



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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The Bone at the Heart

Care for the Dying - the Contemplative Approach

© Kirsten DeLeo

Charles was one of my first hospice patients. I had been sitting with him during the afternoon and I was coming to the end of my work shift. It was the end of a summer day and I still remember how the dark red shadows from the setting sun enveloped his room and touched his frail body. His eyes were closed and he spoke softly in between long pauses to catch his breath. I listened.

I don't know this old man, I thought. I had only seen him a few times. We were just two strangers, sitting together. Looking at this frail body, I felt sad and tender. As I tried to let go of his hand gently and leaned back on my chair into the shadows of the room to hide my face and feelings, he suddenly shifted his head towards me and opened his eyes. It felt like I had just walked into a fire. Don't run. Just don't run. Stay, an inner voice said. Without a word, he pulled my hand onto his chest and rested it there. I could feel the bones underneath his skin, his heartbeat. This is what it means to show up, I realized in that moment. Not to run, but to stay, even in the fiercest fire. I moved back out of the shadows

Greetings

The *Wise Brain Bulletin* offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

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[Rick Hanson, PhD](#) edits the *Bulletin*. [Michelle Keane](#) is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by [Laurel Hanson](#).

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so he could see my face. My heart burned, but at its very center was a place of unexpected calmness. “I am sad. I am here,” I said to him. He gently squeezed my hand. “Good”, he said. “Good.”

Being with someone who is dying is always personal—it does not matter in what role or capacity we are serving them. A dying person requires our professional skills and knowledge but, equally important, he or she needs us to connect on a fundamental level, from one human being to another.

With his small gesture of resting my hand on his chest and his kind, simple reassurance—through his presence—Charles taught me how to be present for others. He showed me that it was ok to feel vulnerable, and still have the courage to show up. He taught me how to stay when I wanted to run, to remain open when I felt sad or afraid.

Accompaniment is a beautiful word and not much used these days. It speaks directly to what we do when we care for someone nearing the

end of life. The Greek word for comforter is *paraclete*, which means “the one who walks alongside”. Caring for another means we accompany them, we walk by their side. Walking alongside the dying on their journey, we are fully present for them and also fully present to ourselves. There is a sense of equality on the mere human level, which at the same time does not disregard the need for professional expertise and knowledge.

Walking alongside the dying takes courage. No doubt. It takes courage to show up with all your human flaws and imperfections, your fears and self-concerns, and feelings of sometimes deep helplessness. Yet, walking alongside, you can also come to discover your capacity for kindness, compassion, and wisdom. Learning to trust this capacity takes courage too. To trust does not mean to feel more comfortable, however. It simply means we are aware of our internal landscape without it getting in the way of serving the other. The Tibetan word for courage, literally translated, means heart bone. The metaphor points to

the great physical strength of heart—the bone at the heart—that is needed both in order to be present with someone who is experiencing suffering, and to face our own reactions as we bear witness.

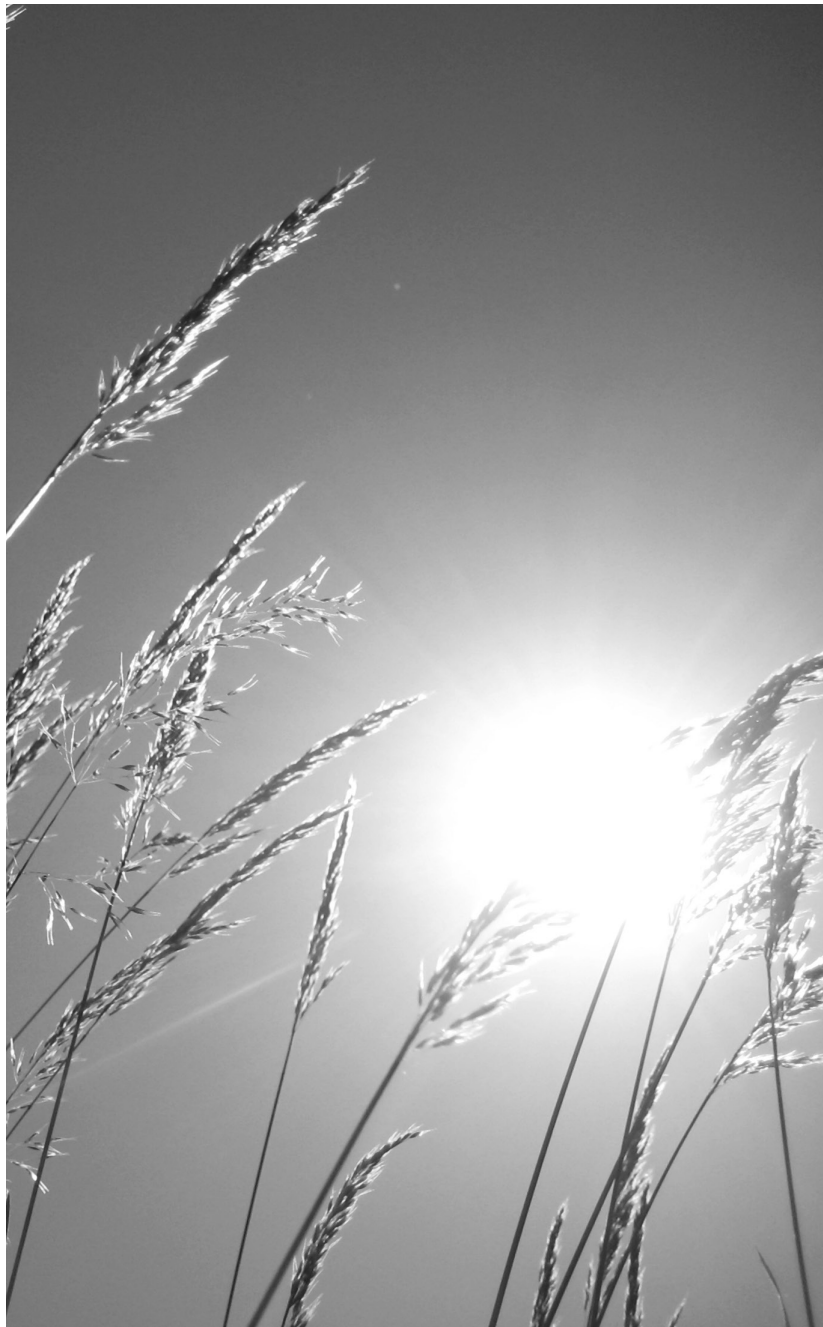
Contemplative practice has deepened my capacity to be present. One of the gifts of meditation is that it supports greater self-awareness and self-acceptance. You grow less judgmental and more friendly with yourself, and more forgiving, which results in better care. “In meditation, I am learning to be aware of myself, my emotions, and states of mind, and how that might be projected onto my patients during a clinical encounter,” shared a young resident during a skills training in contemplative practice that I was holding for physicians at a hospital. With greater self-awareness and self-acceptance, there is less need to validate our presence through words or unnecessary activities. We can let go of trying to pretend to be somebody. We come in touch with our fundamental goodness, and as a result we come to realize one of the most important lessons: how we are is good enough.

When we learn how to be in meditation, it becomes much easier to embrace feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, and to drop the unrealistic high expectations we put on



ourselves. The more I can “just be” and relax, the more can I reflect a sense of ease, comfort, and wholeness back to those I care for. The way I talk to a patient, the way I touch and look at them, the whole quality of my presence, can make them feel understood and remind them of their sense of purpose and meaning—and make them feel whole.

Our deepest fears, wrote the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, are like dragons guarding our deepest treasure. Being with the dying continuously challenges us to get to know ourselves, our heart and mind, and to be present, open and, aware—to be awake.



Never let someone die empty-handed, my teacher once told me. Always give them a sense of hope and meaning. This advice always haunted me, particularly at those times when I bore witness to deep anguish and pain, and I felt at an utter loss as to what to say or do. In those difficult times, I pray for guidance and it sometimes comes in unexpected ways.

Many years ago I was caring for a Chinese woman who only spoke Mandarin. She had a 17-year-old daughter, who came to visit every day. During her visits her daughter always stood at the end of her mother’s bed and would only sit down next to her dying mother when we encouraged her to do so. The mother and daughter’s

helplessness and grief about this painful situation was palpable, yet they never spoke a word and avoided physical contact. Our social worker and the rest of the staff tried desperately to find ways to connect them and to allow them to say their goodbyes. At the time, I was working night shifts, and when the hospital had quieted down I always tried to take some time to sit with the patient, wishing silently that she and her daughter could find a way to come together. During one of my

nightly visits, the mother sang a Chinese song in a low, tender, and sad voice. The beautiful and simple melody touched me and I started humming along. Over the next few weeks, every time I visited her, she made it her mission to teach me the song. With great patience and stubborn insistence, she taught me the words—every single syllable—correcting me and sometimes scolding me with a playful grimace on her face as she listened to my poor pronunciation. The social worker managed to record her song and, on the morning she died, when the daughter arrived the social worker gave her the tape. Listening to the tape, the daughter became tearful. As it turned out, the song was an old Chinese folk song from the village in rural China where her mother had come from so many years ago. The song was about the natural beauty of the place, and the longing to go back home. It seemed to encapsulate her mother's life story. In her very own, simple way, through this song her mother was saying goodbye to her. It was the legacy she left behind.

Dying is hard. Leaving this body of flesh and bone is hard. Sam was a young Korean man in his mid thirties. He was dying of cancer. His entire body was in spasms as his end drew near. His family was in agony and distress watching him die in this way. A number of us from his care team tried to soothe him by gently holding him. It was a heart-wrenching scene. We all felt his pain and struggle—his family, the entire ward—yet there was also an invisible net of love and connection surrounding him. He did not have to do this alone.

**The Wellspring Institute
for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom**

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You never really know what a person's inner experience of their dying process is like. Eventually, Sam calmed down, and his body and facial features relaxed right before he took his final breath. There was an incredible sense of stillness and peace in the atmosphere. All of us continued sitting with him in this special atmosphere, without saying a word, for what felt like a very long time. A few days later, his family came back to the hospice to pick up his belongings. His mother was in tears. With help of the translator she told us that, even though her son had died far too early and his dying had been very difficult to watch, she felt there was love. It was something they had never talked about while he was still alive.

One of the greatest things I have learned in caring for someone is the realization that the person I am with is simply "just another me", another human being. This helps me to dissolve any sense of separation and also softens my heart towards myself and the other. If we are honest with ourselves, don't we tend to focus on what sets us apart from the other, on what makes us unique rather than seeing what we have in common?



Considering the person as “another you”—just like you—is a simple yet effective way to prevent our work from becoming “routine”, and the person we care for from becoming just another case or number. The next step is to put myself in the other person’s shoes, even for a brief moment, and to try to get a sense of what the world looks like from his or her perspective. This simple reflection can be very illuminating, especially when we are working with a situation where we are at a loss as to how to help.

The moment of death is more than just a medical event. Ann Allegre is a hospice physician and graduate of the Contemplative End-of-Life Care program. Ann joined our faculty some years ago. She always cautions her colleagues not to become blasé. For us, it might be the second or third death that we are present for in a week or even in a day. To the person who is dying and his or her family and friends, however, it is a special moment, one that will be remembered by every person present in the room for the rest of their life. “My contemplative practice” says Ann, “ helps me to step back and realize how sacred and important the moment of someone’s death is.”

We may never come to see the effects of our care in tangible ways. Yet every gesture of kindness and courage as we extend ourselves to others is of benefit. It is also an act of self-healing as we are all human beings. We are all imperfect and vulnerable, and we all are fundamentally good and whole. This provides the ground to care for those we accompany.

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Kirsten DeLeo is a senior teacher in Rigpa’s Spiritual Care Program and senior faculty for “Contemplative End-of-Life Care”, a professional certificate launched in partnership with Naropa University in 2003.

Inspired by the “*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*” by Sogyal Rinpoche and under the patronage of the Dalai Lama, the Spiritual Care Program offers contemplative-

based education in North America, Europe and Australia.

The Field

© JoAnne Dodgson

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing
There is a Field. I'll meet you there.*

-Rumi

Translated from his native language written long-ago in a faraway place, Rumi's poetic description of the yearning for a loving field of connection still speaks to our hearts today.

So where is this Field? And how do we get there?

In our modern-day society, the maps we've been given to find acceptance and connection often lead us astray along dead-end paths. We're led to believe that happiness will be found in somebody else or somewhere out there. We buy into the idea that true love and friendship, that relational circles free of anger, judgment and blame, are around the next corner, not available until tomorrow, always just out of reach.

Yet I hear Rumi calling us to remember: we are co-creating the very fields in which we meet.

We can choose to reach beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing
to set aside assumptions and blindly-adopted beliefs
untangle from resentments
leave behind the history
throw away the old maps.

We can choose to root deeply in Love that has no conditions

to hold a wide-open, accepting, respectful embrace
to boldly see ourselves and all life with fresh eyes
listening with curious minds and free-of-fear hearts.

When this lush field of inner connection is nourished
and given lots of room to expand, flourish and grow
the experience of Love, Acceptance and Respect
comes all the more alive
and fills the field within you
and naturally flows beyond
and fills the field around you
setting the ground for relationship
coloring what's woven in between
you and everyone and everything else
nearby and in faraway places
whether or not you speak any words.

We have the power to co-create vast sacred spaces
filled with loving connections and deeply-felt respect
in each and every moment, any time, any place.

I'll meet you there.



Forgiveness and Healing

© Dick Young

This is a little story about me and the results I have had rewiring my brain.

So a little about myself: I'm an 80-year-old male who was born into a home with a paranoid mother and an abusive father. I was physically abused, sexually abused, and emotionally abused by them. And then I went to school. I am ADHD and this, coupled with the trauma at home, meant that I performed very poorly, even to the point of sitting in the corner with a dunce hat on for most of the 2nd and 3rd grade.

I have worked, through therapy, for about 40 years on forgiving my family and I'm pleased to say that after a lot of work I reached an emotional plateau of just being accepting and peaceful. I call it my neutral spot. I also decided that, in my work



on rewiring my brain and internalizing the positive, I would try to reach a higher level in healing those deep footprints around my mother.

It took me about 2 months to bring to mind a time when my mother and myself had a positive relationship/interaction that didn't end in anger and hostility. I loved model trains and had a big Lionel train layout in the basement that I had built. I was at the stage of doing some landscaping - building mountains, tunnels, trees and fields. My mother liked to do handicrafts and she saw what I was doing and offered to help. So, we did papier-mâché over chicken wire for the hills and tunnels, used coffee grounds for the various fields, green sawdust for the grass, and put in trees. It lasted for about 3 hours without a disastrous outcome.

As I sat in the chair working through the process and taking in the good of that memory, I could smell the coffee grounds, feel and taste the papier-mâché, and the smell the musty basement. I could also feel warmth and love from my mother as our hearts connected at some level. My heart and mind relaxed and opened. As I continued to sit there I started to tremble, sweat a little bit, cry, and then felt an overwhelming presence of her love for me. It was a very, very deep experience – and I've gone back through it a few times and re-experienced it.



Foundations of Well-Being

Experiential Activity: The Caring Quilt

© Laurel Hanson

The [*Foundations of Well-Being*](#) is an online program teaching participants how to hardwire the 12 pillars of well-being - such as mindfulness, gratitude, and courage - into their brain. This experiential activity is from the first pillar in the program: *Self-Caring*. You can watch Laurel Hanson's video tutorial for it at <http://bit.ly/caringquilt> and see its directions and template just below.

The Caring Quilt

Materials needed:

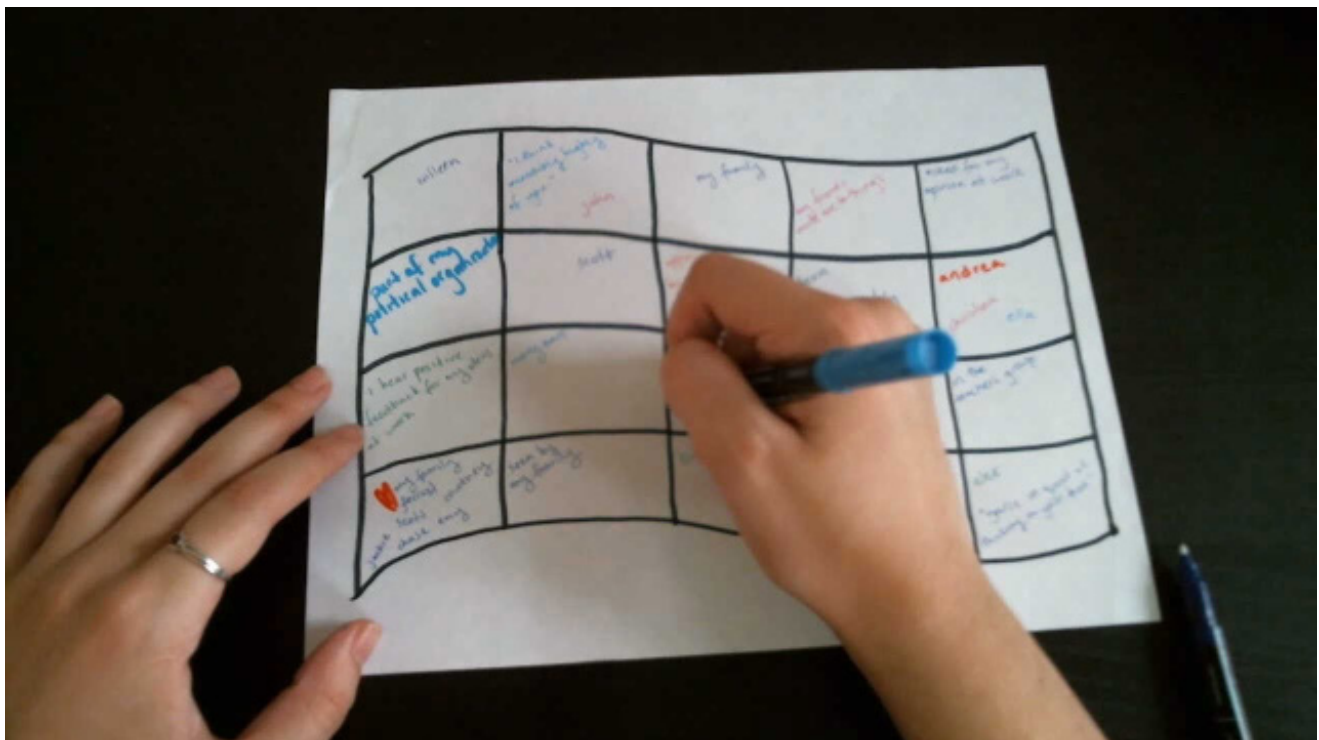
Activity template (on page 14), markers or other things with which to write or draw

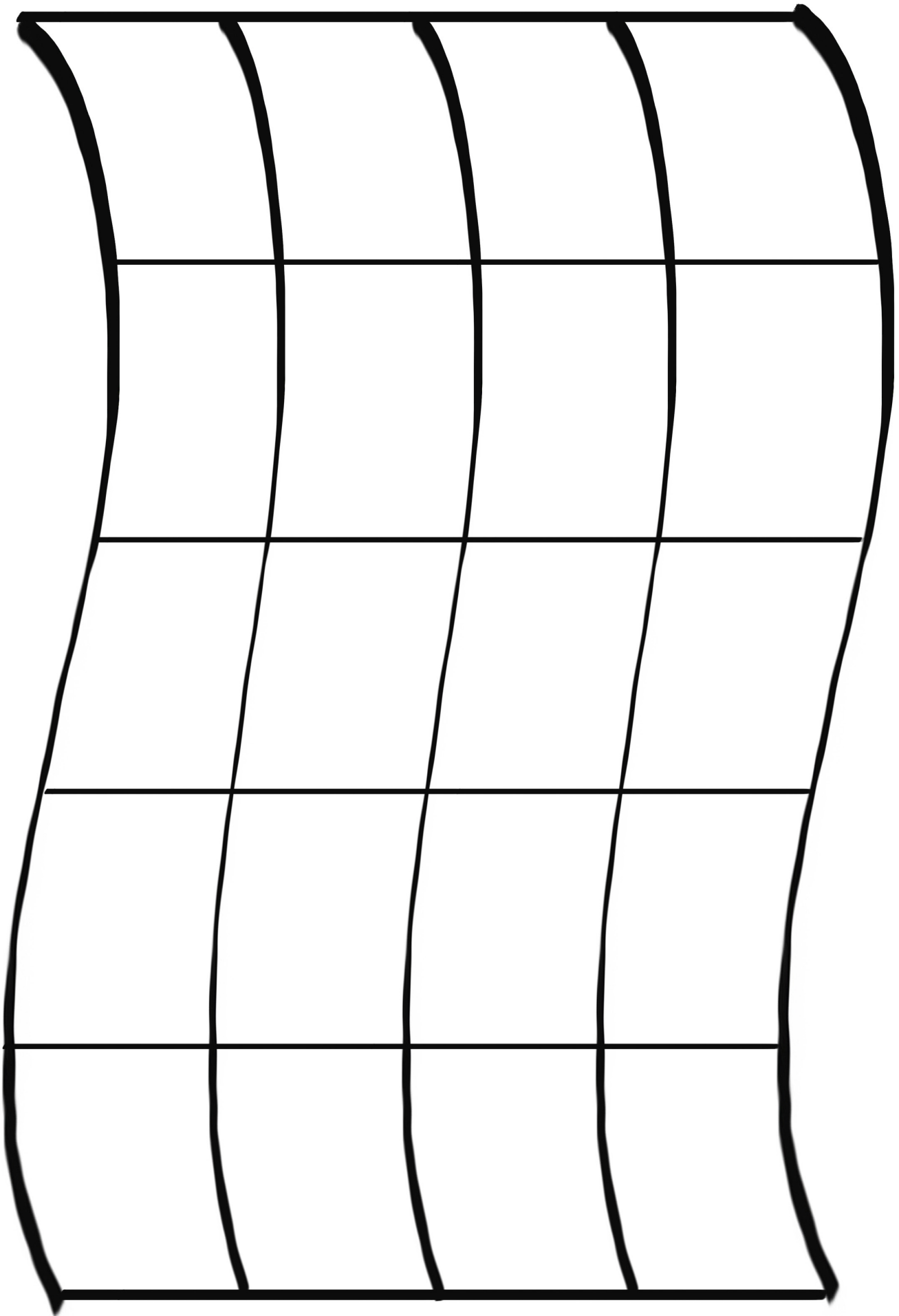
Directions:

1. On the quilt template, use different colored markers to write, draw, and otherwise depict things that help you feel cared about. We'll explore the five aspects of caring for yourself (see below). Throughout the activity, you could write the names of those who care (or have cared) about you or draw little pictures of them, indicate activities or settings in which you feel cared about, write down things people have said to you or inspiring quotations, or put in anything else that helps you feel warm or good or safe inside. Remember that these relationships do not have to be perfect for the aspect(s) of caring in them to count and to be real.
2. The first aspect of feeling cared about is *feeling included*. This could be at work, among friends, in nature, in groups and organizations, or with any other situation or person in which you have belonged, been a part of, or otherwise been included.
3. The second aspect is *feeling seen*. Write or draw people, pets, groups, events, or settings in which you are (or have been) understood, empathized with, or seen – or in which someone was simply *trying* to understand you.

4. The third aspect is *feeling appreciated or respected*. Write or draw people, pets, groups, events, or settings in which you are (or have been) appreciated, respected, valued, on the receiving end of gratitude, wanted, or recognized – for your contributions, character, talents and skills, humor, opinions, warm heart, or anything else.
5. The fourth aspect is *feeling liked*. Write or draw people, pets, groups, events, or settings in which you are (or have been) liked. This could be relatively mild and simple, like a barista who is genuinely warm and friendly with you, or more intense and complex, such as the liking, affection, and mutual loyalty you have with a close friend.
6. The fifth aspect is *feeling cherished or loved*. Write or draw people, pets, groups, events, or settings in which you are (or have been) cherished or loved.
7. If you like, now go through and write down words (“loved,” “seen,” “warm,”) that arise when you bring to mind a feeling of being truly cared about. Imagine or sense this caring for you as a warm and cozy and supportive quilt wrapping around you. Take a moment, if you’d like, to let these feelings sink into you more and more deeply.

Watch the video tutorial at <http://bit.ly/caringquilt>





Still Wanting

© Tom Bowlin

I'm still wanting

My parents

To be

Proud of me

And they've been

Dead for Years

<http://writingonnapkins.com>

Skillful Means

[Your Skillful Means](#), sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Building Your Social Support Network

Purpose / Effects

Numerous studies have shown the benefits of a strong social support network. Having good friends that you can count on can help improve depression and increase feelings of happiness, self-worth, belonging, and security.

Method

Summary

Build your social support network by maintaining current friendships, getting involved in your community, and meeting new people.

Long Version

Cultivating and maintaining current relationships

- Make a list of friends and family members that you are close to and make an effort to connect with them regularly. Aim for one emotional connection (e.g. call, text, email) a day but be gentle with yourself if you don't do that.
- Remember to keep in touch with friends when things are going well and not only when you are struggling.
- Look for opportunities to practice listening to, supporting, and encouraging your friends.

- Rotate sharing your problems with different friends instead of having only one person you always go to.
- Be aware of friends that are overly negative or leave you feeling drained.

Connecting with people in your community

- Brainstorm activities and hobbies you enjoy and look for opportunities to do them in your community (e.g. sports teams, coaching, outdoor activities, cooking).
- Find something you are passionate about and volunteer for that cause.
- Join a gym or take exercise classes.
- Take courses at a community college or continuing education program.
- Get a pet and connect with fellow pet lovers. Pets are beneficial for your health!

Meeting new people and building friendships

- Go to social places such as coffee shops, parks, etc. where you have a higher probability of meeting people.
- Make a list of potential friends including people you know peripherally or just met and invite them to do an activity.
- Look for opportunities to meet friends of current friends.



Perspectives on Self-Care

Make a point of accepting every invitation you can. Although this can sometimes be awkward or uncomfortable, especially if you are shy, you will find yourself in many new situations and will meet more people this way.

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this *Bulletin*), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

History

The tips provided in this method came from a variety of sources, including the National Mental Health Association and the Mayo Clinic's online resources.

Notes

As always, practice good judgment when meeting new people, and if they make you feel unsafe or uncomfortable in any way, make sure to take care of yourself and safety.

Tips to remember when trying to make new friends:

- Try not to take it personally if not everyone responds to your invitations or efforts.
- Remember to be patient and that making friends takes time.
- Try not to be too picky about who you hang out with initially. You can evaluate later on if you want to pursue or continue the friendship once it is formed.

See Also

[Gottman's Marriage Tips](#)

External Links

Article on the benefits of friendships

<http://www.oprah.com/relationships/The-Hidden-Benefits-of-Friendship>

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.