

June 9, 2010 Open Mic Recap: Ten Ways to Take Care of Yourself

Headline News: A small group of us engaged in a rich conversation about self-care, church services that “nourish me like visiting grandma,” a useful vocabulary for emotions, and more. Two factors contributed to the depth and richness of this edition of OM : (a) a simplified plan for the hour (a centering meditation; a definition of self-care; and a list of “Top Ten Strategic Areas for Self-Care) and (b) the small number of callers. The “less-is-more” design and the cozy group size seemed to stimulate deeper conversational connection and intimacy. Read on, and plan on joining us on **Wednesday, June 23 at 5:00 p.m. eastern time**, for the next edition of Open Mic.

Recap:

A Centering Moment: I invited participants to experience a minute or two of close-eyed breath meditation (none of the callers was operating a vehicle or heavy machinery at the time); while they were following the in- and out-breath, I invited them to listen as I read aloud Chapter 15 of the Tao te Ching (<http://www.edepot.com/tao4.html>):

The ancient Masters were profound and subtle.
Their wisdom was unfathomable.
There is no way to describe it;
all we can describe is their appearance.

They were careful
as someone crossing an iced-over stream.
Alert as a warrior in enemy territory.
Courteous as a guest.
Fluid as melting ice.
Shapable as a block of wood.
Receptive as a valley.
Clear as a glass of water.

Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?

The Master doesn't seek fulfillment.
Not seeking, not expecting,
she is present, and can welcome all things.

Afterwards, I explained that having “the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear” has long seemed to me a key to being present, discerning what we need, and taking “right action.” Which sounds like good self-care, but not at the expense of anyone else. One participant said that the “mud” passage is her favorite part of that chapter, and explained that owning one’s “mud” leads to clarity – not just for ourselves but for everyone else in the situation. Another OM'er noted that lately, she has been making more mindful use of the short time interval between client appointments; she's learned to allow any anxiety about the upcoming

client interaction to “settle”; when she does so, she senses the tension moving from her head and neck downward, and eventually exiting her body. Very cool process!

Defining Self-Care I offered this definition (which I had introduced during the May 26 Open Mic): *“Practices and habits that keep you stable, functional (performing well), feeling reasonably good (“well-being”), and growing and developing.”*

One caller remarked that taking care of oneself seems to involve a balancing act between acts of commission and omission. “It’s a matter of (a) reducing the excessive practices (‘commission),’ e.g., over-eating and over-thinking, and (b) increasing the frequency of acts which nourish us, which we may have been ‘omitting’ (such as feeding our spiritual hunger, spending time with nourishing family and friends, etc.). Her personal example of ‘commission’ was over-indulging her appetite for attending professional development events; her recent example of self-nourishment was attending “a cute little church service” which re-connected her with her roots, and reminded her of how she’d felt when visiting with her grandmother (i.e., “remembering where I came from”).

A second participant shared a recent self-care event, consisting of her taking a class “compassionate communication” at a local church. The class has provided her with a new and useful vocabulary about feelings and emotions. She noted that attending the class was “one of the smartest things I’ve done for myself in the last couple of years.” (Check out www.cnvc.org/ for an intro to the approach known as Non-violent Communication, or NVC, which was pioneered by Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D. Like Altoid™ Mints, it’s “Curiously Powerful.” One feature of NVC is learning to take responsibility for one’s emotions in a non-blaming way. Check out the difference between “I’m feeling anger” and “You’re making me angry.”)

The Top Ten Areas for Great Self-care I introduced ten areas which I believe offer the greatest leverage for increasing our ability to survive, perform, thrive, and develop. Rather than speaking at length about each, I went down the list, briefly noting why this area earned a place in the Top Ten. Here they are:

1. Minding the Machine (aka: the Body)
2. Tending the Soul (e.g., prayer, meditation, time in nature, etc.)
3. Family/Intimate time
4. Savor the treasures of this moment
5. Invest in your communities
6. Practice gratitude
7. Cultivate “Realistic Optimism”
8. Straighten out your thinking
9. Watch your Ratio (of Pos: Neg emotions, thoughts, behaviors, etc.)
10. Have an inspiring life purpose

One participant quickly noted that, if #2, *Tending the Soul*, were placed ninth, the list would be “an inverted Maslow hierarchy” (i.e., the Maslow pyramid has Self-actualization at the top and safety needs at the bottom, with physiological and other needs following). See <http://www.umsl.edu/services/ctl/DEID/destination2adultlearning/largehierarchy.html>.)

I’d never noted the pattern in the strategic areas as I was developing the list, so this was a new and fascinating insight for me. She explained that “as a person of faith (she’s a pastoral counselor), my life purpose, my faith, is more basic to my survival and safety than anything else.”

I was further fascinated to observe that that, presenting the ten areas with minimal elaboration seemed to set people’s wheels in motion.

- One participant realized, for example, had a real “A-ha Moment” – she’s let her “ratio” of positive-to-negative slide towards the negative and “It’s not allowing me to let go of things.” She finds it hard to shake the aftertaste of a negative situation for a couple of hours; she now sees that she’s been feeding her negativity, which has kept the bitter aftertaste alive. She resolved to be more mindful in such situations, and challenge her negative construction and “instant replays.” (In the May 26 Recap, I offered this link in Positive Psychology News Daily to a very good article on how to challenge such thinking: <http://positivepsychologynews.com/news/nicholas-hall/20070606273>)
- We also discussed another practice: allowing herself to experience the negative emotions in her body, without either feeding herself stories about them or seeking to substitute a more constructive thought about them; in other words, to “let the thoughts go, and let the feelings be” (a technique which is a cornerstone of the EVOKE process of life planning; see *Lighting the Torch*, by George Kinder and Susan Galvan, www.kinderinstitute.com).
- A third practice is to literally work on the ratio; as another caller said so insightfully, “If the negative is real and immovable (e.g., if there is a serious illness), then work on increasing the numerator (i.e., add more positives in your life, such as savoring what we do have, surrounding ourselves with nurturing people, and the like) while also limiting our negative thinking” (so as not to add to the denominator term). We also discussed other ways to work the ratio. For example, ramping up our **curiosity** (“I wonder what they might be thinking, if they’re behaving that way and saying those things”) instead of feeding our reactivity or “**judgmental mind**” (“What are they *THINKING?!?*”) A great resource for this practice is the Choice Map, developed by Marilee Adams, Ph.D. (www.inquiryinstitute.com.) Check it out, and print off a copy for yourself.

Note to OM Readers: Here are some suggested uses of the Top Ten list.

1. As you read each entry, rate yourself on how often, and how effectively, you engage in this area. (You can use a simple 1 – 5 scale, with 5 being “Very often” and 1 being “Very seldom.”) For areas where you give yourself a 1, 2, or 3, ask yourself (a) what you could do to ramp up your engagement in this area, and (b) what would be the projected ROI for your investment of time and attention in that way?
2. Are there additional areas that do not appear among the Top Ten? (There’s nothing sacrosanct about “Top Ten,” unless you’re David Letterman.) If so, send me an email with your additions. No reasonable offers refused.

3. If your response to the name of a certain area is "*Huh?! What's that?*" write and let me know. Maybe we'll devote part of an upcoming Open Mic to it. (Anyone up for a conversation about Realistic Optimism, or Watching Your Ratio?)

Coming Attraction: Next Open Mic is **Wednesday, June 23 at 5:00 p.m. eastern time**. Join us for (a) conversation about whatever burning question or luke-warm curiosity is your mind, (b) to find community and authenticity during a busy workday, and (c) find out how to think like a "Realistic Optimist." See you then! **1-219-509-8322, passcode 202779#**.