**Adding Yourself to Your Gift List**

First Unitarian Church, Nov. 27, 2016

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When Barb and I first came up with the idea for today’s topic, it was weeks before the election.

I remember it being a warm, sunny, September evening, as we sat in the conference room brainstorming with the worship arts committee.

Kay Azar had yet to fly south for the winter and November was still far away.

We chose self-care as our topic because Thanksgiving kicks off a season of giving, a season where it is so easy to do for others at the expense of doing for ourselves.

We wanted to take a moment to remind people to be sure to secure their own oxygen mask before assisting others, to add yourselves to your gift list in the month ahead.

All of that is still true. This is a season of giving – and a season of doing, a season of going – and we wanted to encourage you to make it a season of being.

A season of being:

Being true to yourself. Being an advocate for yourself. Being with yourself.

However, we also hope that what we offer today helps you center yourself after what has likely been a tumultuous November. Some of you many feel unhinged – or perhaps unanchored is a better term – not sure where you are headed with a shifting tide and fearful that you, and perhaps others, will drift off course.

At the risk of taking the boat analogy too far, I want to stress today that I believe it is more important to ensure that your boat is prepared to weather the storm than that it has a destination in mind.

We have all heard that life is about the journey and not the destination. The fact is, every journey comes with surprises – some good, some bad – and we are better prepared to tackle those, and to learn from them, if we have a good sense of who we are and who we want to be. It is important that we nurture those – who we are and who we want to be – as we live each day.

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I am not an authority on self-care.

Throughout my life I have often given to others at the expense of myself – whether because I felt unworthy or because I wanted to be liked or because I somehow felt that it was my job as a mother or friend or granddaughter or whatever to sacrifice for others.

I actually ventured into this church for the first time in pursuit of doing something for myself. Weekends were full of laundry and grocery shopping, catching up on work and helping with homework. It felt like I was always running – always at someone’s beck and call – but coming here let me sit in one place for an hour, to focus on what was being said, to take time to reflect away from everything else that was pulling me away.

Weekends were still busy, but they seemed to take less out of me.

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Self-care became an integral part of my daily life this past year, when I learned that my health and well-being depended on me not trying to be everything to everyone.

This will be my first holiday season where I practice self-care with intent. To do so, I first have to know myself.

For example, I know that festivities are often more exhausting than invigorating for me, but by listening to my heart and my spirit I have learned that I can enjoy them more when helping with children or the dishes, and that it is okay to schedule time to myself after a party with others.

I also get easily over-stimulated, especially since my surgery, and I need to be able to exit situations when I’ve done too much. This year, I booked an AirBnB next door to my in-laws so I have a quiet place to go. No one batted an eye when I did this for myself.

I loathe the time I spend in traffic anywhere near Grape and Main, but this year I vow to take the time in the car to listen to music and to give my mind time and space to wander and focusing on how grateful I am that seldom have to be anywhere in a hurry.

These are my issues and my solutions; your own might be different.

You may feel short on time or on money.

You may be missing loved ones who have passed on or are far away.

The long, dark nights may bring you down.

You may still be reeling from the election or adjusting to the rapid drop in temperature.

Ringing in 2017 might remind you of all you hoped to accomplish in 2016 and didn’t.

Of course, you might be someone who finds the holidays invigorating and inspiring. If so, keep today’s insight in your back pocket for potential post-holiday blues.

After all, one person’s junk is another person’s treasure

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To be true to ourselves, let’s start with a reflection.

Imagine, for yourself, the perfect day of your dreams. Where would you be? Who would you be with? What would you do if money, time, and energy were no object?

Do you love a bath, or find yourself bored in water that quickly turns tepid?

Do you enjoy baking, or find yourself stressed when the kitchen is a mess?

Maybe you enjoy walking outside in the winter or prefer wandering an indoor shopping mall.

In order to nurture your spirits, you need to make the time to think about what makes you happy and about how you might integrate some of that in your life.

You might not be able to experience the day of your dreams, but what one, realistic thing could you do for yourself that captures the essence of your fantasy day? How will you make that happen?

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Maybe this is the first time in a long time – or the first time ever – that you’ve stopped to consider what would renew your spirit and you’d like some help thinking it through.

There are ideas for self-care on the cover of the order of service – and, in just a few minutes, we’ll pass out other gifts you can give yourself. You might also think of what you loved as a child and how you might recreate that activity as an adult.

If you loved art, take a class through the parks department or South Bend Regional Museum of Art or just grab a piece of paper and sit down to sketch or color.

If you loved learning, choose a subject to read up on at the local library.

If you miss napping, try a power nap on for size. Research shows that a 20-30 minute power-nap can improve alertness and performance better than caffeine. I have a yoga mat in my office, just for this reason. Some people might be hesitant to take time out of the day for a nap, but I find that it’s more than made up for in how much more I can accomplish after a short nap.

If you crave the outdoors, step outside for a minute or two or schedule a walk or a hike.

Self-care does not need to take up a lot of time – you can smile, you can stretch, you can take a deep breath in and let it out. It doesn’t need to take up a lot of time, but it does require you to be intentional about how you use your time.

To add yourself to your gift list, you need to add yourself to your schedule.

Finding this time might mean saying no, setting boundaries, or settling for good enough. All of those things are okay. Remember, you need to secure your own oxygen mask before helping others. This is not selfish, it’s prudent.

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All right – so we’ve talked about taking the time to know ourselves, the importance of considering what would make us feel happy, loved, or cared for, and how to set aside time to do it.

As I close, I’m going to flip the script a bit and talk about how in this season of giving you might find that one of the best gifts you can give yourself comes from doing something for someone else.

As many of you know, when we do something for other people, we often experience positive emotions – what some call a “helpers high.” The Huffington Post recently published a list of easy acts of kindness, many that are as kind to the giver as the receiver.

For example, the list begins with smiling at a stranger – an act that increases feelings of social connectedness. Another with a similar effect is holding the door open for someone and tell them to have a nice day. Try that out and see how you feel inside.

The list also includes those conventional altruistic acts that lead to those helper highs, like donating money to a personally meaningful organization – and no contribution is too small – or volunteering. This is especially helpful when you can put yourself in the shoes of a recipient or beneficiary, so you can vicariously experience their emotion.

You might also offer someone a genuine compliment, lend them a hand, or write them a thank you note. Research shows that putting a pen to paper is therapeutic and that gratitude boosts wellbeing.

Forgive someone – as letting go of grudges benefits emotional and physical health – or give them a hug, which can lower blood pressure and reduce stress. So does taking a dog for a walk.

The list ends with looking in the mirror and saying one nice thing to ourselves. It also offers bonus points if this nice thing is not about appearance. Research shows that self-acceptance leads to a happier life, but also that it’s a habit that we seldom practice.

Kindness should be extended everywhere and to everyone. That includes ourselves. We deserve it. In this season of giving, be sure to add yourself to your gift list. The common thread in all these self-care practices is the way that they center you in the moment, asking you to be here now – to pause all the doing and start the being.

This holiday season, discover what a present being present can be.