

Praise for *Sanctuaries*

“*Sanctuaries* is filled with a variety of strategies that you will want to try immediately! Not only does Dan build the critical case for self-care as a necessity, but he also empowers us to take hold of our time and commitments so we can take action to live more intentionally with healthier mindsets. You will feel like Dan is there coaching you along the way with his humor, personal stories, and authentic insights. Invest in yourself by focusing on the present moment with this text, employ any of the multiple beneficial ideas within it, and live a more full life starting today!”

—Sarah Johnson,
coauthor *Balance Like a Pirate*, teacher, principal,
educational consultant, speaker, and founder In AWE, LLC

“Dan is a true advocate for his fellow teachers and has unique insights about what it means to practice self-care, even when the demands of the classroom feel overwhelming. Dan’s practical ideas on mindfulness, rituals, and sanctuaries will give teachers simple steps they can take right now to create change in their lives.”

—Angela Watson,
creator of The 40 Hour Teacher Workweek Club
and host of *Truth for Teachers* podcast

“Teachers are consistently listed in the top tier of the most stressful human service professions. *Sanctuaries* provides a holistic and practical relief for helping teachers manage their stress. Read this book, but, most importantly, use the techniques. They work!”

—Dr. Ernie Mendes, PhD,
executive trainer and author of the best-selling books,
Empty the Cup Before You Fill It Up® and *Engage 4 Learning*

“There is a beauty, dare I say a joy, in taking care of others. Servant leadership for educators is organic, and self care should be the same for us—but it isn’t. *Sanctuaries* is a blueprint for ensuring that you see the necessity and beauty of taking care of the most important vessel needed to serve from your overflow—your mind, body, and spirit. Dan’s heart is on every page, and the practical, easy-to-implement strategies can be done immediately. I recommend you read the book, hug yourself for the investment in your well-being, and buy another one for an educator you love.”

—Akilah Ellison,
proud administrator, doctoral student, friend, and mom

Sanctuaries

SELF-CARE SECRETS FOR
STRESSED-OUT TEACHERS

Dan Tricarico

Sanctuaries

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Why Is Self-Care Important for Teachers?

When my wife and I met for the first time, she said, “You’re one of the most relaxed people I’ve ever seen.”

Fast forward ten years and that wasn’t true anymore.

I was married, had a mortgage, was raising two kids, and was over a decade into my teaching career.

By that point, I felt much more anxious and stressed about everything.

Ten more years of life (and mounting stress) passed. Our family was dealing with serious health problems, my marriage was going through a rough patch, and the education profession had gone a little nutty. The Testing Machine was out of control, class sizes were enormous (I had forty students in nearly every class), and the budget for supplies and materials was miniscule. It seemed that, year by year, we received less and less support from our administration, the district, and the state.

During that time, I watched some of the most excellent teachers around me melt down, burnout, and leave the profession. In my department alone, we lost three teachers within the space of a couple years. One day, a good teacher friend of mine asked me to cover her class while she spent the period sobbing in the bathroom. At the end of the year, she transferred to another school where she now serves as the librarian. The good news is that she ultimately found a way to cope and is much happier. Another woman walked out one day and called in the next morning to say she wasn’t coming in. We never saw her again.

Finally, one of the greatest teachers I've ever known put himself in a situation where he had to be escorted from the classroom. Six years later, he died of a heart attack at the age of forty-nine. To be fair, he had his own personal demons, but I also know he was a visionary. I believe he saw where education was going, didn't like what he saw, and took the only way out he could see. I miss him to this day, and much of what I do in the classroom is still influenced by his amazing work. Losing him was a blow to education and to the students who would never have him as a teacher. This book is dedicated to him.

Before too long, the time came when I could see myself heading in the same direction as these teachers. Things got so bad, in fact, that I went through a period of clinical depression. I was prescribed Wellbutrin, Zoloft, and Lexipro—none of which helped very much. I did come up with a commercial and slogan for Lexipro, however. Imagine me holding the little brown pill bottle and looking into the camera, saying in my best broadcaster voice:

“Life blow? (dramatic pause) Lexipro!”

But in all seriousness, with the world crashing down around my colleagues and me, I thought, “I can't do this. I have ten more years. I have to stick it out. I have to find some way to keep my sanity and make it to retirement.”

Changing careers wasn't an option. For one thing, I wasn't even sure I had any other marketable skills. I was over fifty, and I knew I wasn't going back to school to become a doctor or a lawyer, so I had to find a way to make it work. More importantly, I've loved every minute of teaching, and I didn't want to stop.

At a loss for what to do and where to turn, my mind wandered back to my days as a drama major and acting student. Our professors taught us that actors needed to be in a state of “relaxed preparedness,” meaning that you were calm, but ready to go; you were relaxed, but ready to perform. To get into that state of being, we did all of these funky breathing, relaxation, and meditation exercises.

I always joke that I do five shows a day. As educators, we are always “on.” Creating a state of relaxed preparedness was exactly what I needed. I'd also been interested in Zen, Eastern philosophy, and mindfulness, so applying this

approach of meditation and purposeful relaxation to my teaching practice suddenly seemed like a good fit.

I started a blog called *The Zen Teacher* about how to use these techniques. Honestly, the blog started as a way for me to write down some reminders for myself, but when I promoted the blog, teachers responded to the message. Realizing then that others might benefit from this approach, I wrote a book called *The Zen Teacher: Creating Focus, Simplicity, and Tranquility in the Classroom*, which covered how to be relaxed and prepared and ready to perform. My timing was pretty good because mindfulness was just emerging as a technique to use in education. Like actors, teachers are significantly more effective when they are relaxed, present in the moment, not preoccupied with the past or the future, and ready to perform.

The truth is, I am still not as relaxed as the day I met my wife, but since writing *The Zen Teacher* and practicing its concepts, I definitely feel calmer and happier than I have for the past two decades, and I'm much less worried about how I will "survive" my job and make it to retirement. In the process of becoming a "Zen teacher," I've learned a few more things about myself, this profession, and how we can all experience life and teaching from a happier, less-stressed, more peaceful state. And as with my previous book, that state begins with a focus on self-care—something educators tend to neglect. If *The Zen Teacher* reminds you to take care of yourself, *Sanctuaries* shows you how.

You've heard the saying, "You can't pour from an empty cup." Well, teachers are such beautiful people, such givers and servers, that they completely empty their cup and then, if it will help a student, colleague, or a member of their own family, they will gladly hand over the cup as well.

Your well-being and the success of your students, relies, in many ways, on your ability to thrive—not simply survive.

In this book, you will learn why you need to take back your cup. Your well-being and the success of your students, relies, in many ways, on your ability to thrive—not simply survive. In the pages that follow, I'll share practices and strategies for relaxation, mindfulness, and self-care that will equip you to experience life from a place of relaxed preparedness, mindfulness, and strength. While we're at it, I want to show you how to fill your cup with the things you love so you can give more without depleting your resources.

A sanctuary is a place of rest and refuge, of safety and sanity, and often of the sacred and the holy. While there is no objective, absolute answer to what a sanctuary is, we can discover what that word means to us through some simple practices and strategies. To that end, I have included activities throughout the book to help you do just that.

These activities—think of them as rest and reflection stops in your reading—are labeled “My Sanctuary Plan,” and each one can help you figure out what your definition of a sanctuary is, as well as develop what one (or many) might look like for you. Because this culture does not value stillness, reflection, or self-care, you must learn that the answers and approaches will not, and cannot, be decided by others. They can only be defined by you. It's important to remember, as the poet Rumi said, that the “entrance door to your sanctuary is inside you.”

If you read this book carefully and apply what you learn, maybe I can provide you with one or two of the keys that can help you unlock that entrance door.

Once you pass through the threshold, the rest is up to you.

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Where do you go to heal, to rejuvenate, to lick your wounds when life has been unkind? How do you go about creating a feeling of wholeness and erase the overwhelming notion that The Universe is out to get you? What do you do to cultivate the sense that, at the end of the day, things will ultimately turn out all right?

In other words, where is your sanctuary?

A sanctuary, according to Merriam-Webster.com, is “a place of refuge and protection.” It is a kind of shelter that might be a literal place—a church, for example, or a park, or a mountaintop, or the ocean, or your house, or maybe even the classroom where you teach.

But that shelter could also be figurative, a protection against someone else’s rage or abuse or a shelter against an overwhelming personal sense of sadness, frustration, or fatigue. In that case, perhaps, your sanctuary is a state of mind that arises from experiences you have—praying, listening to music, or spending time with loved ones.

Given the stressors of modern American education, it is crucial that we, especially as classroom teachers in the trenches, have a place to retreat. We need to access and develop that sense of calm and equanimity that allows us to regroup and come back to our work lives refreshed and ready to go another round with the challenges that life and education throw at us.

People in all walks of education need to take care of themselves so that they are able not only to survive, but thrive in the classroom. We must learn

to create the conditions where our mental, emotional, and spiritual healing and rejuvenation is valued and looked after, so that we all make it through to retirement—or whatever our life may hold after we leave our schools and classrooms.

Years ago, I read a book called *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* by Parker Palmer, and it changed the focus of my entire career. Palmer gave me permission to teach from the perspective of “who I am” and to see teaching as a path and a struggle and a grand experiment. Even when that experiment doesn't go perfectly, if my heart and mind are in the right place, my teaching practice will always make a difference for my students who, like us, exist in a largely indifferent world. In short, Palmer helped me turn my classroom into one of my sanctuaries.

Palmer, who is now a columnist for a site called *On Being*, recently wrote a post discussing the importance of sanctuaries. True to Palmer's form, the entire column was inspiring, but the following quote resonated with me particularly deeply:

Today ... in a world that's both astonishingly beautiful and horrifically cruel, “sanctuary” is as vital as breathing to me. Sometimes I find it in churches, monasteries, and other sites designated as sacred. But more often I find it in places sacred to my soul: in the natural world, in the company of a trustworthy friend, in solitary or shared silence, in the ambience of a good poem or good music.¹

What matters most is not what or where our sanctuary is, but that we have one.

What Palmer tells us here is that what matters most is not what or where our sanctuary is, but that we have one. It is our own realization that we have a sanctuary and how it helps us create a sense of focus, simplicity, and tranquility that ultimately saves us. Our sanctuary becomes a safe haven when life confounds, a sacred space where we can find stillness, silence, peace, and contentment when we are pushed to our limits.

The truth is, life is too difficult, too challenging, too full of pain and grief and violence to not find a place where we can rest and heal and grow. We so often need a respite from the world where we can find a way to deal with the chaos and confusion. All of us will face troubled times, so it is imperative that we find a place of protection so that these troubled times do not consume us. We are too important, too special, too loved—even if we think otherwise—for that to ever happen.

So if you look around and don't see a place or a situation where you feel safe and secure and can wrap a blanket of warmth and love around you, either make it a priority to find one or ask for help from someone you trust because everyone needs—*in fact, everyone deserves*—a sanctuary.

Where will you find yours?

List three places, life approaches, or mindsets that are your sanctuaries in day-to-day life:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Intentional and Radical Self-Care

The world can be a big and scary place; stress is inevitable. The way we navigate that stress determines the difference between thriving and burning out. In a profession that has historically ignored the need for self-care, we must find ways to cope with the tension and anxiety and deal with the stressors inherent in our work. Because, ultimately, the responsibility for taking care of ourselves lies within our own hands.

If we don't make the choice—and it *is* a choice—to take care of ourselves and value our peace of mind and expansiveness of spirit, then it most likely won't happen. Sure, we might experience random and serendipitous moments of relaxation and respite, but stress and workloads often expand when left unchecked. Unfortunately, self-care, though necessary and beneficial, is not something our society rewards; in fact, it often rewards just the opposite. In a world where its inhabitants are addicted to smartphones, laptops, and Netflix accounts, we are responsible for breaking the cycle and stopping to value and honor those times when we recognize our own deep impulses to slow down, breathe, and maybe even meditate. It may seem unorthodox and unconventional to stop the busyness, especially given what our neighbors and colleagues are doing, but making the choice to pause can be critical, even life-saving, especially when those impulses are buried and suffocated by relentless stress.

Honoring and valuing these impulses is something I call *intentional and radical self-care*.

Let me break down those two words for you:

Intentional—Self-care is not going to happen by accident. The word *intentional*, then, means by choice or on purpose. In other words, no one is going to hand it to you or do it for you. You may have an incredible support system of friends and loved ones—and if you do, fantastic—but, chances are, no one in your life is likely to walk up to you, look you in the eye, and say, “You know what? You look pretty worn out. Why don’t you take a nap?”

Whether you call it self-love, self-care, or self-compassion, these things don’t typically happen as a matter of spontaneity and serendipity. They are skills, muscles and—like all muscles, all skills—they only get stronger and better when exercised and practiced.

Self-care is a choice—your choice. It takes purposeful intention to make it happen. One thing you can do to increase your odds of a little personal TLC is to schedule it on the calendar. Writing something down makes it more real and gives it a little more gravitas than if it remains as a “someday/sometime” idea in your mind.

Radical—Radical means different from what is typical or ordinary. In this Zen teacher’s mind, then, radical means unusual, not like we always do it. If you want to break the frenetic auto-pilot pace you slip into and learn to improve your self-care, you have to do things differently than you have been doing them. This is not only a great challenge for us but also for those around us.

I first heard the expression *radical self-care* used by the writer Anne Lamott. She recognized that self-care often broke with some kind of traditional norm. This means that if you insist on time for renewal and rejuvenation, for example, you may face resistance from those around you who are used to you behaving in a certain way. They may experience what is called *role stress*, which is what happens when the role they are accustomed to you playing in their lives changes, and they find themselves feeling uncomfortable or even threatened by the new you. When that happens, your best recourse is to accept what is and proceed with nonjudgment. Intentional and *radical* self-care calls you to set boundaries that value and respect your personal needs and desires even if it pushes you (or someone else) out of a familiar comfort zone.

Lamott tells us that “Radical self-care is what we’ve been longing for, desperate for, our entire lives—friendship with our own hearts.”² Isn’t the idea of having a friendship with our own hearts a lovely thought? If we cannot commune with ourselves first, then it’s just not clear to me how we can best serve or be present with others.

I remember one day, years ago, I was cleaning the house with my family. After I finished some domestic task that made our domicile a little more inhabitable, I made my way downstairs and announced that I was “going to take a break.” After this proclamation, I stretched out on the couch in the living room. Upstairs, I could hear a slight increase in the noise of the tasks being accomplished. Things were being done a little more vigorously. Drawers were being shut a bit more aggressively. And as my family members wandered by me on the couch, I could sense the heat of their gaze on me. I imagine they were thinking, “Why do *you* get to take a break when we are we still working our asses off?” And while part of me was hoping, I suppose, to model what it was like to take care of myself in the hopes that my typical Type A family members would realize that a little balance is a helpful perspective, I was smart enough to know I shouldn’t actually say, “You can take a break any time you want.”

I mean, I didn’t have a death wish.

In years past, when I tried to match my family’s rhythm of constant forward motion with no breaks, no rest, no Sabbath of any kind, I not only felt unhappy, but I would often watch them push themselves to the *n*th degree and end up sick or worn out or grouchy, simply because they hadn’t honored the impulses they were experiencing that encouraged them to take care of themselves.

When I talk about intentional and radical self-care, keep these two points in mind:

1. If you want to treat yourself better (and thereby be in a better position to love, give to, and serve others), you must do it on purpose and by choice.
2. When you do so, your actions will seem atypical or out of the ordinary.

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Taking action with purpose and by choice, especially when that action is not considered typical by others, can be a subversive, rebellious act.

So I guarantee you'll ruffle feathers.

And I promise you'll get funny looks.

So what?

Be a rebel.

Value your own needs.

Take care of yourself.

What's the worst that could happen?

Inner peace?

About the Author

Dan Tricarico lives in San Diego, California, and has been a high school English teacher for more than twenty-five years. He is author of *The Zen Teacher: Creating Focus, Simplicity, and Tranquility in the Classroom* and *Sanctuaries: Self-Care Secrets for Stressed Out Teachers*. In his spare time, he enjoys writing fiction, watching movies, listening to music, reading, and staring out of windows. His first love is writing poetry, and he has published many poems both in print and online.

For more ideas on reduced stress and improved self-care or to sign up for The Zen Teacher newsletter, please visit thezenteacher.com.



