WORKSHEET

When the Need Comes Home

A shadow-work and contemplative companion to "Being Cared For."

A man built a house with many doors, so that anyone who needed shelter could come in. He kept the house well. For forty years people came, and he gave them what they needed, and they went on their way.

Then one winter he fell ill. He lay in the back room and listened to people knocking, and he could not get up to open the doors.

It did not occur to him, for three days, that he could call out.

On the fourth day he called out. They had been waiting on the step the whole time.

This worksheet is for both sides of care — the one who would be looked after, and the one who would do the looking after. Work whichever side you are on. Then, if you have the stomach for it, work the other one, because the two interlock and neither can be seen clearly alone.

These questions are not for solving. They are for surfacing. Write the first answer that arrives rather than the one that does you credit; the first one is the one with the information in it.

Shadow-Work Practices

Shadow work means going looking for the material you have disowned — the part of this you would rather not have found. Take these slowly. One a day is plenty.

If you are the one who would be cared for

1. Who is the figure inside you who decided that needing is beneath you? How old is he? What is he afraid would happen if he asked for something?

2. What does he get out of being the one who can? Name the payoff precisely — it is rarely virtue.

3. When you picture yourself saying "I need help," whose face appears? What do you expect that face to do?

4. What would you actually lose by being looked after? Name the thing exactly. It is usually not dignity, and it is usually smaller and more embarrassing than dignity.
5. Where have you already made someone lonely by being easy to deal with?
6. Whose need have you been carrying that was never yours — and did carrying it keep you from noticing your own?

If you are the one who would give care

7. What is the feeling you have already had about this, and decided you must never say out loud?
8. Who inside you believes that having that feeling makes you a bad person? Where did that belief come from?
9. What are you grieving that has not happened yet — and have you told anyone you are grieving it?
10. When does your resentment arrive? Note the hour of day, not the reason. The hour is more honest.
11. What would you need, in order to keep doing this? Answer as though someone had asked you and were waiting.

Spiritual Practices

These are the contemplative half — the practices that move attention from role to soul. The shadow questions surface the material; these are what you do with it.

1. The four words, turned around

Sit for fifteen minutes. Put yourself in a room with the person most likely to care for you, or to be cared for by you. Let them ask you: what do you need first?

Do not answer quickly. The quick answer is the managed one. Wait until something arrives that you would be reluctant to say, and then say it silently, in full, as a sentence. Notice what happens in your chest when you do.

Then sit with whatever arrived without doing anything about it.

2. Welcoming Prayer at the threshold

You already know this practice. Use it here, where it was always going to be needed.

When the feeling comes — the flare of refusal, the shame, the impatience — do not argue with it and do not act on it. Sink into where it sits in the body. Stay there until it is a sensation rather than a story. Welcome it. Then let go of the desire for control, for security, for the good opinion of the person in the room, and for this moment to be other than it is.

For an Eight, the one to watch is control. For a caregiver, it is often esteem — the need to be seen doing this well.

3. The small ask

Once this week, let someone do something you could have done yourself. Do not explain it, do not apologise for it, and do not repay it inside the same week.

Afterwards, write one sentence about what it cost you. That sentence is the whole curriculum.

4. An inventory of your doors

List the people who come to you for something. Then list the people you would go to. Compare the lengths of the two lists.

If the second list is shorter, you have not built a life of service. You have built a house where only one direction of traffic is permitted — and the person it protects most is you.

For the two of you, out loud

If you can, do one thing together. Each of you says one sentence beginning “What I am most afraid of about this is…” and the other does not respond, does not reassure, and does not fix it. Then swap.

Reassurance is the reflex that ends the conversation. Sitting in it without reassuring is the practice.

“The two shadows interlock. Mine makes hers unspeakable.”

— from “Being Cared For”

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