

# Valuing Self Care and Rejuvenation: A Learning Process

by Victoria Welle

*(N.B.: A version of this paper was submitted as part of a final project for the class “Adults as Practical Theologians,” a pedagogy course taught in the spring of 2009 by Dr. Susan Singer at the Graduate Theological Union of Berkeley, California. It has been adapted for inclusion on the Youth Worker: Collective website.)*

The problem of burnout is one that many people face, especially people in fields such as ministry, social service, and the many other “helping professions.” Burnout, defined here as “physical or mental collapse caused by stress or overwork,” has become so common that it is often accepted as an inevitable result of work in the helping professions. However, many others believe that burnout is not inevitable, and that it can be mitigated and even avoided altogether. This is the approach taken by the San Francisco based Youth Worker: Collective (formerly the Youth Development Peer Network or YDPN), an organization that provides professional resources for youth workers.<sup>1</sup>

I was approached by Jason Wyman of the YDPN/YW:C to collaborate on the designing of a new curriculum for their workshop on self-care and rejuvenation. Together with Jason, Sangita Kumar, and Margaret Schulze, we designed a new workshop format and co-facilitated the first workshop together. The following will describe our goals, our process, and some of the pedagogical theories at work in the design and implementation of the workshop. Woven throughout our work from beginning to end was a commitment to valuing self-care and rejuvenation as essential

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<sup>1</sup> The YW:C/YDPN defines youth workers as “professionals who work with or on behalf of children and youth to facilitate their social, ethical and educational development and enable them to gain a voice, influence, and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence.” See “What is a Youth Worker,” <http://www.ydpn.org/>, accessed 10 May 2009.

elements for avoiding burnout in our own lives and the lives of those taking part in the workshop. The result was a successful collaboration and the development of a curriculum that can be applied beyond the realm of youth work to assist anyone interested in cultivating the values of self-care and rejuvenation.

## **Background and History**

Prior to designing this workshop, the YDPN/YW:C had already helped organize “Days of Rejuvenation and Self Care” for youth workers.<sup>2</sup> The content had varied, but was often based on Buddhist practices, and was led by persons well versed in Buddhism and related practices such as yoga and meditation. While effective and enriching for participants, the YDPN wanted to develop a permanent curriculum that took the best from these experiences and expanded their reach in certain ways. In designing the new workshop, the YDPN wanted to include the following key components:

- **Multi-faith/No faith context.** The workshop would be non-dogmatic with regards to religion and suited for a variety of faith perspectives, including individuals who are atheist/agnostic or do not practice any religious faith. Spiritual practices (for example, meditation) could be done by all participants without adherence to a particular faith.
- **Replication.** YDPN/YW:C wanted a workshop that could be easily replicated by

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<sup>2</sup> YDPN, *A Day of Rejuvenation and Self Care Facilitation Guide*, <http://www.ydpn.org/component/content/article/52-blogs/119-rejuvenation.html#josc14>, accessed 11 May 2009.

non-professionals or non-experts. One need not be a religious leader, mental health professional, or teacher in order to make the experience happen in a particular setting. In addition, the workshop could be held in virtually any setting, and need not take place at a formal retreat center.

- **Low Cost.** Related to ease of replication is the issue of cost. In order to demonstrate that self care is not a luxury for only those who can afford a trip to a spa or a far away mountain retreat center, we attempted to keep materials to a minimum and attempted to use items that are easy to find in any context (such as art supplies). The curriculum itself is free and able to be downloaded via the YDPN/YW:C website.<sup>3</sup>
- **Adaptability.** The design of the workshop was meant to be flexible and applicable to a variety of settings and age groups. Each portion of the workshop is self-contained and can be used alone, or combined with other activities not found in the curriculum. Although a basic degree of literacy is presumed in some of the activities, overall the material is accessible to adults and people as young as elementary school age, regardless of formal education.

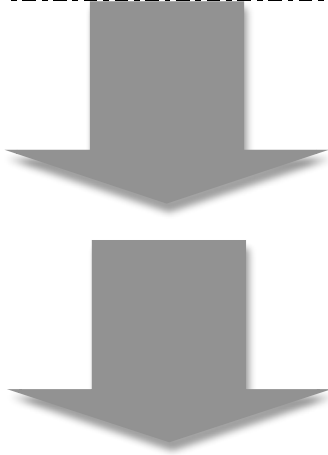
## Values Transformation

Underlying all of our work in developing the curriculum was the goal of helping participants envision and practice self-care and rejuvenation as fundamental values.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

**Burnout is  
inevitable;  
self-care is  
a luxury  
I can't afford.**



*I value self-care  
and rejuvenation  
as essential to my  
well-being;  
I am able to  
construct effective  
ways to avoid  
burnout.*

*A typical operational frame of  
reference held by youth workers,  
followed by a new, transformed  
frame of reference.*

Looking at this from the point of view of author Jack Meizrow's transformative learning theory,<sup>4</sup> this was achieved by the way in which we first identified an operational frame of reference held by many youth workers and others in the helping professions. Once identified, that particular frame of reference could be challenged and hopefully transformed through participation in the workshop (see figure, left).

The frame of reference we were dealing with begins with an assumption that stress, overwork, and eventual burnout are all but inevitable in certain professions. This leads into the related unexamined assumption that taking care of oneself is not essential, but rather a luxury, or even a negative action. Self-sacrifice is elevated as a desirable model to emulate, and taking time off for retreat and self-care is judged as self-indulgent or even lazy. Each of us working on the curriculum had either seen this dynamic in many contexts (youth ministry, activism, non-profit organizations, etc), or had personally experienced this reaction when attempting to take time off for our own self-

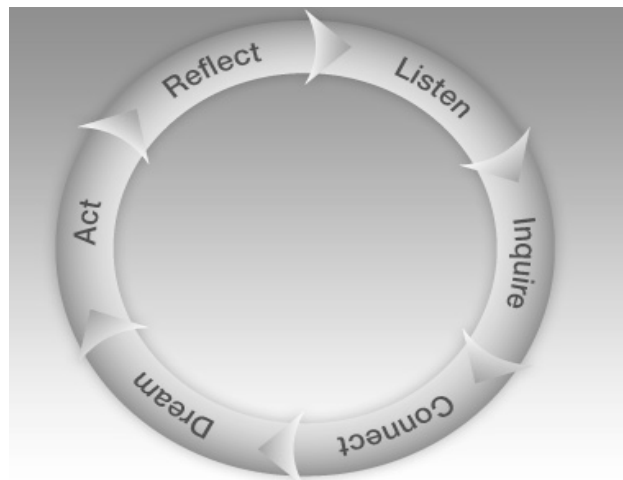
4 Jack Meizrow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 16-17.

care and rejuvenation.<sup>5</sup> We knew from our own years of experience that like us, the participants of the workshop who continue to hold these assumptions and expectations needed to be actively challenged in a way that demonstrated a new frame of reference.

The desire to practically demonstrate methods of self-care and rejuvenation in our own lives was also a constant theme in our planning of the workshop. For example, when one of our meetings was scheduled on a day that was particularly busy for one of the team members, she realized that traveling from the East Bay to San Francisco and then immediately back again would take up a lot of time and add to her stress level. Fortunately our meeting space was equipped with a conference phone, and our team member was able to participate via speakerphone for the meeting. We congratulated her for taking this small but significant step for the sake of her own self care!

### Process and Format

The YDPN/YW:C uses a process that is integral both in its planning and its organizational structure (see diagram). It incorporates a model of engaged reflection that is similar to the see  $\Rightarrow$  judge  $\Rightarrow$  act commonly used by community organizers,



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5 A glaring example of this happened to a group of volunteer relief workers in post-Katrina New Orleans who planned a short weekend retreat at a nearby campground. Before leaving, members of this group were belittled by one of the leaders of the organization they worked for, who accused them of undermining the organization's effectiveness for choosing to take a "vacation" when there remained much critical work to be done.

or the hermeneutical circle of praxis-based discernment more common in contemporary theology.<sup>6</sup> In developing the workshop, planning meetings were organized and facilitated according to this model, and in shaping the workshop itself the model was incorporated as much as possible.

The process begins with reflecting, which is defined as “to look inward and explore. It is in understanding ourselves that we can start to understand others.” This is followed by moving outward to “hearing others' stories” in the Listen phase. Inquiring moves the process to a deeper level, so that increased understanding of the situation can take place. The Connect phase involves the art of remembering, which includes identifying where resources have been located in the past that can be brought to bear on the current situation. All of these steps lead up to Dream stage, where visioning of a plan takes shape, which will culminate in the Act phase of the process.<sup>7</sup>

Using this process was helpful on many levels. For example, the four people designing the curriculum did not all know each other prior to the first planning meeting. Instead of immediately launching into curriculum design, time was taken to first reflect and listen, so that each person was able to identify their interests and motivation for taking part in the project, and the other collaborators could get a better sense of the experiences being brought forth by each individual. Then when it came time for the work of designing the project in the Connect and Dream stages, trust in the abilities and experiences of the others had been established, making for a smooth and efficient

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6 See John Paver, *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry: The Search for Integration in Theology* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate 2006), 57-61.

7 Youth Development Peer Network, <http://www.ydpn.org/our-process.html>, accessed 11 May 2009.

collaboration process. Work was split evenly, and only three planning meetings were needed in order to complete both the curriculum and the planning of the initial workshop.

The following is a general outline of the workshop activities as they correspond to the YW:C/YDPN process:

**Reflect** – The workshop began by helping the participants turn inward and mentally put aside distractions and thoughts of work outside of the workshop. With relaxing instrumental music playing in the background, a facilitator led them in a grounding exercise based on three short questions for them to contemplate. This short meditation set the tone for re-framing and better envisioning self-care and rejuvenation, preparing participants for the following activities.

**Listen** – Because of the emphasis on self-care, the listen phase was adapted to involve a more contemplative, inner listening, utilizing walking meditation and mindful breathing as participants viewed values cards and pictures that represented self-care and rejuvenation. Participants were asked to choose three words or images that “spoke” to them with regard to the values most important in their own lives.

**Inquire** – This portion allowed participants the chance to get to know one another through small group debriefing. The word and image cards chosen in the previous activity served as a springboard for the discussion questions. The questions were based on the Institute of Cultural Affairs’ O.R.I.D. model of asking questions that are objective, reflective, interpretive, and decisional.

**Connect** – The “connect” portion involved two different activities that all

participants took part in. One was a short storytelling exercise in which participants were asked to recall a healing event and share the story with one other person. The stories were then condensed into three short sentences, and told aloud by the person interweaving it with their partner's, each reading one sentence at a time to larger group.

The second "connect" activity utilized the visual arts and encouraged participants to create artwork inspired by a series of reflection questions. Before a new question was asked, participants would rotate to a new art station that was supplied with a single color and tool (marker, paintbrush, etc.). The exercise was not only an example of a rejuvenating activity but an apt metaphor for the ways that youth workers often asked to create a great deal with very little resources available to them.

**Dream** – This portion of the workshop gave the participants the opportunity to "embody" values through a movement exercise that engaged the whole body. After making sure that it was within everyone's comfort level, the exercise involved moving to a simple drumbeat and, upon hearing a word called, pose their bodies in a way that expressed that word to them. Doing this activity near the end of the workshop worked well, when participants had become more comfortable with one another and with themselves.

**Act** – The final portion of the workshop involved the beginning stages of making a plan for self-care for each individual participant. After identifying a number of self-care and rejuvenation practices (including those demonstrated in the course of the workshop), each person chose a specific practice, and scheduled a regular time for that activity in their planners or smartphones. Participants took turns sharing out loud what

they had committed to do to begin or continue to integrate self-care and rejuvenation into their regular schedules.

## **Engaged Implementation**

The design and facilitation of the workshop is an example of what author bell hooks describes as “engaged pedagogy.” Drawing on the work of educator Paolo Freire, hooks speaks of an educational model that “emphasizes well-being”<sup>8</sup> and democratizes the relationship between the teacher(s) and the taught. In prioritizing replicability, we chose activities that could be done with little or no formal training as a teacher, artist, psychologist, or spiritual leader. Further, the entire curriculum and supplemental materials were posted to the YDPN/YW:C website for participants to access. This further breaks down the power differential between the teacher and the taught by making all of the material available to anyone wishing to make use of it. There is no withholding of “expert” knowledge from the student. It also allowed for more agency with regards to the participants adopting the activities and making them a regular part of their own self-care.

Another instance of engaged pedagogy in action was the choice of the facilitators to actively participate in the portions of the workshop they were not leading. This demonstrated to the participants that the workshop facilitators were also engaged in the act of self-care and rejuvenation, further democratizing the space and modeling openness to full participation in the process. hooks notes the importance of teachers

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<sup>8</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15.

being able to model and engage in the risk-taking activities being asked of students, noting that “empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks.”<sup>9</sup> This was particularly important in a workshop such as this, where participants were at times asked to engage in new, “out of the box” activities that had the potential to conjure strong emotion. By placing ourselves (literally) side by side with the participants, we were able to demonstrate that we, too, were students, so there was less of an expectation to draw a “perfect” picture or move one's body in the “correct” way to a drum beat. In addition, facilitators used self-disclosure in an effective way. For example, during the storytelling exercise, one of the participants began to cry as she told a significant story involving her family. Margaret, who was leading this particular workshop, had already made an opening for this level of vulnerability by first disclosing her own emotional reaction the first time she did this activity. Her ability to be candid about her own learning process helped give permission for others to move deeper into the process of storytelling and healing.

### **Multiple Learning Styles**

In the course of the three-hour workshop, participants are given the opportunity to take part in several activities that modeled self-care and rejuvenation. Though an explicit decision to utilize multiple learning styles was not vocalized in our planning, nonetheless many learning styles were engaged through the variety of activities crafted. While not initially setting out to do so, the workshop activities still were able to

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<sup>9</sup> hooks, 21.

successfully incorporate nearly all of the “multiple intelligences” as developed by Howard Gardner and described in Thomas Armstrong's work on the subject.<sup>10</sup> The following table shows the how the particular activities in the curriculum can utilize one or more of these intelligences:

<b>Workshop activity (based on YDPN/YW:C process)</b>	<b>Type of Intelligence(s) engaged</b>
<b>Reflect</b> – turning inward grounding and visualization exercise	Intrapersonal (also linguistic if journaling)
<b>Listen</b> – walking meditation and choosing of words/images of self-care	Intrapersonal (also bodily-kinesthetic)
<b>Inquire</b> – Small group debriefing with use of word and image cards	Interpersonal (also spatial, linguistic)
<b>Connect (1)</b> Writing/storytelling exercise <b>Connect (2)</b> Visual arts for rejuvenation	(1) Linguistic, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal (2) Spatial (also bodily-kinesthetic)
<b>Dream</b> – embodying values with movement exercise	Bodily-Kinesthetic Musical
<b>Act</b> – Making a plan for self-care	Logical-Mathematical

When adapting the workshop in the future, persons wanting to more fully incorporate all multiple intelligences would need to find ways to include the Naturalist intelligence, as well as more fully utilizing the Logical-Mathematical. It is also possible that, instead of adding to this particular curriculum, the YDPN/YW:C can address the under-represented intelligences in the other programming and workshops they organize (for example, the logical-mathematical would likely be engaged in a money management workshop).

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Armstrong, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom, 2nd edition*. Alexandria, VA: Thomas Armstrong, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (Alexandria, VA: Association For Supervision & Curriculum Development, 2000).

## **Final Thoughts: A Postmodern Religion?**

The workshop designed for the YDPN/YW:C is an example of how values creation can take place using a mix of traditionally religious practices combined in a secular, postmodern context. The workshop format is an exercise in what Stanley Grenz describes as “the reconfiguration of various traditional objects,”<sup>11</sup> or the “bricolage model” of creating meaning and values. Instead of putting together a set religious belief system in the traditional sense, the reconfiguring of spiritual practices, psychological methods and forms of art are combined to help participants create a new way of envisioning lived values. Values creation in this instance is not done through the teaching of sacred doctrine or engaging in worship practices, but instead by actively demonstrating what self-care and rejuvenation look like and feel like and inviting participants to make these practices their own.

For the those of us facilitating and developing the curriculum, there was what Grenz might call an “uncentered-ness” of religion in our work, and yet while religion in the traditional understanding of the word was not part of our curriculum, it was evident that our spirituality was infused into all that we did. Also in keeping with this postmodern approach is a breakdown of the religious vs. secular duality. Elements of both were blended together throughout: the inaugural workshop took place in a Boys and Girls Club community center (not typically thought of as a “sacred space”), and yet evidence of the sacred was infused throughout, from the music played during activities, to the

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<sup>11</sup> Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 21.

different forms of meditation, a *Namaste* bow given to a facilitator at the conclusion of an activity, and the sharing of a meal at the conclusion of the workshop. While values creation is not the same as the cultivation of religious belief, there is insight to be gleaned in continuing to examine the role of spiritual practice in a post-modern context, especially as younger generations continue the trend of moving away from formal religious practice and develop values and meaning from a variety of sources. The problem of burnout will continue to persist until self-care and rejuvenation are seen as core values; creative ways of assisting youth workers and others in cultivating these values will be needed from many sources in order to make burnout less common.

### **PostScript – A short exercise in replication**

I adapted the workshop activity “Using Visual Art as a Rejuvenation Tool” for use with a small group of six adults taking part in a course at the Graduate Theological Union. It was an opportunity for me to try facilitating an activity I hadn’t led in the initial workshop, and a test of the adaptability of the curriculum.

The group was an equal number of male and female participants, and ages ranged from approximately mid-20s to 50s. Many Christian denominations were represented, and participants were either ordained Christian ministers or in training to become ministers. Given the Christian background of the participants, I adapted the reflection questions to a more faith-specific focus (1. Where is God in your life? 2. Where do you feel God’s absence? 3. Where is the Spirit leading you?). Due to time limitations, the art-making time was a couple of minutes shorter, but the participants

seemed to have enough time to develop some rich imagery nonetheless.

The participants gave a lot of positive feedback and overall found the practice very insightful. Similar feedback from the first workshop was also heard with regard to the initial dislike of only a single color and tool to work with, which shifted as they were able to “let go” and discover a new way of expression. I was especially encouraged that one of the participants, an Anglican minister from Cameroon, spoke to me about adapting the exercise for an outreach and ministry project she was developing for women recovering from trauma in her native country. She was in the process of looking for resources that could be used with women who had little formal education or written literacy skills, and thought this medium of art making would work very well for the women she will be serving.

I was pleased at the success of this short exercise, and hope to utilize it and the entire curriculum in many other venues. I remain deeply committed to promoting self-care and rejuvenation, and grateful for the opportunity to put my values in action by assisting in the development of the workshop curriculum.

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