

Assuring Psychological Endurance and Physical Safety: The Marriage of an “Emotional Sense of Direction” and Personalized Self-Care Strategies

By SaraKay Smullens

In 1962, I was one of several regional coordinators for the Young Democrats. For special events, I was assigned work at the White House. During these periods, President Kennedy suggested social work as a profession, and guided me toward Catholic U. The president was assassinated early in my first year. Soon after, I impulsively married a Penn graduate student and transferred to Penn to complete my degree.

My field placement was the Philadelphia Society to Protect Children, where I learned from an extraordinary, committed rainbow coalition of social workers how to inspire abusive and neglectful parents toward hope and change. As a student, although I had no idea why, my body began to erupt with large, painful blisters. Following a year of post-graduate employment, I withdrew from a practice important to me, seeking refuge from both the blisters and their cause, but promising myself that someday I would return. Leaving caused an end to the blisters, but not the answer to what was being touched in me that caused them.

Finding the courage to face what was necessary would take several years. It followed the birth of two precious daughters, a divorce always under threat of contest, a new marriage, and a blended family. Eventually I was able to keep my promise and return to work – blister free – a commitment that existed side by side with my clinical practice for almost 20 years. By this time, however, a majority of the devoted mentors and colleagues I had known had left practice. When I contacted them, I was told by each that they were “burned the hell out” by many factors.

Their candor led me to think deeply about three primary causes of burnout: compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and countertransference, which I interpret as dealing with impossible people and impossible situations. One question has continued to plague me: Since self-care is widely recognized as an effective way to address and prevent burnout, why are so many of us not using available choices with consistency, continuing to put our own needs last?

In terms of physical care, why aren't we getting enough sleep, eating healthily and taking better care of ourselves, including times to relax, have fun, and think creatively? In terms of professional care, why aren't we more readily speaking up together about the necessity of safety, effective supervision, mentoring, and opportunities to continue to learn? Yes, the threat of job loss for speaking up is real. However, if we speak up as one profession, we can help to protect all of us. In our social and intimate relationships, although we knew that certain behaviors and attitudes deplete us, why are we not making necessary changes?

As I see it, here are the “whys.”

1. The Care aspects of Self-Care have been thoroughly addressed. However, there has been little concentration on each unique Self and a realization that what will work for a

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A few months ago, I was asked to present for three hours to a small group of clinicians, psychodramatists, and students at the Delaware Valley Regional Meeting of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama. I agreed, having no idea what I would present about. Over the next few weeks, I paid close attention to my work, noticing any themes that emerged and tried to simplify what it is that I do as a social worker and trauma treatment specialist. After some thought and conscious observation, it became clear. On the most fundamental level, I simply help people remember their goodness.

My work is primarily with people who have experienced significant trauma, loss, and addiction. I spend time with people in their woundedness every day and help them develop and/or connect to their strengths, their support, and their transformative process. Through the experience of loss, trauma, and addiction, it is easy for us to forget about our goodness, or feel like it was lost, or even taken from us.

I knew that this was the theme that I would present on, and realizing that I would be presenting to professionals, not clients, I knew I had to refocus it to my audience. In psychodrama training, we teach and learn experientially - by doing rather than talking about it. My intention for the workshop was to create a space where we, as professionals, could remember our own goodness. How can we help others remember their goodness if we haven't connected to our own?

As social workers, working with people impacted by tragedy, crisis, and structural violence, it is easy for us to become burnt out or lose touch with our inner goodness. Sometimes it may feel like we have given it all away to our clients - they need it more than we do anyways right? Nevertheless, without our connection to inner strengths, interpersonal support, and something greater than ourselves (spirituality, a vision, social justice, etc.) we are limited in what we can offer the world. I have come to believe that taking care of ourselves, and continuing to do our own personal growth work, is the single most important habit for a social worker to develop.

Humility is often defined as having an honest and accurate appraisal of one's self, which includes owning both our strengths and our vulnerabilities. So, what are the internal strengths that you bring with you each time you enter your office?

At times, I have found it helpful to concretize a strength as a creative way of increasing my awareness of it. This is as simple as choosing an object in the room to represent a strength such as *compassion*, and placing the object where I can be reminded of my compassion for my client and myself each time my eyes land on this object. On the other hand, putting a small object in my pocket that represents *courage* just before I go on stage to give a lecture to a large audience. A small white ribbon tied to my name badge that I see every time I use my badge represents my spiritual connection.

Interpersonal connections are essential for healthy functioning; we tell all of our clients this. However, how often are we in relationships where we are not in a *helping role*? Are we in regular supervision, our own therapy, fulfilling our spiritual needs, seeking out mentors, spending time with friends or supportive family, and in general allowing ourselves to be nurtured too?

Some of us may draw upon transpersonal (beyond human) strength from participation in a religion or spiritual practice, while others may experience the transpersonal in art, music, nature, or a vision greater than ourselves. What vision guides your work? How do you keep your spirit alive?

I often tell clients that "acknowledging our strengths is just as important as acknowledging our wounds". Through the role of a social worker, we are often exposed tremendous woundedness, which at times mirrors our own suffering. Richard Rohr reminds us that if we don't transform our own pain, then we will transmit it to others. We see this all the time with our clients and in the world, and at the same time, we are not excluded from it.

So, let's practice what we preach, and be models of healthy living, self-care, and acknowledge all of the goodness around us and within us.