

Pipsqueak: friend, brother, lover, psychiatric nurse and teacher...

The word **care** made me feel angry for so long. Like an obsolete word in the dictionary, I struggled to understand it and more importantly, to feel what it meant or how I could relate to it. After all, had I not grown up holding my breath, fast forwarding in fantasies and daydreams as to what I would do when I grew up. Life had felt like too small a jumper, tight at the throat and at the elbows, some unpleasant experience to get through as quickly as I could, as unconsciously as I could. Poverty, racism, loneliness, alcohol, drugs, homelessness, squatts, pregnancy, exile, blackout.....each one of these tragedies weighed heavily on my psyche and by the time I was 28, I felt as old as if I'd lived to 95 and been through several world wars. Thankfully, the last 23 years had been focused on caring for my daughters, the apple of my eyes and my *raison d'être*. I'd fed them, clothed them, spoken to them, taken them to school, read to them and travelled with them as extensively as I could but looking back, did that amount to care?

I was never taught to care about myself but was taught to 'care' for others until it hurt, until I hated them and resented them profusely for taking what was mine.

I would look outside of myself for someone else to look after me but surely that would only happen after I had taken care of all the people and all of the problems around myself.

This tall order came from being raised in a mediterranean culture of what it meant to be a woman, looking outside of myself, looking to the group to rescue, fix and compulsively help whilst longing to belong, to be accepted, to be loved and cared for.

I first encountered the notion of **self-care** through twelve step programs designed to rid me of my string of addictions to substances a day at a time. I'd internally battled with the concept, not knowing how it could apply to me or only to the Gucci bearing well off women in the meetings, the ones who always seemed to be coming back from one retreat in India or another, having entrusted their kids to the care of a nanny or to their extended family. No wonder I didn't relate and didn't think it'd apply to me.

When Covid 19 burst on the scene and brought my world to a grinding halt, I immediately put on my martyr suit, braving supermarkets without a mask, doing so much, projecting my energies outwards through newsletters, calls to the vulnerable, baby music classes, zoom sessions, an endless list of activities keeping me awake until the early hours of the day when my insomnia would kick in for several hours of worrying.

I quickly crashed and berated myself for not being enough, not working hard enough, not straining enough, not doing or being enough. The idea was that 'I didn't even care if I got the virus'. I didn't give a shit for my health, for my life, I didn't care if I got ill. I thought I probably deserved to be ill. That's how bad I thought of myself. That's how low I thought of myself. That's how ingrained self-hatred had become, decades of self-abandonment had been the only constant when it came to relating to myself. I remember growing up in a cramped shoebox of a flat in Paris where getting ill was the only way I'd ever felt anyone cared for me, my preoccupied parents temporarily turning their attentions to me. They would bring me tea and food in bed, talk to me and ask me how I was.

When I crashed, I looked around me. Having to stay indoors forced me to face myself and pay attention to what was going on inside of my home, my mind, my heart. I slowed down and moved back into my body. That's when I realised that my cat, Pipsqueak had been really quiet and strangely avoidant, the opposite of his loving and caring self. It didn't take long for me to discover that he had an infected claw. I got him medication and looked after him for the week that followed, during which he still wasn't himself. One night, I even dreamt

he'd died in the night and I'd woken up to a cold furry body next to mine. As I nursed him, I became aware of how much I love him, something I'd covered up along the years, with sarcastic jokes about the size of him (he likes his food), puns on his name and male -shaming comments (he's the only male in the family) to get us to have a laugh between females (myself, my daughter and Cherie, our she-cat{also pipsqueak's mother}) and get rid of the day's stress.

My heart softened as I prayed he would recover and as he did, I began to understand that Pipsqueak had been my teacher all along, teaching me what it's like to stay soft in a hard world, caring for self, washing self, allowing himself to lie down for long restorative sleeps. I have felt really blessed to have him around during lockdown, knowing that some people didn't have access to such precious love in the form of my Pipsqueak, friend, brother, lover, psychiatric nurse and teacher.

So I urge you to be like Pipsqueak, don't eat as much, but please take good care of yourself. You owe it to yourself to take care of yourself and that, my friend, is not a job you can ever be made redundant of or furloughed from.