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To care for others well, teachers must care for themselves in healthy and responsive ways. The “love mandate” in Scripture, says that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22: 37-39). Far too often, Christians (particularly those in serving professions) fail to properly understand and enact healthy, God-honoring care for themselves. When teacher educators fail to model responsive self-care, they unwittingly perpetuate unhealthy messages about what it means to care well for others, and communicate to teacher candidates that doing good supersedes being well. In order to break unhealthy cycles and scripts relative to self-care, this paper presents four axioms for embodying and modeling healthy self-care.

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**Abstract**

To care for others well, teachers must care for themselves in healthy and responsive ways. The "love mandate" in Scripture, says that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22: 37-39). Far too often, Christians (particularly those in serving professions) fail to properly understand and enact healthy, God-honoring care for themselves. When teacher educators fail to model responsive self-care, they unwittingly perpetuate unhealthy messages about what it means to care well for others, and communicate to teacher candidates that doing good supersedes being well. In order to break unhealthy cycles and scripts relative to self-care, this paper presents four axioms for embodying and modeling healthy self-care.

**Introduction**

Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-39)

Most Christians are familiar with what is often referred to as the "love imperative" in Scripture; however, how many of us really understand what it means to love our neighbor as we love ourselves? What ought this to look like? How might healthy, appropriate, God-honoring love and care for self impact our ability to care well for others? This paper explores these questions and proposes four axioms for embodying responsive self-care that honor God and equip us to better love and care for others.

**Who is my neighbor? Unpacking Kierkegaard**

To understand how we are to rightly love ourselves, we must first understand not only who our neighbor is, but how we are to love our neighbor. In loving our neighbor rightly, we can in turn learn how to love ourselves rightly. In his classic treatise, Works of Love (1847; translated, 1995), Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard examines the imperative: You shall love your neighbor. Kierkegaard begins his argument by stating that Christian love presupposes that every person loves himself, but what exactly does this mean, and what should it mean? First, it is important to note that there are many kinds of love (e.g. romantic love, familial love, friendship), but the Christian love of neighbor is paramount. Most of the time, loving someone romantically or in the context of friendship is easy to do, and there is something "in it" for us. As we love the romantic-other, or the friend-other, we love ourselves as a part of that exchange. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but these are privileged loves. They are relationships that we choose. Loving the neighbor, on the other hand, is not always easy, convenient, or what we would choose of our own accord, but it is the highest love which we are duty-bound to extend to all others – including ourselves.

> The one to whom I have a duty is my neighbor… If the commandment is properly understood it also says the opposite: You shall love yourself in the right way… The law is therefore: You shall love yourself in the same way as you love your neighbor when you love him as yourself. (Kierkegaard, 1995, pp. 22-23)

When the lawyer questioned Jesus, asking "who is my neighbor" (Luke 10:25-37), he was looking for a legalistic answer. In effect, he wanted to know, who is it that I am required to love? Interestingly, Jesus did not respond by identifying which others were (or were not) neighbors to the lawyer, rather He asked which of the characters in the story was neighbor to the man who fell among robbers. In essence, Jesus indicated that identifying who is/is not the neighbor is not the point; any "other" one encounters is the neighbor. Rather, how will each of us choose to respond when encountered by the neighbor-other? Will we choose to extend

Christian love to the other and be the neighbor that Christ compels us to be?

So, what does this suggest about how I am to love myself? Extending Christian love to the neighbor-other involves dying to self, that is putting the needs and interests of the other ahead of my own. Offering responsive love and care to myself requires the same; to love myself well, I must set aside what I think I need or desire, and be willing to receive from God and others what He knows is ultimately in my best interest.

**Understanding and Enacting Responsive Self-Care**

Teachers and others who are drawn to serving professions daily extend care to others as an integral part of their vocation. In many ways this drives and fuels us. We derive personal and professional satisfaction from genuinely caring for others and helping to fulfill their needs (Astley, 2004; Noddings, 2013). When this exchange transpires as intended, the one-caring reaches out to the cared-for and (typically) the cared-for receives and acknowledges the expression of care, thus completing the care cycle (Noddings, 2013). But, what happens when expressions of care are not received or acknowledged by the other? Has care still occurred? Yes, but how does the one-caring experience the completion of the care cycle if the one cared-for does not respond? (See Wolterstorff, 2015; and Schat & Freytag, in press, for a more thorough discussion.) There is no guarantee that the needs of the one-caring will be met through the caring exchange, but God is faithful to provide for the carer, even if the cared-for is unable or unwilling to do so; this is where healthy self-love and care becomes vital. To love ourselves well, we need to build disciplines and structures into our lives that allow us to receive from God what He desires to give us for our own well-being and for the perpetuation of healthy care that contributes to the flourishing of others (Matthias, 2015; M. Jordan, personal communication, March 8, 2016).

We are not told if the man who fell among robbers expressed any sort of thanks or gratitude to the Samaritan; that was not the point of the story, nor is it the point of the care that we are called to extend to others. Christian love compels us to care for the other, whether we are naturally inclined to do so or not, and whether our care is acknowledged or not. To care for others selflessly and without condition is what is required; this is what it means to extend Christian love. So, how do we love ourselves as we love the other?

According to Tan and Castillo (2014), responsive self-care is not "one more thing to pick up"; rather it is the intentional integration of nourishing, responsive practices that contribute to one's own health and well-being, which – in turn – help to promote the flourishing of others. Some of these practices include (but are not limited to): engaging in physical activity, spending time with family and loved ones, pursuing hobbies, inhabiting solitude, developing one's spiritual life, resting, and asking for and accepting care from others.

Teaching, counseling and other pastoral ministries can have an exacting toll on the care-giver. If we are not mindful of our own well-being – personally, emotionally, and spiritually – we run the very real risk of losing our effectiveness with others (Matthias, 2015; Tan & Castillo, 2014). Additionally, if we burn the proverbial candle at both ends, we fail to model for others the disciplines and rituals that will equip us to be effective in our service to others (Addleman, 2012; Smith, 2015). By caring well for myself, I am better able to care for others (Matthias, 2015; Souers, 2015).

**Four Axioms for the Development of Healthey Self-Care**

As I have examined the care theory literature, as well as the writings of Christian thinkers and theologians (see Schat & Freytag, in press), numerous recurring themes have emerged, which I propose as axioms for the development of healthy self-care.

**Axiom 1: Healthy self-care begins with the acknowledgement that God is in control.**
He cares for me, He cares for the ones I care about, and He desires that I enter into regular Sabbath rest in order that I might learn to trust Him more and emerge better equipped to care for others.

**Sabbath**. In his book, The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath, Mark Buchanan (2006) explores the topic of Sabbath rest in paradigm-shifting ways. He discusses what a healthy view of work should look like, and he speaks unapologetically about the attitudes, postures, and ways of being that are essen-

tial for us to experience the true rest of God. Many people, particularly those of us in the helping professions, tacitly believe that we must work like everything depends on us (Addleman, 2012). Sabbath is God's reminder to us that everything is not up to us. In reality, we can control very little. Granted, God wants us to give our very best energy and attention to the work that He has called us to do, but He also wants us to recognize that all things ultimately come from Him; to fully recognize this we need to cease from our labor and allow Him to provide for us and others. Sabbath is His gift to us. By stopping to rest, we acknowledge that we are not in control, but God is!

Buchanan (2006) also notes, "Sabbath is camping out in one place long enough for God to wound us and heal us" (p. 99). As much as we would like God to "fill us up" during seasons of Sabbath, there are times when emptying is needed before the filling and restoration can occur. Sabbath is a discipline that is cultivated over time. To truly experience the love and care that God wishes to extend to us, we must be still – not just for a few moments, but sometimes for extended periods of time. Quite often, we need to exhale and breathe out the toxins that have invaded our spirit. Then we are positioned to breathe in the grace, healing, and restoration He desires to give us. When we create space to receive His "God-care" toward us (Tan & Castillo, 2014), we are able to tune our ears to hear Him rejoicing over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17).

**Axiom 2: Healthy self-care involves dying to self. Self-denial.** While it sounds antithetical to assert that to care for oneself one must die to self, a healthy understanding of what "dying to self" does and does not mean can enable one to embrace this paradox.

Let us begin with what dying to self does not mean. Dying to self does not mean that the one caring becomes a doormat, somehow believing that the needs of others always require an active, immediate response. In fact, there are times when the caring thing to do is to refrain from fixing or rescuing so that the cared-for can develop agency, thus avoiding situations that could foster dependency and helplessness (Nouwen, 1974; Schat & Freytag, in press; Wilde, 2013).

Interestingly, dying to self means many things that we might not often consider. Laying aside our own notion of what we think we need or want in terms of our own self-care (or God's care toward us) is a form of self-denial. Sometimes we think we know what we need to be refreshed, refilled, or restored, but sometimes God's ideas about what we need are different from our own (Isaiah 55: 8, 9).

Self-denial is not always a binary choice between right and wrong; sometimes it is sacrificing something good in order to experience something better. Tan and Castillo (2014) assert that responsible self-care involves denying oneself. Similarly, Burns, Chapman and Guthrie (2013) explain, "Self-denying self care… may include getting to bed on time, saying no to work by setting aside time for Sabbath and sabbatical, getting responsible exercise, and eating a balanced diet" (p. 21).

Dying to self often means putting the needs of others ahead of our own (Philippians 2:4), yet this requires discernment. There are times when God wants us to stop what we are doing to be present to the neighbor in front of us (as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37), but there are times when we need to recognize the "tyranny of the urgent" (Hummel, 1994) and not allow it to drive us; the "better thing" in such instances is to choose to abide at the feet of Christ, as Mary did, and allow Him to fill us (Luke 10:38-42). If there is a legitimate need in front of us, we must stop and extend care and meet that need, but how often do we mistake what is truly necessary for what is merely "urgent"? It is significant that the admonition to extend care to ourselves (as illustrated in the account of Mary and Martha, Luke 10:38-42) appears immediately after the mandate to extend love and care to our neighbor (the "Good Samaritan", Luke 10:25-37) – thus, Christ provides us with a clear example of what it means to love your neighbor as yourself! As Kierkegaard (1995) maintains, when I love myself as I ought, I am able to love my neighbor rightly. One does not necessarily precede the other, but both are essential!

Mysteriously, axiom 1 and axiom 2 are uniquely intertwined. In order to be able to let go, surrender, and die to self (axiom 2), we must acknowledge that God is in control (axiom 1) and allow Him to do a restorative Sabbath work in our lives, so that we might be better equipped to extend care to others. By acknowledging that God is in control, and recognizing that when we forsake Him we are no better than broken cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13), we create space for him to fill the

voids in our life with all of Himself, and He – in turn – re-makes us into channels through which His springs of living water can flow, in order that we might proffer his nourishing care to others.

**Axiom 3: Healthy self-care requires the establishment and maintenance of appropriate boundaries.**
**Boundaries.** While the development and maintenance of boundaries in one's life might initially appear to be at odds with the notion of dying to self, it is – in fact- a complementary idea. God wants us to place responsive boundaries around ourselves for our health and wellbeing. As we establish flexible, breathable boundaries by taking responsibility for our own lives, we are better able to extend care to others (Cloud & Townsend, 1992). Scripture admonishes us to "carry each other's burdens" (Galatians 6:2), but also to "carry [our] own load" (Galatians 6:5). When we learn to take responsibility for our own physical, emotional and spiritual welfare – in response to God's leading and direction in our lives – we are better able to provide gracious and responsive care to others.

By establishing healthy, responsive boundaries in our personal lives, we reduce the risk of "leaping in" to rescue others, which often unwittingly perpetuates dependency and helplessness on the part of the cared-for (Nouwen, 1974; Wilde, 2013). Givens (2007) wisely notes that boundaries are not merely about protecting one's own needs and interests; well-considered boundaries are also about respecting the autonomy of others and allowing them space to grow, learn, and develop personal agency. If I am being truly loving toward my neighbor, I will exercise wise restraint. I will leave space for God to do His work in both my life and the life of my neighbor. By practicing disciplined boundary-keeping, I enhance both my own health and the health of my neighbor.

Addleman (2012) has likened boundaries to a "backpack". To be healthy, I must prayerfully discern what God is calling me to "pick up" and what He is asking me to "lay down". Caring well for myself includes refusing to overstuff my backpack with things that God has not asked me to pick up. Conversely, caring well for myself could also involve placing some things in my "backpack" that I might not prefer to pick up. Sometimes, dying to self involves the formation of positive, life-giving disciplines that might initially feel like work (e.g. diet, exercise, Sabbath, purposely unscheduled time, etc.), but these, too, are from God; they are designed for our flourishing and will enable us to serve others from a healthier place. By establishing and protecting healthy boundaries in our lives, we care for ourselves in ways that enable us to continue to care for others well (Smith, 2015).

**Axiom 4: Appropriate self-care requires vulnerability characterized by grace. (Vulnerability - the ability to be appropriately authentic and transparent with others)**
**Vulnerability.** Each of us desires to be seen by others as one who "has it all together"; yet, we all share in the brokenness of the human condition and one of the most caring things we can do for ourselves and others is to be honest about our needs and weaknesses. I used to think that I needed to be a perfect, flawless example for my students – to always have the right answer and to unfailingly demonstrate "withitness" in every situation. After several years of instructing preservice teachers, I have come to realize that what my students truly need from me is an honest, sincere, authentic model who demonstrates wise grace towards self and others (Souers, 2016). My students don't need someone perfect; they need a genuine human being who exemplifies appropriate vulnerability by humbly admitting that I do not always have all the answers and I, too, need help.

This kind of vulnerability and transparency requires discernment and appropriate grace (Smith, 2015). There are things one shares with only their inner circle of close family and friends, but it can be a very caring thing to let others see your humanity and that you, too, are still stretching and growing. When we prop up a super-image of the self that we want others to see, we unknowingly set unrealistic expectations for others; but when we show our neighbor that we also need help and support, our transparency gives them permission to safely expose their humanity as well. This is a critical expression of care both for self and neighbor.

Christ is pleased to use both our strengths and our weaknesses. If we are honest and vulnerable in the way we live our lives before others, He can use our brokenness for his glory and the encouragement of others (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).

**Conclusion: Rightly Understanding Care for Self**

Noddings (2013) asserts that for the care cycle to be completed, the cared-for should acknowledge and receive the caring act. While this is how caring exchanges function most of the time, there is no guarantee that genuine acts of care will necessarily be acknowledged or received as such by the cared-for (Schat & Freytag, in press; Wolterstorff, 2015). Whether we succeed or "fail" in our attempts to care for others, if we are acting selflessly by attending to the needs of the neighbor, God will be faithful to acknowledge and affirm us in our caring efforts. If I am seeking affirmation based on others' responses to my acts of care, I am operating in my own human effort and I will come up short. If, however, I seek to love my neighbor and myself as Christ would have me do, I will never fail to experience all the fullness of Christ living and working in and though me. When I stop and care for myself by allowing God to care for me, I am better able to extend his care to others; I am no longer striving to operate in my own strength, rather I am drawing from His abundance.

The ultimate goal of care is to perpetuate others' capacity to care well (Schat & Freytag, in press). When we demonstrate healthy self-care by extending grace to ourselves, we empower others to do the same (Souers, 2016). By modeling for others what responsive care for self can look like – namely, acknowledging that God is in control and embracing Sabbath; dying to self; establishing responsive boundaries; and exemplifying grace-filled vulnerability – we can be catalysts used by God to equip others to lead healthy lives that enable them to love self and neighbor well.

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