

Selfish Care, Self-Care, and Soul Care — What's the Difference?

Tending to Ourselves and Our Souls



Nathan Foster (</people/nathan-foster/articles>)



Humans are adaptive machines. God designed us with this incredible capacity to change and adapt – not just to changes in weather, but also to nutrition, stress, and trauma. The human body and mind are constantly adapting to our physical and social environment.

It's really quite marvelous how God did this — the creation of a self-regenerative, adapting machine. This is not just for human survival but a marvelous example of the creative mind of God. We see this in all of God's other projects, nature and animal life. Of course not every-

thing adapts and is able to thrive in changes... our adaptation has limits.

In the last fifty years, the way in which life is lived in American society has dramatically changed, and many are not adapting well. We are potentially on the cusp of a new human evolution as our brain circuitry is being rewired to acclimate to the new pace and clutter of how we do life. As a result, many of us are finding it nearly impossible to thrive in the noise and fullness of the modern world. When we ask people how they are doing we hear the worn cliché of “busy, stressed, overwhelmed and tired.”

Self-care is often seen as a luxury. Selfish care is the norm. Intentional soul care is too often reserved for clergy, retired persons or something we intend to get around to. Instead the default is to drown.

It is imperative for the human race to learn how to intentionally navigate life at a livable pace. There are profound spiritual consequences to the current pace of life we are thrust into. Our world is literally dying for a different way to live.

In this essay I'd like to explore a few simple ways to look at some necessary tools that we as humans need to thrive in our changing world.

Let me first note that the line between selfish care, self care, and soul care is often fuzzy as many activities are similar or distinguished only by the heart. However, I want to attempt to draw some distinctions between the three in hopes that we can move with grace and intentionality with how we approach life and the way we spend our time.

Selfish Care

When many reference self-care what they really mean is having their own way and doing things they enjoy — a selfish care. This is probably in part the reason many people don't allow themselves to attend to legitimate human needs for fear it is self-centered.

Selfish care is essentially doing the things we want for no purpose other than to have our own way. I wouldn't call it bad per se, humans are chronically selfish. God knows this and gives space for us to work this out. And many activities we selfishly pursue resemble good self-care or soul care. The difficulty becomes when we seek to have our own way in unhealthy, obsessive, and destructive manners. And otherwise benign activities serve as a painkiller, a drug of sorts, to numb out life.

There are any number of activities we can selfishly use, much of the advertising industry is an invitation to numb out to the latest and greatest distractions, promising the new hit will be better than ever, and of course that we deserve it. Not only are we socially encouraged to live for the distractions and painkillers, there can even be social consequences to not pursuing the latest show, experience, website, or device.

We all have various preferences for the rich diversity of painkillers readily available to us. For some it is food, sex, TV, shopping, drinking or work. Others can get lost in that ever-illusive online hit reminding of us our importance and inclusion in the world. Or we might find an

effective relief from our life by clothing ourselves in negativity, sarcasm, and gossip. Of course packed schedules, general noise and distraction seems to efficiently accomplish the goal of avoiding reality. We can even go so far as to greedily use spiritual practices in destructive manners.

You know you're moving into destructive practices when a sense of entitlement creeps in as you move towards caring for yourself. This is most clear when the thing we want to do becomes interrupted, and we're left bitter that we didn't get what we "deserved." This can lead to developing a sense of martyrdom or even lead to hurting others for getting in the way of us having a hit.

In a very real sense we're all a bunch of addicts. Of course the answer is not to become completely ascetic and deprive ourselves of anything remotely enjoyable, but to live within the tension — to live into our transformation.

I say all this not to shame or shun the glittery things the world has to offer, rather to point out the importance of keeping these things in their proper place – having them serve us rather than we serve them. And remember that the deepest cries of our soul, to know and be known, to love and be loved, by God and others, will never be found in entertainment, accumulating goods, comfort and/or personal leisure. In a very real sense the glittering painkillers our world has to offer are simply false reflections of the goodness of God, unsatisfying cheap imitations of that which our soul desires, and the good life found in following Jesus.

It's painfully clear the fruit of our pursuing selfish care. For many it leads to broken relationships, chronic health and financial problems, and for some death. On a very basic level it hampers the fullness of life God has to offer and cheats the world out of the person we could become.

Self-care

I should first note that there is a difference between living a generally disciplined life and practicing spiritual disciplines. I might develop good disciplines in life like eating healthy, reading, taking time for silence or walks, but these practices don't necessarily have anything to do with God. Spiritual formation is about pursuing practices with and before God. It's a common misconception for people to frame good and fruitful self-help practices as spiritual formation. And while the actual practices can overlap and sometimes have no clear boundaries, there is a distinction, particularly in our motives.

Quite simply, good self-care is attending to and respecting the limitations and needs that God has designed for humans. I find the analogy of caring for our car as a helpful starting point. Changing the oil and doing regular maintenance is simply being a responsible car owner. It is not selfish to ignore the flashing check engine light; it is not a measure of one's strength to ignore our needs as a human, rather foolishness. And so, respecting and attending to our human limitations and needs is simply caring for God's crowning creation, the human machine.

Below I outline a few disciplines that can develop into habits that vastly improve our quality of life. Being a fully functioning human and navigating life in healthy ways often bumps us into God. I find these basic self-care practices can easily flow into spiritual practices. The soul and body are mysteriously linked, and so good care of the body certainly holds spiritual implications. Shifting self care practices into intentional acts before God can often be as simple as prayerfully tuning our awareness to what God is already doing and intending for us in the midst of our everyday ordinary life.

Sleep

At least in our present condition, God designed the human body to require a certain amount of sleep; fighting this is foolish. Of course, we can survive on limited amounts of sleep, but we are simply unable to live into our potential if we are constantly pushing the limits and borrowing from tomorrow's fuel to survive. Intentionally giving one's body what it requires for optimal function is a way of respecting God's design. Experts say this is somewhere around 9 hours per night. Do I have to change my oil every 3,000 miles? No. But, it's just foolish not to. Will I accomplish more in my day if I sleep less? Possibly, at least in the short term, but, at a cost. When I'm depleted, others suffer. I'm left to offer a diminished self; we can only give what we have. The simple practice of sleep revives our quality of life and allows us to be more equipped to be of service to our neighbor.

Physical

There is much to say about attending to one's nutritional and physical health. Eating healthy and committing to regular exercise are good practices in and of themselves, but I do take some issue with the common motivation for such pursuits. The American obsession with physical health often has much more to do with vanity than self-care. Socially speaking, we assess much worth and value based off of our outward appearance, and while prescribing to social standards has many rewards, it is quite possibly the shallowest measure of a human. I can't help but wonder if we spent a fraction of that time, money, and emotional energy attending to the conditions of our hearts, habits, and character this world could be completely transformed. But this is still an issue for self-care. Attending to the machine God has made for us is good. Putting whole foods into our bodies and maintaining regular exercise has many benefits for our quality of life, sleep, and stress function.

Play

I try to carve out time each week to spend alone with my kids. The other day my ten year old and I were trying to decide how to use our time. Usually we have activities or specific things planned, but today we were at a loss for what to do.

“Oh Daddy, let's just play.”

“Okay, cool what do you want to go do?”

“Play!”

“Right, but what does that mean?”

He was utterly confused. I sat for a moment and sheepishly made a confession.

“Kai, I don’t know how to play.”

His confusion intensified.

“Kai, adults don’t know how to play. We forget.”

He sat for a moment. And began to tear up. “Why? How? I don’t want to forget....”

I’m not sure why or how it happened to me, but it has. I know how to do activities. I have plenty of hobbies, but in growing up I’m afraid I’ve forgotten some very real and helpful parts of being human. Self-care is about play, laughter, and creativity. I suspect I can’t read a book to teach me these valuable treasures about being human. I need Jesus’ favorites — the little children — to teach me.

Boundaries

So many of us, particularly women, are socialized to view boundaries with our time and service as a luxury we’re not allowed. Not only are good boundaries healthy, they are a way to love others. Pushing the limits beyond what is healthy is the path to exhaustion, burnout, and ultimately bitterness. Working within the God-given parameters he has designed for humans to function well sets us free to be present to God and the world. It is no virtue to live a ragged life of never saying “No” to people or activities.

Of course this is just a few of the many helpful habits we can develop; I’m also partial to a practice of gratitude, slowing, and being early to events.

We develop habits, good and bad, in large part because at some level they work. And so when we were start restructuring our lives it’s not uncommon for various emotions to bubble forth. For example, if I start saying “No” to people, this might reveal deeper issues of my heart; need for control, self-worth, and ultimately how I receive love. Do not let the discomfort of this discourage you; it is a wonderful invitation to prayer. And we often find how self-care practices lead us to spiritual practices.

Soul Care

Soul care is essentially learning to live our life with God. Soul care is not about us doing; it’s about what God is doing. We simply place ourselves in a position for God to care for us, attend to our souls, and let his agenda supersede ours. It is a space where we allow the Lover of our souls have his way — to tend, care, nurture, correct and guide – to renew our inner beings and fill us to overflowing with his love and care.

This can be done in a variety of ways; there is no exhaustive list of spiritual disciplines. I find in our day prayer and solitude are two wonderfully helpful entry points. I’m convinced that God is ever ready to direct us into new practices if we only ask and create space to listen. While carving out specific space to work with, the disciplines are the primary way we think about soul care. It’s important to remember that many disciplines can and should be prac-

ticed in the midst of life — our work, school, family, eating and sleeping life. Often it's really as simple as tuning our awareness to God in the midst the stress and mundanity of life and not obsessively compartmentalizing our lives into categories of sacred and secular.

Spiritual practices are not something to be conquered. For those of us caught up in a long list of to-dos, soul care can be difficult and counterintuitive. The key is doing acts before God, as a movement of submission, as a little death to self and having our own way. The practicing of intentional spiritual disciplines trains our heart and mind into new habits, allowing God to enter into the ordinary and mundane. And while practical habits with how we spend our time will emerge, the real habits we are looking for is the fruit of the spirit. Where we become people who naturally live lives of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We become a people conformed and transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. This is certainly a long and slow process.

It's so important to let go of our expectations of what will happen in these times. Our loving father wants to give. The space for soul care is for his agenda, a space where he says "Let me love you." Our experiences, emotions, and situations in life lie before him, exposed and vulnerable. We come with familiarity and trust and in this we are changed as we co-labor with Christ as he has his way with our lives.

As is often the case in my writing I find myself gravitating towards topics I need to learn. This topic is a big one for me. So often I find myself confessing that I don't know how to live, I don't know how to navigate life well. And of course the tension of knowing what to do and actually doing it remains.

May the stillness of God pour out from our lives to a desperate and hurting world.

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Nathan Foster is Director of Community Life at Renovaré. Formerly, he served as the Andrews Chair in Spiritual Formation at Spring Arbor University and the Pastor of Spiritual Formation at a Free Methodist Church in Jackson, MI. Nathan is a licensed clinical social worker, a certified addictions counselor, and plays bass in the indie rock band Istra Blue. Learn more at [nathanfosterprojects.com](http://www.nathanfosterprojects.com) (<http://www.nathanfosterprojects.com>).