

Rachael Ward
Rule of Life

Rule of Soil Care for Life

Since childhood I've been passionately interested in caring for and caring with others. I knew that God was in the midst of this care and my embodied call to be a blessing to one another. My fascination with humanity, I believe, comes from the deep held belief that we are kin to one another from the *tehom* to the groundling that emerged. My call to be a pastor is not one of prideful indulgence. I desire to be the soil that is never spoken of yet yields gardens in partnership with others. To be a pastor with the people is to care for the soil and never forget or neglect the nutrients that come from the ground. It is critical for me to show up to relationships in humanity no matter how difficult to bear witness to our diversity, our pain, our uniqueness, and be able to develop a pastoral sense of where it hurts verses our joy. I know this much to be true of my call and as I write this, I also know that "I" is not centered in thought of "*how do I care for myself in this work.*"

For the rest of my life, as God cultivates, I hope to be a pastor who holds this useful tension of our human form in relationship with each other and the divine who created us and called us good. To be an active partner in this calling, it is essential that I continue to come to my own soil; my own garden and ask of it – *what is my soil care for life? How will I sustain this joy of being human and devoted to one another in care?* As it turns out the literal dust of which we come from and shall return holds useful lessons in how to soil care.

Practices of Soil Care for Life

Reducing Tillage and Soil Traffic: Intellectual Self-Care

Soil needs to be tilled thoughtfully and intentionally so the organic matter that provides life isn't reduced or disembodied from its life cycle. Tilling soil is a balance of mindful practices that promote growth for the life and not yet planted. Healthy tilling increases oxygen, stimulates activity, and disrupts soil aggregates. Mindful tilling promotes life.

My own soil intellectually needs tilling to ensure that my mental health is not neglected decreasing my wholistic wellness overtime. This tilling looks like a commitment to a practice Marlee Grace calls pages. I am a writer at heart which you might imagine makes this practice compelling, but actually it's challenging. These aren't words with careful thought of how to form the sentence to send the message. No, pages are grueling and honest about where I am. It is the dislodging of stories I tell myself, the anger, joy, loss, grief, moments of my weekly rhythm. And, when I neglect pages, I neglect my genuine self. Because flexibility is a part of mental liberation for me, I decided to commit to pages once a week preferably on Fridays. Each entry is filled with the date, time and location that I chose to write. Pre-covid this usually was always Brickstore Pub's upstairs low ceiling tucked away corner booth. I'm still grieving the loss of space in this new world. Now, I vacillate between outdoor coffee spots and the local Wyld Woods garden near my home. Each entry has no set limit of offering. It is space to share and it is all mine. Pages, for me, gives space to liberate all the thoughts of guilt, doubt, loss, joy in a slowed down form. It is meditative.

Increase Organic Matter: Missional Self-Care

Soil needs its organic matter levels to be constantly balanced by the input of organic matter to the loss of organic matter due to decomposition. Soil care is a life – death – life cycle and so is missional self-care. Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes, “one is supposed to get to one’s feet and go in search of what one belongs to.” I believe ministry and this weird, wild, mysterious calling is meant to be a search of what one belongs to for life. There is life in this call and death in this call and a continued rebirth. There are three practices of which I feel have begun to blossom that speak truth into this life, death, life cycle of call and missional self-care. This year I am in search of a spiritual director to specifically work with as this season of my life transitions from seminary to hopefully ordained ministry. This practice will be a monthly meeting for connective, questions, doubts and reflection on the abundance of opportunity floating around my orbit this season. I need help maintain a healthy pause and posture of if these opportunities align with my own theological and spiritual awareness from God in this world. The second practice is a group of clergy based and future clergy based individuals sharing their journey so far, life-lessons and check-ins. This group consists of my cohort members and a few friends in other seminaries as well as another group chat with UCC Clergy. These groups regularly stretch, support, and resource care and opportunity for my call. Both are practiced as equitable intimate friendships, converse weekly, and I am better for them.

Use Cover Crops: Spiritual Self-Care

Soil needs shelter and rejuvenation to be a flourishing field of life and so do I. Spiritual Self-Care is difficult. Because of the nomadic nature of a queer person in Church, many practices

have faded and re-formed. This use to be incredibly frustrating and isolating. And that frustration will resurface with questions like “how is your prayer life?” I can immediately slip into a question filled series of wondering if my spiritual practices are “spiritual enough.” The question of Spiritual Self-Care feels strange to me. Perhaps that is because I place an extreme amount of emphasis on others Spiritual Self-Care and liberation that I forget about my own. There may be a duality of appreciating what feels spiritual to me now and placing that first. Leaving those in need for Spiritual Self-Care at the inn so that I can continue on the journey too is vital. Here are practices I’ve identified for this duality.

Keeping Sabbath for rest is something I’ve said out loud several times I want to do and have never set the intention. I commit myself Friday-Saturday as my Sabbath. This practice will consist of Saturday morning reading, 15 minutes meditation and zero social media output on Friday. My hope is for this to be a ritual of clearing energy and distraction to make space to nurture my relationship with the divine. This year, I’m reading through the Bible with a queer group of clergy as a spiritual discipline. We read weekly, share what we’ve learned or have questions on and completely nerd out over the Bible and God. It’s been a rejuvenating practice I look forward to each week. Lastly, prayer walks with my dog. This consists of using the time I walk my dog each day as time to talk to God.

Reduce Toxins & Provide Habitat for Organisms: Emotional Self-Care

Soil needs an entire ecosystem to keep it thriving; an embodied effort to keep beneficial organisms alive. There are three practices that help balance my own soil ecosystem: therapy, water-coloring, and no is a complete sentence. I’ve been in therapy for 6 years now. Depending

on season, I attend therapy bi-weekly or monthly. Water-coloring slows down me down and I leave each session feeling more alive and rested. I paint every weekend. Marlee Grace says, “no is a complete sentence.” This practice consists of saying no at least once a week and this helps embody that I have the ability to always say no and care for my energy.

Rotate Crops: Physical Self-Care

Rotating crops in the soil helps break up disease and manages weeds. This year I want to commit to hiking bi-weekly, biking daily (weather pending), and a every other day workout schedule. As a queer non-binary person, I’ve recently had a lot of body dysmorphia with my changing body entering my mid-thirties. I need these practices to re-connect with the beauty that is my body that God gave me to break up this negative perspective and acceptance of appearance.

Manage Nutrients: Relational Self-Care

Soil needs intentionally planned care of relational components that help create a bed for thriving plant growth. In my own soil care, I see this relational bed with the people who want the same kind of world I do. Yearly, I commit to a practice of taking stock of friendships. Are they equitable, intimate, and benefiting my journey? If the answer has changed then the circle of intimacy changes. This is a literal chart drawing and each year I make a commitment to engage the friendships nourishing me with more intentionality. I write letters, share a meal, or text these individuals my intentions and hopes for our friendship. The other practice is new for me: a commitment to being a friend to myself. Each quarter of the year, I commit to taking a solo-trip to be with myself in nourishing ways.

Soil care is an embodied act with awareness to the needs and life/death cycles that take place to churn the dust we are made of toward a life well-lived. And just like the seasons, soil care demands growth and change to continue care for its overall health. I commit to embodied health.

