

## Putting on Your Own Mask First



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### When the Abstract and Reality Collide

This February I had an opportunity to hear a presentation by Patti Digh, author of the new book titled *“Life is a Verb: 37 Days to Wake Up, Be Mindful, and Live Intentionally.”* Throughout Patti’s speech, I was reminded how her advice seemed to apply so beautifully to the lives of those serving as nonprofit CEOs, CFOs, senior managers and volunteer board members. Several days later Patti graciously accepted the Center’s invitation to serve as one of our keynote speakers for the 2009 *Risk Management and Finance Summit for Nonprofits* scheduled for September 21-22 in Austin, TX.

Close friends, Center clients, board members and staff generally become accustomed to my frequent use of clichés such as “truth is stranger than fiction.” It never ceases to amaze me (oops, that’s another one) that the situations in which nonprofits find themselves rival the most intriguing plots from daytime and primetime TV. The stories and scenarios I’ve collected from our technical assistance service include hair-raising and jaw-dropping tales.

As someone whose travel schedule includes almost weekly airline trips departing from Washington’s Dulles Airport, the tip in Patti’s book that grabbed my attention was “Put Your Own Mask on First.” I’ve heard the instruction on every flight I’ve taken. Sometimes the announcement causes me to smile and say to myself “if my daughter were here and the oxygen masks appeared, I think I’d get her squared away first!”

During her presentation and in *Life is a Verb* Patti explains that it is impossible to be an effective caregiver to others—whether that is as a nonprofit executive, boss, volunteer board member or mother—when one’s own health is on the “back burner.” After returning from the conference where I heard Patti explain this concept I eagerly shared the “tip” with anyone and everyone who’d give me five minutes of their time.

Exactly one month from the date I heard Patti speak in Miami, I boarded a flight for San Antonio, bringing on board a suitcase weighing in excess of 50 pounds. After a too-quick assessment of readily available help which yielded no eager volunteers, I decided to hoist my “carry on” into the overhead single-handedly. Within hours of landing in Texas my neck started to ache. For the next few weeks I tried various over the counter pain relievers and pain “patches” to ease my neck pain. After a presentation where I had to turn my entire body to address audience members seated on my left and right, and subsequent travel in excess of 20,000 miles, I started to

suspect that medical intervention might(!) be needed. To make a long story short, an MRI and subsequent cervical spine surgery provided a compelling, unforgettable personal lesson about “putting your own mask on first.”

During the time period when I tried to “work around” the pain, and during the painful post-surgical period, I realized that my duties as a mother, nonprofit CEO, church lay leader, and volunteer board member—had all been compromised by my neglect of my own health. The announcement each of us has heard from a flight attendant prior to take off is a simple and *wonderful* metaphor for anyone who wants to make a difference in the lives of others. Take care of yourself so you can help others at home, at work, and in the nonprofits where you volunteer. And I would suggest that this metaphor extends beyond taking care of our physical health. We should also sustain ourselves with continuous learning to be prepared to serve others.

A full schedule of workshops and keynotes for the Center’s 2009 Conference is now available at [www.nonprofitrisk.org/](http://www.nonprofitrisk.org/). Not only is Austin, TX an affordable location served by all of the major discount airlines, we’re holding the conference at a brand-new university-based conference center that is providing a deeply discounted room rate. And getting from the airport to the conference center costs a mere 75 cents!

I urge you to check out the exciting lineup of keynote presentations and information-packed workshops. This year’s line-up includes not-to-be-missed sessions on managing HR risk, advanced financial management, crisis management, risk communication and more.

Over the course of two days, you’ll be inspired, energized, and leave with practical tools, strategies and approaches that you can immediately put to work in your nonprofit. The early-bird rate offers a chance to save \$100 on the already reasonable registration fee. If you’re ready to sign up, proceed to the simple online registration process.

Learn how and why to “put your own mask on first” and so many other lessons, strategies and insights by making plans to attend the 2009 *Summit*.