

The Art of
Extreme
Self-Care

Also by Cheryl Richardson

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The Art of Extreme Self-Care

CHERYL
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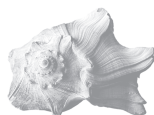
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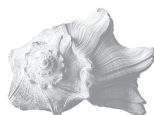


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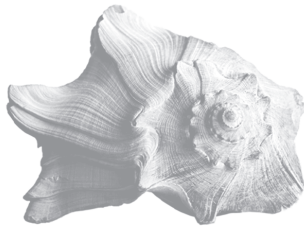
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Introduction

In 1994, I made a decision to hire my first personal coach. Although I thought this decision would make me a better coach myself, it turned out to do much more. It gave me a better life. Thomas Leonard, founder of Coach University and the leading pioneer in the field of professional coaching, was the man's name, and I'll never forget what happened in our first session.



During the intake process, Thomas asked me to tell him a little about my life. He wanted to get a sense of who I was and how I lived. For the next 20 minutes, I talked about all the things that occupied my time:

- ◉ I worked as a business-development counselor at night and on weekends.
- ◉ I taught career-planning seminars for a corporate consulting firm.
- ◉ I volunteered for a local job-search organization, offering workshops on interviewing and networking skills.
- ◉ I supported friends who were struggling and needed a selfless, compassionate ear.

As I listened to myself talk about my schedule, I have to admit that I felt pretty good. There was a certain level of

satisfaction that came from being needed and in demand. When I finished, Thomas was quiet for a moment, and then, with a slight edge in his voice, said, “Wow, you do a great job of taking care of a lot of people. You’re such a good person.”

I smiled to myself, thinking, *Hmm, he really gets me.* But what he said next took me totally by surprise: “And the truth is, Cheryl, your ‘good girl’ role is going to rob you of your life.”

I sat still for what felt like a very long time. My moment of triumph slowly turned to tears as Thomas’s words hit home. I *was* a good girl. I was so used to playing the role of caretaker that it had become a normal way of life. It had also become my identity and how I defined my self-worth. Now, many years and many clients later, I know I wasn’t alone. So many of us, especially women, have taken on this “noble” role. What we don’t realize—until it’s too late—is the high price we pay for being “so generous” . . . a price extracted from our very bones.

While at that time I thought I felt good about caring for others, when it came time to talk with Thomas about what wasn’t working in my life, my complaints revealed something quite different. I had to admit that I had no time for myself. I felt resentful about helping to make others successful yet never getting around to doing what I wanted to do. I also had to face the reality that too many of my relationships were one-way streets. Some of my friends were extremely needy, yet I kept them in my life because they

made me feel safe, in control, and significant. Yes, Thomas was right: I was a good girl, and it was sucking the life out of me.



It was during our work together that Thomas introduced me to the concept of Extreme Self-Care. The word *extreme* intrigued me and got my attention. I remember feeling excited about the idea, but also a little nervous. From Thomas's perspective, Extreme Self-Care meant taking my care to a whole new level—a level that, to me, seemed arrogant and selfish, practiced by people who had an inappropriate sense of entitlement. It meant taking radical action to improve my life *and* engaging in daily habits that allowed me to maintain this new standard of living. For example, it wasn't enough to take a weekend off from helping others so that I could enjoy some downtime. Thomas wanted me to schedule time for myself (on my calendar, in ink) *every day* for six months.

Extreme Self-Care also involved surrounding myself with people who were smart, self-aware, and only interested in two-way relationships. It meant taking bold steps, such as eliminating clutter from my life, for good; creating a soul-nourishing work and home environment, and keeping it that way; getting my financial act together so that I always had choices about how to live my life; and not making any commitments whatsoever out of guilt or obligation.

In addition, Thomas explained that making pleasure a priority was critical for Extreme Self-Care—real pleasure, not just a massage every couple of months, an occasional bath, or a yearly vacation. It meant leaving work in the middle of the day to get out into nature, enjoying a great massage once a week, and developing daily habits that made me feel happy and nurtured, including listening to the music I loved, drinking my favorite tea, or ordering fresh flowers for my office.

At first I had great resistance to the idea of Extreme Self-Care. A massage once a week? How could I ever afford that when I had to pay my rent? Time to myself every day? I could barely find time to go to the bathroom, let alone for a walk at lunch. My coach's suggestions seemed idealistic, bordering on absurd. But, as I would soon discover, *a great life starts with an open mind*. To this day, I'm thankful that Thomas Leonard had a higher vision for my life than I had for myself.

As I slowly began to incorporate Extreme Self-Care into my life, it was clear that internal changes were required in order to make these behaviors stick. For example, I needed to quit being a martyr and focus on getting my needs met. I had to stop expecting others to read my mind and start being direct about what I wanted. I was challenged to try asking for help long before I needed it. Rather than bitch and moan about how others had let me down, I was to see my frustration as an indication that something needed to

change. I also had to begin asking people to share the load instead of being a hero by attempting to do it all myself. Finally, I had to stop being an automatic yes machine when people asked for my help and instead learn to say no with confidence and ease.

As the work Thomas and I did together progressed, I discovered that making these changes wasn't easy. When I look back now, I can see that I was challenging a legacy of self-sacrifice and overgiving passed down to me by generations of women in my family—the same legacy that confounds so many women even now. Too many of us are continuing to be the good girl, and it's a tough habit to break. I still catch myself doing this when I feel stressed and under pressure. Suddenly I'm bending over backward to make it easier for an employee to do his or her job (I call this "hiring people to work for"). Or I'm scheduling too many activities into a day to accommodate the needs of everyone else (I call this "insanity"). For those of us who do such things—and this includes men as well as women—it's often an automatic response, as if a default button gets pushed and we reflexively revert to these behaviors.

The Rewards of Extreme Self-Care

A good coach focuses on the source of a problem rather than the symptoms. In my work with Thomas, I was forced to look

at the truth of why I continued to give too much, usually at my own expense. I wanted people to like me, to enjoy spending time with me, and to see me as wise and helpful. I also wanted to avoid the anxiety I felt whenever someone disapproved of something I did. Funny, but after years of practicing Extreme Self-Care, I've realized something ironic: if you want to live an authentic, meaningful life, you need to master the art of disappointing and upsetting others, hurting feelings, and living with the reality that some people just won't like you. It may not be easy, but it's essential if you want your life to reflect your deepest desires, values, and needs.

Over time, as my life became more oriented around the principles of Extreme Self-Care, it began to have a positive impact on my work. As a coach, I passed on what Thomas had taught me by challenging my clients to accept no less than the highest possible standards—be it for their work, their relationships, their health, or just their overall well-being. When they did, their lives changed dramatically—it was as if they became more aligned with a divine energy or force that opened doors to support their highest good. But even though the idea was intriguing and fun to consider, it wasn't always easy getting people on board. As much as Americans are portrayed as an overindulgent society, the truth is that when we decide to care for ourselves in a more attentive, proactive, and soul-nourishing way, we're forced to confront a cultural view that *selfish* is a dirty word.

The concept of making one's self-care a priority remains controversial to this very day. Over the years I've repeatedly had to defend this idea to the media as well as to clients and audience members. Now I welcome the opportunity, and here's why: the practice of Extreme Self-Care forces us to make choices and decisions that honor and reflect the true nature of our soul. While the whole notion of this might seem selfish or self-centered, doing so actually allows us to make our greatest contribution to the world. The choice to live a life that reflects the tenets of Extreme Self-Care is critical if we want to make a difference in the world . . . and most people I know do.

From years of personal experience, as well as from the work I've done coaching many caring and hardworking men and women, I've learned that when we care for ourselves deeply and deliberately, we naturally begin to care for others—our families, our friends, and the world—in a healthier and more effective way. We become conscious *and* conscientious people. We tell the truth. We make choices from a place of love and compassion instead of guilt and obligation. And we begin to understand—on a visceral level—that we're all connected, and that our individual actions affect the greater whole in a more profound way than we ever imagined. A CEO who never gave much thought to recycling, for instance, finds that his own awakening to Extreme Self-Care leads him to not only take better care of himself and his family, but to also start

a recycling plan at work. Or a mom who learns to make her own needs a priority (rather than always attending to her children first) develops a program to help mothers raise more confident and independent kids.

Enjoying a life of Extreme Self-Care means living and working in a soul-nurturing environment; developing a greater appreciation for, and connection with, nature; doing work that provides an opportunity to express your greatest gifts and talents; and caring for your emotional, physical, and spiritual health in a way that's aligned with who you are and what you most need. When you allow yourself to want this and then have it, you can't help but want it for others as well.

The art of Extreme Self-Care takes patience, commitment, and practice. It initially requires a willingness to sit with some pretty uncomfortable feelings, too, such as guilt—for putting your own needs first, fear—of being judged and criticized by others, or anxiety—from challenging long-held beliefs and behaviors. It's an organic, evolutionary process; an art as opposed to a science. Over time, you'll make progress and become more comfortable with the process, but you'll also regress. I know the dance well. There are days when I set firm limits on my availability so that I don't feel overwhelmed with work, yet there are other days when I'm beating myself up, wondering why the hell I'm still in the office at 9 p.m. The difference today is that I'm much more aware of what it feels like when I'm

getting into trouble, and I know what I have to do to get back on course.

During the past 15 years, the rich and fruitful life I've experienced has been a direct result of practicing Extreme Self-Care. Because I know that there are no quick fixes—and we're talking about challenging a way of life, not rearranging a room—I've designed this book to help *you* practice it by taking small steps every month. Each of the following 12 chapters offers you a different way to do so, and at the end of every one, you'll find an "Extreme Self-Care Challenge" with guidelines and suggestions for getting and staying on track. You'll also find some of my favorite resources*, which will offer you additional ways to pursue and sustain your individual self-care goals.

Set Yourself Up to Succeed

If you like being held accountable when attempting to make changes, set yourself up to succeed by enlisting a good friend or, better yet, *a group* of like-minded people to accompany you on your journey. If you don't have someone in mind, or you feel uncomfortable with the idea of assembling a group, don't worry. Just visit www.

***Editors note:** All *italized* titles in the resource sections refer to books, unless otherwise noted.

cherylrichardson.com and check out the Life Makeover Group section. This wonderful online community, which includes thousands of people from all over the world who have been supporting one another for many years, provides free resources to help you make connections in your area. When you join a Life Makeover Group, you'll soon find yourself practicing Extreme Self-Care with a wide variety of caring and helpful people who are committed to changing their lives. By following the guidelines on this site, you'll also learn how to form and run a successful group of your own.

As you get started on this life-changing journey, be mindful of what types of changes would benefit you most at this time in your life. To develop a clearer perspective of this, I suggest that you read the entire book first. When you finish, if you're not sure which chapter to begin with, pick the one you'd most like to avoid, and then get to work. Make Extreme Self-Care a consistent part of your daily life. And remember, not only will it be the greatest gift you give to yourself, it will be the greatest gift you give to others, too.

Okay, are you ready to transform your life? Dramatically, and for good? Then let's get started! Good luck, and I hope you enjoy the ride. . . .

Resources

- ◉ Coach University (www.coachu.com)—for information on finding a coach and becoming one yourself, including coach training.
- ◉ CoachVille (www.coachville.com)—a Website dedicated to coaches that provides content, community, and a curriculum for coaches from all walks of life. There is lots of great information from Thomas Leonard, written before he passed away in 2003.
- ◉ The International Coach Federation (www.coachfederation.org)—the largest independent professional association for coaches worldwide, it also offers a coach-referral service.
- ◉ My own Website (www.cherylrichardson.com)—for information on finding or starting a Life Makeover Group in your area, along with resources on how to run a successful group meeting.
- ◉ My weekly Internet radio show, “Coach on Call” (at HayHouseRadio.com®)—if you’d like to receive live coaching from me directly.