On the Journey

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TOOLS FOR LIVING

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Self-Care: Becoming Your Own Best Friend

Need someone to work extra days? Ask me.

Someone who'll clean up the place because we've scheduled an open house? Sure. I'll even bring the cleaning supplies.

Need someone to babysit your kids while you go away for a weekend? I'll do it.

Stay late? Cook extra? Loan money? Run an errand? Give up my bed, my book, my best outfit? You bet.

"This was my life," said Sharon, 42. "I thought I had to do anything and everything people asked. Even if they didn't ask, I'd find ways to accommodate them. And if I couldn't, I felt guilty."

Sharon was an expert, no-holds-barred, genuine "accommodater." Somewhere along the line she learned that her needs weren't important. In fact, she had been accommodating others for so long and doing it so well, she didn't even know what her needs were.

What she did know was that she was unhappy, that she sometimes felt angry and almost always felt guilty. She realized she allowed people to use her, but she didn't know how to say no.

"To me, self-care had something to do with giving myself breast exams," she said. "If someone mentioned boundaries, I thought they meant property lines."

"Self-care is an attitude toward ourselves and our lives that says, I am responsible for myself," wrote Melody Beattie, author of *Codependent No More*. It doesn't mean you become selfish, cold, and dispassionate. But you first become compassionate with yourself.

To practice self-care you must continually ask the question, "What do I need to do to take care of myself?" To be sure, self-care can take the form of gifts to yourself and pleasurable activities, but it can also mean work. For example, you may need to change some behavior or take care of some responsibility. Sometimes just saying "no" is the hardest thing you have to do. Especially early on when new behaviors are as foreign as clothes are to cats.

Self-care also means asking others for what you need and want, everything from returning an iron that doesn't work to requesting certain sexual pleasures from your partner.

Practicing self-care means you become your own best friend, confidante, personal counselor and spiritual advisor. One thing is true: practicing self-care will always improve any situation you are in.

Following are some self-care qualities:

Being financially responsible. This means being aware of your financial situation and taking responsibility for living within it.

Taking care of yourself physically. Eating healthfully and exercising; practicing preventive health care. Being in touch with your body.

Having fun, playing, and laughing. You'll feel better physically if you include laughter and fun in your life.

Setting and maintaining boundaries. This is what I will or won't do. This is how far I will or won't go. This is what I will or won't tolerate.

Maintaining nurturing relationships. Spending your time with people who are kind, loving, honest and appreciative. Giving and accepting compliments, hugs, love.

Affirming and nurturing yourself. Seeking professional help when you need it. Remember, you don't have to do it alone. ❊

10 Warning Signs of Stress

For all its bad reputation, stress isn't a product of only negative things. It's a response from your body to changes in your life. "Good" things can cause stress as frequently as "bad." The stress created by getting that new job or the arrival of a baby can take its toll just as much as that caused by losing someone you care about or getting laid off from work.

Following are ten warning signs of stress. Simple stress reduction techniques such as meditation, deep breathing, relaxation or exercise may be able to reduce these symptoms.

1. Fatigue or exhaustion that is interfering with daily activities.

2. Sleeplessness or bouts of insomnia caused by a list of concerns and worries.

3. Irritability or moodiness that may trigger negative responses and reactions.

4. Anxiety about what the future holds.

5. Depression that affects your ability to cope and weakens your spirit.

6. Lack of concentration that makes it difficult to perform familiar tasks.

7. Health problems such as headaches, backaches, chest pains, constipation or diarrhea, or a change in appetite.

8. Anger and difficulty in controlling your temper.

9. Social withdrawal from friends and activities that once brought pleasure.

10. Feeling overwhelmed or out of control. What lies beyond it can keep us young at heart. ❊

A Letter From

Michelle Barone, MA, MFT

Enjoy this issue of my newsletter.

My new book, Finding Your Way: Exploring Your Family's Educational Journey, *is now available through lulu.com. You can go directly to lulu.com or access the ordering page on my website: www.michellebarone.net.*

The book is a journey for self and family discovery. Full of thought-provoking questions and exercises designed to increase self-awareness, define beliefs about education and design family goals. You can hear a discussion of the book on my website. Seminar and teleseminar dates for Finding Your Way, *are also available on my website.*

My office news and services: I would like to welcome Laura Rauh, MA, MFT, as my intern. Laura graduated from Pacific Oaks college and brings with her expertise in breastfeeding, attachment parenting, prenatal stress, blended families and parenting. She is mom to five children.

Currently, I work with individuals, couples, families, children and teens. I bring my knowledge of interpersonal neurobiology, mind/body therapy and alternative health/education to my work. I maintain a large referral base of supportive health care providers. I currently serve on the board of the Glendale Area Mental Health Professional Association as the e-list facilitator.

Services Offered

- *Individual, couple, family counseling*
- *Healing grief and loss*
- *Mind/body therapy*
- *Stress management*
- *Alternative education/homeschooling support*
- *Parenting classes and support groups*

Office and phone sessions by appointment.

Please visit my website www.michellebarone.net for listings of groups, classes and speaking engagements.

Treat yourself gently,

Michelle Barone, MA, MFT

How Good are Your Relationship Communication Skills?

Anyone who's ever been in a relationship—that means almost all of us—knows that while cruising along life's highway in tandem with someone else, bumps are bound to appear. Potholes sometimes. Even roadblocks. Skillful driving, plenty of fuel and a good roadmap are needed to stay the course. That's what good communication is all about.

Take the following quiz to find out how you fare in relationship communications skills.

True	False	
❍	❍	I don't assume my partner can read my mind. I say what I'm thinking and feeling.
❍	❍	I acknowledge my partner for being, not just doing. I say "what I appreci ate about you is …"
❍	❍	I'm specific about issues I want to discuss.
❍	❍	I stay in the present rather than bringing up the past, and try to resolve one problem at a time.
❍	❍	I try to bring up concerns or objections as soon as they occur, or at the first appropriate opportunity.
❍	❍	I focus on the positive aspects of our relationship, rather than dwelling on the negative or hard times.
❍	❍	I speak in "I" messages rather than "you" messages, saying "I feel hurt," rather than "you hurt me."
❍	❍	When I'm wrong, I apologize. And when my mate apologizes, I accept readily.
❍	❍	I don't blame my mate when I'm having a bad day or take it out on her/him when something goes wrong.
❍	❍	Just like I don't expect my partner to read my mind, I can't expect to read hers/his. When I have questions about something, I ask.
❍	❍	I don't criticize or show contempt for my partner.
❍	❍	I never become physically aggressive or threaten harm.
❍	❍	I don't shout or yell at my partner. When things start to escalate, we take time outs.
❍	❍	I don't call names or label actions (that's a "man's issue" or a "woman's thing," a "stupid" mistake).
❍	❍	When something needs to be talked through or resolved, I don't avoid my partner or withdraw. I don't avoid issues, either.
❍	❍	I keep my communications as simple and clear as possible, rather than sending double messages like "I need your help/leave me alone."
❍	❍	I listen. I make time and stay present.
❍	❍	When issues come up that we can't work through alone, or communications break down, I'm willing to ask for outside help.
❍	❍	I say I'm sorry. I say I forgive you. I say excuse me. I say please. I say thank you.
❍	❍	I say I love you often.

Not everyone can answer yes to all the questions all the time, but if you've got more no answers than you'd like, it might be time to tune up your communications skills. ✻

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Finding the Gifts of the Shadow

Imagine a resumé for your "shadow"—that unconscious part of us that holds all the feelings and beliefs we deny, discount, disown, bury or pretend do not exist:

Vengeful, easily victimized, lazy, bad, untrustworthy. Excel at hopelessness and rage; expert on greed. Not creative. Never finish what I start. Stupid, a loner, damaged goods. Nurture murderous thoughts. Definitely unlovable.

No one likes to admit to a dark side. We spend huge amounts of energy denying and repressing this shadow self. But the more we do, the more havoc it wreaks in our lives.

What many of us don't realize is that the shadow can be a loyal friend, bearing the gifts of depth, integrity, vitality and whole- ness—if we choose to meet it and love it.

"Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once, beautiful and brave," wrote poet Ranier Maria Rilke. "Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something that needs our love."

How the Shadow Develops

Many forces play a role in forming our shadow selves: parents, siblings, teachers, religious leaders, friends, the culture all have their part. One example:

Little Elsie's mother suddenly entered the hospital two months before the birth of twins. When she returned with the newborns, the overwhelmed woman encouraged 2-year-old Elsie to "be independent" and a good big sister. Anger that erupted was severely reprimanded.

Afraid that her mother would leave again, Elsie learned not to rock the boat. She took care of herself, became a pleaser, kept her needs and feelings to herself.

The Shadow's Gift Revealed

Today, Elsie, a single mother, is uncomfortable with much intimacy in her personal relationships. She smiles a lot and has trouble saying "No" to requests for help, works late into the night, and rarely takes a day for herself. She doesn't "do" anger publicly, but at home, she sometimes explodes at her children.

Working to integrate these lost and neglected parts of her is challenging, Elsie says. But doing so is helping her to commit to a deeply nurturing relationship, "indulge" in more self-care and bring more humor to her parenting.

"I'm realizing how much energy it has cost me to keep this stuff underground," she says. "I'm trying to say 'Yes' more often to myself. And I cheer inside when my children tell me how mad they are!"

These, then, are the gifts of shadow work:

- More genuine self-acceptance
- Less guilt and shame associated with our negative feelings and actions
- Fewer emotional eruptions during our daily lives a clearer and more accurate picture of others (uncolored by shadow projections)
- The opportunity to heal relationships through more honest self-examination.

What's in Your Shadow?

Awareness of the elusive shadow is always the first step towards the treasure box that lies within your shadow. Here are some effective detective tools:

Examine your exaggerated negative feelings about others. Look at the characteristics of the people in your life whose behavior pushes your buttons, at people you dislike or hate, at what irritates or angers you the most. When we are blind to our own shadow traits, we often "project" these traits onto others.

Notice what you really admire in others. Perhaps, growing up, it was not acceptable to be powerful, creative, intelligent or empathetic. We can also project this "greatness" onto others, not realizing that it is actually our own.

Examine your impulsive and inadvertent acts. A slip of the tongue can reveal shadow traits. So can "forgetting" things or getting sleepy when it's time to talk about uncomfortable subjects.

Study your dreams. The shadow often appears in our dreams as a figure of the same sex whom we react to with fear, dislike or disgust. Observing this figure's actions, attitudes and words can help identify shadow traits.

Examine situations in which you feel humiliated. Keep an "over-reaction diary" to record when you are possessed by strong feelings of shame or anger, or when your behavior is off the mark in some way.

Observe your distractions. Do you work too many hours? Overeat? Numb your feelings with drugs or alcohol? What feelings are you avoiding?

Track down the inner critic and victim. Write the internal dialogue between the powerful, critical, demanding part of you and the weak part that apologizes and makes excuses. Both are voices of the shadow.

Ultimately, as author James Hillman says, the cure of the shadow is rooted in love.

"How far can our love extend to the broken and ruined parts of ourselves, the disgusting and perverse?" he writes. "How much charity and compassion have we for our own weakness and sickness? How far can we build an inner society on the principle of love, allowing a place for everyone?" ✻

The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting

"Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."
—Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*

Imagine a baby shower where the guests bring a special kind of gift for the new parents.

Not baby clothes. Not strollers or cribs. Not even a single book on child-rearing.

The gifts for the new parents? Self-awareness, self-love and self-growth as a person, as well as a parent.

The best parenting requires that we not only work to nurture and care for our children but that we nurture and care for ourselves.

Parenting is one of the—if not *the*—most challenging jobs on the planet. There is the awesome responsibility of raising and guiding another human being, of course. But it's the daily interactions between children and parents that can require almost super-human amounts of flexibility, patience and awareness. All the experts and all the books aren't there when it's your toddler who won't nap, your child who stole a valued toy from his best friend, your depressed teen who is desperately searching for answers, your adult child who can't hold down a job.

Successful—even joyful—parenting is about listening to ourselves as well as listening to our children. It's a hands-off approach that brings the focus back to what we are feeling and experiencing, so that we don't unthinkingly rain anger and fear down upon our children. Being aware of ourselves helps us develop a strong "inner authority" or an intuitive sense of knowing what is best for us and our children in any moment. (And accepting that sometimes we really don't know yet!)

"We guide (our children) not because they have basically shabby motives, but because they lack the one strength most of us have: awareness of the world," write authors Hugh and Gayle Prather in their book, *Spiritual Parenting: A Guide to Understanding and Nurturing the Heart in Your Child*.

Their book calls parenting a spiritual path that helps us grow as people while we are helping our children grow into adults. Our children challenge us and if we can truly listen, we can grow.

One of the first challenges is to understand that old patterns—often formed in our own childhoods—can often rule our behavior as parents right now. For example, if our own parents tried to fix everything that went wrong, we may try to do the same with our children. But our children may need us just to listen to their fears and not jump in with our own fears and try to "fix" it all.

In the process, we allow our kids to make mistakes, and that means we can, too. And if we can forgive our kids and accept them in all their flawed glory, it can't be too big a jump to do this for ourselves.

As author Joyce Maynard writes, "It's not only children who grow. Parents do, too. As much as we watch to see what our children do with their lives, they are watching us to see what we do with ours. I can't tell my children to reach for the sun. All I can do is reach for it myself."

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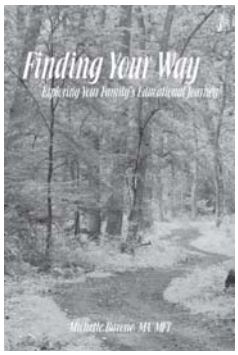

Michelle's new book, *Finding Your Way: Exploring Your Family's Educational Journey*, is now available through lulu.com. You can go directly to lulu.com or access the ordering page on my website: www.michellebarone.net.