

Keeping Someone Else's Boat Afloat

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Each day you put yourself into a harness. No one tells you to. You just know that this is your life job. You walk the dog, fix breakfast, drive carpool, bite your tongue when your stupid boss says something stupid again, you pick up dry cleaning, pick up kids' clothing from the floor, go to a planning meeting you would prefer to skip, join a committee because "No thanks" doesn't quite come out of your mouth.

Any of this might be fine for a variety of reasons: You adore dogs, carpool is a fun time with kids, you believe in community participation. In other words, while not always fun, you might CHOOSE these activities. They pave the road to your joy or contentment.

This list can also look quite depressing to you: No other parents drive carpool but you, and they don't offer to buy gas; even though your spouse and kids are the real dog-lovers, you wind up doing most of the dog work. In other words, you're keeping someone else's boat afloat. You're making sure others' lives go well at the expense of your own. Definitely the path to resentment.

Life, as we learn when big responsibilities knock our narcissistic pins out from us, gives us a boatload of jobs we never remotely considered when we were footloose and fancy free. Your parents will probably be delighted to share that memory with you. We shoulder them and soldier on; it's what adults do. Few things are less attractive than the MeMeMe grown-up with emotionally starving children chirping behind.

However, we can go to the dark side and over the edge. Because everyone around us is all too happy to let us do it, we can begin picking up "shoulds" that don't belong to us. We're kept from tending to our own boat. It's not only bad for the chicks in our nest (stunts their growth); it makes our lives miserable because we wind up in a place where we can stop doing basic things we need to do for ourselves (teeth, feet, eye doctors) because we're so busy keeping others' boats afloat, unbarnacled, pristine. This way lies madness.

This will always be a delicate balance: what we need to do to care for ourselves and how we manage our responsibilities. The message of this is to look at your own longings, talents, and needs and make a decision to attend to them — whether it's for a few minutes or long hours. It will make your other responsibilities lighter. It may also mean — gasp! — the kids will have to walk their darling dog or pick up their clothes, or the committee will just have to survive without you.

Get going!