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## 7 Soul-Nurturing Strategies for Those Who Support Others



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SUPPORT PLEDGED



When I was a kid, I used to sit on the kitchen counter and watch my Nana cook. Our conversations during those times filled my heart, mind and soul as much as or more than the chicken-fried steak and gravy filled my stomach. She never used a recipe, but somehow the *way* she cooked made an indelible impression on my life as a young woman.

For the last two decades, I have had the honor of walking alongside, learning from and working with caring and creative people across the globe in spiritual leadership development, peacemaking, social action, and justice work. Often the complexities we face when confronting suffering and injustice wear down our resolve and hope. We struggle to maintain balance within ourselves. Our souls, or we might say, the center of our being or the intersection of our heart, mind, spirit and relationships, grow weary and need care and attention. Brokenheartedness is a common result of those who care deeply. Bitterness and cynicism can creep in when it feels like the world as we know it is falling apart.

Brokenheartedness doesn't have to be a bad thing though. There is a Hasidic story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, "Why *on* our hearts, and not *in* them?" The rabbi answered, "Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your heart, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside." When our souls are nurtured, our hearts can remain pliable, open and able to hold both suffering and joy. The possibility of deeper wisdom, empathy and engagement is real. I've witnessed it throughout our broken and beautiful world in people just like YOU.

Now, as a seasoned adult woman and Global Consultant for Training using the Restorative Arts, I don't have recipes for the work I am called to do, but I do have some *ways* of working in the world that I have found helpful. These strategies keep me both grounded and growing. Passed down from trusted mentors and discovered on my own, these strategies for nurturing the soul and sustaining creative engagement in the world are my gift to you. Though certainly not exhaustive or exclusive, I hope these soup-for-the-soul strategies support your good work.

### 1. **Set**

Set the table to serve up soul care and openheartedness by setting a time and place to do it. Schedule daily, weekly and monthly encounters for solitude, spiritual enrichment, social connection and creativity. It doesn't have to fill your day, it just needs to take priority. If you don't set aside time, it won't happen. Routines don't happen automatically, but the more you practice, the easier it becomes. Set an intention and it will help you to focus. Space speaks. Clutter can be chaotic. Set down your phone and unplug from social media for a bit. Be present to yourself and those who you are with. Pay attention. Setting the stage by taking away distraction and competition will allow the soul to feel welcome and safe.

### 2. **Be Sense-able**

The way to understanding our experiences comes through the senses: sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. Invest in the health of your soul through your senses. Practice skills related to your senses to become sense-able, in tune and attentive to the sensory input around you.

Your soul is connected to your body. It is embodied. When you eat food, be mindful of the memories it brings up for you. Notice the smells as you walk into your home. Notice what emotions arise in you and honor those whatever they may be. Look intently at the people who share your table at home or at work. See them, notice what is in their eyes, what kind of day they are having, what stories lie beneath the surface in their faces. You'll be amazed at the connection you'll find there. Practice art-making that is sensory-based. Listen to music. It can calm you down or energize you. It can resonate with your mood, remind you of hope and help you to move from one mood to another. Create like you did as a kid: invent new food, play with color, make silly sounds, scribble, dance just because you're happy or to move through the sadness. Pay attention to the small things, notice the understated beauty all around you.

### 3. **Silence**

"Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10 In stillness and silence we can find our way. The gift of silence can be life for the thirsty soul. There is quite a bit of sound in silence, like wind, birdsong, and breath that we can begin to hear if we slow down to listen. The wisdom traditions and contemporary neurosciences agree on the benefits of meditation and mindfulness practices for our health and well-being. Through simple breathing prayers, I am able to find calm and connection with myself, God and others. The shy soul, like a wild animal, will be more likely to show up and feel welcome when we are quiet and still.

Through compassionate non-judgment we can also learn to silence the inner critic or the accuser that says we're not good enough.

### 4. **Season**

Just as there are seasons throughout the year, there are also seasons of the soul. Pay attention to the rhythm and pace of your body, mind, spirit and relationships. Our souls need seasons. Rhythms found in ritual can help nourish and nurture the soul. I have found it helpful to ask myself: "Where is your soul? What season are you in right now? Perhaps you are experiencing your soul's Spring. You are blooming and growing rapidly. What does this season bring you that you can share with others? Perhaps your soul is in transition, changing like the Autumn leaves or stuck in a fallow waiting zone like Winter. What are you learning here? How is your soul being stretched and expanded? Are you in soul's Summer? What is ripe and ready for harvest in you? How is your creativity thriving? Give yourself grace wherever you are and celebrate the uniqueness of each season.

Also, soul care soup needs seasoning for added flavor. Eugene Peterson's Message version of Jesus' words in Matthew 5 reminds us of the importance of bringing seasoning to life: "Let me tell you why you are here: You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth."

### 5. **Stay**

A good soup's flavor lasts. It can be recalled and remembered because it made a lasting impact. It stays true to itself. Like a good soup, stay true to yourself and your dignity. If you cannot de-escalate or intervene non-violently, don't stay in situations of violence and harm. If you are supported and safe, stay put, stay present, and stay engaged. Create brave spaces where you can stay in the conversation even when it gets uncomfortable. Justice work can be hard, don't run from the hard, but stay steady and rooted in restorative practices. Stay with others when they are going through the hard stuff. That's empathy. We may be tempted to avoid suffering and struggle because it feels overwhelming and too close for

comfort. We may miss out on experiencing the depths of joy when we numb ourselves from the depths of pain. Stay present not only to the pain, but also to the things that make you smile, that soften your heart, that bring you hope. When you decide to stay engaged, make sure you are supported. Stay connected to life-giving friends, family and community. Stay close to your resources of faith, refreshment, rest and renewal. We are not made to go it alone, we need each other.

## 6. **Slowly savor**

A good and healthy soup takes time. Slow time. It can't be rushed. The soul needs time. Slow time. It can't be rushed. We need to approach and nurture the soul with respect and honor. As I said before, the soul is shy. It needs to feel safe to come out and play. Coax your soul into interaction with a long walk or a warm cozy soak in the tub. Slow down to watch a sunset, breathe in a lung full of pine scent as you sit for a bit under a tree. Sooth away the tensions of complex conversations with a good sweat from a jog, yoga, kneading bread or pushing a kid on the swing. Whatever works for you, but take your time doing it. It isn't a waste of time to nurture the soul. If we don't take care and give it the time it needs, we will find ourselves shriveled, instead of robustly ready to support those who we are called to serve.

## 7. **Share**

A good soup is meant to be shared. Good community happens when we share our table. Our souls are meant to be shared as well. We share ourselves, our feeling, our hopes and dreams. We nurture our souls when we can share our thoughts without fear of judgement, our feelings without fear of dishonor, and our love without fear of rejection. The integration of our hearts, minds, spirits and relationships is directly impacted by community. Our soul nurturing strategies are not complete without interaction and meeting. We meet and are met, we give and receive, we love and are loved. Everything I do impacts those around me and the world in which I move and have my being. Everything around me impacts me as well. We are interrelated, connected and interdependent. I can nurture the souls I support by nurturing my own. I must. I hope you will try one or more of these seven soul nurturing strategies that I've shared as well as share your own with me.