

from surviving to thriving

by Margie Carter

Over the last ten years or so Deb Curtis and I had the splendid opportunity to work alongside the late Tom Hunter with a particular focus on bringing encouragement and nourishment to beleaguered early childhood folks. Our sessions included Tom's wonderful songs, stories, and poems we gathered, and interactive experiences to reconnect people with their dreams, sources of strength, and collective power. With Tom's death, Deb and I are committed to including more music in the work we do together; and we find that is enlivening us as much as the folks we work with. Today, more than ever, we feel called to bring support and sustenance to those who are on the front lines of early care and education. We don't see this as fluff or extraneous to the professional development work in our field. Rather, our work with Tom led us to frame a message to claim our responsibility to live fully in order to do our work well.



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focus of their Harvest Resources work, visit www.ecetrainers.com.

It is not uncommon for early childhood administrators to feel they don't really have a life outside of the demands of their jobs. After long days keeping their centers on track, directors are often in meetings or workshops at night. Weekends find them back at the center painting, cleaning, and cranking out budgets or reports. Cell phones, laptops, and Blackberries® are further temptations to stay on the job 24/7. To me, this is the antithesis of living fully. I know from experience that this produces more stress than joy. It isn't sustainable. You will burn out if you don't get a grip on living a fuller life.

The director's job

Periodically the media features a story reporting on the most stressful jobs in the country. Don't we have a thing or two we could tell them! Early childhood program directors never make their surveys or lists, but that doesn't mean your work is any less stressful than that of an air traffic controller. Consider all the roles a director has in any given week on the job. You are a broker, detective, carpenter, rodeo star, beekeeper, and meteorologist. The list goes on and on.

Some of us thrive on roller coasters and crises. Others become ill and wasted.

Make a list of the roles you have played this week and, as you review it, consider which of them have drained you and which have brought sustenance. Using metaphors can help you refocus when you run into a barrier or find yourself discouraged over some aspect of your work. Sometimes metaphors help relieve the strain you feel with a few good laughs. But as you strain through the challenges of your job, day after day, and week after week, you will need more than a laugh or magic word. Pacing and sustaining yourself will take some self-awareness and planning. As you say 'yes' to a vision you have for your program and move full speed ahead, there will be times when you need to say 'no,' to pull back, catch up with yourself, and do some replenish-ing. This is not a suggestion to be taken lightly or laughed at. It is a call to consider your responsibility to yourself.

Messages from the universe

How often have you found yourself getting sick on the heels of a demanding fundraiser? Have you ever had a car accident while eating your lunch and rushing to the next meeting? Perhaps there are days when you find you've shown a prospective family around

your center and not noticed a thing they said. These are actually messages, not from the universe at large, but from your own body and spirit. It's tempting to point the finger elsewhere when these kinds of incidents occur. Instead, stopping to notice and wonder will usually alert you to read these as clues. You'll discover you haven't been paying attention to yourself or the things that nourish you.

Sometimes people can get so out of touch with themselves that they need the help of a professional counselor to get them back on track. But in most cases, one can train oneself to pay more attention and learn how to take better care of oneself. There are oodles of self-help books on the market and most of them offer good, common sense; but living in today's world, it's remarkable how easy it is to forget about good advice. I recommend becoming more intentional about ordinary self-care strategies. They will make an extraordinary difference in your life.

Strategy:

Listen to your body

Self-awareness is a key ingredient for self-care. Learn to recognize clues your body gives you, be they headaches, stiff necks, indigestion, or back spasms. As you start or end a work week, take a few minutes to close your eyes and ask yourself these questions:

- As I've been walking, do my feet have energy or are they dragging?
- Have my eyes been eager for or irritated by the things around me?
- Am I sitting with my weight equally balanced over my buttocks and my spine?
- Are my shoulders and head aligned and free of tension?
- Where is my breath and how is it moving in my body?

Even the act of closing your eyes can bring your attention inward to assess

how you are doing. Most of us are besieged with overwhelming external stimuli and it's often difficult to hear what our body is telling us. A few moments to regularly check in with yourself will help you take care of yourself on a more consistent basis. If you discover you are typically tense, without energy, or irritable, it might be time for a stress reduction exercise, or new nutritional plan for yourself. One assistant director we know keeps a sign over her desk which reads, "Your body is a better home than your house, a better vehicle than your car. Invest!"

Strategy:

Be clear about your best time of day and healthy energy boosters

Directors have an advantage over teachers in that you can set and rearrange your own schedule at will. Consider your daily, weekly, and monthly tasks and how you can match them with the ebb and flow of your energy. Some people do best early in the morning, while others can't creatively function until almost noon. Most people slump at some point during the afternoon. Assess yourself and plan accordingly. Ask yourself questions like these:

- When are you at your peak to tackle difficult questions or tasks?
- What routine tasks can be done when you aren't at your best?
- Is there something else besides sugar or caffeine that you can turn to in your low times of the day?

Finding answers to these questions is the first step. The next one involves arranging your time and tasks accordingly. If midmorning is your best time of day, let your voice mail answer the phone and put a 'do not disturb' sign on the door. Perhaps your peak time is first thing in the morning, but by early afternoon you have a brain-dead

period. In that case consider using those early morning hours to do your most demanding tasks, in the quiet of your office, at home, or in a coffee shop. Then catch up with your personal errands after lunch when you can't get your brain to focus steadily.

Try limiting how often you turn to chocolate or coffee for energy, and instead, take a brisk walk or swim, practice yoga, or take an aerobics class during your low-energy time blocks. Or go to a room where the children are and sit on the floor with them for 20 minutes. You'll be amazed at the fresh energy routines like these will bring you.

Strategy:

Join a sports team, reading circle, or support group

In your work as a director, you are in the leadership position, with many people turning to you for guidance and support. Make sure you are part of at least one other group where you have someone else offering you leadership and support. Again, this doesn't have to be within the early childhood domain. Even if you just meet once a month, find a group to be part of that will keep your body alive, your mind stimulated, and your spirit replenished.

Reflect on your experiences and values

You can hold on to yourself and stay the course when you are clear about your values and personal resources. In the foreword to Carol Anne Wien's book, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Real Life*, Elizabeth Jones says, "Professionalism is defined by reflection on practice. To reflect, we must tell our stories and give names to our experience, names that connect it with the values we hold and the theories that inform our work" (1995). Begin an

informal self-inventory by answering questions like these:

- What stories have confirmed your understandings, fueled your passion, or served as an inspiration to keep on keeping on?
- What qualities in yourself can you count on when the going gets rough?
- Who or what can you turn to when you find yourself weary or in muddy waters?

Consider the answers you came up with as resources you can return to again and again. As you come to name your passions and values, they will provide sustenance for your life, as well as those around you. Initially you may need to remind yourself to do seemingly simple things like slowing down, taking time to enjoy the children, staff, and families around you. As you cultivate yourself as a reflective person, this will start to happen organically.

To become more mindful and reflective, surround yourself with simple beauty and inspiring words. Seek the company of those who do the same. Care for your spirit, your mind, and your body. Make a commitment to be physically active and to eat well. And, in tribute to Tom Hunter, as well as your own lively self, remember to sing — in the shower, car, kitchen, your office, and hallways. In these ways you can claim your responsibility to live fully while you move from surviving to thriving in your job.

References

Hunter, T. (2008). *As Human as They Can Be. A Tribute to Tom Hunter*. CD with songs and photos. Bellingham, WA: Song Growing Company.

Wien, C. A. (1995). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Real Life*. New York: Teachers College Press.