Promoting self care and well-being among feminist activists and women's rights defenders: Reflections from Burma and Palestine

By Ginger Norwood Buddhist Chaplaincy Program Upaya Zen Center March 2013 This paper is dedicated to feminist activists and women's rights defenders working for inner peace and collective liberation in Burma, Palestine, and around the world

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is itself to succumb to the violence of our times. Frenzy destroys our inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful. – Thomas Merton

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare. – Audre Lorde

Sometimes I look in the mirror and admire all the beauty that God created in me.

 Annabelle Mubi, Women's Protection and Empowerment project manager, Thai/Burma border

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Abstract

This paper explores self care and well-being among feminist activists and women's rights defenders. Using Bernie Glassman's analogy of the Supreme Meal of Life, I discuss the necessary ingredients of the five courses of spirituality, study and learning, livelihood, social action, and community and relationship as they relate to the various dimensions of our well-being: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and relational. Starting with my own background as a feminist activist, I discuss the factors limiting women activists' well-being and the importance of social context and identity when considering aspects of self care. I consider the role of the activist chaplain in preparing a meal of well-being and then reflect on my experiences and learning from facilitating self care and well-being workshops with feminist activists and women's rights defenders from Burma and Palestine. Finally, I analyze the self care and well-being workshops from the perspective of the five course meal, recognizing the ingredients of each course that could support feminist activists and movements grounded in sustainable visions of peace and justice for ourselves and our communities. How we prepare and enjoy the joyous feast is the conversation to which I hope to contribute through this paper.

Introduction

In *Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master's Lessons in Living a Life That Matters* (1997), Zen teacher and author Bernard 'Bernie' Glassman describes 'The Supreme Meal' of living one's life fully and in the present moment as passed on by Zen master Dogen. Aligned with the Zen teaching of the Five Buddha Families, the five courses of the Supreme Meal involve spirituality, study and learning, livelihood, social action or change, and community and relationship. Each of these courses is essential to the meal of a full life.

Spirituality may or may not be tied to a particular religious tradition and involves any activity that "helps us to realize the oneness of life and provides a still point at the center of all our activities" (Glassman, 1997, p. 8). In the Buddha families, spirituality is characterized by the qualities of spaciousness, receptivity and peace. Study and learning, evoking qualities of clarity and precision, gives us the knowledge we need and sharpens our intelligence as we move out into the world. When combined, spirituality and learning can be a solid foundation on which to generate expansive resourcefulness so that we can pursue livelihood in ways that we sustain ourselves, aware of the world around us and the impacts of our actions. Our social action grows and develops out of this spiritual awareness of interconnectedness. The last course of community and relationship is characterized by engaging passion, and brings all the other courses together to create a joyous feast (Glassman, 1997; Rockwell, 2002).

In this paper, I use the framework of the Supreme Meal and relate it to my work with feminist activists and women's rights defenders on our own self care and well-being as we work for peace and justice in our communities and the world. Starting with my own background as a feminist activist, I discuss my approach to well-being in relation to the five course meal and the importance of social context when considering aspects of self care. The literature review provides an overview of relevant research on the need for self care interventions and my perspectives on what is missing from the current debates. In preparing for the five course meal, I discuss the role of the activist chaplain in facilitating a meal of well-being and then reflect on my experiences and learning from facilitating self care and well-being workshops with women's rights defenders and feminist activists from Burma and Palestine. Finally, I analyze each of the five courses, recognizing the ingredients of each course that contribute to the joyous feast of well-being.

My background: Spiritualized social justice activism

I have lived and worked in Thailand since 1997 as an activist and facilitator in social justice movements. I originally moved to Thailand to work with a women's organization in the refugee

camps on the Thai-Burma border. Five years later, I co-founded International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP) with my dear friend and colleague Ouyporn Khuankaew, a Thai activist who had worked with grassroots women's groups around Southeast Asia as part of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB). We came together around a vision of creating a space where women activists could learn and share together. As feminist activists on spiritual paths, we knew well the feelings of isolation, alienation and disconnection that so many activists experience. Our feminist communities are wary of spirituality, either because it is equated with religious institutions in which many women have experienced marginalization and oppression in the name of religious tradition; or because spirituality is understood to be personal, private, and passive, in direct opposition to the political, public, problem solving orientation of activism. On the other hand, women activists in religious communities face skepticism towards feminism, as it is misunderstood to be anti-male, anti-family, anti-religious. Thus few spaces exist for those of us seeking holistic and seamless integration of our spiritual lives and our activist lives. Ouyporn and I sought to create such a space to foster community where we recognize the interconnection between the inner work of building peace within ourselves and the outer work of our social justice activism. We cultivate spiritual practice as a foundation for sustainable activism: activism that is grounded in values of peace, compassion, wisdom and justice for ourselves and our world. We see this as an antidote to the burnout, despair, hopelessness, and fatigue that so many activists experience. Self care and well-being is essential to – is at the heart of – sustainable activism.

For just over 10 years now, IWP has offered workshops and retreats to social activists, based on our 'triangle framework' of the integration of feminism, non-violent activism, and spiritual practice for personal and social change. All of our courses focus on understanding society (power, structural violence, dominant culture and partnership culture, oppression, marginalization and privilege); understanding ourselves (identity, gender, sexuality, and the ways we internalize what society teaches us); and cultivating awareness (mindfulness practices and building peace within so we act from a place of clarity and peace). We have worked extensively within the Burma movements for democracy, especially the Burma women's movement, Thai grassroots movements including people living with HIV/AIDS, the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) movement, and women's rights activists; and regionally within Asia with community peace organizations and women's groups from Sri Lanka, India, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and Tibet. I am constantly inspired, humbled, challenged, and renewed by the activists we meet through our workshops, and my reflections on this journey are part of my own process of self care and well-being.

My approach: Five aspects of well-being in relation to the five course meal

Bernie's prescription for the five course meal strikes me as profound in its simplicity, a workable formula for holistic integration of our lives. In my work with activists on personal and movement sustainability, I also use a five point formula of well-being, recognizing the inter-related aspects of our lives, including physical, emotional, intellectual/mental, spiritual and relational dimensions.

In the way I describe these personal aspects of well-being, physical well-being refers to taking care of our body, ensuring proper rest, diet, and exercise that fosters strength, resilience and balance. Emotional well-being is the ability to express our feelings, embrace difficult emotions without exploding or suppressing them, and to be able to experience joy and happiness. Mental well-being is awareness of our thoughts, their impacts on us, and the intention and ability to think positively. Spiritual well-being is anything that fosters a sense of inner peace and hope. Relational/intimate well-being is having an affirming self image, a positive relationship with our own body, the ability to communicate openly with others, and to express our needs, desires, and pleasures in relationships.

The correlation between the recipe of the Supreme Meal and my activist definition of well-being has helped me to delve deeper into a holistic approach to sustainable well-being on a personal and a movement level. For many feminist activists and women's rights defenders, we see the Supreme Meal of our lives through the lens of our livelihood *as* social action (and social action *as* our livelihood.) Livelihood as social action is the focus, the priority, what makes meaning for many of us, and it is the reason we come together in struggle. Critically, it is also the reason many of us are sick, burned out and full of despair. Using Bernie's analogy, the Supreme Meal is heavy on these courses and too light on the other essential ingredients for optimal well-being. My perspective of the Supreme Meal for activists is built on how we can incorporate, with love and balance, the elements of spirituality, learning and relationship/community into our social action livelihoods, with particular attention on self care for our bodies and minds. Thus we are working to create needed space for spirituality, learning and community to enhance our physical and emotional self care while also seeking ways to blend them into the courses of livelihood and social action for healthier, more sustainable organizations and movements.

Following discussions with organizations working in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border in early 2012, I developed three day "Self Care and Well-Being" workshops for women working in a Women's Protection and Empowerment program. Participants in the workshops included project managers, case workers for domestic violence survivors, safe house coordinators, and women's organization volunteers. The workshops were framed by the five aspects of well-

being and introduced the idea of self care for those of us for whom our livelihood and social action is giving care to others. Later in the year, in collaboration with a feminist women's right organization working with Palestinian activists in Israel, West Bank and Gaza, we expanded the workshops to incorporate the five aspects of well-being into our understandings of what it means to create healthy feminist organizations and movements that support our well-being.

Self care and well-being in a social context

While self care and well-being is personal —making ourselves feel healthier and happier, none of us live in isolation and our well-being is impacted by many factors around us. External factors can either facilitate or hinder our self care and well-being and understanding the social context in which we live and work is essential. Many of the factors and conditions that enhance or limit our well-being are cumulative and indirect influences that may not be readily apparent. Thus approaches to self care that only address stress of direct factors like pressures at work can serve to reinforce the dominant notion that self care is one's personal responsibility and can be managed through some stress relief techniques. Ignoring the larger context and our locations based on identity within it limits the possibility for sustainable well-being. We easily get stuck trying to 'fix' symptoms of stress instead of addressing root causes of the stress bound in how we are socialized to be and to act and the beliefs we have internalized around those cultural messages.

In working with feminist activists and women's rights defenders in Burma and Palestine, I presented the image of an individual inside a series of concentric circles that influence our lives. Most immediately, we are impacted by our family and work. Family and work can be great sources of strength, love, inspiration, intimacy and connection. They can also be sources of stress, demands, violence, control and exhaustion. Our family and work are impacted by our immediate community, which again can contribute to our sense of well-being as a source of support or to our stress and fatigue. The community is impacted by factors in the larger environment – the natural world as well as the society we live in. Finally, our relationship to all of these spheres is influenced by our socialization in regards to our ethnicity, gender roles, religion, culture, etc.

The ways in which these factors impact us can be complex and conflicting. A woman living with her family in the refugee camp may find her love and devotion to her family her greatest strength. Yet, the demands of her roles and responsibilities within the family as a mother, wife, daughter and sister to take care of others and put their needs before her own can cause a lot of stress and anxiety. Work may be fulfilling and give us a sense of meaning and worth yet the constant stress of listening to others' suffering, the urgency to respond to different needs, and the limitations of unjust bureaucratic systems we have to encounter can feel like too much. The community may be

a support system but also add pressure and anxiety when we feel judged by neighbors for not being 'good enough' as a community worker or leader, or when we are accused of trying to destroy families and our culture by the work we do defending women's rights. Living in a refugee camp in Thailand may give people from Burma some sense of safety, but the lack of freedom, movement, security and uncertainty contribute to feelings of hopelessness and dependency. Being Palestinian is a great source of pride and power within, but the effects of living under occupation for decades takes its toll on people's inner peace and ability to trust oneself and others.

When we talk about stress and the need for self care, we have to consider all these factors. The daily stress we may feel from a long day at work or sick parents or children to care for is compounded by many other external factors. We may be able to influence and manage some of those factors and others may be out of our control. Our interactions with our family and work, for example, are easier to influence and change than Thai policy towards refugees in the camps or the Israeli government's policy on Palestine. Working to ease the daily stress we feel at work is easier than managing the anxiety of an uncertain future for ourselves and our families. So it is important to see the ways in which the factors are inter-related and can influence one another in a ripple effect. As we learn to better manage the daily stresses around us, we have more clarity and skillful thinking about the anxieties seemingly outside of our control. And just as the external factors influence our well-being, our commitment to well-being can begin to influence the conditions around us. If we are a healthier, more mindful and peaceful person in our family, work, and community, they may begin to shift as well.

Literature Review

There is a growing literature on self care for practitioners in care-giving professions, recognizing the physical and emotional risks of stress, burnout, and secondary trauma on clinicians and therapists. In the mid 1990s, psychologists and mental health researchers began writing about the costs of care-giving professions as *compassion fatigue* (Figley, 1995) and *vicarious trauma* (Saakvitne and Pearlman, 1996). In her third book on trauma, *Help for the Helper* (2006), Babette Rothschild explores both neurobiological and psychological perspectives on factors contributing to secondary/vicarious trauma and offers tools for therapists to mitigate the stresses they experience when working with clients. In *The Resilient Clinician* (2008), Robert Wicks presents a guide for clinicians on developing self care protocols based in mindfulness and meditation. Jon Kabat-Zinn's work on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has mainstreamed the intersection of mindfulness approaches and stress management for both clients and clinicians.

In *Trauma Stewardship*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky broadens the notion of care giving professionals beyond clinicians to include people working in other social services, humanitarian aid workers, and non-profit social change agencies. She also broadens the notions of compassion fatigue, secondary or vicarious trauma by using the term *trauma stewardship* to include, "the entire conversation about how we come to do this work, how we are affected by it, and how we make sense of and learn from our experiences" (pg. 6). Joan Halifax presents a new approach to understanding compassion as emergent and enactive, suggesting that *compassion fatigue* is a misnamed and inaccurate description of the emotional distress experienced when in fact we aren't able to practice compassion (Halifax, 2011; 2012).

The impacts of stress, burnout and secondary trauma on humanitarian aid workers has been addressed by foundations like the Headington Institute (http://headington-institute.org/) and the Antares Foundation (http://www.antaresfoundation.org/). Both groups work to strengthen humanitarian organizations by promoting support, well-being and self care strategies for aid workers. Both websites provide guidelines, tools and written resources for mitigating the negative impacts of aid work and trauma exposure.

Thus, the research is available and clear on who will experience stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary/vicarious trauma by virtue of their work. What is missing from the existing literature by and large are the complexities of identity in terms of how and why people experience these stresses in regards to socialization and expectations based on our multiple identities, in particular gender and ethnicity. Moreover, the majority of the research has a strong western/US focus on professionals with secure employment. Even Lipsky's work, which is intended for a wide audience of social change agents, makes the explicit assumption that the fact we choose our work provides us with a sense of agency and empowerment that can help to counter feelings of burnout. While I would not want to deny that there is choice in every situation, no matter how complicated the conditions or marginalized the community, many feminist activists and women's rights defenders do not experience choice-as-empowerment as Lipsky suggests; the costs of leaving the work – financially, mentally, emotionally – far exceed the consequences of staying. The choice, then, is in the attitudes and intention we bring to the work, which is an issue that needs more focus in the literature on resilience as a factor in self care and well-being.

Shah, Garland and Katz's work on secondary traumatic stress among aid workers in India (2007) expands the typical discussion of humanitarian aid workers as western expatriates to include the specific concerns of local aid workers in their home context. They also recognize factors of identity in terms of who is impacted by stress, including women and people from the same

ethnicity as the people being served. But more research is needed from non-US, professionalized environments where the profession is the only identity considered.

While the work on the stresses, risks and negative consequences of working with traumatized people and populations have been well documented, less has been written about the benefits of such work and people's motivations for being drawn to it in the first place. Emerging fields of study of compassion satisfaction and vicarious resilience offer more complete understandings of care givers motivations and experiences. Compassion satisfaction refers to the satisfaction derived from being able to help other people. It can increase our ability to show and practice compassion and, far from making us burned out and tired, it adds to our sense of well-being and satisfaction. There are also studies to suggest that hearing stories of the ways in which people cope with, survive, and overcome great suffering is a source of immense inspiration for many caregivers and activists and helps us to continue with our work, to reassess priorities in life and to commit to continued service in the face of suffering. Vicarious resilience refers to the way that exposure to the resilience of the survivors we work with has a positive impact on our experience and understanding of ourselves and our own lives. Positive impacts of vicarious resilience are more awareness of the human ability to heal ourselves, more compassion and understanding for our own problems, an increased appreciation for the healing powers of spiritual practices, and appreciation of our own work and our ability to engage with it (Engstrom, Hernandez & Gangsei, 2008).

The focus of this paper is on experiences of feminist activists and women's rights defenders, where among these communities, discussions of self care and well-being are still new. In 2008, a coalition of Latin American feminist activists and organizations published a comprehensive Self Care and Self Defense Manual for Feminist Activists systematically outlining the intersections of gender socialization and the need for self care. CREA, a women's rights organization based in India, republished and distributed the manual in English in 2011 and it is widely known in many feminist activist communities, particularly in the global South. Two women's rights funders, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights and Kvinna till Kvinna, have put much needed resources into women activists' self care and well-being. Urgent Action Fund supported the research and publication of What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance? (2007) by Jane Barry and Jelena Djordjevic in which they interviewed over 200 women's rights activists around the world on their experiences with stress, burnout and sustainable approaches to self care. In 2011, Barry wrote the *Integrated Security Training Manual*, published by both Urgent Action Fund and Kvinna till Kvinna, which provides tools and methodologies for exploring the intersections of personal security and self care among feminist activists and is used by women's rights organizations that Kvinna till Kvinna supports.

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) had a self care and wellness area for the first time at their bi-annual conference in April 2012 that brought together over 2000 women's rights defenders from around the world. They also had several breakout sessions exploring women activists' self care and security. In September 2010 an online conversation by New Tactics for Human Rights (newtactics.org) explored self care among human rights defenders. Activists and mental health professionals who work with activists contributed experiences from their own contexts. Thus, the conversations are underway and needs and strategies are emerging.

A critical area that needs more attention within feminist conversations and movements is the role of spirituality in our activism broadly and specifically in our strategies for self care and well-being. Our organization, International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP), has been practicing spiritual activism with an explicit feminist focus since 2002, but there is still some resistance within feminist circles to shift conversations beyond oppression in the context of religious fundamentalism to spirituality as a source of collective well-being. Fortunately, the conversations around the need for a spiritual base for our feminist activism are now happening globally, expanding the understanding of spirituality beyond the limited continuum it has long been afforded of religious doctrine on one end and new age, esoteric (out of touch) practices on the other.

Spiritual activism is quickly becoming a common-place term to describe activism working to integrate the inner work of building awareness and peace within ourselves and the outer work of social transformation. *The Spiritual Activist* (2002) by Claudia Horwitz is an accessible, hopeful and inspiring manual for activists with exercises for reflection on the intersections of personal and social justice movement sustainability. Michael Sheridan has identified seven themes that emerge in writing on spiritual activism that connect spirituality and social justice activism including: (a) spiritual motivation for justice work; (b) recognition of interdependence; (c) the means matter; (d) acceptance of not-knowing; (e) openness to suffering; (f) outer change requires inner work; and (g) commitment to spiritual practices (Sheridan, 2012, 195). These principles can greatly enrich feminist and women's rights activism, just as feminist perspectives can deepen our analysis of what it means to truly live them. *Feminist.com*, a popular and reputable feminist activist website, has a section dedicated to understanding the principles of spiritual activism from a feminist perspective (Goldstein, 2011).

Many feminist activists have been inspired by Audre Lorde's famous quote, 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' Yet, self care is still largely understood as an antidote to burnout – hopefully preventative, or as a cure for symptoms if we are too late. It is often assumed to require a stepping back or stepping away from

activism and movement work. We as feminist activists need to challenge ourselves to vision feminist movements based in well-being; that our own well-being is prioritized as part of our movement building and struggle for social justice, recognizing that our healthy presence is integral to the just societies we are seeking to create through our activism. Self care is resistance, prioritizing our individual and collective well-being as a way to challenge the dominant messages seeking to silence and make invisible the work of feminist activists and women's rights defenders around the world. Healthy activists in healthy movements cannot be silenced. Self care as resistance is the intersection of spiritual activism and healthy feminist movements. How we get there is the conversation to which I hope to contribute through this paper.

Preparing the Five Course Meal

The role of the activist chaplain in facilitating the meal of well-being

My experience with chaplaincy has come in the form of group process facilitation of spiritual activism, connecting our social justice work in the world with the inner work of self transformation, self care and growth. Among spiritual activists, activist chaplains are those of us who step into roles to facilitate safe, yet challenging, processes of looking inward for personal reflection and transformation. I have identified seven roles or functions of activist chaplains:

Activist chaplains hold space and represent peace within. In the closing of the self care workshop with Palestinian activists, much of the appreciation participants expressed to me as a facilitator was for my sense of calm. It reminded me of a talk Father Richard Murphy gave to the Upaya Chaplaincy program on his reflections from his early days as a chaplain. As he entered his first AIDS patient's room and started talking, the man told him to shut up and just sit; the priest's presence represented the sacred that was needed and he didn't have to add anything by talking. I feel my presence as a facilitator can represent and contribute to a sense of peace within that members of the group are seeking and get a glimpse of through group process in a safe space. The sense of peace within I hold is not devoid of the anger and grief so many activists experience, but I am working to not be consumed and fueled by them. That is a critical distinction at the heart of spiritual activism and what 'convinces' many activists of the value of self care and inner work.

Activist chaplains invite the possibility for spirituality to emerge as a unifying force in groups. Sarah Vesaki, an eco-activist chaplain, shared with the Upaya Chaplaincy program about her process of coming into her own 'pastoral authority' among peers, offering a spiritual perspective/practice when she perceives the need even if there hasn't been an explicit ask from the group. In activist communities of diverse religious faiths and/or of people who have been alienated and disconnected from religious traditions, mention of spirituality is assumed to be risky, unwelcome, and divisive. Yet if spirituality is understood and modeled as building resiliency and peace within, of reclaiming hope and joy, spirituality can unify activists around a positive vision and practices to achieve it. Something as simple as beginning a workshop session with a moment of silence and inviting a bell to start and break the silence can provide an unexpected and powerful grounding tool for activists whose minds and thoughts are constantly racing. Activist chaplains step into their spiritual authority to introduce spiritual perspectives and practices, even if group members are initially uncomfortable because they are unfamiliar. Doing

so provides the space and 'permission' for people to explore what spirituality means for them, individually and collectively, outside the confines of religious practice.

Activist chaplains hold 'insider/outsider' privilege. In the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border and with the Palestinian women activists, I felt a keen sense of holding insider and outsider identities which afforded me the 'legitimacy' to name sensitive issues. I do hold some common identities with members of these communities, as a woman, feminist activist, and women's rights defender, and I was explicit in my solidarity for their movements, both emotionally and ideologically. But I am clearly an outsider in both circumstances and, as such, had the power and privilege of distance and status to name issues that can feel too risky for women entrenched in struggle together to surface.

On the most basic level, I could name a litany of subjects that are taboo in activist circles because they are considered 'soft' and not about the 'real' issues. I named that we need to create spaces for women to come together to talk about self care. That we deserve this time. That the hostility towards our movements has seeped into our movements, our relationships and actions towards each another. That the anger we feel may be positive because it is reflective of our commitment to justice but it is harming us as it consumes us. That many of the ways we have internalized what it means to be good women, activists, leaders, mothers, partners and daughters is neither in the best interest of ourselves, our loved ones, our movements, nor our societies. That the burnout we feel is natural and understandable and it is time to learn to love ourselves. That the path to well-being is a spiritualized path based on awareness and love.

I could name those perspectives and use 'we' because they are common across the movements with which I identify. Participants could agree (or not) and deepen reflections and discussion on points that resonated with them without having to 'own' the touchy/taboo subjects that we as activists are afraid to open up and share with one another. I, as facilitator, 'teacher', 'trainer', (stealth chaplain), could say without hesitation during total relaxation, "You deserve this time for you to rest. There is nowhere else you need to be right now," knowing no one would contradict me, even though everyone in the room likely had five other places they felt they "should" be and as colleagues, they would never had said such statements to one another. I can use my power as a facilitator and privilege as an outsider to create safe spaces for new ways of seeing, based on the assumption that once it is established it can be continued if it is helpful.

Activist chaplains make personal-movement-society connections. The Upaya Buddhist chaplaincy program has a strong emphasis on systems theory, recognizing the mutuality and interconnectedness of influencing change at different levels within systems. Activist chaplains help to make visible the structures within which we are working and living, and challenge

activists to reflect on the interconnections. We ask questions: How have we internalized all that we are struggling to change? How are the messages we tell each other mirroring the hostility around us and harming our well-being? How can we create movements that support our well-being instead of destroy it? What is our vision for a peaceful, healthy society and what are we doing to contribute to it today?

Activist chaplains name and work with emotions as part of our well-being and self care. It is not just about making sure we get to the yoga class on Friday afternoon, or take a hot bath, or eat lunch with our colleagues every now and then. While celebrating those actions as important, cultivating well-being has to include mindful awareness of all five aspects of ourselves. We often talk about stress and burnout as the problems, but it is the underlying emotions - the anger, despair, and grief that lead to the burnout and exhaustion in the first place. Activist chaplains facilitate ways to talk about how to hold and transform emotions, and make working with emotions part of our spiritual practice, as individuals and movements.

Activist chaplains ground our work in the three Zen Peacemaker tenets. The three tenets of not knowing, bearing witness, and loving action, are the foundation for facilitating individual and group processes. Effective individual and group processes involve bearing witness as participants share their experiences and reconnect with their own wisdom through the sharing, resting in the not knowing of what will arise, and trusting that loving action will emerge as individuals in the group listen to themselves and others about how to go forth. Mindful awareness is essential to avoid the patronizing actions of trying to 'fix': awareness of judgments as they arise, of the need to comfort someone expressing emotions, of the need to reassure people everything will be ok, or to move the process along towards a desired outcome.

Activist chaplains hold the balance of supporting the cultivation of personal empowerment and a strong sense of identity and self-worth with non-attachment to the ego. Much of my work with women activists is with the intention to support them to develop a strong sense of self. Claiming one's rightful space in the world is part of resisting and challenging the silencing forces of patriarchal oppression. Women's collective action and rights work is based on the solidarity of the shared identity as women. Processes of empowerment are dependent on recognizing our own inner resources and finding our voice to speak our truths; in doing so we honor and validate our lived experiences at the intersections of our multiple identities (of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc), which are often invisible because they are marginalized.

At the same time, attachment to identity, and the prescribed roles and messages we have internalized from that attachment are severely limiting to many activists' sense of well-being. Attachment to our roles as activists, as women's rights defenders, can make women lose sight of

their needs as there are always other women to defend and protect. Clinging to the identity of feminist activist can make us resistant to communicating openly with others with different agendas and promote entrenchment in our positions.

Spiritual activists try to balance identity as source of power-within with non-attachment to the limiting potentials of identification in order to reach common truths. bell hooks described it best when she said,

"If I were really asked to define myself, I wouldn't start with race; I wouldn't start with blackness; I wouldn't start with gender; I wouldn't start with feminism. I would start with stripping down to what fundamentally informs my life, which is that I'm a seeker on the path. I think of feminism, and I think of anti-racist struggles as part of it. But where I stand spiritually is, steadfastly, on a path about love (hooks, 1992)".

Activist chaplaincy with feminist activists and women's rights defenders from Burma and Palestine: Reflections and learning

Self care and Well-being feels like a subject whose time has come within activist communities. Early in 2012, we (IWP) were contacted by the manager of the Women's Protection and Empowerment program of an international NGO working on the Thai-Burma border. She was concerned her staff were all burned out and wanted to support them; she had heard our organization 'did workshops like that.' It felt like a critical shift on the eve of our 10th anniversary as an organization talking about personal sustainability and transformation: we no longer have to convince groups of the need to talk about these issues, they are coming to us!

Over the next six months, we developed a series of interventions with the staff of this NGO. The program included participation in a trauma healing workshop for their leadership team at our center, a workshop on self care for the town based staff (20 staff spread across four field offices), a series of workshops in the far northern camps for the direct service staff (women working in safe houses, etc), and a manual so they can continue to offer workshops in other camps. The impetus for this thesis came from the self care and well-being interventions with the Karen and Karenni women working broadly on women's human rights in the refugee camps.

In early November, a women's human rights organization working in Jerusalem contacted us. They were in the process of developing a workshop integrating feminist politics and self care for their Palestinian project partners. They had heard of our work and could I come? It felt like a dream to be contacted by a feminist funder committed to self care and well-being and backing it with appropriate resources. Over the next few weeks the workshop organizers and I developed a workshop combining our well-being framework from the camp interventions with feminist ideology and movement building, drawing largely on the work of black feminists and on

liberation theory. At the end of November I co-facilitated a three-day workshop with 20 Palestinian activists from West Bank, Gaza and Palestinians living inside Israel. The preparation and learning from that workshop have greatly influenced my perspective on what it means to create healthy feminist movements as the broad vision as we commit to and facilitate self care among us. It also reiterated for me the need to really explore emotions and our activist reactions to them as root causes of burnout and stress; until we do we are putting band-aids on wounds without working to heal them from within.

In reading background research about stress and burnout, and particularly the research on humanitarian aid workers, I was struck by the fact that most women from Burma I knew working in NGOs fit most or all of the factors and/or identities that increase the risk for stress and burnout symptoms. The same was true for the Palestinian activists. These include:

- women
- people who are from the same ethnic nationality group as the group being served (for example, Karenni staff women working in the Karenni camps)
- people who are from the same country as the people in crisis
- poverty
- children in the home/in one's care
- severe exposure to the crisis/disaster
- living in a highly disrupted community
- experienced traumatic events in the past
- living in isolated areas
- middle managers may not have peer support; pressured by upper management for outcomes; need to both supervise and support other staff
- New employees want to prove themselves and their abilities and may not have experience dealing with work pressures
- "middle age" workers 40-60 years old
 (Shah, Garland & Katz, 2007; Laidig & Speakman, 2009)

When I presented this list at the workshop with refugee staff women, a few said every point was true for them, and everyone in the group said "some or most" of the points described them. Naming and normalizing the fact that we are at risk of stress and burnout in part because of identities we hold seemed to be a great relief to the staff; it is not that they are lacking in strength, skills or know how, it is simply the reality.

One participant said her symptoms of stress 'made sense' to her after seeing this list. She said:

"I keep having dreams that someone will come and abuse my kids, even though I know I won't let that happen. Every one of these points describes my situation, so I can see the dreams are stress from being a new manager in the camp and worrying about how to take care of my own family while I listen to the stories of other Karen women and mothers."

Despite the fact that all the workers fit these profiles of risk for stress and burnout, everyone in the workshops said the idea of 'self care' was very new for them. During a particularly quiet session in one of the camps, my co-facilitator and translator, Moe Moe Aung, asked why everyone was so shy to speak. The response from one participant summed it up: "We aren't too shy; it's all so new. We've never talked about ourselves before!"

In the closing circle of the first day with case managers responding to cases of domestic violence, one participant described her experience:

"When I heard I was going to attend a self care workshop, I assumed it was about teaching the survivors we work with how to care for themselves. Even being here in the workshop, I've still been thinking how I could use this knowledge to help them. It is just occurring to me now that this workshop is for me, for my care. I've never thought about *me* before."

For women's rights activists in the camps, their prevailing and multiple roles as women leaders, women's organization members, mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters override any sense of an individual/personal identity. Identity is relational and the strong gender socialization with those relations is of sacrifice, putting others before oneself, of keeping the peace at whatever personal cost. In fact, there is not even calculation of the personal cost, it is just assumed and shouldered as part of the roles that all include taking care of others.

Thus in this context, for women to think about what *I* might need or want neither comes naturally nor is it culturally endorsed or encouraged. Women are trained to derive happiness from others' happiness and thus even one's well-being is in relation to those for whom they care, not from sources internally derived or sought out.

Issues of identity were also at the heart of the lack of self care for Palestinian women activists. For activists fighting for the liberation of an entire population, women's issues are, at best, considered secondary to the freedom and justice for the whole group. As Rana Khoury, my cofacilitator in the Palestinian self care workshop, explained of her activist context, "Everything in the Palestinian movement is about the occupation. Women's issues and women's rights are

invisible. So imagine the women who are fighting for them - we are completely invisible! The thought of our self care has no place."

Burma activists face similar challenges. Many activists working in women's organizations have told me they have been challenged by male colleagues: 'are you working for democracy or for women?' as if the two are mutually exclusive. Thus, in this climate of having to defend and justify the work in a context of often hostile voices from even within social justice movements, women feel immense pressure to work tirelessly to promote the cause.

Many women activists' identities are coupled with complex issues of power and privilege which further distance women from their own needs. Palestinian women's rights activists are labeled 'elitist,' 'bourgeois,' and 'westernized' by critics aiming to undermine their work. In order to prove these labels are inaccurate judgments, women activists feel pressure to work non-stop. Many have internalized the notion that any acts of self care are 'extravagant' and that to indulge in devoting time to oneself would mean the critics are right.

For the women's rights activists working in the camps, their relative privilege of a salary and status in the community, especially vis-à-vis the survivors who seek their services, contribute to feelings of pressure and duty to work as much as they can. Struggling with guilt because they have more relative security than others, there is a strong feeling that they 'can never do enough' to help others.

For many activists, thinking about self care can feel like 'too much' because it is seen as another project or problem we need to take on. Thoughts along the lines of, 'I'm already trying to save the world, now I have to make time to really take good care of myself, too?' can feel overwhelming and impossible. Moreover, the reality that many women's rights activists are trauma survivors, and being disconnected from our bodies has long been a coping strategy of unhealed traumas, attention to self care can feel unsettling and awkward at best, terrifying at worst.

Ideally, self care is about more than just trying to cope with the pressures and stresses around us, more than just trying to ease stress we feel or prevent damage to our body. Attention to our self care and well-being helps us to grow, thrive and live more fully. That requires positive visioning, being able to imagine what it would look like, feel like, be like to feel healthy, whole, and sustained. Often as caregivers and activists, we are very good at naming the problems and all that is wrong, but we have a harder time visioning what would feel *Good. Well.* In workshops, we reminded participants that spending time alone and with colleagues and friends visioning and imagining a positive future helps us to open up to possibilities of what can be and helps us to live them more fully now. As Alice Walker, an American poet and writer says, "Look closely at the present you are constructing: it should look like the future you are dreaming."

During one workshop, a participant earnestly asked, 'Do you think talking about self care for three days will really help me?' I answered no. I don't think *talking* about self care for a few days will alter deeply ingrained attitudes, behaviors, habits and internalized messages that are limiting our ability to really love ourselves. But I do think *practicing* self care in a supportive environment can offer a glimpse of what it might feel like to prioritize oneself into better health and more positive mental states. The workshops were designed to introduce the ideas, offer some techniques, and plant some seeds for more reflection, thinking, action.

For me as a facilitator of this process, it is important to remember to celebrate small successes and to practice non-attachment to outcome. During the first workshop with the NGO staff working in the camps, participants brainstormed severe symptoms of stress and burnout with such ease it was clear they had personal experience with them. Examples like locking oneself in a dark room and not speaking with anyone all weekend, long periods of insomnia, multiple physical aches and pains, suicidal thoughts, and feeling like a robot were clearly not hypothetical; it was apparent many of the participants were presently living with these symptoms.

At the end of the workshop, we asked each person to identify something they could commit to do to improve their self care, and over half the group said, 'Drink more water.' While chronic dehydration does cause many physical problems and a loss of energy, and could no doubt contribute to people's overall sense of improved health, I could not help but ponder water's ability to address the depression and burnout so palpable in the room. And I have to admit to some feelings of disappointment that perhaps we had not been able to convey the messages of holistic well-being as well as we hoped.

And yet, the tangible, seemingly small action of reminding oneself and colleagues to drink more water requires mindful awareness, and cultivating awareness of ourselves, our actions and those around us is an integral part of spiritual activism. Recognizing that we can take action which can positively impact our well-being helps us develop the confidence and power within that can lead to bigger, more profound changes in the future. When I followed up with the participants from the first workshop three months later and asked what they had been able to integrate into their daily routines to improve their well-being, they included a range of strategies incorporating diverse aspects of the five course meal:

'I'm keeping my promises to myself: I drink more water, eat regularly, exercise and do yoga almost every day, and I leave the office punctually.'

'I'm expressing myself more freely. I find a friend who will really listen so I can say what I need to say. I don't hold back and I express my emotions.'

'I have reduced pork and ajinomoto [MSG] in my diet, and I'm more appreciative of my food.'

'My supervisor and I regularly ask each other if we are doing our self care and praise each other when we are!'

'I have more compassion. I try to practice compassion for men who abuse women and understand the root causes of their actions. This is not only about work, it helps me understand and deal with my anger at my father.'

'The biggest thing I had to overcome in order to practice self care was my guilt. I used to feel very low, like I never do enough. Now I'm able to be grateful for what I can do and see it is good and enough.'

'I feel more peaceful. I always look at problems in the community and try to solve them, and I often neglect myself. I realize I need to slow down and let myself breathe so I'm not so reactive and I can think more clearly about the best solution.'

Although the feminist activists and women's rights defenders in the Burma and Palestine workshops all said the idea of self care is new, the importance of it is intrinsically understood in women activist communities; the consequences of burnout, overwork, distress and despair have taken their toll, physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually and in our relationships. We seek a sense of peace within as a foundation for well-being. Yet it feels elusive and out of reach given the nuanced and multi-layered facets of gender and activist identities, and the forces of marginalization, oppression and internalized notions of our social roles and responsibilities that complicate our ability to truly know and love ourselves. Cultivating awareness is a critical first step in cultivating the sense of peace that can calm and ground us, even amidst the chaos. Once we develop the awareness, the clarity of authentic self care to match our needs can take shape. That process of awareness that leads to wise action is the five courses of the Supreme Meal of life.

The Five Courses

Spirituality, the first course

Spirituality is, at best, a contentious topic of exploration among women's rights activists, as many women feel oppressed by and alienated from religious communities, teachings and hierarchies. Added to that in the Burma context, religion has often been used by the military regime to 'divide and conquer' ethnic minority communities; Buddhism is considered by many in the camps as the religion of the oppressor. Among the Palestinian activists, there was an assumed (and spoken) sense that the feminist movement is secular space, despite the outspoken presence of several

deeply religious women in the workshop where everyone was identifying as feminist activists. Religion is therefore exclusively in the private domain in most activist communities, and spirituality, equated with religion, is prayer or meditation that one does on her own time.

In relation to self care and well-being, I define spirituality and spiritual practice as broadly and all encompassing as possible - as 'elements in our lives that help us maintain hope, counter despair, and feel a sense of peace.' The foundation of our approach with activists is mindfulness and awareness, linking the clarity of mindfulness to self care and compassion. In the workshops, each session started with a guided breathing meditation, we did mindful movements together after breaks, and practiced mindful eating and walking as techniques to develop awareness. Each lunch break included a half hour guided total relaxation body scan. Thus 'spiritual practices' were integrated into the day, and also spirituality, as a force of hope and peace, was the basic foundation for our work towards well-being.

The workshop with Palestinian activists started just three days after the cease fire ending eight days of bombing in Gaza. Emotions were high. There was a sense of fragility among the participants and a range of emotions just below the surface causing unspoken anxiety. I offered an additional framework of Joanna Macy's "Work the Reconnects" spiral of gratitude, honoring the pain, seeing with new eyes, and going forth, recognizing it as a spiritual process for social justice activism. We began the workshop with gratitude and did some work on despair and grief the following day.

Excerpt from the Self Care and Well-Being manual (Norwood, 2012):

Mindfulness and Self care

Mindfulness means paying attention to what is happening in the present moment. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a US based doctor, writer and teacher, defines mindfulness as "moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally, and as openheartedly as possible" (Kabat-Zinn, 2006). Mindfulness means we are just noticing what is happening without trying to control it, avoid it, cling to it or run from it. Just being aware.

Developing mindfulness helps us to deal with physical, emotional and mental stress. Research shows that for many people, mindfulness helps reduce anxiety, depression, fatigue, anger and chronic pain. It can also help improve sleep, cultivate self-compassion and generate positive emotions. Mindfulness helps us develop resilience to face the stress and difficulties in our lives.

Each interaction we have is an opportunity to practice mindfulness in our speech, our actions, and the way we listen to other people. It's hard to engage fully with the world when our mind is frantic. Staying present, we also begin to notice and be mindful of our emotions – anger, joy, frustration, fear, excitement, despair – without becoming attached to them. Mindfulness strengthens our ability to ask: What is my truth? What I am feeling right now? What do I need? What is the best response to this situation? What else do I need to know? Mindfulness increases our ability to think clearly about our work and ourselves (Horwitz, 2002).

The continuous practice of mindfulness helps us to develop a powerful inner resource to use in stressful situations. In an emergency or stressful situation, mindfulness helps us to maintain a clear focus on the tasks at hand. It helps us to lessen our reactivity and respond from a place of clarity. Once the emergency or stressful situation is over, mindfulness can help us to transition back to our sense of safety and calm instead of continuing to replay the stress in our mind. Mindfulness gives us greater control over our habits and behaviors and awareness of our experiences and reactions to them (Kane, 2012).

Self care and well-being begins with mindful awareness; awareness of what is happening in our body and our mind. Mindfulness practices can teach us valuable lessons about ourselves without judgment or negative interpretations. It can help us to experience "being" with positive, negative and neutral experiences instead of our tendencies to always need to be "doing" something to change things, or running away from our or others' negative feelings.

Compassion

Compassion is second only to spirituality as a taboo topic among most activists, as compassion is considered passive, soft, weak, condoning of harm, and conciliatory, in direct opposition to justice. What gets lost in this interpretation, aside from the implicit violence of 'othering' those who do harm, is compassion for ourselves and fellow activists, all of which are critical elements of self care and well-being.

On the other end of the spectrum are activists as caregivers who are motivated to find meaning through our compassion. With good intention of helping others, many activists experience burn out as what is perceived as the 'costs' of compassion. Either way, compassion is misunderstood as a problem at great peril to activist movements. Thus exploring the ideas of self compassion and looking more deeply into the essential elements of compassion is an integral part of spiritual exploration.

Self Compassion

Self-compassion includes three main components: (a) self-kindness—being kind and understanding toward ourselves in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical, (b) common humanity—perceiving our experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as our own individual suffering, and (c) mindfulness—holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them. Self-compassion is an emotionally positive self attitude that can help protect against the negative consequences of self-judgment, isolation, and depression (Neff, 2004, p. 29).

As explained by Kristin Neff, a researcher who studies the health benefits of self compassion,

"Self compassion requires that we are touched by our own suffering. We don't ignore or repress our own pain, but stop to realize, 'this is really difficult, I'm going through a lot right now.' It also means that we desire well-being for ourselves and feel compelled to help heal our own pain. When we fail or make mistakes, it means that we have a kind and understanding attitude towards ourselves that accepts our limitations and imperfections rather than harshly judging ourselves. Finally, it means that we see our personal experience in light of the common human experience. Instead of feeling isolated and separated from others when we fail or are suffering, we stop to realize that many others feel what we are feeling. It's all part of being human" (Neff, 2004, p. 29).

Four essential parts of Compassion

Many humanitarian aid workers are drawn to the work of helping others out of a deep sense of compassion and desire to help those who are suffering. Often when aid workers experience compassion fatigue we can feel guilty or weak that our compassion is depleted, like we are not strong enough.

Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax Roshi has worked as a caregiver for dying people and with people in the prison system in the United States for over 40 years. She says that the idea of *compassion fatigue* is misnamed because when we are fully practicing compassion, we do not get burned out from it. It is when we get distressed with empathy and caring but are not able to turn it into compassionate action that we get depressed and overwhelmed. We become too tired to continue.

The four parts of compassion are:

- being fully open and present to the suffering while also holding the awareness that it is not your suffering
- intention to release/reduce the suffering
- taking action to reduce the suffering
- not being attached to the outcome/being with what is.

(Halifax, 2011)

Thus, compassion is awareness and action with positive intention. It requires us to be fully present to the suffering the person/people we are working with is experiencing. We cannot hide from or suppress the suffering, but we also have to be able to recognize that the suffering is not our own. We have to find the healthy balance of empathy for the suffering person and awareness that we are not the suffering one in this moment. Our ability to hold this balance allows us the space and clarity to take action in the ways we can to reduce the suffering. But we have to be able to take action without needing the outcome to be a certain way. Otherwise, we will get depressed and angry each time our actions don't completely solve the suffering. But the fact is, there may be many conditions in the situation that we cannot change; our compassion helps us to identify the ones we can change and to take positive action.

Study and Learning, the second course

As self care and well-being are still 'new' concepts for many feminist activists and women's rights defenders, the study and learning needed in activist communities around these issues is expansive, ranging from identifying the 'problems' causing the need for self care to ways to 'solve' the problems. The latter was the focus of most of the participants' expectations: tools and

techniques to feel better and less stressed (and mostly to help others feel better and less stressed). Equally important, however, is learning about the messages women, activists, people facing multiple forms of violent and subtle oppression in refugee camps or living under occupation, have internalized that informs, impacts and directs beliefs and actions. For feminist activists and women's rights defenders, the language of rights, of equality, of oppression and liberation comes easily; but the deeply entrenched messages we've been socialized to believe are the critical *un*-learning that has to happen for a process of self care and well-being to be able to take shape.

Joanna Macy calls it 'new ways of seeing' in the spiral of 'The Work That Reconnects' and it is what leads to positive action when 'going forth'.

Naming the limitations to our well-being and self care is the first step. Common factors exist across professions and social contexts that cause stress and limit all aspects of well-being. So while the specificity of experience, culture, gender, and location impact the ways in which the factors are internalized and responded to, the factors themselves are cross cultural.

Psychological and emotional challenges for aid workers, care givers, and activists

Roshi Joan Halifax has identified six factors she calls Edge States for Clinicians, Therapists and Caregivers. These six common factors are relevant and critical in activist communities and movements and contribute to increased stress and reduced well-being across identities. Being aware of them is critical so that we can learn to mitigate their negative influences.

- O Pathological Altruism: always putting others' needs ahead of our own to the point that we cause ourselves physical, emotional or mental harm. When we start neglecting ourselves in our effort to take care of others, we are no longer helping anyone.
- Burnout: the result of cumulative work demands and stress that leads us to feel exhausted,
 ineffective, hopeless, and unable to continue in our work.
- Secondary Trauma: feeling the effects of trauma and experiencing its symptoms as a result of working with trauma survivors and their suffering.
- Moral Distress: When we know the right thing to do to reduce suffering/help someone in need but we are not able to do it because of the systems or institutions (regulations, policies, corruption, etc) we are part of. Moral distress is when we feel like we are not able to be effective and that we are contributing to the injustice and violence we are trying to stop.
- Horizontal Hostility: anger and aggression directed towards our colleagues. When we are
 part of systems that make us feel like we have no control or power, we can take out our
 frustration and anger on the people around us. We blame our stress and burnout on our

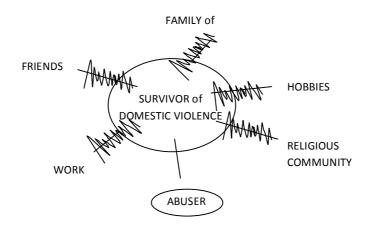
- colleagues or people with less power than us (maybe clients or younger staff) because we feel powerless to change the root causes.
- Structural Violence: the systematic discrimination based on our gender, class, ethnicity, legal status, religion, age, sexual orientation, etc. that is perpetuated by the various institutions that govern our lives (family, community, religion, education, media, politics)

Activists in both the Karenni and Palestinian communities identified with these factors and acknowledged the strong presence and influence of these factors in limiting their well-being. Hostility and aggression towards colleagues, what Joan Halifax calls "horizontal hostility", is among the most difficult factors to contend with and leads to high rates of burnout and moral distress. As one activist who worked with trafficked children explained to me, "People think my work is difficult because I work with so much suffering. That part is not as difficult as dealing with the aggression and apathy of my colleagues." Issues of power and control are rarely discussed among activist communities as we are supposed to be the ones challenging abuses of power.

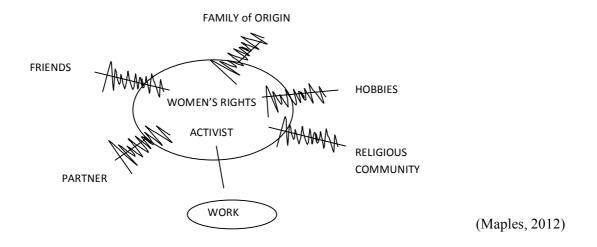
The Palestinian women activists agreed these six factors limit their well-being and said, "Yes, but there is more." They felt that the total lack of space for women – literally physical public space as well as intellectual and emotional space for women's issues and concerns - was a major exacerbating factor to the impact of each of the other edge states. Even larger than structural violence, the lack of space for women creates and dictates their public and private lives so completely that it is the primary root cause of the other edge states.

Singular identity with a job leads to burnout and isolation

Cheri Maples, a veteran US police officer who teaches mindfulness to people within the justice system, makes the comparison of 'overinvestment with the job leading to a singular work identity' with what happens to a survivor of domestic violence. Usually when a person first starts out in a relationship she has many sources of support to help her feel safe, grounded and balanced. Most will have ties to their family of origin, work, a spiritual/religious community, friends, hobbies, etc. When the partner becomes abusive, she initially has others she can go to for support, solace, counsel, and to help her cope. But if the abuse continues over time, what usually happens is she loses those systems of support and balance. Women who are in abusive relationships often lose contact with family and friends, they may disconnect from people at work and places of worship, and they stop doing things that are fulfilling and meaningful for them. In this way, the survivor's identity is solely tied to her abuser as she has been cut off and isolated from the balancing forces in her life. Her coping mechanisms and sense of self confidence can become depleted because her relationship with an abuser is the thing defining her.



In much the same way, chronic and constant overwork cuts us off from people and activities that help to bring balance, connection and meaning in our lives. Often new employees will have many outlets and sources of support in the form of family, friends, hobbies, engagement in the community, etc. Work is one part of a healthy, fulfilling life, and when work gets stressful, there are other systems to help to release and reduce the stress, and to build resilience to handle the stresses of work and life. But when/if we work all the time and prioritize work over everything else, relationships with other sources of support start to suffer and we can begin to feel isolated and alone. If we stop making time to do things we love for enjoyment, connection and relaxation, tension and resentment can build up and burnout and fatigue can set in. If work is the only thing we are doing in each day, our identity with work becomes so strong that the stresses and pressures of work feel like they are taking over and we aren't able to regain the perspective we need to handle the difficulties. We can feel like victims to our work and feel like we have lost control over our situation.



Thus, work cultures that encourage workers to <u>not</u> overwork help to ensure employees who are balanced, who handle the stresses of each day and who can continue to do the work for a long

time. Managers who model reasonable work hours and promote an environment in the office for others to do the same can encourage culture shifts that allow people to be productive when they are at work and guilt free when they leave it.

The analogy with a survivor of domestic violence was obviously apt for the staff of the Women's Protection and Empowerment program, as they know well the cycle of control, isolation and victimization of many of their clients. Many have internalized that a singular identity with work is a good thing, as it proves commitment and dedication to the job. Learning about the shadow side of unbalanced commitment created new perspectives on the consequences of overwork.

Understanding stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious (or secondary) trauma

Feeling 'stressed' or 'burned out' is common parlance among women activists, but many people are unaware of the full range of physical, psychological, emotional and behavioral impacts of stress on our lives. Understanding the factors that contribute to stress, burnout, compassion fatigue and secondary trauma helps to ease the symptoms and severity of how we experience them by normalizing the reactions and de-mystifying the reasons.

Excerpts from the Self Care and Well-being Manual:

Causes of Stress

Stress arises from five general sources: internal (thoughts, feelings, emotions); life events; physical body; lifestyle; and environment. Each is explained in more detail below:

Internal: Your thoughts, memories, feelings and belief systems can be a major cause of stress. Internal causes of stress include:

- Negative thinking (interpreting events in a negative way)
- Past emotional trauma
- Fears and phobias
- Perfectionism
- Feeling powerless
- Low self-value
- Not expressing emotions
- Resentment
- Worries and anxieties about present and future events

Physical: Physical injuries, strain, and pain in your body are stressful. Even though we do not have control over many events in our lives, some of the physical causes of stress are within our control. For example, improper breathing (usually breathing too fast and shallow) is not only a symptom of stress, it is also a cause of stress, as your body does not receive enough oxygen. By learning to breathe properly, you can reduce your stress levels and become more relaxed.

Other physical causes of stress are:

- Infections, viruses, fungi, parasites
- Inadequate breathing
- Too much exercise
- Improper exercise
- Physical injury
- Surgery
- Physical pain acute or chronic
- Poor posture
- Repetitive motions over long periods of time

Lifestyle: Your lifestyle contributes directly to the amount of stress that you experience. Some lifestyle causes of stress are:

- Work-aholism (addicted to work)
- Inadequate self care
- Lack of organization and time management
- Overspending spending more money than you have
- Insufficient sleep and rest
- Poor eating habits
- Use of recreational drugs
- Excessive drinking

Environmental: The environment itself can be a source of stress. Pollution, extremes of temperatures, and poor living conditions all contribute to your stress.

Some of the environmental causes of stress are:

- Very loud noises
- Radiation
- Lighting too much or too little
- Fluorescent lighting
- Too hot or too cold
- Impure air and water supplies
- Other toxins plastic, pesticides, toxic fumes
- Severe storms, drought, famine, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods
- War and displacement

(www.stress-relief-tools.com/causes-of-stress.html with adaptation to the context)

Burnout

Burnout is experienced as feelings of hopelessness, emotional exhaustion, and difficulty in dealing with work or in doing our work effectively, a sense that our effort makes no difference. It is usually gradual and builds up over time (Van Hook, 2008).

Compassion Fatigue

Symptoms can affect us at home and work and include difficulty concentrating, loss of hope, exhaustion and irritability. It can also lead to profound shifts in the way we view the world and our loved ones. We may become depressed and cynical at work, which can lead us to make errors, violate boundaries, and lose a respectful perspective towards our colleagues and the people we are serving. It has been shown that when we are suffering from compassion fatigue we work more rather than less. What suffers is our health, our relationships with others, our personal lives and eventually the people we are meant to be helping (Compassion Fatigue Solutions, nd).

During workshops, women named experiencing the following symptoms of stress and burnout:

Physical	Emotional	Mental	Spiritual	Relational
 Headaches Over/under eating Hurt self Tired Trouble sleeping Lower back pain Shoulder pain Stomach pain Constipation/diarrhea Use drugs to relax Can't be still/quiet Headaches Over/under eating Hurt self 	 Blaming self Anxiety Confusion Can't make decisions Feel negative Can't hear feedback Depressed Avoid people Worried/fear Complain Can't stop talking about work Irritated Can't listen Nightmares Stop talking 	 Feeling useless Forgetful Blaming self Anxiety Sad Over react Aggressive Angry No emotions Flashbacks Crying Don't feel effective Guilty Cannot concentrate 	 Don't trust self or others Despair Hopelessness Isolated Feel like never do enough Suicidal thoughts 	 Isolation Disconnected from body Lose friends/don't see friends Can't separate work and home No time to read/write for self Difficulty in relationships Blame others Can't communicate feelings

Of course a lot of these symptoms 'overlap' and it is not so important to categorize them as physical, emotional, etc. The important thing is to recognize the multiple ways stress and burnout affect us.

Trauma

In the Karen and Karenni languages, trauma is understood as 'bad experience.' There is a strong cultural value on overcoming bad experiences with strength exhibited by a suppression of the feelings and emotions that may have accompanied the experience. It is acceptable and appropriate for women's rights activists to understand the trauma experienced by the survivors of violence in their program, but talking about one's own trauma is considered irrelevant and unnecessary at best, indulgent and selfish at worst. It is seen as inflicting your pain and suffering onto others and they have their own to deal with.

In a trauma healing workshop at our center attended by six project managers of the Women's Protection and Empowerment program, participants were asked to share an experience of trauma from their past and how they were able to cope and survive. All but two of the project managers chose instead to talk about future hopes and dreams, preferring not to dwell on the past. While this form of positive re-framing and recognition of possibilities for the future is a sign of resilience, it was also indicative of discomfort in discussing anything considered negative or that might evoke strong emotion. When the two project managers who did share about past trauma continued sharing in the big group, they cried as they explained it was the first time they had spoken about it to anyone and they felt relieved. Their four colleagues, however, were visibly uncomfortable, avoided eye contact, and were unable to offer compassionate presence in the face of their friends' suffering. The inability to name that we have experienced trauma and its impact may be lingering and then limits any attempts at improved well-being for ourselves or for really supporting others.

When we discussed trauma in the camps, I started with the list identified by Leitch and Miller-Karas in their Trauma Resilience Model work (2010) and asked the participants what else - either one-time events or cumulative factors - led to trauma in the lives of camp residents. While the conversation stayed impersonal – ie, 'others experience these traumas' – it was clear by the list that everyone in the room could 'legitimately' acknowledge trauma in their lives. When one participant offered, 'Living in a refugee camp is itself a kind of cumulative trauma,' everyone else agreed.

Traumatic events

Cumulative Trauma

- Natural disasters
- 'man made'/development disasters, ie the military forcing a village to relocate to build a dam
- Sexual assault/rape
- Physical violence and threat of violence
- Death of a loved one
- · Forced separation from loved ones
- Incarceration/Jail/detention (of self or loved one)
- Deportation
- Serious illness
- Car/motorbike accident

- War
- Sexism
- Racism
- All forms of oppression
- Discrimination
- Poverty and hunger
- Chronic abuse child abuse, domestic violence
- Neglect
- Displacement
- Undocumented status
- Living in a refugee camp
- Living under a dictatorship
- Drug abuse (oneself or loved ones)
- Witnessing the suffering of others

Trauma Reactions

Once we could acknowledge that everyone in the camps may experience trauma, it was easier to name some common trauma reactions. Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, in her book Trauma Stewardship, lists '16 warning signs of trauma exposure response:' (p. 47-113)

- Feeling hopeless and helpless
- A sense that one can never do enough
- Hyper-vigilance
- Diminished creativity
- Inability to embrace complexity
- Minimizing
- Chronic exhaustion/physical ailments
- Inability to listen/deliberate avoidance
- Dissociative moments
- Sense of persecution
- Guilt
- Fear
- Anger and cynicism
- Inability to empathize/numbing
- Addictions
- Grandiosity: an inflated sense of importance related to one's work

During the course of the workshops, most of these reactions surfaced as stress and burnout symptoms, as well as secondary/vicarious trauma reactions. I also referenced them in describing the 'highs' and 'lows' of the biology of trauma (see insert for description of the biology of trauma).

The multiple layers of trauma people have experienced are always just under the surface of discussion, implicit yet rarely spoken. While I was explaining what happens in the body during a traumatic event, I asked the group if anyone had experienced the 'highs' and 'lows' I was describing. One woman said she had experienced both at the death of her father. When I asked her to say more, she explained that when her village was attacked by Burmese soldiers, and her house set on fire, her family fled. At that point, she identified that she experienced the "highs" of hyper-vigilance and anxiety. When she realized her father had not been able to get out and he had been killed in fighting in the village, her emotions and grief sent her to a low. In the coming days, as she and her surviving family members hid in the forest, her feelings fluctuated between anger, shock and grief; they still do now many years later in the relative safety of the camp environment.

Most people in the room were nodding their heads, as similar stories are common. Multiple traumas are so common that only the most extreme cases of suffering and dysfunction are even considered worthy of mention. Later in that session when we practiced grounding and tracking, and I asked if these techniques seemed useful, another participant reflected that these exercises *might* be useful for a woman currently living in one of the safe houses, a woman she described as suffering from a severe mental breakdown – her speech had become incoherent and she screamed at all hours of the day and night. For this client experiencing extreme suffering the participants could identify with the need for techniques to help their bodies regain balance. People had a much harder time acknowledging their own traumas, like the one their colleague had previously described, as there was the sense that suppressing emotion and coping strategies that keep people functioning have to be sufficient in the context of past collective traumas. Thus the learning (and *un*-learning) around trauma is a complex process in the camps that requires time and sensitivity.

Excerpts from the Self Care and Well-being Manual:

The biology of trauma and secondary trauma (what happens in the body)

"To begin to heal, you have to notice what your body is really telling you" -Bessel van der Kolk, psychiatrist working on trauma

Just as stress and burnout affect all five levels of well-being, we can experience symptoms of trauma at each level as well: physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and relational. It is important to understand the various reactions to trauma so that we can take a holistic approach to healing ourselves and others.

Often people think of the effects of traumatic reactions as psychological, something that is "in our head." While there are many common reactions to exposure to trauma that effect our emotional and mental states, our bodies are also affected in critical ways. If we can learn to 'read' our bodies stress reactions, we can learn ways to manage and help stabilize our systems to come back to a state of calm and rest. The human body is designed to heal itself and seek a state of balance. We can learn skills to help our bodies find that balance.

When we are exposed to a traumatic event, or we hear stories of other's traumatic events, our body may respond with some of the following reactions:

- Rapid heart beat
- Blood pressure increase
- Difficulty breathing
- Irregular heart beat
- Tense muscles
- Overly sleepy
- Headaches
- Fainting
- Flushed or pale face

The reactions are normal responses to threat and danger. Nothing is wrong with us if we react in this way – our bodies are programmed for survival. *Without thinking about it,* our body's nervous system responds to threat through a **flight, flight, or freeze** response, depending on which is needed to protect us and help us survive.

When we feel safe, our body's nervous system maintains a sense of balance that helps us function with resiliency. It is like our nervous system is a gentle wave of energy and rest to deal with the events throughout the day. It helps us feel stable, think with clarity and manage our feelings. We may experience some stress – for example, our baby won't stop crying and we are late for a meeting so we feel rushed and worried. But once we are able to calm the baby and get to the meeting, we return to a state of calm and our body can rest and relax.

When we experience trauma, our nervous system is 'kicked out' of this place of resiliency because the stress is too much. Our body is flooded with energy to survive and it is important this happens. It helps us to be hyper-alert so we can fight off the danger or run away from it. The difficulty is that often, even after the trauma is over, our nervous system gets 'stuck' and is not able to re-gain the balance that would help us to know we are safe and feel calm. We may get 'stuck on high' and constantly feel anxiety, rage, hyper-alert, or we may get 'stuck on low' and constantly feel depression, numbness, fatigue. Or we may go up and down between the two extremes without finding balance.

The physical reactions described in the list above are some of the physical symptoms that alert us to the fact that our nervous system is responding to threat and danger. For people who have experienced trauma, or those of us who witness and work with people who have experienced trauma, these reactions can occur *even when we are in a safe place and not in danger*. Our nervous system can be triggered by people, places, sounds, feelings, words and/or smells associated with the trauma that makes our body react like the trauma is happening again, even if it is not. If we are triggered by many things, we can feel like we are 'stuck on high' or 'stuck on low' most of the time (Leitch & Miller-Karas, 2009).

Why is it important to understand about the nervous system?

As mentioned before, our bodies have a natural desire to be healthy, and we have the ability to help our bodies return to a state of balance. Awareness of how our body responds is the first step to building our resiliency. When we can become aware of our body's responses, we can use our awareness to help regulate our nervous system. The techniques of tracking and grounding are essential first steps in this process. If you notice reactions like the list above and you are able to ground yourself by feeling the support of the floor or your chair, you may begin to notice changes in your body: your heart rate may start to slow down, you may start to take deeper breaths, your muscles may relax...this is your body's way to restoring balance and coming back to a place where you feel resilient. The skill of resourcing helps you access this place of resilience, and actually deepen and expand it so you can adapt and deal with stress with more flexibility and ease. Understanding the natural responses of your body can help you feel more in control and not overwhelmed on your path of healing and well-being (Leitch & Miller-Karas, 2009).

New Ways of Seeing

Once we name the problems, our learning needs to include new ways to think about our health, well being and attention to self care. It requires creating a new relationship to stress in three ways. In workshops with activists, I used the simple formula of the "3 Rs" of release, reduce and

reduce the amount of stress we are feeling, and build resiliency to be able to cope and manage potential stressors more effectively. I used the Dalai Lama's explanation of resilience as, "The ability to face difficulties without losing hope or becoming overwhelmed" (Dalai Lama, 2009, p. 232). Participants recognized that many of the activities that release stress, such as mindful movements, deep relaxation, and healthy coping mechanisms they identified already practicing in their lives also help to build resiliency to handle future stresses. Ultimately, though, reacting to and managing stress is only one part of self care and well-being. Changes in our daily schedule, behaviors and attitudes to reduce the stresses we have some control over, like not working late into the night, saying 'no' to additional projects and requests, and eating healthily and regularly, are essential for shifting from managing symptoms to thriving.

Ways We Cope

Even though talking about self care and well-being is new for many activists and women's rights defenders, most have already found ways to help reduce and release the stress of life and work and to bring more calm and peace even during difficult times. Some of the common ways activists said they cope included:

- Sleep
- Listen to the radio
- Talk with friends who can really listen
- Sing/play music
- Paint, draw or other art activities
- Play with children
- Watch a funny movie
- Go to the jungle/be in nature
- Read spiritual or inspirational books
- Watch documentaries that are inspiring/motivating
- Visit and be a friend to old people
- Exercise
- Get dressed up
- Cook foods you like to eat
- Write in a private journal
- Grow flowers or vegetables

It is also important to recognize that some things we may do to relieve stress help us feel better in the short term, but do not contribute to our well-being and self care. Participants mentioned coping strategies like using drugs and alcohol, using physical violence, watching violent movies, or completely isolating ourselves as coping techniques that are short term fixes but do not work to enhance well-being. Worse, they can contribute to even more stress and trauma for ourselves and others. Instead of feeling guilty or judgmental about these coping mechanisms, we can develop an awareness of the ways they impact our well-being and seek to find alternatives that promote improved physical and emotional health.

Empowerment and well-being

For women's rights activists, women's empowerment is both the foundation and the goal. Thus linking well-being to empowerment is an effective way to counter attitudes that self care and well-being are indulgent and superfluous. There is a direct relationship between empowerment and well-being as they support and influence one another. As we wake up to our own power, whether individually, in relationship, or collectively, we recognize the importance of caring for ourselves and have the confidence to name and prioritize our needs. In the same way, as we focus on loving ourselves into well-being through self care, we feel a sense of empowerment and inner strength to face internal and external obstacles as they arise.

Latin American activists are at the fore of self care and empowerment from a feminist perspective. In their manual 'Self Care and Self Defense for Feminist Activists' they discuss empowerment at three levels. Personal empowerment supports the development of our individual abilities by recognizing our strengths and developing confidence. Empowerment in our close relationships means we are better able to negotiate the shapes and forms of our relationships and how decisions are made in them. Collective empowerment enables empowered people to work together to make change (Bernal, 2008).

Processes of empowerment at each of these levels include mindful awareness and commitment to individual and collective well-being. Well-being looked at in terms of these three levels contributes to greater self care, healthier relationships, and shifts in our collective attitudes and behaviors to promote more collective responsibility for the care of whole communities.

Joy and pleasure

Another new way of seeing for many women's rights activists is the notion that we are worthy of joy and experiencing pleasure. Many activists have so deeply internalized that we must work all the time in the face of so much suffering and put others needs before our own that there is no time for doing things we enjoy. Worse, we feel guilty for experiencing joy and pleasure, feeling it is somehow 'bad' or selfish. Especially for women, and particularly strong for Asian women, gendered socialization to put others needs before one's own leads to notions of self sacrifice as duty and self judgment for not doing so. In addition, gendered messages that only men experience sexual desire means reinforcement for women that their duty is to pleasure men.

Ignoring one's sexual desire can eventually translate into lived experiences of women ignoring all pleasures, particularly when they are already being judged and scrutinized for their feminist activism. Brenna McCaffrey, a US feminist writer on self care, reflects that for women in our activist and NGO cultures,

"where caring for our own well being is always last on our to-do list, it is easy to feel selfish when we do care for ourselves. But being kind to yourself, banishing negative body-talk, taking necessary time away from work, feeding your body with food that makes it happy, taking a morning for spiritual growth, doing one activity you enjoy just because you enjoy it—these things are not selfish!

For so long, women have been socialized around the idea of "guilty pleasures". Female pleasure—whether it is related to sex, food, or even an activity—must be categorized into "good" and "bad" categories. We are taught to feel "guilty" for "indulging," but often these indulgences are normal, healthy expressions ... For women, things that we enjoy doing are labeled "indulgence," and we chastise ourselves for being "bad" if we do them. Indulgence sounds dirty, but most of our "guilty pleasure indulgences" are simply acts of self care. Self care is not bad. Self care is not selfish. Our lives do not have to follow the script of obedience" (McCaffrey, 2012).

During the workshop with Palestinian feminists, at one point participants were asked to write and draw about their hopes and dreams for themselves. One woman came up to me, almost whispering and said, 'I know my hope is supposed to be for justice, and I do feel that. But really, I want a car. Is that OK?' Even letting herself dream of owning her own car did not seem acceptable. In a closing circle in one of the refugee camps, I asked every woman to name something she would do that evening for her own self care. Over half the group mentioned activities with their children. My co-facilitator, who is also a camp resident, challenged her colleagues and said, 'Yes, being with my children makes me happy, but that is not something I'm doing for *myself and my self care*. Tonight, I'm going to cook something I really want to eat.' She told me the next day she really enjoyed mindfully eating her noodles. Not to suggest that cars or noodles bring happiness and joy in an ultimate sense, but for women's rights activists to let themselves delight in material goods is a tangible way to start naming their own needs and desires.

Livelihood, the third course

The question for feminist activists and women's rights defenders is how to make our 'good' livelihoods good for us. While women's rights activists face external hostility, generally within

activist communities, we are proud and confident about our livelihood as agents of social change. But even in activist communities talking about self care and well-being, it is still based on the assumption that our work, organizations, and movements will burn us out, and at some point, taking a step back and focusing on our own care is inevitable. Then when we feel 'recovered' we will start the accumulation of stress again. Further, there is still the assumption that self care is a personal endeavor, even in organizations with the language to support it. Leaving work with enough time to spend some time in nature, or attending a yoga class, is still one's individual responsibility. One of the project managers in the Women's Protection and Empowerment program summed it up when she said, "Everyone at work tells me to rest and relax. Then they call me on a Sunday and ask where my report is."

For self care and well-being to shift from band-aid, temporary fixes to sustainable and healthy approaches to life, the organizations and movements we create have to reflect the ethos of self care and well-being. As Natasha Ann Tassell writes of humanitarian organizations, "Ensuring the well-being of populations directly affected by humanitarian crises is the primary aim of humanitarian organizations...In line with their humanitarian objectives, organizations must equally prioritize the welfare of their workers" (2009, 6). The same can be said for women's rights organizations more generally. Essential to self care are work cultures that are conducive to fostering well-being without guilt, blame or judgment.

Organizational factors that contribute to reduced rates of stress and burnout and increased rates of well-being include:

- the presence of adequate supervision
- · reasonable workload
- clear job description
- co-worker support
- opportunities for advancement
- salaries
- an organizational climate that supports workers

(Schulz, Greenley & Brown, 1995; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining & Lane, 2005 as referenced in Van Hook, 2008)

While these conditions are important for institutionalizing self care and well-being, many activists feel powerless to influence policy change within the organization. Participants in the workshops all identified that changing the culture of the organization begins on a smaller level with the ways that we relate to one another. Some suggestions that arose in the workshops included:

- Greeting one another in the morning
- Check ins during staff meetings about how people are doing

- Deep and compassionate listening to one another (especially in meetings)
- Sharing meals cooking and eating together
- Encouraging each other to turn off computers during lunch; eating lunch outside and away from the workspace
- Regular time and space set aside for yoga/total relaxation
- Showing appreciation for one another
- Encouraging one another to leave work at the agreed time.
- Support each other to take allotted holiday time.
- Going on retreats/mini holidays together to relax and build relationships

Everyone agreed that a critical part of creating a culture of well-being within an organization is that the leadership models self care and well-being. Too often, leaders encourage and expect staff to take care of themselves, but then they model behaviors that encourage overwork and burnout. When leaders do not practice self care, it sends the message that workers who are dedicated and responsible must make unhealthy sacrifices for the organization/movement. This dynamic is particularly strong when the leader is significantly older and/or has more experience than others. The contentious issue of elders judging younger women for their lack of commitment to the cause and younger women not wanting to replicate the burnout they see among their role models was named in both the Burma and the Palestinian contexts as a limiting factor to healthy movements. Leaders who practice their own self care, or, at least are able to identify ways their work patterns have limited their well-being, send the message that it is possible to do meaningful work with healthy boundaries and to foster well-being for oneself and the whole community.

The Women's Protection and Empowerment program project manager, Annabelle Mubi, stepped into her leadership in powerful ways during the workshops in camp. She came to the workshops and offered her personal stories and experiences which helped everyone else to open up. She acknowledged that learning about self care helped her to realize she did not really love herself so how could she love and take care of others? Highly respected in the camps, her honesty about her own limitations and process helped to normalize vulnerability; her appreciation to herself for how far she has come sent the message that self care and self love are positive, not arrogant or 'too proud,' which is often the controlling retort to keep people from boasting about themselves. In her introduction of why self care has been so important to her, she explained that she used to feel very bad about herself, guilty that she could never do enough. Now, she takes some time each day "to admire all the beauty that God created in [her]." She is setting a powerful example of empowerment and self care for other women in her organization and the wider community as she creates space within the work culture for personal reflection and sharing.

During the workshop with Palestinian activists, we reflected in two parts on well-being of the feminist movement. First, in what ways has the external hostility directed at feminists affected their self care, and secondly in what ways has that hostility seeped into the movement and affected the ways women relate to one another. The first discussion was 'easy' (although painful) because the messages are all too common: feminists destroy families, cause divorce, are antireligion, anti-culture, anti-men; are manly (unfeminine), elitist, bourgeois and out of touch. We could laugh about this hostility as baseless and untrue, and activists have long developed the coping strategy of unity and pride in their identity to mitigate and guard against the blatant damage inflicted by this condemnation. So while the cumulative effects of hostility towards one's identity cannot be overstated, the ways that feminist activists have internalized the hostility and relate to one another also perpetuates unhealthy attitudes and behaviors. Messages that committed activists work all the time, never take a break; that the young generation is not dedicated; attitudes of competition and judgment as opposed to alliance-building; feelings of guilt about power and privilege; and attitudes of exclusion (i.e. of women of faith) in the name of solidarity all reinforce isolation, disconnection, and alienation from the very movement women are committed to.

Creating feminist movements based in well-being, or defining a feminist movement as one in which women's well-being is prioritized, requires devotion to tackling the issues of internalized oppression and horizontal hostility. Further, it requires honest engagement with the range of emotions that women's rights activists experience and yet rarely share. Emotions of anger, despair, guilt, grief and fear that present just below the surface have to be recognized and allowed space instead of suppressed. Upon hearing the workshop would be focused on self care, one Palestinian participant said to the organizer, 'if we fall apart, there won't be time to put us back together.' Fear of 'falling apart' and not having trust in our own inner resources to put ourselves back together keeps many women from exploring their own needs for self care. And groups of women too afraid to be that vulnerable with themselves cannot then support one another. During the closing of the workshop, one of the participants said to me, 'I want to feel peace and I see it is possible, but I just want you to know, I'm still going to be angry, too.'

I shared wisdom from Joanna Macy about recognizing the positive sides of deep emotions. Paraphrasing her loving words, I explained when we experience anger, recognize the deep sense of passion for justice underneath. When we experience grief, recognize it is based in love. We do not grieve what we do not love. When we recognize fear, honor the courage and bravery it takes to acknowledge fear during these violent times. And when we feel despair and emptiness, see the space emerging for new beginning (Macy, 2006). Feminist movements need passion for justice, love, courage, bravery and the space for new beginnings; those powerful essential qualities

emerge through honest, non-judgmental, and compassionate engagement with our own emotions and creating space to listen to and hold others emotions.

Social Action, the fourth course

While for feminist activists and women's rights defenders, our livelihoods are based in social action, in the context of these self care and well-being interventions, the social action included learning techniques and applications to share with other colleagues and clients, how to integrate self care into home and work in ways that encourage others to do the same, and more generally to normalize the notions of self care within the community.

Being part of a self care and well-being workshop for a few days can be a great way to bring attention to the need for self care, but really changing attitudes and behaviors about self care requires consistency, support, and changing unhealthy/limiting habits. Ways that participants identified they could help to create cultures of self care in and around their home, workplace and community included:

- Short guided relaxation and breathing exercises at the beginning and end of the meetings
- Deep listening with their children and spouse
- Offering deep listening to women in the safe houses
- A short well-being activity during a workshop to get people thinking
- Adding some time for art or music during long meetings, or art and music with clients
- Guided discussions on different aspects of mindfulness and well-being in the office
- Teaching others mindful movements or simple yoga
- Guided relaxation after the lunch break and in the safe houses
- Sharing a mindful meal or break together (the family eats together and in silence)
- Healthy snacks and drinks for breaks during workshops
- Encourage clients to create and share self care strategies

Community and relationships, the fifth course

I recently took Rosalin, a Karen women's rights activist to the doctor because she was having such bad headaches she feared a brain tumor. The doctor explained her headaches were stress related and that she had to reduce her workload to relieve the tension. She cried as the doctor said to her, 'I know your work and your movement must continue and it never stops. And you must trust that it can continue and will support you as you take a step back to rest.' For many feminist activists and women's rights defenders, our organizations and movements are chosen, 'social' families whom we depend on for support. For refugee and exiled women activists, community becomes family in the absence of family members who have been separated by war, displacement, or resettlement.

Community as support system is an essential element of women's rights organizations. Rosalin's commitment to her work, which has led to her overwork and stress, is her sense of responsibility to the welfare of her entire community - both within her organization and the broader community of which her organization is part. She knows on an intellectual level that her colleagues can manage as she takes time to rest, and importantly, that they would support her decision to take a step back for the sake of her health. But when community is vital to one's sense of self identity and belonging, and when work and community are one in the same, feeling that you are letting the community down creates deep feelings of grief and guilt.

Community as support system is also an essential element of well-being. We are more able to take care of ourselves when surrounded by support and love, we can be more positive, more present and more resilient when surrounded by others. Thus, strong community and the recognition of the importance of deep relationships is key for sustainable self care strategies for anyone, and especially for activists for whom the community is also often the social 'safety net' in the absence of formal systems and institutions meant to offer that support. Further, feeling like part of a group is critical to combat the feelings of isolation and depression common with secondary trauma and burnout.

Appreciating the community of which we are already a part is a powerful process of positive appraisal of the forces in our life which contribute to well-being. In the workshops with activists, we gave a lot of attention to expressions of gratitude. Joanna Macy says gratitude helps us to be fully present and reminds us we have a right to be part of this beautiful world (Macy, 2006). Gratitude is a 'social emotion' in that often our feelings of gratitude are related to the kindness, generosity and love shown to us through our interactions with others. Research on gratitude has shown that it contributes to a positive sense of well-being in many ways. Physically, people who practice gratitude have stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure, better sleep, and less irritation by aches and pain. The have higher levels of positive emotions, more joy and pleasure, optimism, and they feel less lonely and isolated. They are more generous, forgiving and compassionate (Emmons, 2010).

In one activity, I asked participants to draw or write a list of people/places/things that were part of their support system, and then later to draw or write a list of people/places/things they felt grateful for. One Palestinian participant said, rather frustrated, that she had a hard time thinking of people to be grateful for different than those of her support system. Another participant chimed in, "But that is the point, right? Thankfully, there are people in our lives who support us." This seemingly simple revelation seemed really powerful for the first woman who then reflected, "Wow, I guess I've never thought to appreciate them." In a closing circle with the refugee women staff, one woman summed up her experience as,

"I am grateful to be me. Here. Now."

Learning to Listen

The practices of deep listening and council are integral to workshops with women activists for trust and relationship building and for personal empowerment. As women are socialized to always be the listeners and have so little space for our voices and wisdom to emerge, the act of creating space for women to be listened to with respect and compassion is itself an act of resistance. Further, the practice of listening with a present and open heart and mind and without judgment is a powerful mindfulness practice that can be integrated into so many other aspects of life.

The women's rights activists in the refugee camps found the deep listening practice very beneficial in developing relationships among themselves. One Karenni participant reflected, "When I use my heart to listen, I'm not burdened and I can be present. Using my head and thinking makes me feel like I need to solve [my friend's] problems and I can't really be here for her." Another participant said that the practice of deep listening helped her to feel empathetic joy for her colleague. She explained, "my friend has lots of hopes and dreams and I really think she can reach them. I feel happy for her."

Conclusion

At the end of the first day with Palestinian women's rights defenders, after an intense exercise on the personal impacts of burnout and despair, I facilitated a trust building exercise where the group had to work together to solve a problem. In this case, they had to pass a roll of tape around the group without using their hands or letting it fall. After many creative strategies that only partially worked, everyone broke down laughing and really only managed to finish by severely bending/ignoring the rules. After everyone caught their breath from laughing so hard, one woman turned to me and asked, "So what was the point of that?!" I asked the group back, "Yes, what was the point?"

Several women named the importance of team building, working together, and establishing cooperation and trust. Trying to relate it to the objectives of the day, a few said the challenge required both taking care of oneself and also helping others. One woman linked it to the importance of listening to one another and having a common strategy. Then a woman from Gaza said, "The point for me was to laugh. I haven't laughed since the bombing started [12 days prior]. It was good for me. I'm grateful to laugh."

In a meditation retreat I attended in 2011, meditation teacher Christina Feldman urged us to attend each meditation session, despite whatever internal resistance, doubt, fear, restlessness or sleepiness may arise that would make us want to give up. She reminded us, 'What we feed will grow,' that continuing to show up helps us cultivate the positive habits of mindful awareness. I feel so grateful and privileged to be part of dynamic, global communities of feminist activists and women's rights defenders who are growing our awareness, understanding, commitment to and application of self care and well-being for ourselves and our movements. We are feeding ourselves by coming together in community, creating safety to laugh and love and cry, having healthy and challenging conversations about the limitations of our movements, and visioning ourselves into well-being. The personal journey of writing this reflection on the workshops with women activists from Burma and Palestine has been part of my own self care, as it afforded me the space for reflection, analysis and questioning so essential for cultivating clarity and wise action. And as I shared early drafts of it with feminist activist friends for feedback and critique, it opened up possibilities for new questions and new conversations. I am constantly reminded and encouraged that these workshops and the learning from them are small pieces a of much larger whole gaining force and momentum - feminist movements grounded in sustainable visions of peace and justice that recognize our care for our communities and our care for ourselves are intimately interconnected.

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Useful Websites (resources and organizations) for Self care, Well-Being and Spiritual Activism:

<u>www.womenforpeaceandjustice.org</u> – International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (feminist spiritual activism)

www.stonecircles.org – stone circles at the Stone House (spiritual activism)
www.newtactics.org – New Tactics in Human Rights (resources for human rights defenders)
http://www.feminist.com/activism/spiritualactivism1.html - feminist activist resources
www.antaresfoundation.org - Antares Foundation: Staff support in Humanitarian Organizations
http://headington-institute.org/ - Headington Institute: Care for Caregivers worldwide