

Companions on the Way



Personal Development Resources

Self Care for Clergy



Self Guided Retreat

Introduction:

As Clergy and church workers we are all “Carers” among other things. Many of us also have other caring roles. At this strange period in history when we are all having to find new ways of caring for others and our selves while practicing physical distancing our caring roles may be strained and stretched even more than usual. This is a good time to review how we take care of ourselves.

At its core "caring" for others involves the experience of having our hearts outside our own bodies. This experience is essential to our development as spiritual beings. And as embodied human beings with finite energy and time we also need to be able to return to our own selves and take good care of ourselves. It is not a matter of either/or (either caring for others or caring for our selves) but both/and (we want to be able to both care for others and we want to take good care of ourselves).

This self guided retreat is designed to take place over three sessions on each of four days. If you can take a block of four days that is wonderful or you can take two and two or one day each week. I would encourage you to take at least whole days so that you can take the time and space to follow threads and allow your imagination and longing to lead you to new reflections and insights. Each day begins and ends with the practice of coming back to our sacred source and being replenished in the flow of God’s love that is our origin and our destination. This is intended to be a time of replenishment as well as work.

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We will also consider in simple practical ways what the demands on us are, how we discern what is for us to take on and what belongs to others, where we might find help mates and allies, and most importantly pay attention to ourselves and our own needs. We will explore simple and sometimes serious sometimes playful ways of looking after ourselves better - and letting others do some of that caring.

I encourage you to prepare. Firstly choose a day or days and a place where you think you will be uninterrupted. (If you need to be on call please divert your phone to someone else who can take messages and can find you in a real emergency). Get yourself a journal or at least blank sheets of paper in a folder, some pens, pencils and any other art materials that you enjoy. Get some nice picnic food for the day time. Allow at least from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. The actual sessions will take you 4 to 7 hours a day but you will want plenty of rest and refreshment time in between. If you are staying at home you will be free to join your family in the evening. If someone else can do the cooking that would be great.

If you have a spiritual director, supervisor, mentor, counsellor or particular friend it would be good to let them know what you are doing. While it is not my intention to pick apart your fragile coping mechanisms any deep work can stir and disturb. So just as I encourage you to choose a safe and sacred physical environment in which to work and replenish I also encourage you to choose some safe and sacred travelling companions.

Blessings, Sue

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Day One: You as a Carer of Others and One who is Cared for by God

Session One: Let us begin with you.

As Clergy and church workers we are, among many other things, carers of others. The old epitaph “Cure of Souls” can be in part translated Care of Souls. You are probably also carer of multiple buildings, insurance arrangements, safe church standards implementation, and responder to your communities’ pastoral needs small and large. Some of us will also be caring for others in many aspects of our life. Some of us are carers by personality type and have probably been in multiple caring roles for much of our lives. Others of us may have found ourselves in a particular stage of life in which we seem to have had caring roles thrust upon us.

Probably we are all a little overwhelmed and under nourished as a result of the call to care for others. We probably know that we “should” be caring for our self too as part of being well adjusted mature people. But self care so often gets put last on the list of endless tasks and by the time we get near it the thought of doing more, even for ourselves, can feel like a chore rather than nurturing!

Let me just say at this point that if I ruled the world then I would wave a wand, or make a royal decree, and reduce your stress, heal your relatives and/or parishioners, take some of your tasks away, get you more resources, and generally make your life easier. However I don't rule the world – I barely get to be in charge of my own life. So let me companion you for a little while as we seek to take a clear sighted look at your situation and try to identify what you can do to take better care of yourself (and where possible enlist some others in helping you).

While I am reluctant to make easy promises about guaranteeing improvements to your life we will go through a series of exercises that are aimed to help you get greater clarity about the demands on you as a carer, identify supports that you may be able to increase, and how to increase your self awareness so that you only take on those caring tasks that are really yours, and that you are able to choose greater

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balance as to what you give out and what you are open to receiving for your enjoyment and self care.

But the beginning and ending of our work together is stating in absolute terms that you are of infinite worth and completely loved as you are, for who you are, and not for what you do for others (although that is seen and valued by the One who sees all). You are worthy of being cared for not simply to keep you functioning as a carer for others but because YOU are precious and important, because you have been called into the fullness of life as well as the self emptying of service.

Opening Time of Prayer:

Make yourself comfortable in a quiet place.

Breathe deeply and naturally. No need to alter your breathing just be aware of it and occasionally sigh deeply and empty your lungs before taking a deep breath.

Visualise yourself entering a sacred space and time,
Maybe your usual worship area or a unique space.
You have come to be with your Lord.

As part of your preparation for this time of communion you are invited to light a candle for each person and concern that you carry in your heart.

You might like to visualise a sand tray and to light a votive candle for each person or concern saying as you light the candle: "Into your hands Lord I commend ... such and such" and then leave your connection and concern with the Lord knowing them to be safe and loved while you spend precious time enjoying your relationship with the divine. Each time a person or a concern comes into your mind simply light a candle for them and hand them over.

When you have named and handed over all the people and concerns that readily come to mind then return to awareness of your own breath and become quiet and still. Allow your needs and wants to be present. Spend five or more minutes just being in the presence of your Lord. And when you are ready consider the Blessing of the Whole Person:

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“God our Creator, you made each one of us in every part.
Bless us through and through, that we may delight to serve you to the full.
Bless our eyes, that we may discern the beauty you give.
Bless our ears, that we may hear you in the music of sounds.
Bless our sense of smell, that your fragrance may fill our being.
Bless our lips, that we may speak your truth, and sing your joy.
Bless our hands, that they may play, write and touch as you guide them.
Bless our feet, that they may be messengers of your peace.
Bless our imaginations, that we may be fired with wonder in your truth.
Bless our hearts, that they may be filled with your love.
Bless us through and through, that we may delight to serve you to the full,
through Jesus Christ, who took our nature to make us whole.
Amen.”

(A Prayer Book for Australia, Broughton Books, 1995, page 221)

Who and What do you Care for?

(allow 1.5 to 2.5 hours for this task and then plan a break)

Take a piece of paper and write down each caring role you are in. Make it detailed. You may want to give each person or role that you care for a circle and then add details. Or you may wish to do a mind map like a cross section of a tree and draw each person or task as a branch and then you can draw the details like sub branches. Or you can draw it like a village with all the people and roles in your family under your roof, and then all the people and roles under the church roof, etc. If all of these suggestions are too fussy just write lists. The beauty or otherwise of the art is not the task but rather getting an overview of how many people are in your heart and how many tasks demand your time and energy.

Start with your personal relationships. Do you have dependent children? Are you a single parent or the primary caregiver? Does your partner need care? Does a parent need your care and support? How many of these roles require daily care and how many are a few times a week? How many live under the same roof?

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Then list your ministry caring roles. Maybe your role is completely about caring. Break down the role and identify all the caring tasks and identify the roles that you find the most rewarding and those you find the most exhausting.

Some of you have a portfolio of jobs – part time parish priest and part time chaplain in an institution. Draw it all. Then list other community roles in which you are a carer. Maybe you coach your children's sports team. Maybe you volunteer or are a member of various community groups. You can decide how many of your roles are caring roles. And list any other caring roles that you fill. And you may need to come back to this from time to time.

No wonder you are motivated to consider increasing your self care!! The amount you do for those in your personal life and your community is amazing. No doubt such vital caring brings rewards into your life. But I imagine that it is also very costly to you – physically, financially, emotionally and socially.

I want you to honour yourself for the amount of caring you do. Not the amount of fixing, although I expect that is a lot, but the amount of caring you do. The holding of others in your heart, your carrying them around with you, the number of times a day you put others first. While I imagine that some see some of what you do (and some may even from time to time thank you or admire you for this) the enormity of caring cannot really be seen by any one other. Except by the One who sees all. Maybe this is part of what is meant by the phrase that occurs several times in Scripture especially related to prayer and good works "... and your Father in heaven sees ..."

I do not think the point of this is to find comfort in knowing that a judgemental God notices that we are doing some good things and adds that to the balance sheet but rather the divine source of all that was, is and will ever be, is a witness to our loving and struggling. Our caring for others is embraced by the One who cares for us. Everyone we care for is also cared for by God. Caring for others is one of the most sacred tasks there is because it is what God the Creator does for all of us. Which is also to say that sometimes we can pause in our caring and rest because it is not our task alone.

If you need a tea break please feel free to do so.

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Who and where does the energy come from and go to?

Not all caring roles or occasions are the same. I remember as a new mother that caring for this new precious being could make my eyes shine with joy and gratitude one minute and then I could be weeping with exhaustion and fear not long afterward. Few relationships are that intense but most of us know that caring can both bring us meaning and purpose, recognition and reward as well as exhausting us, isolating us, and costing us dearly.

Beside the names or drawings that you made earlier make a simple marking with +++ or --- or even stars as to whether this relationship or task brings you energy or takes energy away. (Use a different colour to the last session) It may of course do both. I remember in parish life that often people from the general community would want financial assistance on my days off. Sometimes it was a terrible drain of energy. At other times I felt energised by being able to help in such a practical and simple way.

You don't need to get this diagram exactly right. And what is accurate today may not be next week. The point of the exercise is more to map what relationships and roles are reciprocal, which ones are draining and if any are sources of energy and replenishment for you. I have had one or two parishioners who although I visited them in their frailty, supposedly with me as carer, I always left feeling that I had been given so much more than I had been able to give them. Other pastoral relationships were completely exhausting! You may well notice that there is a net drain on your energy even though you do receive some energy back in your caring roles. No judgement, just notice who and where you lose the most energy (however you define that) and where there is some reciprocity. You may want to keep adding to this drawing or making notes. Remember the purpose of this exercise is not necessarily to make you a better carer of others but to gather information that will help you better care for yourself.

It is time for a break. Put your drawings, writings to one side if you are in a shared space or if safe you can leave them where they are for now. We are going to pause for a change of pace – for a cup of coffee, for a walk, for some yoga or stretching. No church work – you are on retreat! Time for the heart and the body and the mind to rest and revive.

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Session Two: Who else shares in the Caring?

(allow 1.5 to 2.5 hours)

We are now going to revisit our drawing or diagram or list of our first session and looking at all the roles we are called to be carers in to look and see who else shares in our caring.

Using yet another colour pen or pencil write next to the names of those people and tasks you care for the name of others that are also involved in the task of caring. If you are a parent of a child that still needs care is the other parent involved, are grandparents or godparents or other responsible adults involved? In your caring role in your church or faith community are there others that are also responsible or interested in the same relationship or task? Both the formal co-carers such as Wardens and Licensed Lay Ministers and also the less formal roles that others perform.

You may find that in some relationships you are the only one responsible for caring. But in most relationships and roles you are likely to find that there are others who also care (or should care). These are the names of those who are your potential co-carers, colleagues, fellow travellers, help mates, and support network. Make note of those who are already very involved as co-carers and also notice those who are on the edge but not yet as fully involved as they could be, or you just don't know. And also notice those 'missing in action' who you think should be involved but don't seem to be. Some family members often seem to go missing when there is work to be done.

We are gathering this information because your willingness to lay some of your burdens to rest, to share some of your caring, and to take the occasional respite from your responsibilities may to some extent be linked to being able to identify others who can share in the caring.

Spend as long as you need and you can keep coming back. Remember this does not need to be complete rather it is an ongoing exercise in having an accurate picture of your life as a carer of others and gathering information that will help you become a better self carer.

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Who is there for you?

You probably need a clean sheet of paper by now. Now I want you to identify who is there for you. Some of these people will have been mentioned earlier as those you care for and as co-carers. Start with them. But there are hopefully others. Family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, fellow members of the faith community, social media contacts ... both “work” supports and personal or social supports.

Not all of them are equally available and supportive. Start with those, the inner circle if you like, of those who are the strongest supporters. I used to think in terms of those I could ring in the middle of the night if I needed to.

And then the next circle of those that you feel close to but with some reservation and slightly firmer boundaries. And then so on until you come to those you like but feel you couldn't ask too much of, or those who are mainly in your life for a good casual time rather than reliably there for your needs. There is still room in life for these delightful folk but you do need to know who you can call upon when and for what.

It is good to know who is there for you at short notice if you need someone for you, who will fill your cup when you are feeling empty. It is also good to identify interesting kind people you care about that you want in your life but maybe your relationship has never had to go beyond sharing the easy fun things yet. These may be the people who you can share some fun and light times with and who will increase your sense of liveliness even if they do not “do” serious too well. When I moved to a small country community I had to learn to be very clear about what level I could share with people. And then when I retired I had to revisit that list all over again. I enjoy all the people in my life but I need to be careful not to ask too much of those who want to keep things simple and cheerful. Neither do I need to deny myself the support and joy of the company of those who are available for more robust friendship and support.

As you go about thinking and writing these names down you might think of some people you haven't seen or spoken with for a while. So identify who you can make contact with for a coffee or a chat (as soon as social distancing restrictions are slowly lifted). Cultivate those you can talk to about the harder things with. And also

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cultivate those delightful relationships with folk who are good for having coffee with, going walking with or to the movies. We all need some light hearted friendships (not the same thing necessarily as light weight!). Sometimes what we most need is someone who brings the good times with them and rather than fixing whatever problems we have they can lighten our load simply by reminding us how to laugh and play and see the delightful.

You may be delighted by the number of those who are your supporters. You may also have identified gaps. I especially found when I moved to a country town that most of my personal supports were hundreds of kilometres away and while I could drink deeply of friendship and family support when I went to the city about once a month most of my other relationships were ones in which I was carer or potential carer. So don't be alarmed if your drawings have identified bottlenecks and spaces, overlays and unconnected parts.

When you have finished this exercise it is time for another break – maybe lunch or afternoon tea. Make this a good break in which you give yourself time and space to rest and refuel, to zone out and simply be a physical being – walk, work in the garden for a bit, do a load of washing if you have to (but only if you have the house to yourself and you can put on music and dance while you do it?!). Do and be rather than think for a little bit so no ministry work!!

Session Three: Identifying the Self Care Strategies already in Place

(allow 1 to 2 hours)

Now that you have sketched a lot of information about the who and what of your caring for others it is time to think about what you do, and others do for you, that is about care of you.

On a blank piece of paper write or draw how you care for yourself. Maybe it's a weekly coffee date, maybe you go walking in the morning or evening, maybe you get a massage once a month or your hair professionally looked after (when we are allowed contact with strangers again), or maybe you usually have a novel on the go

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and therefore somewhere exciting to escape to. Have a column of reliable things that you do or allow to have done for you. And then add those things that happen sometimes, especially any you started but have let lapse. For those that are infrequent or you have let lapse put a star next to those you would really like to have more of. What stops you? Money? Time? Just don't get around to it? No friends available to do it with?

All this writing and drawing is not about judgement but about information. Information about how things are now and the beginning of identifying what and how things might improve for you. On day two we are going to explore more about what caring means for you in terms of your identity. Then on day three we are going to circle around again and come back to all these drawings, diagrams and lists and look at what can be changed in your life that would result in better self care.

Whatever your reaction/s to the "pictures" of your life, honour yourself - the amount of caring you do, the complexity of your life, the depth and breadth of your connections, and even honour the gaps in your life for they may become the places of growth and replenishment.

However for now just sit with all your papers and sit with how you feel. Do you feel overwhelmed? Do you feel satisfaction? Maybe you can see some patterns and feel some excitement in anticipation of change. Maybe you can see an imbalance between the caring you do for others and the amount of care and support you get and this may lead you to feel sad, or hurt, or ashamed, even angry. Any and all feelings are ok, some are just more pleasant than others. And feelings are fleeting. You do not need to stay sad or anxious.

I encourage you to prepare for a time of Sabbath or sacred replenishment very soon – this week. Plan to go for a walk, or a coffee date, or get a chapter or two of your novel read, or whatever you can realistically do that will care for your self. If you can manage a whole uninterrupted day - wonderful. If you can only manage half a day – ok, we are going to work toward you enjoying a Sabbath day as our good Lord intends you to! And if you can only create an hour or two then take that and relish it (and we will work on increasing it).

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Meditation:

Finish your reflection and work today with a time of meditation. Return again to the sacred worship space that awaits you.

Visualise yourself entering this holy place in which there are all manner of God's gifts of creation – see, hear, feel, smell, taste ...

Hear also the whisper of your Lord.

" 'Come then, my love, my lovely one come.

For see, winter is past, the rains are over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth.

The season of glad songs has come, the cooing of the turtledove is heard in our land.

The fig tree is forming its first figs and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance.

Come then, my love, my lovely one, come.

My dove, hiding in the clefts of the rock, in the coverts of the cliff,
show me your face, let me hear your voice;

for your voice is sweet and your face is beautiful.' "

(The Song of Songs, chapter two verses 10 - 14, The Jerusalem Bible)

Know that the holy one longs for you, longs for you to spend time in delight.

Delight in your Lord and know that your beloved Lord delights in you.

Know that your divine beloved longs to restore you, feed you raisin cakes and figs fresh from the tree, longs to bathe you in flowing water, to comfort you with the touch of a gentle breeze, to cause you to swoon with the sound of birds and the scent of fruit and flowers.

Spend as long as you like in this sacred place and when it is time whisper "Amen" and come back to your daily life recreated by the knowledge that the beloved's banner over you is love and that you are your beloved's delight.

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Day Two: How is your Identity shaped by being a Carer of Others?

Session One: What did you learn about caring in your family of origin? (allow 1.5 to 2 hours)

Most of us learnt the basics of caring at our mother's breast and our father's knee. Much of that was probably good or good enough but some was probably not so helpful or downright harmful depending on how healthy and happy our childhoods were. As well as the events of our particular childhood are the stories of our families back through the generations and our ethnic and religious culture. Today we look at how our life, especially our early life, has prepared and shaped us for caring.

Opening Time of Prayer:

Make yourself comfortable in a quiet place.

Breathe deeply and naturally. No need to alter your breathing just be aware of it and occasionally sigh deeply and empty your lungs before taking a deep breath.

Visualise yourself entering a sacred space and time,
Maybe your usual worship area or a unique space.
You have come to be with your Lord.

As part of your preparation for this time of communion you are invited to light a candle for each person and concern that you carry in your heart. You might like to visualise a sand tray and to light a votive candle for each person or concern saying as you light the candle: "Into your hands Lord I commend ... such and such" and then leave your connection and concern with the Lord knowing them to be safe and loved while you spend precious time enjoying your relationship with the divine. Each time a person or a concern comes into your mind simply light a candle for them and hand them over.

When you have named and handed over all the people and concerns that readily come to mind then return to awareness of your own breath and become quiet and

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still. Allow your needs and wants to be present. Spend five or more minutes just being in the presence of your Lord. When you are ready pray:

“Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives:
give us discernment to hear your word, grace to relinquish our tasks,
and courage to follow empty-handed wherever you may lead,
so that the voice of your gospel may reach to the ends of the earth.
Amen.”

(A Prayer Book for Australia, Broughton Books, 1995, page 210)

Time for another sheet of paper. Draw a diagram of your family of origin. Basically who lived under your roof so it may include grandparents or other people. Begin with your parents or adult carers. Then note the various caring roles you observed. Was it your mother who fed you, cooked, cleaned, nurtured? Did she do it with pleasure or did she convey weariness or annoyance? Was she "missing in action" due to illness or death or too many other children or addiction or ... all the other things that can diminish someone's ability to care fully and attentively. Did others also help care for you? And as you got older what caring roles were required of you and what recognition or reward was there in those roles? Many of us will have had formal jobs as children that may or may not have been linked to rewards such as pocket money or treats or our adult carers approval. But there are often other roles such as watching younger siblings or elderly relatives, soothing or reassuring a parent with mental health or addiction issues, or a myriad other unnamed roles that were thrust upon us.

Most of us learn both healthy helpful caring skills and philosophies in our family and some not so healthy ones. It is important to our own wellbeing and mature self development that we can discern the healthy from the not so healthy, that we choose what of our inheritance to take forward and what to set aside. As someone wise once said the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.

Which of the caring roles that you learnt in your family do you most fully and gladly embrace? My mother was killed instantly in a car accident when I was 44. I was in my first year of training as a priest and I was the single parent of three teenagers.

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Something about her death gave me a second wind as a parent, it was as though she bequeathed me her gentle patient never give up on your kids approach that I leaned deeply into in those very demanding years. When my vocational identity was changing as I gave up being a social worker and became a priest I leaned into my mother's conventional and very caring parenting example when I might otherwise have neglected the less pleasant aspects of parenting teenagers and been so distracted by my own changing identity that I may have failed to notice theirs.

What relationship and moments of being cared for in your family continues to nurture and support you? I was doing some work as client with a trauma counsellor who uses a somatic or body focused approach to understanding our trauma and healing from it. One of the first suggestions she made was to imagine or remember someone lovingly touching my face in a calming and soothing way. For a moment I struggled and then I remembered that not long before my mother was killed I had called into visit one evening and she had, like all good mothers, invited me to stay for dinner. She topped up the ingredients in the pressure cooker and we sat down to wait. I was very tired and she invited me to lay down on the couch while the evening news was on. I did and placed my head in her lap and with my eyes closed she stroked my temples. Even though she is long gone now, all I have to do is close my eyes and I can feel again the comfort and re-centring calm of her touch. In stressful times I often conjure up the comfort of that moment. What are the moments and relationships that can bring you comfort or re-energise you?

Relish all that was positive and healthy and life giving. And know that with intention and work (sometimes a lot of work!) you can choose to leave behind what has not served you well.

What we learnt in our families of origin informs how we care for others. It can also inform how we care for ourselves. When my mother cared for me as an adult she taught me about how to care. When I intentionally recall that memory and play it to myself when I am in need of comfort or encouragement I am self-caring because I am using what I learnt about caring to take care of myself.

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What things that you learnt about caring are you generous and wise enough to give to yourself? Journal as little or as much as feels important.

It is now time to take a break. This may or may not have been an emotionally charged or draining session for you. Be gentle with yourself. Make a cup of tea or if its been a really long session have lunch. Go for a short walk even if just around the garden.

Session Two: What did you learn about caring from your culture?

(allow 1.5 to 2 hours)

For many of us there is a huge overlap between our family values and norms and those of the general community. But if we were raised in an ethnic minority or a very political or religious family we may have had differing expectations conveyed to us between home and the general community. It is neither good nor bad just something to be aware of.

As we are no doubt aware many of us who are women have certain expectations of us by others (and by ourselves) about taking up certain caring roles in the family. We are expected to provide nurturing to almost anyone who needs it. Men are traditionally expected to provide care through protection, provision of material needs, discipline. In the last two plus generations these cultural expectations have shifted and rather than freeing us in some ways we are now all expected to be and do everything. As a single parent for much of my children's lives I was very aware of needing to be all the traditional maternal caring roles and to be a good financial provider, disciplinarian, academic tutor etc etc.

So take pen and more paper and draw or write some of those expectations and understandings. You might want to have fun and see how many advertising jingles you can think of and notice the assumptions they make about what caring roles you should be fulfilling. You may want to remember some of the best and worst sit-coms and the expectations they conveyed about caring roles. And of course our favourite novels - our heroes and heroines. I used to love reading nursing books when I was young and always thought I would be a nurse. In reality it is my two sisters who have

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carried on the family tradition of nursing but I did work in hospitals for twenty years as a social worker and then as chaplain.

Of course culture does not present a single uncontested description of what being a carer looks like or what it means to the one who is caring. Popular culture often conveys ways in which we should be cared for by others - doors opened for us, neighbours turning up to help in times of catastrophe, gifts of flowers and chocolates as comfort and congratulations, foot massages by intimate friends ... These can all be wonderful. But novels, movies, songs, less often describe ways in which we can take care of ourselves. Occasionally we may see an overworked woman run a scented bath and put some music on while relaxing. But more often self care takes the form of self comfort in destructive ways such as drinking alcohol or eating entire tubs of ice-cream. Often self care is portrayed as selfishness or an embarrassing acknowledgement that we don't have anyone to do it for us!

Think of at least three ways of self caring that you already do or intend to do that you have not seen or heard much of in popular culture.

What did you learn about caring from your various Professional Roles?

Many of us came to the priesthood later in life and had a well developed professional persona and set of expectations of self and others before we gave ourselves over to being moulded in the role of pastoral carer. Most professions have quite explicit value statements that will include some statements about how we take care of our clients or customers, our organisation, our colleagues and how we can expect to be taken care of by our employing organisation. Some professions are more overtly about caring than others of course.

I would encourage you to not only include in this section what you did to earn an income but you might also include roles you undertook as a volunteer such as ambulance worker or country fire fighter, or little league coach for your children's sporting club. You probably received some training and there would have been some explicit teaching about caring for others and being cared for. However there will also be a lot of information in the culture of the organisation which will be conveyed to

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you by informal means. Some are positive and others can be quite destructive or negligent like soldier on no matter how much you are hurting physically or emotionally. Write down those messages you were given directly about how to care for others and of the value of caring for others. For example as a social worker I deeply took on board the ethic of "client self determination" which at various times in my life has been in creative tension with my parenting instincts or my leadership role in the church.

Did your vocation - career or volunteer - explicitly teach about caring for your self? What and how? For example as a social worker I was taught to seek professional supervision which was primarily about accountability but good supervision was also about self care. I certainly emphasised it in my years as a supervisor of others.

It you were to be your own best supervisor/mentor/coach what self care strategies would you applaud yourself for undertaking? And what additional self care activities and attitudes would you encourage yourself in? Journal.

Take a break for a hot drink or a meal. Take time to walk or even do some practical physical work for a short time but no ministry work!

Session Three: What did you learn about caring from your Faith Community?

(allow 1.5 to 2 hours)

As you may already have begun to suspect if not be absolutely convinced of not everything we were "taught" or "caught" in the church or any faith community is core to the actual faith belief system. For those of us who are women we were often taught that sacrifice, niceness, putting others needs before our own etc were the essence of Christianity. And while undoubtably the core message of Christianity is that of love, niceness is certainly not highly valued in most of Scripture and there are a variety of ways of loving that are modelled, including by Jesus himself, that are not particularly nice or polite or submissive!

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Scripture is certainly full of obligations, commandments, guidelines, household codes etc. Scripture also reminds us of the importance, indeed sacredness, of rest, celebration, prayer and reflection and care of the body including our own.

We have the story of Martha and Mary to remind us that sometimes the caring serving everyone else first behaviour of Martha is not necessarily the most desirable. Indeed the apparently self caring behaviour of Mary seeking to listen to the Teacher is the more desirable behaviour. What other examples do you recall? (Luke chapter 10 verses 38 – 42)

The Old Testament emphasises the importance of Sabbath and Jubilee - weekly, seasonal, and seven year cycles of rest and regeneration. (Exodus chapter 23 verses 10 -12)

Even St Paul reminds us that we are temples and to take care of ourselves in that knowledge. (1 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 16 and chapter 6 verses 19 – 20)

To take care of ourselves in not only sensible it is a sacred undertaking and it is not new age self indulgence it is ancient holy wisdom. Choose one of the above Scriptures to consider how rest and care of the self is an instruction from God rather than laziness or self indulgence (things that many of us fear or suspect).

Review what you have been taught and discovered about Caring and Self Caring.

Read back through today's reflections. Write a list of all the skills, attitudes and values you have been taught about caring for others in one column. Then write another list of all the skills, attitudes and values you have been taught about caring for your self. Is one list longer than the other? If the self care list is shorter then go back to your first list and rephrase the items as self caring. For example

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"clients/people have the right to self determination" becomes "I have the right to determine for myself ..." Or "Children must be listened to and their explicit permission must be gained before ..." could become "I have the right to be listened to and my explicit permission must be given before I allow to happen."

Which of these statements is the most attractive or fascinating? What freedom, energy, comfort, pleasure might be yours if you cared for yourself in this way?
Journal.

When you are ready bring your day's reflections to a close with a time of mediation and prayer.

Meditation:

Make yourself comfortable in a quiet place.

Breathe deeply and naturally. No need to alter your breathing just be aware of it and occasionally sigh deeply and empty your lungs before taking a deep breath.

As part of your preparation for this time of communion you are invited to light a candle for each person and concern that you carry in your heart.

You might like to visualise a sand tray and to light a votive candle for each person or concern saying as you light the candle: "Into your hands Lord I commend ..." and then leave your connection and concern with the Lord knowing them to be safe and loved while you spend precious time enjoying your relationship with the divine. Each time a person or a concern comes into your mind simply light a candle for them and hand them over.

When you have named and handed over all the people and concerns that readily come to mind then return to awareness of your own breath and become quiet and still.

Visualise yourself entering this holy place in which there are all manner of God's gifts of creation – see, hear, feel, smell, taste ...

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Hear also the whisper of your Lord, your Creator.

“You are my beloved one, I have known and loved you since before you were made. Indeed it is I who created you, even your inmost self.

I put you together in your mother’s womb.

You are a wondrous mystery and yet I know and love you through and through.

I have watched over you as your bones took shape
and as you were being formed in secret.

I know your every action and all your days, your needs, your desires.

You do not need to know my every thought or intention to know that you are loved,
that you are desired, and that every good thing is intended for you.

Be loved, be restored, be recreated in peace and joy,

You that are the fruit of my hope and love.”

Rest in my love.”

(a reflection on Psalm 139)

After a time of rest and restoration whisper Amen knowing that you return to life refreshed by the Beloved Lord’s love for you.

Post script: If you want to take the question about how your personal development influences you as a carer of others and your inclination to care for your self then you might want to explore or revisit the issues of how your personality type influences you. If you are doing this retreat over a week then you have plenty of time to follow up if you wish to. If you are already familiar with this material then just bring to the fore of your mind what you have already learnt.

Let's face it some of us are carers by nature (as well as by nurture, circumstance and training).

If you have been in therapy for a long time or are a therapeutic background profession you probably have a very theoretical and detailed understanding of why

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you are the way you are. Hopefully those self descriptions not only explain why you are a carer but have some wise input into how to self care.

For the rest of us there are some simple models that have some value in both explaining the way we are but also what we might do to become more balanced and how we might self care.

Many of us in church circles will have undertaken the Enneagram training at some point. For a while there many went around saying: "Well I am a two or a seven or a six" as though that explained everything. Like any other psychological tools Enneagram wisdom only helps to the extent that you want it to. Information about your personality type according to this tool can be useful when followed up with related wisdom about the strengths and weaknesses of your type. I found the writings of Don Richard Riso with Russ Hudson "Personality Types: using the Enneagram for Self Discovery" very helpful. (There is also some free on-line material such as the abridged version of the Riso questionnaire at www.9types.com/rheti/index.php) Having discovered that I was a Two or The Helper was only confirming of what I knew. But the follow up chapter that described the healthy expressions of "twoness" and the unhealthy expressions was what really helped me with self care because it helped me know pre-emptively what I needed. For example two's will help until they are exhausted and then suddenly snap and become very resentful that their helpfulness is not appreciated. So as a two it is important to get regular rest and replenishment to prevent exhaustion and the gathering storm of resentment and self pity!!

Once again I would encourage you to do this sort of personal work, which has the potential to take you deep, in the company of a professional counsellor or spiritual director so that any issues that get stirred up can be held in such a way that the experience will lead to growth rather than insecurity or self doubt. Remember that whatever you discover about yourself has probably been the truth, or a part of it, for a long time and unless you are in imminent danger of physical harm there is no need to make sudden decisions.

Indeed much of this self discovery can be fun and it certainly has the potential to enhance your life and therefore your potency as a carer of others and a carer of self.

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Day Three: Taking Better Care of Others Yourself

Self care involves an attitude of valuing yourself and relating to yourself with the same care and respect and affection that you probably direct towards others. It involves properly placing yourself at the centre of your own life.

Of course the human being cannot be divided into unrelated parts such as body, mind and spirit because we are one holy integrated whole but I need to explore things with you one aspect at a time so for convenience we will begin with the body.

Opening Time of Prayer:

Make yourself comfortable in a quiet place.

Breathe deeply and naturally. No need to alter your breathing just be aware of it and occasionally sigh deeply and empty your lungs before taking a deep breath.

Visualise yourself entering a sacred space and time,
Maybe your usual worship area or a unique space.
You have come to be with your Lord.

As part of your preparation for this time of communion you are invited to light a candle for each person and concern that you carry in your heart. You might like to visualise a sand tray and to light a votive candle for each person or concern saying as you light the candle: "Into your hands Lord I commend ... such and such" and then leave your connection and concern with the Lord knowing them to be safe and loved while you spend precious time enjoying your relationship with the divine. Each time a person or a concern comes into your mind simply light a candle for them and hand them over.

When you have named and handed over all the people and concerns that readily come to mind then return to awareness of your own breath and become quiet and still. Allow your needs and wants to be present. Spend five or more minutes just being in the presence of your Lord. And when you are ready consider this opening prayer and thanksgiving:

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“In the beginning, O God, you shaped my soul and set its weave.
You formed my body and gave it breath.
Renew me this day in the image of your love.
O great God, grant me your light.
O great God, grant me your grace.
O great God, grant me your joy this day
and let me be made pure in the well of your health.”

(Each Day and Each Night: Celtic Prayers from Iona”, J. Philip Newell, Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow, 2003, page 31)

Session One: Taking care of your Body

(allow 1 to 1.5 hours)

Many of us have an ambivalent relationship with our bodies to put it mildly. We are prone to be anxious or embarrassed or momentarily focused on feeding our appetites only to be bored or disgusted shortly afterward. Even when we quite like our bodies they then go and change and fail on us as we age. And when it comes to caring we often put off tending to our own bodies in order to tend other people's needs.

Today we are going to ask our bodies who they say we are and what they need from us. So rather than talk about our bodies needs from an academic health position let us pick up a pen and ask "Body of my own self who are you?" Journal for a few minutes, in dot points if you like or as free form poetry or prose. When you have finished writing or not being able to write for a few minutes come back.

Flora Slosson Wuellner wrote a lovely book called "Prayer and Our Bodies" and she asked herself this question and was amazed at what happened. 'Responses rose so swiftly and urgently into my conscious mind that I was almost overwhelmed. They came like answers that had been pent up for years.

"I am your friend and closest partner. Sometimes I am your mother and your father. Sometimes I am your child. Always I am your lover and spouse.

I am the truth-teller. I witness to you your unknown self.

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I am the faithful messenger and recorder of your memories, your powers, your hurts, your needs, your limits.

I am the stored wisdom and hurts of the ages and generations before you.

I am a gift-giver. Through me, you live and move in God's creation. Through me, you have your vital link with the rejoicing, groaning, travailing universe.

I am your partner in stress and pain. I carry much of your suffering, so your spirit does not need to carry it all alone.

I am the frontier you have barely explored and the eager companion who speaks to you every moment.

I am the manifestation of the miracle which is you. I am the ground of your deep powers.

I am the microcosm of the community that surrounds you. I am the microcosm of the universe in which you live.

I am the visible means by which you relate and unite with others.

I am one of the major ways by which God abides with you, speaks to you, touches you, unites with you.

Far from separating you from your spiritual life, I open it to you.

You can pray with me, for me, through me. I can pray also, in my way, when you cannot.

I am always in embrace with you, though sometimes you ignore me or even hate and try to harm me.

I will never leave you. I will be with you after death as your risen companion of clearer light and swifter energy in a different form. Only my outer appearance dies. Together, in passionate unity, we will become the fully alive human being."

Now that was Flora's response but it points us the passionate depths of the connection and the distance that has sometimes opened up within us. In the presence of this intimate loving partner do we not need to love and care for our self much better?

So let's get physical as the song said. What does your body need? More sleep, better food, more fun, to dance, sing, swim ... Not what should your body do but what is your body telling you it needs and wants?

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What are you already doing for your body, with your body, as part of caring for your self? Do you sometimes put on favourite music and dance, do you take a hot cup of tea into the garden first thing in the morning and enjoy the hot liquid and the cool air, and do you take your dog for a walk that is all about enjoying the experience and not worrying about how many steps you are taking?

What do you allow or organise others to do for your body? Do you have a friend or a professional to massage you, or to apply pressure to those points of your feet or elsewhere to release tension and toxins, do you have someone to cook for you and spoil you a little?

Now your body needs not only fun things like massage but practical things like doctors and dentists appointments, making getting those orthotics or new glasses a priority rather than bottom of the list. (I was once so busy taking my husband to countless medical appointments that I didn't notice I hadn't been for myself until I ran out of all my scripts and the receptionist would not organise a repeat for me because I hadn't seen the doctor for so long!! I was totally shocked when I worked out how long it had been.)

And your body needs affection. For those of us in the church we have understandably become reticent to hug or be hugged by parishioners because of fear of scandal and hurt or confusion. But we still need affection and touch. Who are the safe and appropriate people in your life? Draw, write, depict those people with whom you have comfortable intimate relationships starting with family and maybe some robust friendships. When I was single and in ministry I had a couple of good friends with whom I could be very relaxed and physically comfortable. My acupuncturist not only stuck needles in me but massaged me every month. I went walking on the beach and swimming in wonderfully refreshing water. Not the same as a loving full bodied partnership but it did help me stay a whole person with a physical body that was not completely ignored or denied.

This exercise is sure to have identified some areas of your self care that is lacking or difficult to fulfil at this point in your life. Do not be anxious. Just note what is missing and if possible put an asterix * next to the two or three things you would most like to

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attend to and then act on the most desirable way of caring for your body that you can afford to and have the opportunity to. This might be as simple as taking your cup of tea outside in the morning and saying your prayers in the garden in nice weather rather than in a darkened room. Or if you have a birthday or something coming up you might suggest that someone you trust pay for a massage for you. Or a trip to the hairdresser if that would make you feel cared for. Keep it simple. Make it practical. Do it now (or very soon!)

Take a break. Hopefully you have something nice to eat with your hot drink. Maybe a quick wander around your garden. Something to delight your body.

Session Two: Taking Care of your Mind

If taking care of our body is difficult taking care of our mind is even more so. Partly because we are not necessarily in agreement about what we mean by mind.

For our purposes let us talk about taking care of our minds in three ways: mindfulness, narrative, and enquiry or study. I will introduce these ideas and encourage you to explore at a beginning level what these ideas mean to you and then trust you to practice what is useful over the next days and weeks.

Mindfulness: There is a wealth of information about mindfulness some of which is quite complicated and others which is very simple. Sometimes those of us who pray regularly think that we do not need to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness as I understand it and try and incorporate into my life is one expression of praying without ceasing. My prayer life includes the formal prayers of the church, personal petitions or requests, prayers of intercession for others, and the more spontaneous conversation as though between friends and lovers.

Mindfulness is part of how I consciously seek out the reassuring and centring touch of God the Creator while in the midst of life. For example while preparing the original of this course my husband, who has Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after decades as a police officer, went into a deep and dark episode in response to a legalistic process

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around his work place trauma, which meant that I had to be on heightened watch and support. I felt I couldn't leave him for more than an hour at a time. Part of what I did for my self care was to go for a short walk every afternoon and I would just notice every leaf and blade of grass - the way the afternoon light shone through it, the scent of the coastal wattle, the sigh of the wind in the she-oaks, the sound of approaching or disappearing cars, the birds. Simply paying attention to all that was in the here and now. And it helped reduce the hyper vigilant anxiety of watching him and his every reaction. My breathing slowed, I'm sure my blood pressure dropped, and my pleasure in life and hopefulness increased. And even in the worst times of his rage and despair I kept coming back to really simple tasks of mindfulness such as the task to note three physical things I could see, two I could hear and one I could smell.

What and how do you understand mindfulness and how do you or might you incorporate it into your prayer and praise pattern of life?

Pause, stretch, get a cup of tea or water.

Narrative or story telling is another way of thinking about how we take care of our mind. We constantly tell ourselves stories and are told stories. These stories are the ones from our faith tradition, our family, our political system, our culture both ancient (such as fairy tales) and popular (such as advertising and current movies) and our particular life stories. Some of those stories are probably more helpful and self caring than others.

All readymade stories, be they from the lives of the saints or from popular fiction, are just that - ready made. It can be helpful to identify the stories we tell ourselves and to decide if they fit us accurately or not. There may be other stories that better fit us and our situation and where the stories carry the seeds of insight and information about better ways of working things out.

Often, especially with ancient wisdoms from the Bible and other sacred texts, there are layers of truth to be discovered and greater and deeper truth than the interpretation we were given by others at the beginning of our journey. Many of us will be familiar with "lectio divina" ways of reading Scripture or reading ourselves

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into the story. This can be a very powerful addition or amplification to simply accepting others interpretations in academic commentaries. (Although when it comes to preaching or teaching others I am a firm proponent of studious preparation that includes familiarity with the conventional and scholarly understandings of our Sacred stories as well as our personal appreciation.) But so often we the preachers of the Word are so busy digesting Scripture for the sake of others that we do not allow ourselves time or permission to soak deeply in the Word letting it speak to us as the Spirit wills.

We also tell ourselves stories and our families tell us stories about us. These stories may or may not have ever been very accurate. They may certainly be out of date now. When we find ourselves telling us a story about ourselves - "Here we go again, I always get this sort of thing mixed up ..." or "Well of course that will be me who has to do ... after all I am the only one in the family who really understands Dad's moods ..." we need to question the story. Maybe some of it is accurate but probably not all of it. Or we may just choose a different story that is healthier.

It is also interesting to note missing characters in stories - sometimes there are ghosts, people who have gone who still exert an influence for good or ill. Sometimes there is an absence of helpers or champions. For example many ancient legends or fairy tales have helpers that help the hero achieve their task. When human helpers are missing sometimes creatures will help the hero escape or work out the riddle. Often when creatures feature they are representing aspects of our natural world and our inner world. In the Greek myth of Psyche and Eros, Psyche is set an impossible task to sort mixed seeds into piles of like with like. She is overwhelmed by the task and is weeping with resignation and grief when an army of little ants or insects come to her aid and sort the seed for her.

I remembered that myth when I had to move out of the rectory when I retired and got married. I had somehow filled a four bedrooms plus study house and double garage with the detritus of my domestic and professional life. It was overwhelming and I frequently felt like I couldn't do it unless I relented and hired skip bins and just threw everything away. But I didn't want to do that because there were treasures in there and I had preached a creation centred gospel for years and was deeply

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committed to downsizing in an environmentally responsible way. I reread the myth and while an army of ants did not come and magically help me the story did help me understand the situation as a psycho-spiritual task which required a thousand small decisions to realise this new start again stage of life. And it also meant that I more readily recognised those "friendly ants" that turned up - a sister who is dedicated to de-cluttering who came and spent a weekend, a friend who had been a minister of religion who laughed with me over coffee and affirmed the importance of what I was doing beyond moving out of a house, and much besides.

Stories can be powerful reflections of where we are and can hold within the seeds to information about how we can make our way forward. What stories do you hold precious for their encouraging wise images? Keep your eyes and ears open for new stories that attract you.

Time for another break and stretch. Please take the time to journal your response before you move on.

Enquiry or study is an important and exciting way of keeping our minds not only functioning and growing but of working with our own life in order to question, refine, heal and continue to develop in all areas of our being including self care. But as preachers and teachers we often limit our study to the task of educating the soul or mind in disembodied ways.

Have a look at the books on your shelf (either in external reality in your office or living room and internally in your personal reference library of ideas). I suspect that you have a lot of novels and a lot of professional books including those on pastoral care of others and maybe a sprinkling of self help. How many books do you have about caring for your self? Not about how to analyse yourself and fix yourself but how to care about your self? I suspect very few.

I am not necessarily advocating that you buy a lot of new books about self care but that you might want to approach how you read and reflect on life with that particular

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lens. "How do the ideas and suggestions in this book or story teach me about self care or are detrimental to self care?" If the books and ideas from your family of origin, your religious tradition, and your profession only teach you how to care for others - often at expense to yourself - then you may want to add a few other books.

There are many books on spirituality that are not overtly about self care but can become part of the wisdom with which you approach the care of your self. A random selection of some of my favourites include:

Brown Taylor, Barbara "An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith", Harper Collins, New York, 2009.

Cameron, Julia "The Vein of Gold: A Journey to Your Creative Heart", Pan Books, London, 1997.

May, Gerard "The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love you Need", Harper Collins, New York, 1991.

Moore, Thomas "The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life", Harper Collins, New York, 1996.

O'Donohue, John "Benedictus: A Book of Blessings", Bantam, London, 2007

Rupp, Joyce "Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino", Orbis Books, New York, 2005.

Slosson Wuellner, Flora "Prayer and Our Bodies", The Upper Room, Nashville, 1987

Time for a break. You have been working hard and your body, mind and soul probably need to be given time to be replenished and relaxed for a while.

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Session Three: Taking Care of your Soul

(allow 1 to 1.5 hours)

What can we say about this life giving task that can fit here? Not nearly enough but we can begin by saying that this is arguably the great task of life. Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love God with all our hearts, minds and soul and our neighbour as our self. We cannot be spiritually alive or mature unless our adoration of God is expressed in care for neighbour **and** self. It is the core of our calling and yet most of us put ourselves as an afterthought or another chore like servicing the car in order to keep it running well. Caring/loving ourselves is a God given commandment.

My only problem here is what is not soul? Maybe for our purposes we shall simply say by soul I mean the sum total of all that we are in the here and now and that shall continue on. Therefore soul is more not less than body and mind - our truest self, the self that we need to honour and nurture.

Mystics throughout the ages have understood much about soul and of how it is to be found and nurtured in the everyday world. Mechtild of Mageburg said "The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw - and knew I saw - all things in God and God in all things." I have for many years now been an admirer and occasional student of Ignatian spirituality which, in a nutshell, claims that God is to be found in all things. I would recommend Margaret Hebblethwaite's book "Way of St Ignatius: Finding God in all Things" (Harper-Collins, London, 1994) to any interested in a practical contemporary interpretation of that tradition. I also frequently dip into Margaret Silf's "Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality" (Chicago, Loyola Press, 1998).

And maybe the most accessible book for me about nurturing the soul in everyday life is Barbara Brown Taylor's "An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith". When describing her own journey of faith and reflecting on the faith journey of the famous in the holy book Barbara writes: "People encounter God under shady oak trees, on riverbanks, at the tops of mountains, and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes, and perfect strangers. When people want to know more about God, the son of God tells them to pay attention to

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the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay. Whoever wrote this stuff believed that people could learn as much about the ways of God from paying attention to the world as they could from paying attention to scripture. What is true is what happens, even if what happens is not always right. People can learn as much about the ways of God from business deals gone bad or sparrows falling to the ground as they can from reciting the books of the Bible in order. They can learn as much from a love affair or a wildflower as they can from knowing the Ten Commandments by heart."

To take care of our soul is to take care of how we experience our life. To attend to ourselves - to notice, to honour, to take seriously and yet lightly. To be fully present to our life. The chapter headings in Barbara's book maybe hint at the range of ways in which we might take care of our souls:

1. The Practice of Waking up to God: Vision
2. The Practice of Paying Attention: Reverence
3. The Practice of Wearing Skin: Incarnation
4. The Practice of Walking on the Earth: Groundedness
5. The Practice of Getting Lost: Wilderness
6. The Practice of Encountering Others: Community
7. The Practice of Living with Purpose: Vocation
8. The Practice of Saying No: Sabbath
9. The Practice of Carrying Water: Physical Labor
10. The Practice of Feeling Pain: Breakthrough
11. The Practice of Being Present to God: Prayer
12. The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings: Benediction

Prayer, meditation, contemplation and mindfulness are all practices that take care of the soul. So is being present while we are washing dishes (I still struggle with this one), chopping wood, folding clothes, weeding the garden. So is reading and writing. So is talking to our neighbour.

And because we often miss in the moment what is really happening I would encourage the simple practice from Ignatian spirituality of Daily Examine. That is at

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the end of the day allow a few minutes to reflect on your day. Firstly recall your day looking at those moments that you spontaneously feel grateful for, seeing the giftedness of your life. Then ask that the spirit show you what the spirit wants you to see and reflect again on your day looking not only at the external events but also the internal experiences of love, joy, fear, resentment ... Where and how is the divine drawing you? What brought comfort and nearness and what distracted you and kept you distant? Seek forgiveness for the moments in which you did not see or respond. And ask for what you need for tomorrow to live more fully, more attentively.

Integrating Care of Body, Mind and Soul

When we take our morning cup of tea or coffee into the garden and walk around watering the plants or focusing on things in order to dead head a flower here, pick a strawberry there, freshen the bird bath or inhale the scent of a rose, while giving thanks to the Creator for the beauty and abundance of life we are integrating the care of our body, mind and soul. When we go for a walk with our own or a borrowed dog and stop and take a photograph of something of interest taking note of the angle of the light, the movement of the wind, the cool of the shade and heat of the full sun, we are taking care of body, mind and soul. When we find a quiet table at a coffee shop and order our favourite drink and something tasty but healthy while we read a chapter of something edifying and then journal our response, we are taking care of body, mind and soul.

And taking care of body, mind and soul does not have to be isolationist – especially once we are free again to be in close physical proximity with others. When I was a newly ordained priest my two ‘besties’ - fellow women clergy - and I would organise a house at least an hour’s drive from home for three nights, two days, and we would eat, pray, laugh, read, talk our way through the approaching season of Advent or Lent and plan our respective worship timetables and preaching plans. What we were doing was serious work but utterly a feast of the body, mind and soul. It was always restorative and exciting even as it was exhausting.

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What are the daily things that you do or could do that would care for your body, mind and soul in a way that integrates and restores? What are the seasonal times and occasions that are a feast or a sacred fast for you to simply *Be* an integrated whole and holy person? What might you do with others where you can all delight in being whole persons experiencing the holiness of life?

The more you practice a daily examination of your life the more likely you are, in the moment, to discern the divine as you go about your daily life. This is part of living an integrated life and makes self care more likely to be one of the focuses of your day.

Meditation:

Make yourself comfortable in a quiet place.

Breathe deeply and naturally. No need to alter your breathing just be aware of it and occasionally sigh deeply and empty your lungs before taking a deep breath.

Visualise yourself entering a sacred space and time.
You have come to be with your divine beloved.

As part of your preparation for this time of communion you are invited to light a candle for each person and concern that you carry in your heart.

You might like to visualise a sand tray and to light a votive candle for each person or concern saying as you light the candle: "Into your hands Lord I commend ..." and then leave your connection and concern with the Lord knowing them to be safe and loved while you spend precious time enjoying your relationship with the divine. Each time a person or a concern comes into your mind simply light a candle for them and hand them over.

When you have named and handed over all the people and concerns that readily come to mind then return to awareness of your own breath and become quiet and still.

Visualise yourself entering this holy place in which there are all manner of God's gifts of creation – see, hear, feel, smell, taste ...

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And listen to your Beloved Lord, your Creator and Saviour.
“You are my beloved and I long to dwell in you and you in me.
You are a temple made by me, and you are made for my glory
and I long to dwell in you.
Do not be ashamed or fearful if you are humble or broken.
I chose you and I choose you.
When I chose the young woman’s womb
I chose humble human flesh and a common life.
I chose you and I choose you.
I desire to dwell in you and with you in your humble abode.
I love your body, your heart, your mind, your spirit.
There is love to be delighted in.
There is joy to be experienced.
There is work to be shared.
There is healing to be completed.
There is growth to unfold.
I chose you and I choose you.
You are my beloved and I long to dwell in you and you in me.”

After a time of rest and restoration whisper Amen knowing that you return to life refreshed by the Beloved’s love for you.

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Day Four: Incorporating Self Care into our everyday Life

Self care is in practical ways a lot about addition and subtraction. Adding what is needed to protect you, nourish you, and to foster re-creation. Subtracting what is exhausting, disrespectful, or just too much. And adding what is restorative and replenishing. Adding and subtracting until there is a better balance in your life and you are more properly a focus of your own care and compassion and wisdom.

Opening Time of Prayer:

Make yourself comfortable in a quiet place.

Breathe deeply and naturally. No need to alter your breathing just be aware of it and occasionally sigh deeply and empty your lungs before taking a deep breath.

Visualise yourself entering a sacred space and time,
Maybe your usual worship area or a unique space.
You have come to be with your Lord.

As part of your preparation for this time of communion you are invited to light a candle for each person and concern that you carry in your heart.

You might like to visualise a sand tray and to light a votive candle for each person or concern saying as you light the candle: "Into your hands Lord I commend ... such and such" and then leave your connection and concern with the Lord knowing them to be safe and loved while you spend precious time enjoying your relationship with the divine. Each time a person or a concern comes into your mind simply light a candle for them and hand them over.

When you have named and handed over all the people and concerns that readily come to mind then return to awareness of your own breath and become quiet and still. Allow your needs and wants to be present. Spend five or more minutes just being in the presence of your Lord. And when you are ready consider this prayer by John O'Donohue A Blessing for a New Beginning:

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“In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the grey promises that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life’s desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.”

(O’Donohue, John “Benedictus: A Book of Blessings”, Bantam, London, 2007)

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Session One: Affirmation and Addition

(allow 1.5 to 2 hours)

Affirmation of what you already do that is self caring and the **addition** of new self care habits. OK let us begin with the positive of self care.

I admit to liking matrixes and spread sheets and venn diagrams so grab a pen or open Excel spreadsheet or some other program. On one axis write the following headings: In the Moment, Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Seasonally. And then on the other axis write: Body, Mind, Soul, and Social. So for example if you see your spiritual director once a month place that in the "cell" where monthly and soul meet. Or if you practice mindfulness when under stress you might put that in the "Cell" where In the Moment and Mind meet. And so on. Hopefully this will begin to give you a picture of how you care for your self. You may see a pattern - particularly any gaps. Are there not many social supports? Or do you have a lot of social support but not much care for your body.

Identify three things you are doing for yourself that deserve affirmation! Make sure you keep doing these things. And now identify three things/activities that would be self caring. Pick the three that you most want rather than you simply think are the most doable. Check what you drew in day one but don't be surprised if your ideas have changed.

Three is a random number and if you have more that is fine but I would prioritise what you most want to add to your self-care regime. Once you have got your three desired caring activities then identify what time, money, company and any other resources you will need to realise your desire. If for example you have identified that you want to go on a five day silent retreat you will need to put it in your diary and organise relief from all your usual work and home responsibilities during this time. You will need to find some money. And because it is quite a big ticket item it will probably take weeks if not months to plan. If you have identified that you want more social replenishment then look back at your writing from Session Three on Day One. Others may have also occurred to you since. Write a list of four or five people you could invite or take up an existing invitation. Work out one or two times you would

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be available and put a coffee or a walk or a movie in the diary (once we are able to be in physical proximity with others. In the meantime you might organise a virtual cup of coffee – that is prearrange a time when you will both, in your separate spaces, have a cup of hot drink and your phone or lap top or other device).

I would encourage you to have some aspirational activities that you can act on in the next few days as well as those longer term big ticket items that may take a while to achieve.

If you need to have a brief break grab a drink and continue.

Subtracting

For many carers reducing commitments is the hardest thing as it seems so contrary to our nature and sense of purpose. I hope that after all the work on Day One especially sessions One and Two that you have some beginning ideas where you might identify tasks, relationships, roles that you can reduce. I also hope that all the work you did on Day Two means that you are a little more insightful about why you end up with so much caring of others in your life – even more than your job description!

There are several ways to reduce your caring for others load:

- Finish the current commitment (if time limited) and not automatically replace that activity.
- Identify other co-carers and reduce any doubling up so reducing your load while still staying in the caring relationship (for example if you are caring for an aged parent then you might clarify with your siblings who is doing what and when, or in your pastoral caring roles in your church you might be clearer with other pastoral visitors how much visiting is or could be done by others).
- Identify potential co-carers and thus share the caring work - refer, remind, recruit others to help or to hand over to.
- Do some healthy goal setting and boundary setting and work toward reduced dependency and indeed independence (where appropriate) in those ongoing relationships.

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Most of these strategies involve working toward a lighter care load. Which will only work if you keep the hard won spaces in your diary and in your heart and mind! It is our mindset or attitude toward caring for others that will probably be the most important element in changing our work load. Which is why insight and change are necessary.

As you contemplate lightening your load what happens to you? Are you excited? Anxious? Guilty? Doubtful? Journal about your reactions and if negative emotions come up then this too is evidence of change and progress. It is good to identify how actual change might trigger reactions so that you are not caught unprepared. You may have to sit with your discomfort. You may be bored. You may even miss the drama. Keep track and take care of your reactions. If you are in spiritual direction, supervision, or counselling explore these reactions.

Take a break!

Session Two: Saying No

At some point you are going to have to say no to a care request – either to the whole relationship and project or to one aspect. How good are you at saying No? I'm guessing not very. Saying No might be what we want to say but feel guilty about. Or for some of us saying Yes is natural and feels good and it is only after as we try and deliver on our promises that we wish we hadn't or wonder how we are going to do what we offered to.

The need to be needed or the desire to be useful is our issue to deal with. It may be part of our family of origin conditioning that we identified back on Day Two. Or it may be part of religious culture as we have experienced it. There is sure to be internal personal issues that we need to identify and work on.

Many of us also live and work in communities where there is more need than resources so anyone who is identified as a worker or a capable person, and the local vicar most certainly is going to be, is going to receive more requests than we can reasonably respond to. Part of our work then is to identify a hierarchy of needs

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according to our job description or calling and give priority to those requests which are our primary concern and allow the painful reality that there will be needs we cannot meet. (Of course we may also want to recruit others to help, find out who to refer to, and encourage the development of better community resources to meet the needs at their source.)

Part of learning to appropriately say No is to develop the Pause. Where appropriate it is good to claim a time of pause to consider if it is our task to accept and if not maybe to make some alternate suggestions.

Sometimes it helps to have some things to say ready. "Thank you for thinking of me for this important task. I need a few minutes/days to think about it." Or "That sounds really interesting/important. Unfortunately I've got too much on at the moment but I would be happy to sit down with you over a coffee and see if we can come up with some ideas about how you might proceed." Or "That sounds like are a really worthwhile project for us/our team. As you know we are rather over committed at the moment so can you suggest what we stop doing in order to take this project up?"

This means you affirm the value of the request/idea (and therefore the person who is making it and the relationship you have with them) while still maintaining your right to determine what and how much you do. Depending on the request you can still contribute ideas without committing to being the worker and if appropriate you ask the requester to invest in the decision making by suggesting what task you currently have could be let go of (only suggest this one if you really want this piece of opinion.)

During the time that you have just "bought" yourself by pausing, consider these things. How good/useful/appropriate an idea or request is it (do you want to energise this idea)? Is it yours to do? (Just because something is a good idea or the need is real does not automatically mean that it is your task! Other people have responsibilities and callings too.) If not suggest who or how else it might be met. If it is yours potentially then reflect on whether that is right now or later, and if soon then what else can give way on your list so that you are not overworked and overwhelmed.

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No matter how well you respond to the request if you end up saying No you may feel uncomfortable. If you do then try and identify where and what your discomfort is. Is your gut a little churned up? Do you feel exhausted or twitchy with agitation? Do you have a negative voice questioning your generosity or are you worried that the other person may be feeling sad, or hurt, or angry? (They may or may not be but those are their feelings and they may just need to feel them.)

Can you at least visualise yourself as a person saying "No thank you." Or "Sounds like an important project but I don't think I can be directly involved. Let me know how it goes." It helps if you have ever been on the receiving end of a good and life giving No.

I once persuaded a valued colleague and friend to take me on as a client to do some grief work (which was her speciality). She expressed her reluctance but eventually agreed to the work. In the second session she told me that sadly she could not continue the work because her approach required that she be able to work with transference and given our friendship she did not feel able to give me her therapeutic best. She said that she wanted our friendship to continue so that she would refer me to someone she really admired. We then spent the rest of the session unpacking the meaning of a life giving No. I felt sad and vulnerable but as I stepped out into the light of day outside her office I felt this great lightness and felt like a new born thing. Someone had said No to me (by no means the first time) but instead of being denied something good I was being offered something better.

Sometimes saying No can be important for the other person as well as for ourselves. Who and what would you at least like to say No to? Let that idea just rest somewhere within you and it will either pass or grow in urgency.

Recall a time when you now believe that you should have said no. Also recall a time when someone saying No to you has proved life giving? Journal.

Take a break now and have lunch or go for a walk.

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Session Three: Leaving Room (in your diary and in your heart)

(allow 1 to 1.5 hours)

We have talked a lot about all the changes you can drive in your life and I hope that has been helpful. But we also need to leave room for the spirit of God, the energy of the universe, the power of synchronicity to work. It is important that we leave gaps in our life. Or if we already have some gaps that we honour those spaces rather than see them as a problem to be solved and filled.

Gaps, spaces, absences can all be important in living a life of self care and fullness. Firstly because if you are prone to being too busy with other people's needs then you may not be the sort of person who is comfortable with spaces in your diary or in your heart or mind. You may need to practice having space without rushing to fill it. (The pandemic has been good for this for many of us.) Firstly because life is full of emergencies and unplanned work and if there are no gaps in the diary then you are always being called upon to work more than you planned. Also because you may not, despite all our colourful drawings and diagrams, yet know what you want in the way of self care. You may need to live with spaces for a little while and grow into knowing what you most want and need.

While we have been talking about self care it is also good to allow others to care for us. If our life - our diary, our heart and our mind - is already completely full then others may not know that we need anything or they may not dare to give us anything. When we talk about self care we mean both what you do for your self but we also mean making sure that your self, your being, is taken care of - and that includes you being taken care of by others.

For example you have one or more days off a week from work so I would encourage you to protect that day not only from your formal "work" but also from most domestic chores. Designate time that is for rest, for relaxation, for fun, for recreation. You may wish to plan most of the day - a coffee with a friend, a trip to the acupuncturist or hair dresser etc - but I suggest leaving some of the day for unplanned adventure or rest! By all means have a book or a project that you can dip into if nothing happens but leave room for surprises or gifts or rest.

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Sabbath

Sabbath - deep rest, letting go of busyness, making ourselves available for rest and restoration, being present to God and allowing the divine to be present to us in the simple things of home, family life, reading and reflecting, catching up on sleep, sport, slow food and favourite music. If the Creator of all that is declared that Sabbath, rest, was the best way to celebrate the work of creation who are we to doubt that Sabbath, that rest, is part of our calling and most certainly part (but not all) of self care.

Sabbath is a commandment if you are a Christian (commandment number four). That is, it is actually not optional! For a long time Sabbath was Saturday and not Sunday. You rested and then you gathered to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus the Christ on the first day of the week. It is good for clergy and other busy church workers to remember that our busy Sunday is not our Sabbath.

Sabbath can be experienced as a list of rules of what you cannot do. I would rather we focus on what we can and want to do to foster deep rest and refreshment. It may vary from week to week. However you may need to write your own list of things you will not do on your Sabbath - read emails, answer work phone calls, do laundry, pay bills, and see people who are hard work - especially at the start of establishing a tradition of keeping Sabbath. If you keep Sabbath on a day other than Sunday you may have to work hard to convince others (as well as yourself) that this is a holy day and a holy commitment.

It is desirable to commit a whole 24 hours (really it is more like 36 hours) to being your time of Sabbath but if you are in the midst of an over committed life you may need to begin with a half day - a morning or an afternoon - and then make that a whole day as you are able to complete and not replace some of your commitments.

Sabbath is not necessarily the same thing as just a day off from your work. Most of us are very busy on our one or two days off from work because that is when we do everything we and our families need. We can do things to make our day off work around the home and family more fun - put favourite music on while we do the housework, listen to a podcast while we drive errands, talk to our family and friends

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on speaker phone while we catch up with gardening or ironing. But this is not really the deep rest that Sabbath is about. Sabbath is not just about 'not doing' but is very much about 'being' our true deep selves in holy communion with the Creator and the creation.

Sabbath sounds wonderful, maybe too wonderful and special. Sabbath is also sometimes uncomfortable as we face our aloneness, our boredom, our fretfulness when we are not being constantly invented and distracted by the demands made on us by others and ourselves. Sometimes Sabbath will lead us to sit by the well of nothingness and meditate on the no-thingness of what happens. Sometimes we will need to spend time in a silent house before we can hear the whisper of our deeper longings. Sometimes we will need to sit in a bubble of our own silence while surrounded by coffee gulping desperately busy strangers having urgent phone calls before we are truly grateful for the spaces in our life as well as all the connections we have.

There are many wise Sabbath traditions you can study. Most of all I want you to allow yourself the deep space in which you can experience yourself as you are, as your Creator made you and loves you, and to feel the blessings and longings of your life. To be restored and recreated by allowing spirit fuelled hope and imaginative yearning and holy gratitude to surface in you and around you.

Meditation:

Make yourself comfortable in a quiet place.

Breathe deeply and naturally. No need to alter your breathing just be aware of it and occasionally sigh deeply and empty your lungs before taking a deep breath.

Visualise yourself entering a sacred space and time.

You have come to be with your beloved Lord.

As part of your preparation for this time of communion you are invited to light a candle for each person and concern that you carry in your heart.

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You might like to visualise a sand tray and to light a votive candle for each person or concern saying as you light the candle: "Into your hands Lord I commend ..." and then leave your connection and concern with the Lord knowing them to be safe and loved while you spend precious time enjoying your relationship with the divine. Each time a person or a concern comes into your mind simply light a candle for them and hand them over.

When you have named and handed over all the people and concerns that readily come to mind then return to awareness of your own breath and become quiet and still.

And listen to your Beloved's voice:

"You are my beloved and I desire only good for you.

No matter your circumstance I am with you.

I know you are sometimes weary and worn.

Stay a while here with me. Let me give you drink and food.

Hear my words of love. Recline beside me and take rest.

Hear the nearby restoring waters.

Feel the warmth of sunlight through the branches.

Smell the fragrance of new growth.

Taste the nectar of the flowers. See the billowing of clouds.

It is my delight to share this with you.

Stay awhile and rest with me."

After a time of rest and restoration whisper Amen knowing that you return to life refreshed by the Beloved Lord's love for you.

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Practical Post Script: Planning for Actually getting around to Caring for yourself!

OK. You have a lot of information now. The only thing left to do is to **Be** self caring! When you get back to work tomorrow or soon after plan your diary for a month. One week at a time.

Firstly put in everything that you have to do, including all that you are committed to doing for others and work etc. Note what room you have for self care activities. Make sure you have some time every day for quiet time, for physical self care, and for socially meeting your needs. Then look at those weekly self care goals you set. Where do they fit in? Make sure they do. And leave some complete gaps for true Sabbath!

If your weeks are fairly similar then you can simply copy and paste weeks two, three and four. Just make sure that those self care activities that you thought would be monthly are fitted into one of those schedules. You will be reviewing your diary as you go along.

If you can't fit all your commitments and your self care activities then get out your pruning shears and identify tasks that can be deleted or modified. If you still can't achieve enough room on paper for all the self care and rest and space you believe that you need then take a coloured pen and place an asterix next to those commitments that you can start work on now to reduce or finish.

Look back at Session One Day Four when you started work on Subtracting. Plan to start this coming week to reduce or wind back those activities that are either not really your responsibility or passion. It may take a little while. When I left my work as a counsellor with refugees who suffered torture and trauma to become a priest I had to say goodbye to many wonderful and important and understandably needy clients. I gave three months notice to my employer and did not take on any new clients after that and then I gave my clients two months notice (which for most of them was four to eight sessions). I worked very hard to say goodbye in a way that was life giving. It was terribly painful but necessary to say goodbye to one part of my life in order to say hallo to a new part. We did some of our most profound work together in saying

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goodbye. This was in part because many of them had family taken or killed or they had been imprisoned or escaped with no opportunity to say good bye or I Love You. It was painful but profoundly healing to say an intentional and fulsome goodbye. Some were transferred on to other counsellors but most finished their work with me safe in the knowledge that they could of course come back to the agency if they ever needed to.

Less dramatically sometimes it is just as important to identify those who ask us to do for them what they could do for themselves and slowly but firmly work toward their increased independence so that our work is reduced for the best reasons - their improved life.

There may be times in life when we cannot reduce the amount of caring that is needed. Such as when we have a loved one who is ill. In these circumstances we may be able to identify others who can help in the caring or find a way to care in a way that is less invasive and demanding upon our well being.

Sometimes lack of resources - money, specialist knowledge and equipment - can be an obstacle to better self caring. For example I love having cups of coffee with friends but I'm retired on a small budget and I have less funds than most of my friends. Sometimes a cup of coffee is in a coffee shop and sometimes it is a thermos in a park or coffee at their place and I bring some food. Sometimes physical self care requires equipment or knowledge. See if you can borrow the equipment, especially if you are just trying out an idea. See if someone will give you an introductory session before you invest money to see if some activity suits you. Recently in drought stricken inland Australia an innovative station owner started her own web based exercise classes demonstrating exercising using old pieces of equipment lying around any farm shed. There can be many ways to go about meeting your goals.

You've done enough for today. Put your pen down, or take your fingers off the keyboard. Close the file. Sleep on whatever you have planned for. Trust the process as a spirit filled one and hand over control for now to the one who holds you in the palm of their loving hands.

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Check in: One, Two, Three and Four Weeks after your Retreat

How is it going? Celebrate all your moments of self delighting, self nurturing, and self care. Note the times that you put your needs off for another day. And note if having put them off for just one day whether you did actually get around to doing the self care activity you planned.

I imagine that you still have a diary that is too full of tasks that are other focused. Are things moving in the right direction? You may also note that more spontaneous unplanned things regularly happen in your life than you thought. Try and create more space in your diary, in your heart and mind so that you can respond to the unplanned demands and still have time and energy for your self. Expect that some things will go well and others will feel like the world is trying to sabotage your efforts.

Self care is an attitude more than it is a series of activities so that the more often you look at your life through the lens of self care the more it will become a natural focus for you. Do not let it become an anxiety producing focus for that would defeat the purpose.

And remember that you can go back and relook at any of the lessons. You may need to work on this issues on and off for a very long time.

Remember that you are loved and longed for by our Beloved Lord. Remember that you are intended to be well, to be joyful, and to be peaceful. Take good care of your self. Amen.