

Sustaining Ourselves for Social Justice

(This article comes from *Advocacy.org*, the newsletter of The Advocacy Institute. For more information, visit www.iscvt.org.)

By Gita Gulati-Partee, OpenSource Leadership Strategies, Inc.

Pause what you're doing for a moment. Take a deep breath. In. And out. Now, take an honest and loving look at yourself. How are you? How are you feeling - literally, how is your body feeling? Are you well rested and energized, or tired, drained, stressed out? Take another breath. In this moment, do you feel creative, connected to others, and powerful, or isolated, perhaps even a little angry?

Are you living the life you intend, the life that will truly change the world? Or are you slowly destroying yourself in the name of doing good? Are you feeding yourself to the system that you seek to dismantle?

Claudia Horwitz of stone circles, a nonprofit that sustains activists and strengthens the work of justice through spiritual practice and principles, declares, "Personal sustainability is an act of resistance." She notes that by replicating unhealthy life patterns, social justice activists have taken on aspects of the dominant culture. It's time to reclaim our birthright to a healthy, balanced life that embodies the change we seek in the world.

Not doing so results in dire consequences — stress-related illnesses, addiction, limited creativity and energy, burning out, and ultimately dropping out — for ourselves as well as our organizations and our movements. The results of investing in our own sustainability are equally powerful — renewed creativity, energy, authenticity, connectedness, resilience, and integrity. Being mentally, emotionally, and physically healthy also leads to practical benefits for our organizations, like lower absenteeism and turnover.

The good news is that we have the responsibility and the capacity to change unhealthy patterns for our own sake and for those who follow us. In their book *Resonant Leadership*, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee write, "Today's leaders face unprecedented challenges that result in a vicious cycle of stress and sacrifice, with little or no recovery time built in....To counter the inevitable 'power stress' of the leadership role, leaders must consciously [step] out of destructive patterns and [renew] themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally."

The possibilities for self-care are as varied as we are. Find the ones that best suit your needs and personality. But remember, self-care is not a competitive sport. You don't have to do it all or do it all perfectly. Intentionally try on a healthy, balanced mix including some things that push you outside of your comfort zone, that allow you to experience truly different aspects of yourself. For example:

- Physical movement or other non-competitive exercise
- Regular rest and uninterrupted sleep
- Deep breathing, meditation, or prayer
- Vacations - non-working ones!
- Maintaining an aesthetically pleasing physical environment
- Developing mutually supportive networks with colleagues and friends
- Regularly (weekly or monthly) prioritizing goals and focusing time on those things that are most important
- Arts or crafts
- Writing, journaling
- Intentional, structured reflection
- Periodically working with a coach
- Eating healthy foods and not skipping meals
- Reading books just for fun
- Scheduling regular "dates" with your partner or a good friend
- Organizations can support individuals by providing resources and making space for individual and collective self-care — for example:
 - Hosting a weekly potluck lunch or monthly reading group
 - Beginning staff meetings with personal check-ins and including time for reflection and learning
 - Celebrating personal occasions and group accomplishments
 - Organizing periodic office clean-ups
 - Offering personal and professional development funds for art or exercise classes, coaching, and time management help

In addition to having a healthy mix of activities that nurture our bodies, minds, and spirits, Horwitz encourages social justice leaders and activists to develop a daily practice. As social activists, we are always called upon to engage. Developing a "practice" allows us to engage from a place of authentic and compassionate wisdom. Practice, at its best, helps to move us from burnout to balance, from isolation to connection, and from despair to possibility.

What's a "practice"? Horwitz defines it as something:

- Done on a regular (perhaps daily) basis,
- In a context where it is uninterrupted,
- Allowing for deep awareness and presence.

Use a combination of research and intuition to find your practice. Reflect on the recent past and identify five times when you felt a sense of wholeness or balance. Think of an image or story that caught your interest. Pay attention to these past experiences and follow the thread to your practice.

Once you find your practice, you can strengthen it through:

- Practicing with a group for support and focus
- Guidance from others who are further down the path
- Periods of more intense practice (for example, a writing retreat)

Another key practice is reflecting on and expressing gratitude for all the things that you do to care for and sustain yourself. At the end of each day or week, take time to notice whatever embodied the life you want to lead. Don't worry how long the list is or about what's not on the list. Focus on and appreciate the positive. Valuing and taking care of ourselves is truly an act of social justice.

You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, when you don't know what was in the newspapers that morning, you don't know who your friends are, you don't know what you owe anybody, you don't know what anybody owes you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first, you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have such a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen.

Joseph Campbell