

Self-Care: Completing the Circle

I rarely book-browse in retail stores – I prefer Amazon Prime if I have a purpose or a vintage bookseller if I have none. But I found myself on the losing end of a battle with writer’s block last Sunday, and decided to scout for ideas in Barnes and Noble before conceding total defeat. I’d barely cleared the shoplifting detectors when I was flanked with shrines to self-care. Instructive manuals such as *Wellness Coaching for Lasting Lifestyle Change*, and *Self-Care: How to Live Mindfully and Look After Yourself* considered me from the right. Anthologies of yoga asanas rose serenely to my left.

It’s no secret that upper-middle class Americans have become increasingly interested in self-care over the past few years, but I was still surprised at the extent to which the nation’s largest bookseller was hawking expert opinions on the subject. When I flipped open my laptop to search “self-care” on Amazon Books a couple of hours later, I scored over 1,000 entries. (“Mindfulness” and “yoga” each registered more than 40,000.) The *New York Times*, also eager to supply opinions, recently polled its staff on their self-care recommendations. Answers ranged from the predictable (long walks), to the unusual (aerial yoga), to the bizarre (reiki – i.e. burping – therapy). I myself have practiced yoga and mindfulness for years, so I had no anti-wellness ax to grind the morning I browsed Barnes and Noble. And yet I found myself asking, *What’s the big deal with self-care? And if we’re caring for ourselves, why do we need so many experts?*

Health might be one significant factor that contributes to our fixation on self-care. We’re inundated with statistics about the rise of anxiety and depression – not just among adults but also among teens and children – and some studies now suggest wellness practices such as

mindfulness and yoga are at least supplemental antidotes for these disorders. I, too, adopted these self-care practices to improve my health, albeit not my mental health. Yoga is essential to my physical fitness as a stroke survivor, and mindfulness is an effective alternative to traditional pain management for my other neurological conditions. But I suspect that what draws many of us to these and other wellness practices is not so much clinical data as much as it is our universal drive to survive. “Survival of the fittest” has been drilled into our heads since grade school, and how are we to survive if we aren’t, well, fit? It only follows that we pursue what we believe – or have been taught to believe – will make us fit. Caring for ourselves seems like a natural selection.

But if survival is an innate human instinct, and caring for ourselves is the obvious key to survival, do we really need thousands of books on the subject? Most people living outside the First World will never read our self-care bestsellers, yet their countries run no risk of extinction – at least from lack of access to commercial wellness resources. On the contrary, human society has functioned for millennia without organized self-care. People trusted their mind-body signals and followed them if they were accorded that luxury. If they lacked the privilege of rest and recreation, they improvised other means of survival.

So here is where the breakdown occurs, at least in my mind. Self-care is a relatively new movement, even for mainstream Americans. For most of the twentieth century, “self-care” was a medical term for teaching self-agency to trauma victims, the mentally ill, and nursing home residents. *Slate’s* Aisha Harris reports the term did not begin shifting paradigms until shortly after the civil rights movement, when minority women adopted it as a political statement to describe their rebellion against traditional hierarchies. The twenty-first century saw self-care

spread to disabled and holistic wellness communities, but it was not until after the politically-fraught 2016 that it attracted national attention with its potential to improve our mental health, sabotage traditional hierarchies, or both. Or, I might submit, it simply seduced us to join a movement that sounded really nice, since most of us don't realize where the term "self-care" came from. We've just been sold on its widespread definition: if we don't spend less time caring for others and more caring for ourselves, we're probably forfeiting our best lives. The *New York Times* recently released an article in its Self-Care section entitled "'I Quit': 20 People Who Walked Away from Their Jobs, Their Religion, Their Relationships, and Even This Assignment." The article began with the words "Is there a more tantalizing two-word phrase than 'I quit'?" While the piece highlighted an undeniably helpful truth – overextending ourselves is harmful – it also epitomized concerning aspects of a potentially positive movement. First, "I quit" highlights the risky proximity between self-care and egocentricity. Second, the fact that the *Times* devotes an entire section to self-care, combined with the number of books, podcasts, blogs posts, and magazine articles on the subject, suggests we are not naturally qualified to care for ourselves.

Yet the question remains: why *do* we need experts teaching us a skill that, according to science, should be intuitive? Perhaps we crave outside opinions because we doubt ourselves. As much as educational, economic, and technological progress has benefited our nation, it may have also convinced us that we are inept unless we are experts. When it comes to self-care, can we be sure we really understand our needs without some sort of life coach? And so, rather than listening to our minds and bodies like our grandparents did and the rest of the non-privileged world still does, we subscribe to the latest podcasts, scrutinize the *best* bestseller lists, then toss out the last self-care book that left us underwhelmed. Expert opinions are essential whenever

mental health is at stake, but much of modern self-care focuses on lifestyle enhancement rather than medical intervention. The rapid turnover rate of our non-medical wellness resources also suggests that much of modern self-care may be missing the mark.

My grandfather was a gruffly stubborn Southerner who despised the word “no” – unless he was applying it to others. He’d certainly never heard of self-care. Papa married my grandmother in Savannah, Georgia, when they were both teenagers, three days before he was stationed in Colorado for basic training during WWII. He spent the war performing specialty operations as a ski trooper in Italy; when he returned, he had three kids with his (formerly) new bride and worked for the Atlantic Coast Line railroad until he retired. Mental health was not discussed back then, and he never mentioned the war. When my grandmother had a stroke and developed Parkinson’s in their early seventies, he cared for her until he couldn’t lift or clean her himself, then sat by her nursing home bed every day until she died. I can’t remember hearing him tell her “I love you,” but the number of times he shouted at barely delinquent nurses said more than enough.

Papa showed rather than told. He loved my grandmother by caring for her for a decade without taking a single day off. He might have struggled to say “I love you,” but he would have never dreamed of saying “I quit.” I think about my grandfather a lot, not only because he’s my grandfather, but also because he represents the kind of self-giving that most of us accepted as a matter of course until 2016, and that many who are underprivileged still accept. It used to be that when your loved ones needed you, you gave them all you had. Except now we’re told we have another choice besides investing wholeheartedly in others: we should invest wholeheartedly in

ourselves first. Papa would have growled that he knew better than some fancy expert, however. I can hear the echoes of his combative “NO!” even now.

My mom is her father’s caregiving daughter, even if she’s much less apt to shout the word “no” at offenders. She also represents the “Sandwich Generation,” or the generation who cares for both their parents and their kids simultaneously. But Mom is too old to be in the “Sandwich Generation.” The blog posts and magazine articles I found assumed the Sandwich Generation was made up of older Millennials who were caring for aging Baby Boomers plus their own kids. The problem is that Mom is herself a Baby Boomer. She spent my elementary through high school years helping my grandparents until they passed away. While my and my sister’s college careers brought her a brief reprieve from full-time parenting, my own accident restarted her role as a caregiver. Caring for aging parents is temporary. Caring for a disabled child is not.

But Mom is still Papa’s daughter. She gets weekends off since my husband is home from work, but she never begs off during the week. Unlike Papa, she’s well aware that self-care exists, but I can’t help noticing that her pastimes (think cooking and shopping) radiate outward instead of drawing inward. How many adorable outfits magically appear in my closet? Why do so many of her gourmet meal experiments end up on my table? Mom’s only activity that almost fits the post-2016 definition of “self-care” is traveling. She loves to travel, and she and my dad have gone to Europe every year since my wedding. I was afraid they’d eliminate the tradition after my accident, but our family has ensured they maintain at least that part of their lives – even if the rest of us have to execute some rather intricate maneuvers while they’re gone. Mom is much less likely than Papa to shout “No!” and much more likely to say “I love you,” but they’re identical on one point. They’d absolutely never say “I quit.”

The extent to which Papa and Mom contradict much self-care expertise runs deeper than their refusal to say “I quit,” however. While they do practice healthy habits like limiting extraneous activities, they’ve succeeded at caring for others as much – or more – than they care for themselves. Papa managed his stress before the advent of self-care, although between his experiences a veteran and his decade as a full-time caregiver, I can’t think of many who would warrant even a basic wellness education more. Mom is one of the harried “Sandwich Generation” caregivers that are periodically consoled in op-eds and parenting columns – except she’s a generation older, and thus even more likely to burn out. But I don’t believe their secret to wellbeing is that they’re intrinsically better than the rest of us (anger is a regrettable family trait). I also don’t believe they’ve resigned themselves to the protracted martyrdom some self-care experts warn will be ours when we pour too much into others and not enough into ourselves. No. I believe Papa and Mom trust themselves to identify and meet their individual needs. I also believe they’ve internalized a timeless self-care message.

“I’m *so* sorry for all this!” I often over-apologize when Mom’s orchestrated something special but my health quashes her plans at the last minute. She’d devoted that particular morning to boiling eggs, baking sweet potatoes, roasting hazelnuts, and toasting slices of baguette so we could enjoy a healthy “girls’ lunch” together. Unfortunately, I become hypersensitive to noise depending on my level of neurological pain, and I quickly discovered I couldn’t stand hearing her chew the “crunchy” salad next to me.

“That’s okay, honey, don’t you worry about it at all.” She donned her most accommodating, Southern smile and carried her plate to the other side of the kitchen – fifteen

feet away. We finished our salads wordlessly, even though I knew she'd spent an hour fussing over lunch with the express hope of "catching up."

"I'm *so* sorry," I repeated. "I know you put a lot of effort into this. You always put a ton of effort into what you do for me. And then things just get messed up." She started to repeat her "It's okay" spiel, but I kept going. "You've got to be so exhausted...I mean, this is all you've been doing for three years. And I know you travel and cook, and stuff, but look at what happens, even when you make lunch."

"It's not what you think," she replied, smoothing back her blond curls. They were frizzed and crackly from bending over the hot stove all morning. "*You're* giving something to *me*, and that keeps me going. There's great joy in giving. Don't you remember, 'It's more blessed to give than to receive?' By letting me help you, give something to you, you're blessing me in return. It's like a big circle."

And I wonder if that is why there's a plethora of self-care books on the market.

If we narrow "self-care" to mean prioritizing only ourselves, have we created a black hole? Watching Papa and Mom makes me suspect they understand what our self-care culture has missed. Specialists are imperative wherever mental health is concerned, but many of our popular wellness experts seem to be marketing fad opinions as replacements for traditional wisdom and our now-shaky intuition. "It's more blessed to give than to receive" is millennia old and less titillating than the newest bestseller, but it's also sustained generations of humanity, while I'm already wondering which new titles will replace those on this month's "Featured Books" display. I practice mindfulness and yoga daily since I've learned they nurture *my* wellbeing. But I'm also becoming a firm believer that the most fulfilling – and lasting – self-care involves investing in

others as well as knowing and trusting myself. At the very least, I suspect it lies outside the next one-size-fits-all happiness prescription.

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Their Relationships, and Even This Assignment.” Retrieved from:

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