

Sustaining Spirit details how to break the cycle of burnout and bring balance to one's life. This is a must-read, not just for activists working toward social justice, but for everyone who supports community and social change.

**Sustaining Spirit:
Self-Care for Social Justice - Second Edition**
By Naomi Ortiz

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SUSTAINING SPIRIT

SECOND EDITION

*self-care for
social justice*

NAOMI
ORTIZ

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What People are Saying about *Sustaining Spirit*

“Ortiz provides a guide on understanding one’s self and location within a larger universe, practical steps on how to engage in self-care every day, how to hold space for ourselves, our communities, and for the people no longer with us, and how to survive in a world of pain, conflict, and uncertainty.”

— Alice Wong, Founder, Disability Visibility Project™

“Burnout amongst my community is not only real but truly a detriment for the work. [Sustaining Spirit] is a guide book for activists and leaders in social justice movements. It’s a Workbook to use in practicing living well daily; [the] questions are journal prompts AND therapy [for] the soul.”

— Erin Blanding, Director, Global Program Innovation of WE, and Co-Founder and Senior Fellow of Borderlands Restoration Leadership Institute

“...[In this] beautifully crafted and exquisitely written book, Naomi Ortiz has given a great gift to those of us whose passionate devotion to social justice activism can too often lead to bodily and spiritual exhaustion. Each chapter ends with finely honed reflection questions that invite us to explore how we can incorporate sustaining self-care into our work on behalf of the communities we love.”

— Melanie Morrison, Allies for Change

“Sustaining Spirit: Self-Care for Social Justice, resonated deeply with me, setting the tone for a poetic and layered journey where the reader is guided to reflect on identity, purpose, and self-care to create personal and social change in a rapidly changing world. Incorporating poetry and narrative from [their] own experiences as an activist along with interviews from other activists, Ortiz covers a wide range of themes, including how trauma is held in the body, the generational impact of colonization, ableism (oppression of people who are perceived to have cognitive, emotional, and/or physical disabilities),

Naomi Ortiz

the power of intuition and ancestral wisdom, and how to be aware of our needs and our value. Every page of this spiritual book is a gift, full of poignant stories, poetic metaphors, insightful questions, and practical suggestions to sustain ourselves as activists over the long-term.”

— Lisa Hoffman, Social Justice Activist

“Self-care and activism has become a widely discussed subject in activist circles, yet in practice has been often been difficult to implement. With this book, Ortiz has made it both accessible, and most important, possible. Ortiz reminds us that we are part of the flow of nature, and helps infuse the spirit in each of us back into our activism. It’s a must-read for those of us doing this work, and a critical reminder that we must care for ourselves too so we can be there for the long term.”

— Adela Nieves, Traditional Health Practitioner, Taino
(Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean)

“This is a gentle, transformative book. Written for social justice activists, it has a much wider application...where many people feel frightened, depressed, or angry about government actions against women, people of color, immigrant people, LGBTQ people, and the environment... Ortiz draws on [their] Mestiz[e] community’s spiritual traditions, suggesting strategies for creating nourishing rituals using the reader’s own ancestry, experience, and traditions. Ortiz emphasizes how to identify one’s strengths, how to manage stress, how to decide when and whether a job, relationship, or other situation has become untenable... Each chapter ends with questions intended to lead the reader to internal knowledge, self-awareness, and peace... For me, the best choice was to read the book slowly to fully integrate its wisdom.”

—Michele Sharpe, Writer and Poet

Books by Naomi Ortiz

Sustaining Spirit: Self-Care for Social Justice

Rituals for Climate Change: A Crip Struggle for Ecojustice

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A Note from the Author on the Second Edition

The journey *Sustaining Spirit: Self-Care for Social Justice* has taken since it was first released in June 2018, is one that has constantly amazed me. From the shelves of bookstores and libraries to being used as a textbook in yoga training classes, ministry fellowships; to supporting staff workshops at the Ford Foundation, the National Basketball Association (NBA); and supporting young people involved in Amnesty International and future social workers at the Child Study Center at Yale University School of Medicine. This interest prompted me to create a companion discussion guide for book groups, available for free on my website, along with several recorded community workshops, readings, and panel presentations. *Sustaining Spirit* has made its own way.

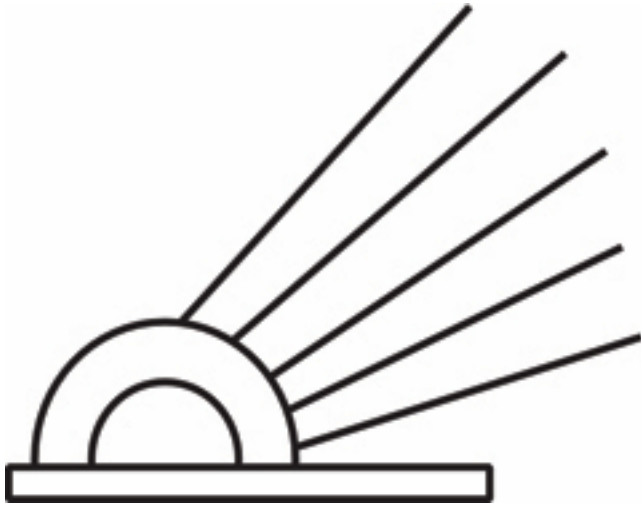
It has also been an intense time of advocacy from Black Lives Matter organizing and protests, to disability community fighting to be included in life-giving triage during the initial phase of COVID-19, to organizers addressing violence and harassment against Asian American community members due to racist rhetoric related to COVID spread. A massive wall was constructed through inaccessible stretches of the US/Mexico border stopping the migration of wildlife and water flow, but not people, who easily cut through the millions of dollars' worth of metal bollards. There are still ongoing efforts to bring light to missing and murdered indigenous women. Headline after headline declare the world's hottest month, then, year, in history. Bills blocking access to transgender and gender affirming healthcare are passing into state law. The US Supreme Court has overturned *Roe v. Wade* and dramatically changed water law affecting the US Southwest. As I write this, the war between Hamas and Israel is disproportionately killing Palestinian citizens. There is so much more that could be added to this list.

Most days find us in our heartbreak, grief, and the drive to continue to come together. We are still people showing up perfectly/imperfectly

trying to bring support and care to the places and people surrounding us. This may not be a time of balance and yet, we must also rest.

Even though I have engaged in discussions around *Sustaining Spirit*, for years now, it's been a minute since I read through the book cover-to-cover. I wondered if I'd be tempted to rewrite sections or shift the flow. As I reread through the chapters making some small edits, I was once-again humbled by the depth of the stories shared by interviewees, the questions they inspired that were the foundation of many of the pieces, and all of our wisdom integrated into each chapter. I was touched by the level of nuance and reminded of skills I am still trying to practice. Most of all, I sunk into the invitation to remember the simple and achingly beautiful question, “¿Y dónde está tu ombligo?” To remember the importance of nourishing my roots where I am.

En solidaridad y con abrazos,
Naomi Ortiz
Tucson, AZ
February, 2024



Grandfather Sun

¿Y dónde está tu ombligo?

Where are you centered or rooted? How does your body connect with where you are right now? Are you sitting on the floor? Are you standing? Are you sitting in your power chair with the battery off? Who we are starts from the ground up. We can't help but be shaped by the place we live, the ground beneath our bodies.

Before we begin this journey together, we each need to know where the other sits. I am sitting on a chair, facing the window. The light from Grandfather Sun reaches out, touching my face as he lifts his way into the sky. Outside my window, a young mesquite tree rocks in the breeze, the limbs casting precious shade onto my neighbor's roof, and beyond that, off in the distance, the blue-brown-gray mountains sit, greeting the sky. In the book, *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rights of Birthing and Healing*, Patrisia Gonzales writes, "The ombligo is also recorded in dichos (sayings) and words. The saying '¿Y dónde está tu ombligo?' means 'Where is your belly button?' 'Where are you centered or rooted?'"¹ I am centered and rooted in the Sonoran Desert, near the land of some of my ancestors. Where are you rooted? Where does your center sit?

We are all rooted somewhere, to something because the elements which connect all life, Earth, Fire, Air, and Water, are our original ancestors. We live in a world made up of these elements, as did our grandparents and their grandparents. Through the elements, we find place and stability when beginning a journey. And this book is a journey.

To begin any journey, we must begin with ceremony.

Become aware of where you are rooted or centered. This is as simple as closing your eyes, taking a deep breath and, as you exhale, becoming aware of your surroundings. Root to this moment and acknowledge where you are. There's no right or wrong place to be. Only a reflection of who you are, where you are.

I ask us to begin this journey with a simple ceremony because "All ceremonies are for the purpose of movement."² And if you are

committed to social justice³ in the world, you understand the need for movement.

I came to writing this book maybe as you came to reading it, tired and angry and desperately seeking movement. I knew something had to change, to shift in order for me to survive. I've been doing social justice work since I was a budding teenager when I advocated against an abusive bus driver. Since then, my passion for justice has taken me to animal rights, restorative justice, disability justice, racial justice, border activism and often all of the above at once. I've worked as a volunteer facilitating workshops in prisons, in schools, in group homes, and at conferences. I've worked at nonprofits and with radical volunteer collectives. I was and am passionate about the big questions, how they connect, and the potential changes they may bring.

¿Y dónde está tu ombligo?

How is your heart rooted or centered? Read the next sentence and then take a moment to close your eyes. Take a deep breath, and as you exhale, listen, what are your feelings? You may feel angry, sad, joyful, or numb. There is no right or wrong answer. We continue together in this ceremony of understanding how we are rooted.

As a Mestize, my heart constantly navigates unknown waters. As a disabled person, my body energy is limited. As someone who grew up poor, I can become distracted by trying to figure out how to survive. My body and heart have held these tensions as I have tried to sink roots into activist soils. I had hoped activism, working to change society, might contain the nourishment I needed to grow.

¿Y dónde está tu ombligo?

How is your mind rooted or centered? (Maybe take a moment to journal about this question.) What does your mind think about the place you are? Where do your thoughts lead you?

Rootedness is a journey. Understanding where we are centered is the foundation of practicing self-care. Self-care means being aware of

ourselves, where we are rooted; aware of what is around us; and evolving from the lessons we learn in order to survive and thrive.

The Seeds I Sprang From

I was never taught how to build up my own soil; meaning I didn't learn until later in life what it actually takes to integrate self-care into my day-to-day. Most of my brain's energy was spent responding to constant requests for me to override my needs. Would I comply or would I not? Yet there were things I knew, things that no matter how efficient I became, I couldn't shake. I knew I was exhausted all the time. I knew most of my reactions contained frustration, anger, or sadness instead of joy or contentment. I knew on many levels I was being asked, even if it was unspoken, to ignore my body and family.

Even though my growing activist mind easily provided a long list of people and situations to blame, I knew that I needed a different way of being, relating, and understanding. In moments when I could think through the exhaustion and blame, I began to realize that problem-solving alone wasn't going to solve the deeper issues.

When I was a kid and thought about what I wanted to be when I grew up, "An activist" was never my answer. I wanted to be a singer or an actor or, maybe if I had to be, a teacher. In high school, I was sent to a conflict resolution program for at-risk youth. This program was the first time that I sat with people in a room and talked about how life was. There was an openness to discuss the violence that other young people and I faced in our communities. There was spaciousness to discuss other tactics available to respond to situations than those ways that were modeled to us (violence or total non-engagement). I had a chance to learn and grow with other youth from my community, and it changed my life forever.

As I've talked to other social justice activists about self-care over the years, they also share initial experiences of learning and growing with others and discovering alternate ways to frame (think about) our lives.

I had a similar experience again when I discovered disability community. I learned that there were political models to understand my

body and my experience in the world that weren't grounded in shame or overcoming who I was. These periods of growth and learning pulled me in. I became invested in wanting others to have the opportunity to learn what I had learned. Unfortunately, the only way I found to do this was through nonprofits; groups that often weren't able to prioritize measuring the effects of learning and growing but, instead, could only count people served, problems solved, and events conducted.

From the Seeds of Our Social Justice Systems

Built into the design of our activist systems are these powerful life-changing experiences, as well as a requirement of a pace, self-sacrifice, and disconnection from others, which all lead to burnout. When I was younger, I could never understand why there were so few Elders in the room. Now I know that it's because most people just don't make it in activism long-term. There's often 100% turnover in activist spaces, leaving those fresh to movements, having just gone through a learning/growing experience, to reset entire movements⁴ back to square one.

After observing this cycle repeatedly, I found myself wondering, what does it take to stay involved over decades? What pushes us past our limits? Are there ways to do activist work that is sustainable? How do we learn about self-care? What does self-care even really mean in our day-to-day lives? How do organizations or activist spaces try to integrate self-care collectively? How do we teach our children to practice self-care? How do we connect with our body, heart, spirit, and place each day? These were the questions I desperately wanted answered.

I read book after book, hoping to find a perspective that wasn't just about ways to pamper myself or how to make a better schedule in order to organize my life. I needed answers to the bigger, deeper questions because my body was tired, my heart was tired—but even more concerning was, my spirit was tired. I needed to know how to sustain my spirit because, for me, social justice activism is spiritual work. To ask anyone to make a shift in their thinking, to challenge any heart to move from one perspective to another, is a spiritual request. It is asking

for a combination of things to happen: for a spirit to deeply listen, for the timing to be just right, and for the universe to support new growth. Activism is spiritual work.

Not finding any answers that satisfied me in what I read, I decided to do what I do best, to sit down with people and discuss the bigger, deeper questions. I formally interviewed over 30 activists from across the country.⁵ I interviewed activists doing all different types of social justice work, from international human rights, to disability rights, to reproductive justice, to racial justice, to U.S./Mexico border activism, to environmental justice, to indigenous community activism, to queer community rights, and many who focused on different kinds of activism at the same time.

Beyond the formal interviews, I've talked to family, grandparents, strangers in the doctor's office waiting room and children about the spiritual questions around self-care. Self-identified as a social justice activist or not, there were two common themes most everyone brought up. People identified our economic system of capitalism (needing to make money and pay money in order to live) as a major obstruction to practicing self-care. Another common element people brought up was the lack of spaces to deeply talk about, envision, and reflect on what self-care means in their lives.

A third theme arose specifically from people who identified as part of many different communities. They described how they could only express one part of themselves in any one space and the frustration of how that impacted their self-care. For example, one interviewee who self-identified as a queer, disabled, border activist shared, "Everyone from funders, to other activists, to the people I was working with, had the same reaction. They were all living and breathing this scarcity model—believing that there wasn't enough time, resources or energy to look at a slightly bigger, more complex picture ... This meant I was never able to fully show up. I couldn't participate in actions because (disability) access was seen as my problem. ... People only acknowledged the need for self-care at times when everyone had just participated in a conference or an action. I could never seem to explain that my disability required a different pace."⁶

From the beginning, my intent was clear—to write a book for people who exist in multiple worlds. Some social justice communities call this “intersectionality” but for me, “living in multiple worlds” makes more sense. Most of the material I’ve found on self-care is written for people who live in one world, those who have ready access to various resources such as money, community, or the ability to easily go places. I wanted to write a book for the rest of us.

Why Self-Care is a Challenge

The hummingbird extends its wings, flapping 80 times a second as it dips its greenish-purple head to drink delicately from a flower. So proud of discovering this bush, its source of energy, the hummingbird perches on a nearby tree stem to keep vigilant guard.

Suddenly, another hummingbird invades, darting toward the bush, gulping down its precious substance. As the greenish-purple head hummingbird chases off this unexpected intrusion, two other hummingbirds seize on the opportunity to drink from this finite source.

For us, even when we’re confident our energy is managed, intruding hummingbirds are all the ways life unexpectedly dips into our stores. Becoming depleted occurs not because we greedily drink up all of our energy at one time and burn out. It’s more complicated than that.

There is this part of us, our internal hummingbird, which tries to guard our source of energy, not letting it become too depleted and trying to ensure there is enough to sustain us for a long time. Yet we live in a beautiful, wonderful world of unexpected opportunities, threats, and interactions, all of which swoop in and take some of our precious energy. We may be responding to a crisis, or we may be having fun. It’s easy to become distracted or to forget to look for new sources of energy and just deplete what we have.

Part 1

How to journey to self-care:

*We flutter from flower to flower with militant attention
Dive-bombed by life unexpected*

*Shadows we do not quite make out
sneakily drink our energy*

*We respond with
fierce fighting and
soft surrendering*

There are a lot of us

What Brings Us Here

We often come to the work of social justice from a place of deep wounding, where we have witnessed or experienced the harm of injustice. One of the gifts of this wounding is motivation to create a change in the world we live in, so that others do not have to experience this same harm. This wounding is also part of our internal work (mending and growing), and yet many of us do not know how to recognize its shape, or how to feel out its edges tenderly. We may try to create a home for it in our political understandings or the values we aspire to, but it never really rests easy there. The only home for our wounding is in the dirt beneath our feet. And yet, where is the time to grow our roots? Where is the space to listen to the wisdom of our wounding? How do we grow in relation to our mind, body, heart, spirit, and land? These tasks are up to us. This is the journey I join you on.

How We Work

As people committed to social justice, we act as the bridge between needs not acknowledged and those who have the power to meet those needs. Embodying a bridge requires balance, love, consistency, and to adapt and move quickly to changing directions, all of which takes

tremendous amounts of energy. In my interviews, a number of activists identified feeling as if they were failing at “keeping up” and “being responsive.” Yet, if we explore this feeling a little deeper, we find that it’s grounded in a truth that we do not name—the tension of how we care for others and care for ourselves. A pace and a need that we feel in our bodies, which also then impacts our expectations of ourselves and each other. And all of this happens in a world where the tools to do the work are rapidly changing. In fact, the structures of social justice movements have had to adapt significantly to changes in how we as a society function.

Global Impact

Now more than ever, we are confronted with how our actions and decisions as an individual, a community, or even as a nation impact the world. Having a global impact that we witness on daily basis is not something that previous generations were confronted with consistently. While it has opened up new tactics for organizing, it has also created new challenges, larger threats to rally against, and even more information to respond to and monitor.

Technology

The ability to communicate instantaneously with someone in a different state or even a different country by words, images, or face-to-face interaction is also relatively new. Technology provides tools for us to redefine concepts like community. At one time, community meant our family, our neighbors, those we lived around and worked with. Now, community can mean anything that brings us together. Whether we live near each other or not, whether we have ever met in person or not, we can be a community of activists working on a specific issue across the world or sharing a specific topic. We are considered a community, even when we’re not actually aware that each other exists.

New technology is constantly being released or updated, and we are continually teaching ourselves how to best function in the present moment. As social justice activists, we have been negotiating this new

reality, especially as it relates to how we can work together to have a voice or to change a system. There has been a huge shift to doing a bulk of our work through technology.

Technology can be a tremendous tool. For disabled people in particular, technology has literally meant the difference between life and death, having a voice that others understand or not having a voice, and accessing community even if we can't leave our homes. Even as we enjoy these life-giving gifts, we're still playing with them. Do these tools actually tie us together tighter, or do they create a deeper sense of separation, or maybe both at the same time? Do we value technology in the context of production or as a way to build deep and sustaining relationships? As new technologies come out, we continue to adapt and explore these questions.

Instant Response

How we are responding to critical issues is changing, but before we talk about how the response has changed, we have to talk about how we monitor issues that are important to us. In previous generations, monitoring issues that affected a community meant tasks like attending local meetings, reading the newspaper, watching the news and connecting with other concerned citizens. Responses were equally straightforward, like writing a letter, speaking up in a meeting, holding a protest, or educating others. Both, how we monitor issues and how we respond, have radically changed.

Monitoring issues now includes keeping up with chats on various platforms and with instant information posted on social media, reading on-line articles and multiple list-serves, talking to other groups around the country, and finding ways to break into where our target communities live to see what's happening in their lives. Where monitoring used to be part of an ebb and flow cycle, a call and response if you will, monitoring now is a nonstop 24-7 activity.

In some ways, this has amazing advantages for activists. We now know what's happening, when it's happening, and there has been a much higher level of transparency because so much more is captured on video, social media postings, and text exchanges. It is easier to get

caught up in the wave of excitement when things are unfolding. It is also easier to generate large responses to urgent issues. Yet we struggle with making intentional, community-based decisions on what items need to be acted on and how to maintain a long-lasting response.

In the Disability Rights Movement, most of the focus has been on securing civil rights for disabled individuals in relation to participating in their local communities and being able to work. Just focusing on rights since the 1970s (in the United States) has been a full-time activity for many disability activists. As a community, we bought into the idea that individual rights would lead to community power; this is the ideology that we based all of our energy on.

However, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, working to secure funding to support home and community-based services (that allow many disabled folks to live at home rather than institutions and to work/participate in local community), along with the requirement that these community rights be fought for individually in the judicial system, was making the monitoring and response efforts all we could maintain. On a conference call discussing Disability Justice,⁷ a framework to expand beyond rights, an activist said, “It’s easy for us to be reactive, but even with reacting in the moment to budget cuts, etc., we’re not winning. People are really being hurt. This way of doing things is just not working.”

Many social justice activist groups struggle to monitor issues/information, as well as maintain an “instant response,” and much has gotten lost outside of these two activities. Activist groups rarely have a chance to reflect, grow, innovate, be truly inclusive, address internal problems, or build bridges with other communities, let alone communicate frequently with the people impacted on a daily basis by their key issues.

Fewer Resources, More Need

As the scope of our work becomes greater, we have become more in competition with each other for funding and community support. Organizations and individuals constantly compete with each other to impress private and government entities that can fund their activism.

Instead of collaborating with each other and building a greater movement, we are forced to look to these funding entities for just our survival. We do not look to each other for our collective liberation.

How does this bigger picture affect us as individuals? How do the ways we work affect us in terms of self-care? The activists I interviewed identified a lot of challenges to self-care in doing social justice work. Some of these challenges include:

- Needing to be available morning, noon, and night.
- Focusing on monitoring huge amounts of information, along with the expectation to produce significant amounts of work.
- Having no time for creative expression, to learn new skills or grow in ways which affect our hearts.
- Needing to produce mandated work objectives in order to keep grants, donors, or a job that takes up most of the time and energy needed for any other activity-based work.
- Caring for others, which in activist work has come to mean: expending effort to meet others' needs; adapting to changing circumstances; witnessing injustice, the harm and its effects; and managing relationships with others and ourselves in the most "efficient," time-saving ways.
- Feeling overly responsible for others. Activists identified that they are often in the position of providing intensive, long-term support to others without the support and sometimes training needed to do so.
- Feeling overworked and undervalued by the organization or social network.
- Assuming that personal lives are secondary, including family.
- Trying to change dysfunctional systems where we also often experience trauma.

"Being traumatized and then trying to hold space for those who traumatize us is unfair and yet what a lot of us do every day and call it *work*."⁸

Rooting to Self-Care

¿Y dónde está tu ombligo?

In what ways are you rooted in self-care? How do you draw in nourishment? Take another deep breath, breathing all the way down into your hips. Take a moment to pause and think about the ways you practice self-care right now. How did you take care of yourself this week? What do you wish you knew about self-care?

The truth is, we need self-care because we need all of who we are. Self-care can mean different things to different people but mainly centers the relationships between our mind, body, spirit, heart, and place.

Types of self-care:

- Body: exercise, massage, baths, high-value food, pampering
- Spirit: religious practices, meditation, being in nature
- Nourishing: creative expression, gathering inspiration
- Mind: learning, feeling valued, skill-building
- Transformative experiences⁹: spiritual deepening, building intuition, doing deep emotional work
- Emotional: self-expression, feeling feelings, accessing relationships
- Being aware of our reality: changing perspective

In this book, I write about self-care as spiritual work which combines care of body, spirit, mind, with being aware of our reality. When we do this, in connection with emotional, nourishing and transformative experiences, we will create an opportunity to be rooted to ourselves, to place and to practice self-care.

Self-care strategies in this book include becoming aware of what you think/feel in the moment, discerning what you need, and drawing nourishment from place. This book also provides specific tools geared to social justice activities. These tools cover areas such as self-care while engaging in advocacy, honoring transitions, and how to integrate simple sources of pleasure.

Yet information is not transformation. Rooting to self-care means doing our own work of considering and exploring questions. We each need different kinds of tools to help us on our journey. Much of my journey in this book is in asking and exploring the deeper questions tied to self-care. At the end of almost every chapter, there are reflection questions to help deepen our skills. I offer a place to start, to grow your roots.

Self-care is in itself an act of social change that is urgently needed as a foundation for everything else we hope to create. By taking care of ourselves, we can respond to people and situations from a deeper, more centered place, therefore impacting and encouraging others to do the same.

Part of self-care is really about deepening our relationship with our own value. Activists can place their entire worth on what they are doing, what change they want to see in the world. This focus holds activists in an emotional stasis between working for change and holding hope for that change to occur. This stillness is where we must attend to ourselves.

Holding hope for change gives us our greatest gift. We care. We care deeply. Self-care generates our capacity to grow roots and draw up nourishment for the journey.

Terms Used

Social justice communities have developed “insider” terminology which helps us quickly understand information but can also leave many people out. Many of us who live in multiple worlds may not be able to permeate activist communities deeply enough to know all the current terms and lingo. I’ve tried to write this book in a clear and understandable way and wanted to define certain terms that I use to talk about the journey and practice of self-care throughout the book.

These terms are:

Spirit—A mystical element sourced within us which connects us with everything else.

Great Spirit—A spiritual entity or web of energy which connects all life and land.

Rule-bearer—Someone who knows the rules of the game, and who creates, knows how to access and navigate systems of power.

Living in multiple worlds¹⁰ —This means having multiple experiences at once in the world. Often tied to multiple ways of being excluded or having many identities which compete for space.

Gift—Something we give or receive. Lingering feelings or energy exchanged in interactions or what we learn from experiences.

In-between¹¹ (time, place)—The gaps between the worlds we live in, the spaces where we can feel most alone, and the space where possibility lives.

Self-care—Self-care means being aware of ourselves, where we are rooted; aware of what is around us; and evolving from the lessons we learn in order to survive and thrive.

This definition of self-care was birthed from the 30+ interviews I did with social justice activists from around the United States, Mexico, and Nicaragua. Let's pause and look at the parts of this definition to create a shared understanding as we each move forward on our journey to deepen into self-care.

Self-care means being aware of ourselves...

In her interview, Kellie Haigh, a Disability Rights Activist, said, "I have really struggled with figuring out what I need day-to-day, not to mention, moment-to-moment. Needs are always changing and it can take so much energy to figure out. I can also spend a lot of energy trying to ignore what I need and hoping that by ignoring it, somehow my needs will go away." Most interviewees identified an awareness of self being tied to knowing what they need. I too share this struggle and many of the chapters touch on building this skill. When we're practicing self-care, we are in touch with what we need.

Self-care means being aware of ourselves, where we are rooted...

Sourcing support means expanding beyond our human friendships and relationships. How do we connect to the place we live? What about our environment gives us strength or calm? In what ways do we depend on

plants, animals, and land? How do we draw nourishment from our ancestors and the wisdom we carry in nuestra sangre, our blood?

Self-care means being aware of ourselves, where we are rooted; aware of what is around us...

Most of the organizers I interviewed shared stories about how they felt impacted by others or how they were impacting other people. Ideally, self-care is about the balance between honoring our needs, with the needs of our loved ones, and the larger world around us. Self-care is about taking time to reflect on what's ok and not ok—to reflect on the balance within relationships.

As I have been building skills around this element, there are two questions that have been helpful for me to ask myself to check in with what's around me. I contemplate, "Is what's happening mutually beneficial? Am I giving as well as taking?" This may not be directly with the same person and it may not be equal all of the time. That is how interdependence works, it is of course is not always convenient, but where I also get to have boundaries.

Secondly, I ask myself, "How do I let myself enjoy other people, or let other people enjoy me?" This question has helped me shift the focus from just everyday frustrations of trying to connect, or work together, towards enjoying other people and being enjoyed. The other piece of enjoying other people and letting myself be enjoyed, is that this is part of developing relationships, which is also a part of interdependence.

Self-care means being aware of ourselves, where we are rooted; aware of what is around us; and evolving from the lessons we learn in order to survive and thrive.

One 14-year-old interviewee (who chose to remain anonymous), after sharing her thoughts on self-care paused and then said, "I think when it comes down to it, it's basically about learning through trial and error."

I loved this. Learning—not judging or beating ourselves up. I think in many ways, we need to give ourselves a lot of credit. To participate in the world, in life, there are skills, coping mechanisms, and tactics that we are trying to figure out all the time, and it can be exhausting.

Yet, there is a possibility to slowly and gently learn from what we do, or don't do, and to pay attention to how these attempts make us feel on a body level, heart level, and in our relationships. Self-care requires a lot of gentleness.

A note on the concept of community care—where we take care of ourselves in relationship to each other. Staring this journey, I didn't know what appropriate care work was. How do we do appropriate care work within communities if we don't know how to do it with ourselves? I have had to take the time to figure out what my needs are. I have had to practice honoring these needs, to learn what appropriate care work is.

These are the fundamental elements of self-care whose themes, angles, and messy bits are covered in each of the following chapters.

Journey Commitment

¿Y dónde está tu ombligo?

How do you root to the beginning of this journey? What ways can you mark engaging in an understanding of self-care? Can you write it down? Can you say it out loud to the sky? Can you use the smoke of sage¹² or copal¹³ to raise this intention up to the sky?

Take note, you've just completed a ceremony marking your willingness to contemplate self-care. With the ceremony complete, it is now time to begin. We must start where we are. Trust your senses. They are the only truth you know.

Our senses are the ways we know our own spirit and know how to be in the world we're in. As we gather information from rocks, trees, raindrops, spiritual truths, heart truths, and mind truths, we will weave the tools we need in order to practice self-care.

What will you weave? Perhaps you will weave a blanket to nestle in to feel safe and warm. Perhaps baskets where you can place the cares of the day as you leave one space and enter another. Maybe you will weave an entirely new life, a new way of living that centers something entirely different at its core. Whatever you weave will be what you

Sustaining Spirit

need. Pay attention to what you find on your journey. Whatever you find will help you along the way. You know what you need.

Part 2

How to journey to self-care:

Hold on to hope

Sing truth into the sky

I share from the vantage of my light

All I have to give—illumination

The surroundings lit up brightly, briefly, clearly

Then I trust

You know

What you need

Who you are

I have traveled dry, dirt roads—

rivets cut deep, large stones tumbled across

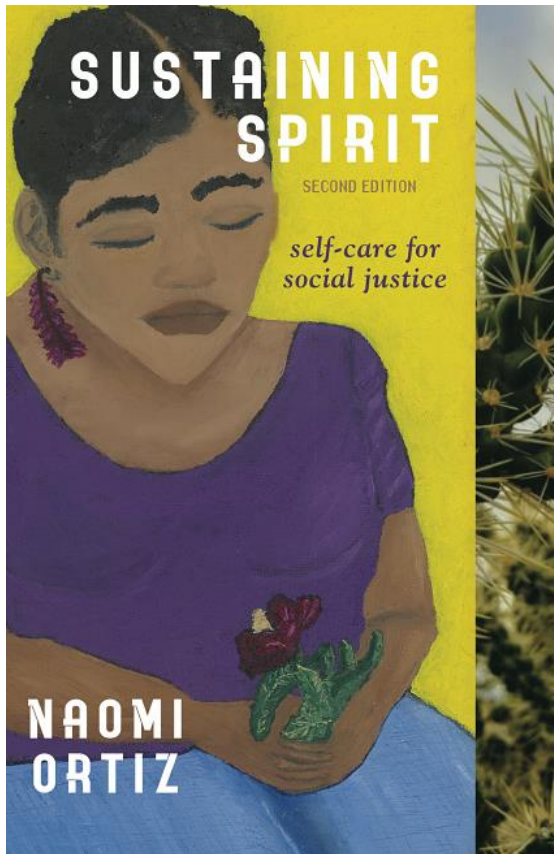
The roads you take will be your own

Right now

this moment

What does your road look like?

Let's begin



Sustaining Spirit details how to break the cycle of burnout and bring balance to one's life. This is a must-read, not just for activists working toward social justice, but for everyone who supports community and social change.

**Sustaining Spirit:
Self-Care for Social Justice - Second Edition**
By Naomi Ortiz

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