



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



ON SELF-CARE

Emilie M. Townes, *Vanderbilt University/The Divinity School*

Blog Series: Teaching Identity

April 03, 2024

Tags: self care | AAR | SBL | Together | BIPOC | Teaching Identity

The following is adapted from a talk given by Dr. Townes during the 2024 Wabash Center's BIPOC Faculty Luncheon at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL).

Self-care is within the matrix of our total health; how we care for ourselves—mind, body, soul, and spirit. Self-care is often the last thing for which the academic life makes allowances. We must decide that we will craft the habits of mind, heart, soul, and body. There is no one way to go about self-care, as we each have our own biorhythms and social contexts. But I believe there are things that we can all hold onto in the necessary work of taking care of ourselves; things that will also help us in bringing people whole in the classroom; things that serve our scholarship, our institutions, our families, and our kin.

In thinking these things through, I have found myself revisiting a passage of sacred text that is apocryphal for me. Some may have heard me reflect on this before. This passage has the same kind of holy-fying (wholly-fying) impact on me. It is found in the film, *Daughters of the Dust* by the African American filmmaker Julie Dash, which tells the story of a Gullah family preparing to come to the mainland at the turn of the twentieth century. Tradition, change, migration, and bondedness to the land, are woven together in the story's Peazant family. The memories of

slavery and working in the indigo plantations of the island are the stuff of history books, written in the hands of the older members of the island and in the stories, they tell to the younger ones, the games the young and old still play, and in the African and Arabic words they continue to teach the children.

The passage that I revisit are lines spoken by the character, Eula, who had been raped by a white man. The narrator of the movie, the Unborn Child, is Eula's child. Only the audience knows that the child she carries is truly the one she conceived, in love, with her husband Eli. Eula calls the women to task for ostracizing Yellow Mary, a prostitute, who turned to this life after her own experience of rape. Yellow Mary had come home to the island to be with her family again and to heal. Eula reminds them all that the fate and hope of Yellow Mary is their own—no one escapes the ravages of evil, no one stands outside of the promise. Eula turns to the younger women and her words are for us as well.

'There's going to be all kinds of roads to take in life.... Let's not be afraid to take them. We deserve them, because we're all good women. Do you... Do you understand who we are, and what we have become? We're the daughters of those old dusty things Nana carries in her tin can... We carry too many scars from the past. Our past owns us. We wear our scars like armor, for protection. Our mother's scars, our sister's scars, our daughter's scars... Thick, hard, ugly scars that no one can pass through to ever hurt us again. Let's live our lives without living in the fold of old wounds.'

It is within this constellation of possibilities that I want talk about self-care with you. The notion of all kinds of roads, and our willingness to take them. The fact that we are, most of us, good women (and men). We are the daughters and sons of those dusty things that Nana carries in her tin can—there are scars: glass ceilings and other discriminations based on gender, sexual orientation, weight, beauty, race, age, religiosity, culture.

And yes, we do *wear* some of those scars. For some of us they are like armor because we have discovered that we do need protection. But what does this do to us, ultimately, when we live our lives in the folds of old wounds? When we cannot see another way to be?

These are the kinds of questions that come to mind when I am asked to talk about self-care. These are the kinds of questions that ask each of us to think through what it means to be responsible, to take responsibility for *creating* our health each and every day, to realize that taking care of ourselves is radical witness to God's ongoing revelation—not only in history, but in the immediacy of our breathing. Indeed, God's presence is the very fabric of our existence, immanent and transcendent, and I think we must stay mindful that a key element of self-care is living our lives with integrity and faithfulness in God. This means coming to a sense of self, finding our identity, treasuring the gift of our lives.

For me, self-care is an important component of health and healing in order to create whole and holy selves. So, we must take care that we do not spin our lives, our careers, our ministries around a success ethic that is grounded in measurable gains and regrettable losses. To practice care for ourselves, means recognizing that we can't run off with someone else's

scholarship or appointment. Because even when we steal, that doesn't make it ours, it only makes it stolen. Self-care is about stretching into *your* deepest self to discover anew what restoration and healing can and must mean for you when it is grounded in grace rather than solely on the latest *U.S. News and World Report* model of success.

I urge all of us to proclaim the blessedness, the sacredness of our lives.

This can be a challenge. It is easy to lose sight of this in the midst of phones that ring without ceasing, calls that are never returned, e-mail after e-mail, and the oh-so omnipresent Zoom. But, if we think about the call to proclaim the blessedness, the sacredness, of our lives as a strength rather than as a virtue, we can draw comfort and sustenance.

As a womanist, I believe that self-care must be embodied, personally and communally, as it brings together the historic force of our spiritual lives with the demand of the spirit to love our faith through our health and through taking care of ourselves as best we can. Self-care is not an abstract, sterile, utopian category. Health and redemption are tools to build bridges that actually go somewhere and give us redeeming time of sustenance building, so that we can continue to make bricks with no straw, if we must.

We must, begin with the wounds, those scars, in Eula's words, those of our mothers, daughters and sisters, thick and hard. We must start caring for those scars, the folds of those old wounds that have, in some cases maimed us with lies, secrets, and silences. These wounds that mark us, do not need to define us. For as wise folk, as people seeking wisdom, we must grasp a hermeneutic of suspicion. That is, we must examine our first works over and over again.

Self-care comes in a variety of sounds and textures and I suggest that we need new visions of excellence and adequacy. Because holy boldness does not mean that we work ourselves to death right up to the pearly gates. We are not to provide racialized and gendered cannon fodder for a bureaucracy that likes to declare its holiness, or relevance, or scholarliness while colleagues engage in mind-numbing studious lint-picking from their sanctified navels; while some white male academics rail on about how white men can't find jobs or a decent match to their self-anointed gifts and then look at all of *us* as if *we* should dignify such inane chatter; while issues of class go unaddressed every day and in every way; while "DEI" has suddenly become a four-letter word, while that very same *diversity* is helping to keep many of our institutions afloat financially. Or, at least give us enough buckets to keep bailing water until the capital campaign begins to reap benefits.

No, self-care means declaring that part of who we are is about seeking liberation of soul and body and intellect and spirit. It means that we must challenge ourselves to ask tough questions of ourselves and our religious homes and our academic institutions and our ministries. Self-care means that prophetic healthiness must be more than so many coins in a bankrupt economy that traffics in people's lives as so much loose change. Self-care means unpacking the gospel into living.

So, how do we get moving in the direction of our self-care?

There are many models for us.

We have much to learn from each other.

We should sit down with each other and give each other the important details of living, share with each other how we have survived, how we have thrived. This is not a time for pulling out an arrogant litany of braggadociosness about how successful we have been, or a heart-piercing recitation of how hard it is. No, this is a time for genuine lament, where we name the realities of our situations with as much accuracy and precision as we can so that our lamentations help us see that what is before us can be managed, if not transformed. Self-care, we do this communally—together. We seek, together, faith-filled ways to work *it* out, to care for ourselves.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2024/04/on-self-care/>