

The Infinite Power of Relational Energy



Heather Lageman for xSEleratED

I used to think energy was something you either had or didn't. Most days I woke up ready to take on the world, other days I had to coax myself out for my morning run, and I chalked it up to luck. Good night's sleep, bad night's sleep. Easy week, hard week. I didn't think of it as something I actually had a say in.

Then a friend asked me a simple question that changed how I move through my days. She asked, "Where is your energy actually going?" I had to stop and really think about how to answer that. I knew where I wanted it to go and thought it should go, but I was surprised how hard it was to pinpoint exactly where I was actually spending my energy.

In School Seasons xSEleratED, Leigh opened this season by asking us to return to the sacred center and to notice who we are beneath the doing. I want to sit inside that invitation a little longer, because I think one of the best ways we can understand ourselves is by looking at our energy. Our schedules and to-do lists tell us a lot about where we are spending our time, but where we focus our energy tells us much more.



Energy Is Relational

Here is something I've come to believe deeply: energy is not just personal, it is relational. We don't generate it in isolation. We generate it, or lose it, in connection with the people and commitments around us. The colleague who drains you in every hallway conversation. The friend who makes you feel like yourself again after one phone call. The meeting that leaves you flat versus the one that leaves you filled with possibility.

When I think about belonging and about what makes people stay in a school, a friendship, or a version of themselves they're proud of, I think about energy. Where is it flowing freely, and where is it leaking out through cracks we've stopped noticing because we've gotten so used to them?

This is not the same conversation as burnout, even though the two are related. Burnout is what happens when we ignore the energy question for too long. What I would like to explore here is earlier than that, the quiet, ongoing practice of noticing where your energy actually goes, so you never get all the way to empty without realizing it.



The Relationship Paradox

I came across [“Where Is All Your Energy Going?”](#) by therapist Kathleen Smith, who writes about [Bowen Family Systems Theory](#), which named something I had felt for years but never had language for. She suggests that relationships, more than social media or work, are often where people quietly waste the most emotional energy. Think about how much of your day goes toward wondering whether someone is annoyed with you, guessing what a colleague needs before they've said it, or trying to manage how someone else feels about a decision you made.

Smith calls this relationship-focus, and she explains that the more energy we pour into it, the less we have left to direct toward ourselves and our own goals, and the more anxious our relationships tend to become. Drawing on Bowen theory, she names what she calls the relationship paradox: when we have less life energy bound up in managing or worrying about our relationships, our relationships actually tend to improve. What an “ah-ha” moment!

This runs against almost everything we're taught about being a good colleague, a good friend, and a good leader. We're told that caring means staying attuned to everyone else's emotional weather at all times. But Smith argues that when we shift our energy away from mind-reading and managing others and toward how we want to manage ourselves, our relationships often gain room to become steadier and more genuine, even if there's an adjustment period first.

I think about the educators I've worked alongside who pour themselves into making absolutely certain every student, every colleague, every parent feels comfortable at every moment. It's a beautiful instinct, but it also has a cost. This is an instinct I have grappled with both personally and professionally. When we're constantly scanning the room for someone else's potential discomfort, we have less energy left for our own clarity, our own regulation, our own work.

This doesn't mean we stop caring about the people around us. It means we get honest about the difference between caring for someone and managing them. It means we ask ourselves a different kind of question. Not “What do they need from me right now?” but “How do I want to show up right now?” Not “Are they upset with me?” but “Did I do the work I set out to do?”



The Gap Between What We Value and Where We Spend Our Energy

In my work with Janice on The Hope-Centered Educator, we built a tool that has become one of the most requested pieces we teach. It's simple on its face. You rate, on a scale of one to ten, the positive energy you're devoting to different areas of your life: yourself, your family, your friends, your colleagues, your physical health, your mental health, your spiritual life, your financial wellbeing, your overall sense of balance. What makes this tool powerful isn't the numbers themselves. It's the gap that shows up between the numbers and your core values.

Almost every time someone fills it out, they put a low number next to something they claim is one of their top values (family...health...rest). Their own name at the top of the list. And when I ask them to sit with that gap, something shifts in the room. Because the truth is, we don't always spend our energy where we say our values live. By default, we usually choose to spend it where the urgency, guilt, or loudest voice in the room lives.

That gap provides powerful information. It's your own life, quietly asking you to pay attention. And sometimes, when I look closely at where the leaks are, I find exactly what Kathleen Smith describes: energy pouring out through relationship-focus and the constant low hum of managing how others feel, rather than through the areas we actually claim to value most.



Observation: Energy as a Renewable Resource

I don't want this to sound like another list of things to feel behind on because energy is not a test you pass or fail. It's a resource and like any resource, it can be renewed, but only if we understand where it's going in the first place.

Think about a time when your week was full of things that matched your values. Maybe it was a season when you were present with your kids,

moving your body, laughing with friends, sleeping enough. Remember how that felt in your chest, in your shoulders, in the way you walked into your building each morning. Now think about a week that pulled you in every direction except the one that mattered most to you. Remember that feeling too. Both of those weeks happened inside the same twenty-four hours a day. The difference wasn't more time, it was alignment.

This is the heart of what Leigh was asking us in September, just from a different angle. She asked us to notice who we are. I'm asking us to notice where we're spending ourselves, and how much of that spending is genuine investment versus anxious management of everyone else's emotional state. Together, these questions build something whole: a leader, a colleague, a friend, who knows both their center and their capacity, and protects both on purpose.



An Invitation to Look at the Numbers

So here is my invitation to you, alongside Leigh's invitation to return home to yourself. Don't just ask who you are. Ask where your energy is actually going: today, this week, this season. Sit with the gap if one shows up and don't rush to fix it, just notice it the way you'd notice a friend was quieter than usual, with curiosity and compassion instead of judgment.

And notice, too, how much of that energy is relationship-focus versus self-focus and how much of your day is spent guessing, managing, and worrying about others, versus doing your own clear thinking and living according to your own values. Energy is renewable and once we know where it's leaking, we can choose to spend more of it where our values actually live.

You are worth that kind of attention.

Your relationships are worth it.

Your whole self is worth it.

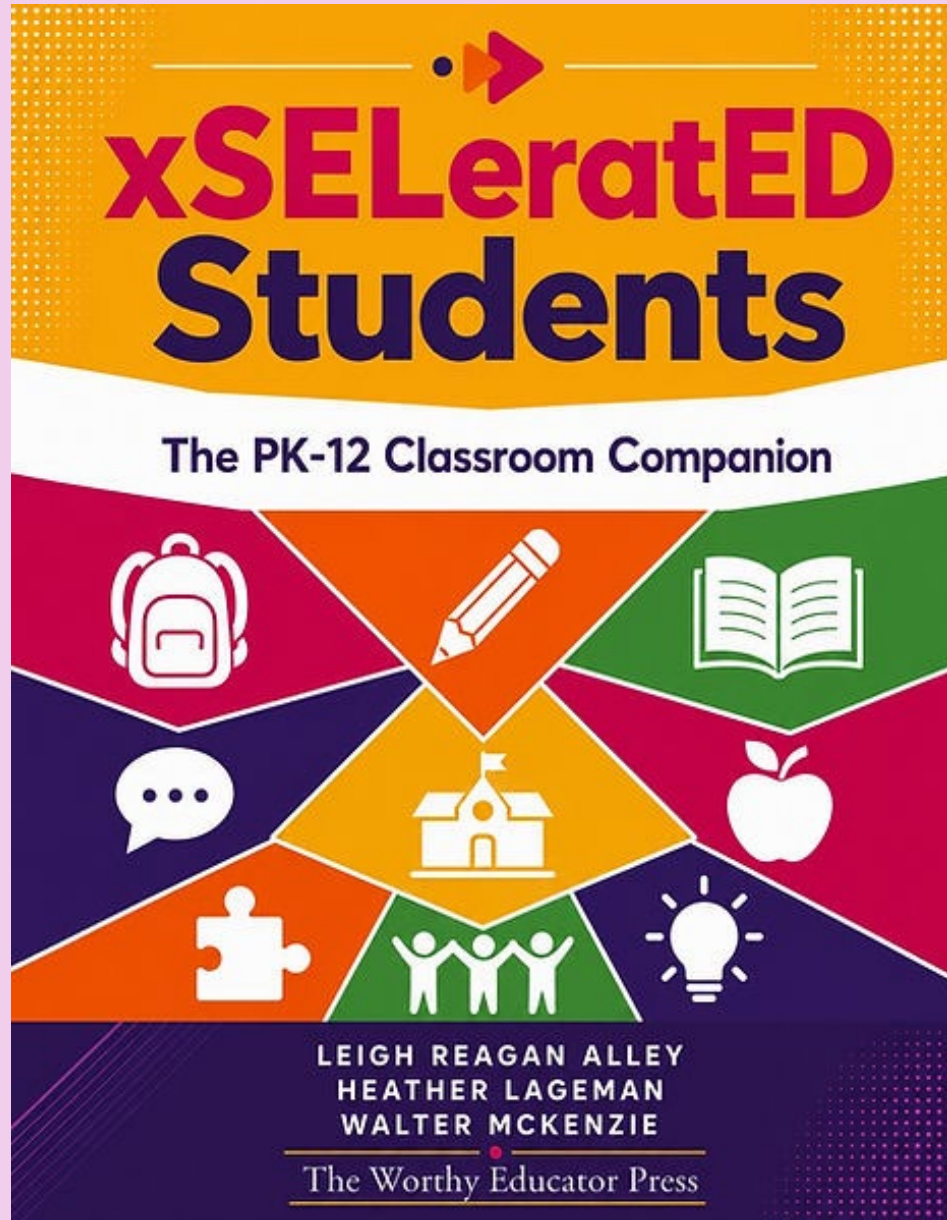
Let's find out together where your energy wants to go.



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For more on the relationship paradox and Bowen theory, read Kathleen Smith's original piece, "[Where Is All Your Energy Going?](#)" at The Anxious Overachiever.

Now available!



Just in time for the new school year!

Your September Bonus Resource!

xSELeRatED



Adapted from Tool #2: Core Values & Energy Assessments, Chapter 5 of [The Hope-Centered Educator](#), with reflection questions informed by Kathleen Smith's writing on the relationship paradox and Bowen theory in ["Where Is All Your Energy Going?"](#)

Purpose: To help educators identify their top core values, honestly assess where their energy is currently going, and notice the gap (if one exists between the two) including how much energy is spent managing others' emotions versus investing in their own values and goals. This activity pairs naturally with September's Inner Compass Mapping, extending the practice from noticing energy sources and drains into a more structured, values-aligned audit.

Time: 30–45 minutes

Materials Needed:

- ✓ Paper or the Energy Bank template below
- ✓ Pen
- ✓ A quiet space and about half an hour of uninterrupted time