful: your soul represents the depth of your uniqueness, seat of your creative essence, your life purpose. The soul wants to express this uniqueness as the driving force in your life (if only your head would stop saying 'no'). Because the soul speaks indirectly, you need create both space and ways of listening that allow you to make the connection.

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. Spiritual connection is also subtle, rarely showing up in either the rational mind or in the midst of life's noise. The natural world is perhaps the best backdrop for opening and experiencing this connection.