

Expensive or Expansive?

By Emily Shaeer

I was talking to an old friend the other day about being a new mom. I haven't talked to her in months. I was telling her how it was so wonderful being a mother and I said it felt so expansive. Her eyes popped and she reached a hand out to touch my knee and asked, "Really? Why? What have you been buying?"

When I clarified with dramatic gesticulations: "Expansive, expansive," she seemed even more confused. Her brow furrowed, and again, she asked, "Really? Are you serious? Most people don't say that about the first year of parenthood."

Well, I'm going to say it. My first year of being Aliya's mother has been expansive.

I'm also going to say that I did not expect it to be. In fact, when we decided to have a child, my husband and I had some pretty detailed discussions about the tedium inherent in caring for a child through the newborn and toddler stages. We talked about all of the things that we wouldn't be able to do. We used words like "homebound" and "shut-in". We also talked strategy in preparation for a colicky baby. Some people would call this kind of behavior cynical or pessimistic, but in my husband's words, we just like to "keep it real".

So, we got ourselves all psyched up to be bored to tears for a few years. We figured things would get fun and fulfilling when the child turned 3 or 4. At a minimum, we figured that things couldn't get very interesting until she could talk. But, that was okay, we thought. It would all be worth it. We just KNEW that at some point we would feel a sense of satisfaction for all the time and energy we had spent caring for her as a baby. Otherwise, why were so many people

having kids? And what compelled them to have more than one?

Thank you for laughing at this ridiculous reasoning. Obviously, we had no idea what we were talking about. At all. By the second day in the hospital, we were walking clichés, saying things like, “There has NEVER been a cuter baby than this,” and, “We are the LUCKIEST people alive!” Superlatives ran rampant. Everything was the BEST, or the MOST, or the CUTEST, or the SWEETEST. We couldn’t believe how much *fun* it was to observe her personhood and remark on its remarkability. We took pride in every mundane thing she did, and congratulated each other for creating such an amazing little person. After all, had any living thing ever yawned with such conviction? Or slept so soundly without ever taking sleeping lessons?

That was one year ago. That was the beginning. I want to talk about what has happened since then.

That transition sounds like things took a turn for the worse. But, they didn’t. Not at all. What began turning when Aliya was born, as I already told you, was my perspective on motherhood. That continued its revolution until I began to see myself differently. A lot of people talk about “seeing the world through a child’s eyes” and everyone knows what that means.

What happened to me was that I began to see myself through a mother’s eyes. I began to see myself the way that I saw my daughter, and I began to mother myself into becoming a better me.

Let me explain.

I am a list person. I am the listiest person you will ever meet, especially of the “To-Do” variety. The only thing I love more than a “To-Do” list, is crossing things off of one.

Be still, my heart. I am not exaggerating. I am *extremely* progress oriented.

Anyway, being a list person during my first year of motherhood was *AWESOME*. Anyone who has ever parented a newborn knows the futility of a “To-Do” list. I mean, seriously. And, yet, a list-driven person like myself cannot *not* have a daily list in her life, so things got interesting.

Frustrated by the aforementioned futility of having a list of things to do that were simply un-achievable for a new mother, I improvised. I wanted – no, *needed* – so desperately to have items to cross off that I started writing things down like “Do nothing” and, “Sleep when the baby sleeps.” You can’t imagine the lengths I went to just to make my list look satisfying to the part of me that needed to feel like something was being accomplished each day.

Eventually, these little tricks stopped doing the trick. I was feeling discouraged that I wasn’t able to do more each day and I was telling my husband about it, and he said, “What could be more important than what you’re doing?”

And I said, “But I’m not doing *anything*.”

And he said, “What do you mean? You’re caring for our daughter. You’re nursing her and bathing her and singing to her...” and on and on he went. What you’re doing is valuable, but you’re not valuing it.”

And, you know what? He was right.

All of my “to-do” lists contained nothing about caring for my baby. Can you imagine? It was like I couldn’t even see all of the things that I was doing for her. Since they weren’t on my lists, it was as if I wasn’t doing any of them at all. Well, not exactly. Of course I was aware that I was doing those things, but I wasn’t viewing them as worthy accomplishments in the realm of my list-laden life, and I wondered why.

The answer was that pre-motherhood, the items on my lists had been exclusively professional, and only related to my career as an educator and a writer. As a new stay-at-home mother, I still hadn't become consciously aware that mothering was now my job description. In other words, I was still thinking of progress and accomplishments in terms of the professional workforce, not the domestic one.

That was a turning point.

I began adding all of the motherly things I was doing each day to my list so that I could cross them off. Long story short: as I began to recognize all that mothering entailed, I began to respect it – and myself – in a whole new way. I couldn't believe how much I was doing! And on behalf of another person! It was incredible to see it all written down (and crossed off) day after day. I had never cared for someone else so completely and so incessantly. I relished the newness of it and the newness of myself in this role.

Looking at the list each day became a bit of ritual for me; a way to honor the love that I felt for my daughter by acknowledging the acts of love I was bestowing upon her hour after hour.

And then something extraordinary happened. I became envious of the care my daughter was receiving. Jealous, even. Of my own caretaking efforts. As I looked at all of the things I was doing for her, I found myself thinking, "Wow, I wish someone would do that for me! That would be the life." Of course, my own mother DID do all of those things for me, and I am exceedingly grateful, but I'm not talking about when I was a baby.

I was imagining having all of my needs met as an adult. In the here and now. At age 32. The thought that someone would meet any and all of my needs no matter what they were or when they occurred, seemed like the absolute ultimate fantasy.

When I thought about it, I would sometimes laugh a little and think, “Yeah, that would be nice. But nobody has the time or the energy to take care of all of my needs like that.” Babies need so much care because they don’t know how to do anything. I’m a grown-up and I’m supposed to know how to take care of myself.

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That thought changed everything.

I’m a little embarrassed about this because it sounds like I have been stunted or something. Like I have never learned to take care of myself. And that’s not it at all. I am a very responsible and upstanding adult who has a career and the financial wherewithal to be totally independent. I care for myself in all of the traditional ways: eating, sleeping, exercising, etc.

What was revolutionary, though, was the idea that I could – and should – be the steward of my own self-care, which I am defining as going way beyond basic needs to the inner desires of the self (or the soul, if you like that term). And I have taken care of myself in this way before, too, but I have never really made it a priority. By now you know what that means: I have never put it on a “To-Do” list.

As I continued to care for my baby, I began to care for myself.

At first, I didn’t know what to put on my “To-Do” list to accomplish this, other than to itemize generically “take care of self”. And I put this at the top to remind myself that it was important, and that it should not be forgotten or overlooked throughout the day. When I saw it listed first, its value was reinforced.

I had to “try” to know what “take care of self” meant for a while, until I realized that it’s not a “trying” kind of thing.

You're not supposed to "work" to know what you need. You're just supposed to let your needs show themselves to you. How do I know this? Well, my daughter taught me. When she needs something, she just needs it. As far as I can tell, she doesn't entertain a lengthy internal dialogue debating the need or its validity. She doesn't think, "Hmmm, I think I might need to eat something right now, but that's not possible because I just nursed 30 minutes ago and I shouldn't be snacking between meals." Nope. She just needs to eat when she needs to eat and she doesn't question it. She needs with abandon and feels absolute entitlement to having these needs met.

And, good for her.

That's exactly what I wanted to cultivate, so I followed her lead, and it was, in a word: *fab*-ulous!

Of course I continued to meet her needs, but when she took a nap or was content to play independently for a few minutes, I met some of my own. It was transcendent! I just did whatever I felt like doing without questioning its worthiness. Sometimes I felt like calling a friend. Sometimes I felt like looking through fashion magazines. Sometimes I felt like daydreaming about future careers I would like to pursue. Sometimes I felt like writing in my journal. Sometimes I felt like doing nothing, and when I felt like doing nothing, I did nothing to the best of my ability.

And you know what? Sometimes when I gave myself the opportunity to listen to my needs and meet them, what I really I felt like doing was snuggling with my daughter, playing peek-a-boo with her, or sitting with her on my lap in the rocking chair and reading Goodnight Moon for the millionth time.

Imagine my surprise to discover that time and time again, when I allowed myself to meet my own needs, what I found myself doing was meeting hers. Ha! What an unexpected paradox. Many of you already know this, but this year was

the first time my conscious self really *learned* and *understood* that loving another person is loving yourself. And that taking care of someone else is a fundamental human need just as much as being taken care of is.

In the process of composing this sermon, I took an informal poll involving friends and relatives. I asked them, “Which is better? Having someone to love, or being loved by someone?” Everyone had an immediate response, but their answers were far from unanimous.

Only one friend contested the question, saying it was faulty. “What do you mean better? It’s two sides of the same coin. That’s like asking me which side of a penny I prefer. I *obviously* prefer the *whole* penny because less than the whole thing is worthless.”

And there you have it.

I propose that the two sides of the relationship coin are “give” and “take”. I prefer the word “receive” rather than “take” because in my mind “receive” implies an openness to accepting what another person is offering while “take” seems like an entitlement to “getting” something from the other person. Another way to think of the “give and receive” nature of healthy relationships is *reciprocity*.

I have noticed that many of my relationships often feel one-sided. This is something I have struggled with for years. I felt like relationships were just “work” and they always seemed to drain my energy. In recent years, I have discovered that the one-sidedness of my relationships is a direct result of my inability to “receive”. I really have the “give” part down, and I really enjoy it, but when I reject any possibility of receiving in a relationship, I doom myself to feeling drained.

Obviously, this tendency of mine was at work in my relationship with my daughter early on. I was not able to see what I was receiving from the relationship for a while. I was

also incapable of receiving from *myself*, feeling like I should always be spending my energy on others and not on myself. As you know, the first UU principle has to do with “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”. I am someone who often overlooks my own “worth and dignity” when I neglect to allocate some of my resources to taking care of my inner needs, and when I resist having any of my needs met by others.

Once I started consciously taking care of myself this year, I was more appreciative of ways that my husband, family members, and friends were taking care of me. I started to value their caretaking efforts more than I ever have before. I noticed when my husband took the recycling out or my mother-in-law dropped off a meal. And I realized that these were things I could do for myself, but it was pretty nice to have someone else to do them for me. It was pretty nice to be on the receiving end of their acts of kindness and generosity.

And I realized something that many of you already know: when someone does something for you, they are usually showing you that they love you. Am I really JUST NOW figuring this out? Yes and no. Mostly yes.

So when I resist receiving from others, I am resisting experiencing their love for me. And I am denying them the opportunity of showing their love in this way and experiencing the joy that goes along with taking care of someone.

If my daughter refused to let me care for her, I would be devastated. So, I should not refuse to let others care for me.

Note to self: put “receive” on top of “To-Do” list.

Really. Receiving does not come naturally to me. At all. I was born a giver. And I don’t want to spend the rest of my life walking around like a one-sided penny.

Speaking of pennies, it's interesting to me is that when I started writing this I was using all kinds of economic terminology. The whole thing was a metaphor of currency and exchange and I came up with all these clever analogies about having relationships in which you feel like a minimum wage worker and other relationships in which you feel like the CEO. And as I wrote, it didn't feel right to me.

Because loving and caring for people isn't a matter of giving and taking in terms of money or commodity. Love is not about money. People and relationships should not be reduced to what they cost. When we talk about how expensive babies are, we are missing the whole point. And when my friend thought I was talking about how expensive the first year of motherhood was, I was surprised because that was the furthest thing from my mind.

After all, this year I have learned to focus on what is expansive about relationships, not what is expensive. And I invite you to do the same.

Conveniently, I am piloting WE CARE starting in September. It is based on the simple premise that if you spend a half an hour a month having a conversation with someone in the congregation, you will reap many rewards. It's like being part of a covenant group, but it's more like a covenant relationship because it is one-on-one.

And, actually, you will be developing TWO one-on-one relationships. In one relationship, you will be designated the "giver" or the "carer" and in the other relationship you will be designated the "receiver" or the "Caree". Depending on your personality, one of those likely sounds more appealing than the other, and you should take note of that.

WE CARE stands for Working to Enhance/Expand/Encourage Connection, Acceptance, Reciprocity, and Enrichment.

The purpose of WE CARE is to help you build caring relationships and to expand your sense of community and connection. Through this program you will have the opportunity to offer and receive support and comfort, build and strengthen relationships, and share ideas and conversation about being involved with Live Oak Congregation and/or Unitarian Universalism. And it only requires a one-hour commitment each month for six months. And this is starting to sound like a sales pitch and that is not my intention. Participate if this speaks to you, and if it doesn't, it doesn't.

You each have a sign-up sheet in your Order of Service. Please note that the sign-up sheet is not a binding contract. It is just a way to express your interest in learning more about this program. You can turn in your sheets to this basket on the table outside, or email me at your convenience. My email address is on the form. The last day to sign up is at the Labor Day picnic. After that, I will be contacting all participants to give you more information and organize people into their "carer" and "caree" roles.

In closing, I'd like to read something entrepreneur, author, and motivational speaker, Jim Rohn said: "Only by giving are you able to receive more than you already have."

As a participant in WE CARE, you will give and you will receive. And I can practically guarantee that you will consider the experience expansive.

May it be so.