

ROOTED, NOT RETREATING: SELF-CARE REDEFINED



Waterhouse, John William. *Miranda - The Tempest*, 1916.

BY SAMUEL HEISMAN

An interesting phenomenon arises almost immediately after your name appears as a school leader on a public website: Within 24 hours, the inbox begins to populate with marketing emails peddling the latest EdTech solutions to perennial challenges in education. “Average daily attendance got you down? Use our Gen AI platform to design an ideal family communication and transportation plan!” or “We do the thinking for you: program your students for success in college and beyond with our intuitive, cloud-based learning software.” While these pitches are flawed in numerous ways—too many to list here—one trend has stood out more recently: the commercialized “package subscription” for leaders and educators which boasts improvements to self-care. “Escape the grind with our teacher leader self-care app” or “Release responsibilities with our delegation tools so you have more time for self-care.” It would seem then, that self-care is best achieved for an educator by temporarily forgetting that you are an educator!

The concept of self-care for educators is in dire need of a redefinition—a paradigm shift, or perhaps even a complete reframing. Within classical liberal arts circles, we tend to think of it as indulgent and “squishy.” Perhaps in reaction to its portrayal in consumer media, self-care is associated with spa days, cucumber-covered eyes, and retreats from rigor. This notion of self-care implies that difficulty is inherently detrimental to well-being and should be avoided or escaped entirely. It invokes retreat from reality, not engagement with it. It is no wonder then, that classical educators who view their vocation as helping children see, grasp, and navigate reality would avoid or even look down on the notion of self-care.

“Self-stabilization fosters a steadfastness that views the world not through a lens of escape, but through something more powerful—love.”

A more disciplined interpretation of self-care, while still problematic, frames it as a means for achieving optimal work performance. With its end being productivity and efficiency, this view promotes activities like exercise, quality time with loved ones, and engaging with the arts as valuable solely because they galvanize and improve our work performance. There is virtue in this model—our schools do need to function effectively. School leaders need to get things done and do them well. However, this approach is inherently unstable. When all forms of edifying human activity—friendship, religious practice, good sleep, and so on—are tied to optimal performance at work, the leader is not cultivating themselves in a way that can withstand the winds of turbulence. Sometimes, for reasons outside the leader’s immediate control, optimal outcomes cannot be reached (don’t use this as an excuse, Sam)! In those instances, the end toward which those edifying activities exist is unattainable, and the activities themselves are now rendered unstable and meaningless.

In such situations, self-care routines become an “all or nothing” ritual: either everything works, or it doesn’t, and then stability crumbles. It reduces self-care to a reactionary tool, not an intentional and grounded goal. Perhaps, we could better define or even reword this idea of self-care. Let’s call it self-stabilization. The aim of self-stabilization? To strengthen our ability to endure and flourish in a full life that is, by nature, turbulent. Even further, it clarifies that we are not meant for work alone. Framed this way, the practices are no longer squishy indulgences with a narrow focus. They cultivate strong roots which can withstand the storms life throws at us, and in this way, they help us fully engage with the realities of the broader human experience. As Seneca said in his essay **On Providence**: “Why, then, do you wonder that good men are shaken in order that they may grow strong? No tree becomes rooted and sturdy unless many a wind assails it.”

Here is my point: The habits usually associated with appropriate self-care (meditation, religious practice, time with friends and family, and reflection), should not be met with abhorrence or skepticism. They should be embraced as grounding pathways toward self-cultivation, a rootedness which helps us grow in our capacity to encounter reality, lead in uncertainty, and give of ourselves when it is difficult to do so.

If there is a takeaway here for your professional or personal lives, let it be this: Self-stabilization fosters a steadfastness that views the world not through a lens of escape, but through something far more powerful—love.

As Shakespeare writes in his Sonnet 116:

*Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no, it is an ever-fixèd mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken...
... Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom...*

Unshaken by tempests, self-stabilization leads to a disposition—a steely-eyed enduring one perhaps, but more importantly it is a disposition which looks on reality through eyes of love. I can think of nothing more applicable to the work of classical education, leadership, or personhood.

About the Author:

Recently named new Executive Director for Great Hearts Texas, Samuel Heisman will oversee the Upper schools in San Antonio. As Founding Head of School at Great Hearts Harveston, he pioneered the expansion of the Great Hearts classical model into the state of Louisiana, with a robust and growing community currently serving grades K-8. The great-great nephew of [John Heisman](#), the man for whom the Heisman Trophy is named, Heisman graduated from Hillsdale College and has served with Great Hearts in three regions, first teaching and coaching at Veritas Prep in Arizona then joining Great Hearts in Texas as Headmaster at Northern Oaks, and finally in Louisiana. He is the proud father of five children and in his free time enjoys cocktail mixology, golf, basketball, outdoor cooking, reading, dog training, and the outdoors, as long as it doesn't involve sleeping on the ground—"that gives me a back ache!"

