

Caring and 'the unified field'

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A Contemporary Reflection by Dr Elizabeth Watson

Carers' Week C

Luke 6: 27-38; Matthew 25: 31-40; Contemporary reading ⁱ

What does the word 'care' conjure up for you? 'Take care!'

And the word 'caring'? 'She's such a caring person!'

How about, the word 'carer'?

What are you seeing in your mind's eye? Or feeling?

As we approach the annual celebration of Carers' Week across the nation, what is it that we are marking? When we speak of honouring care, carers, caring work, what are we doing? What meaning do we attach to all of this?

I am sure that most of you will be familiar with the official definition of a carer: *anyone who cares, **unpaid**, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support.*

And the chances are that either you are a carer yourself (or have been one), or that you need a carer or know a carer, or all three. For all that this activity, this work, is carried out in the so-called private domain, predominantly in the home, it is pervasive. There are carers everywhere.

Some of you will be aware that the greater part of my academic research work was devoted to care, carers and caring work. The empirical aspect of that research involved talking to, interviewing carers about that experience – what academics have called their '*lived experience*'. (I don't know that there is any other kind!) Ah, the richness of all those stories, the sheer hard work, the emotions, the endurance, the sense of doing what is right.

Those of you who have been members of this congregation for more than a few years may also be aware that I was myself a carer, first for my Mum who suffered from Alzheimer's - that was for 5 years – and then for my husband, dying from pancreatic cancer – that was for just over 7 months.

Both in researching caring and in doing it, I have learned a great deal, especially about myself (not all of it unequivocally positive, strange to relate). I acquired new skills and proclivities even though I cannot claim to have always exercised these as I might have hoped.

Nevertheless, I am very thankful for that learning and those insights.

When I first started researching and writing about care back in the mid-1980s, I could never have anticipated just how rich a vein this would prove to be.

I've come to see how profoundly significant is that capacity to care about others and indeed to undertake the hands-on care of another. I found myself pondering the bigger questions that flow from those more intimate and immediate actions and concerns – questions and insights about our interconnectedness, about how interdependent we are, about how much we rely on other people, all the time. So obvious is this that we scarce remember to celebrate the fact or even to recognise this web of inter-connectedness in which we are all enmeshed.

And, not surprisingly, while I was widening and deepening my own understanding of care and caring, other researchers and theorists were doing likewise. As researchers/writers, we might start with the one-to-one highly personal relationship of the unpaid carer and the one for whom they care (and sometimes the more than one) but find ourselves inevitably drawn to a recognition of just how universal, how pervasive and how fundamental the stuff of caring is.

But before we hasten to a consideration of this understanding of the wider significance of care, I do want first to focus on the one-to-one relationship, and to talk about carers and the work they do. After all we are about to embark on Carers Week, that is what we are marking and remembering.

What does it mean to honour caring work and, more especially, to honour carers?

You may already have noticed that I have included on the last pages of your liturgy sheets, some of the statistics about caring in Australia. They help set the context for this reflection. There is also ample material from Carers NSW for you to refer to.

But I thought that I would frame our consideration of carers and caring work by recounting a few of the stories I've listened to over the years. Much of what is revealed will be immediately recognisable to others. Each of you could add your own stories and insights. Caring is both a universal experience and a very particular and personal experience. This is a mere glimpse.

I wanted to begin this brief exploration with the recognition that care is a *doing* word. The notion that one might attempt to care in some removed, abstract sense, makes no sense. Care and caring are a *practice*.

From that flows so much of what constitutes 'caring' in all its dimensions or aspects. It may be surprising to some of you that in the interviews I have conducted with carers over the years there was little explicit talk about love; indeed there was sometimes a recognition that love was not a part of the relationship or no longer present - that at least was how it was expressed to me. I've selected 3 of the many stories that have remained with me.

The first of a woman who was an only child. Her arrival in the world was unexpected and, on the part of the mother, not exactly welcomed, as this woman was constantly reminded growing up. The mother, in her widowhood, had come to live with her daughter and her daughter's female partner. The mother was beginning to dement. She became even more difficult and negative. Nothing was good enough. She strongly disapproved of her daughter's partner and the nature of their relationship. This was difficult stuff. The daughter related how

driving home from the hospital - she was a nurse - she would often (in fact, almost always) pull over to the side of the road just before her home, and sit in the car and cry, sometimes howl. Then she would gather herself together and continue home. When in the interview she summarised her caring and why she had taken on this responsibility, she said...

"You know, Liz, my mother is not a nice person. I don't love her. But she is old and lonely and frightened and she has as much right to proper care and a sense of security at this point in her life as anyone else. So of course I am caring for her."

The second, another woman also caring for a mother who was frail and lonely and also slowing dementing, said, looking directly at me...

"I know it sounds awful but I don't really love my Mum anymore. This is all just too hard."

Then only a minute or so later is describing how, if her mother, who was incontinent, left a mess in the hallway, she'd wait until she was back in the living room before cleaning up as she wouldn't want her mother to think that she was a nuisance. And still later in the interview, that when the family was going on holidays she'd make sure that her mother knew well in advance so that she could choose between going to the nearby nursing home, which offered high quality respite and where she was well known, or to stay with a younger cousin to whom she had always been close.

The third comes from my study of men caring for wives/partners with Multiple Sclerosis.

I was making my way back to my car accompanied by the man I had just finished interviewing. We had, a short time before, been speaking of why he was doing what he was doing. Like so many other men in this study, he was anxious not to be seen as thinking too highly of himself - but he did need me to understand that this was very hard, physically and emotionally - but more than that, he wanted to make the point that staying in the marriage, staying to care, was not what most men do. He, on the other hand, had chosen to stay and care, he had not, to use the Australian colloquial expression, used by many of these men, that he had not '*shot through on his wife*'.

Then he added,

'You know, I know in every bone of my body that if the circumstances were reversed, it would not even occur to my wife not to stay and care for me, so how could I not do the same for her.'

These carers were doing something that was very difficult and where they often found themselves exasperated, frustrated, and very weary - in other words, not feeling especially positive about what they were doing or even feeling positive about the person for whom they were caring - but they were determined to see it through as long as they were able.

There is much we could say about what these stories reveal. Let me simply underline a few of the insights.

First, and to make the point again, caring is hard. The stresses, the difficulties, are manifold.

Secondly, carers do not always 'feel' loving but, in these 3 cases, without exception, they are enacting love. Too often we are caught up in an understanding of love that is essentially about feelings, about being in love, being buoyed up by loving feelings. Our feelings are important – in large measure, we are our feelings – but so are our actions and what we are prepared to do, to devote time and effort to. They define us.

I would underline that there is courage here. This is the sort of every day, every night courage we should valorise more often than we do.

And, of course, grace – should we not see this, too, both as gift and practice.

These stories see carers acting also out of a sense of responsibility, of doing the right thing even when it is hard, of doing what they do out of a profound sense of duty - words used especially by the men in the MS study. We shy away from the word 'duty' in our day and age, scared of its harsh strictures, often unreasonably and sometimes sanctimoniously imposed by others in days gone by. Perhaps we need to engage in some re-thinking here – as perhaps we must with all those things we shy away from.

There is also mutuality – the relationship coming to the fore, the profound nature of what binds us one to another. The complexity of that.

And there is empathy. Another practice. *Indeed it is the Golden Rule in practice.* Remember our first reading.

Empathy requires us to apply ourselves and do so in a very thoroughgoing way. Empathy doesn't just happen of its own accord. It requires effort and focus on our part. It demands greater openness and questioning of ourselves. It means not letting ourselves off the hook.

And beyond that, and most importantly, it means enacting those empathic insights in the way we relate to others – to everyone, including those we do not like. If we practised empathy more often we might get better at it. We might also come to understand afresh how essential it is if our world is to survive.

As about so much else, the truth about caring is rarely pure and never simple.

So what does it mean to honour carers and caring?

In part it is to acknowledge all the above and much more. Caring is an extraordinary act of concern for the well-being of another human being, even if it's a matter of caring for someone to whom we are close, whom we love. Regardless of the nature of the bond, this is sacrificing oneself for another.

But honouring care and carers should never mean we end resorting to hagiography. We do no one any favours when we idolise carers.

In the first place, such treatment of the issue overlooks the reality that not all care is sweetness and light. Some care is exploitative, even abusive, and some of those who are cared for are manipulative and spend their energies in emotional blackmail – as may happen and does happen in relationships across the board.

Secondly it can mean that we neglect the circumstances and needs of those who require care, those being cared for. Their voices can become obscured, yet again. We've witnessed that recently in some of the debate around the NDIS.

Thirdly, it distances caring concerns, pushes them off the policy agenda and into the bland world of good works.

We need to care about caring, all of us, to care deeply and actively about care, caring work, carers and about those for whom they care.

Let us take a moment to remind ourselves that this is in our own best interests. At any moment, any one of us might find ourselves, or someone we love, as a carer or needing care. We need to ensure that we have in place truly fine supports and provisions for carers and care recipients – properly funded, not short-term funding but with a guaranteed ongoing source of finance, services that are readily available and accessible regardless of where you live or your income.

And we need to see work environments across the board transformed so as to recognise that workers – all of them - have responsibilities to others built into their lives and that many workers have significant caring responsibilities. We need to resurrect the notion of 'family friendly' workplaces and give that goal renewed clout. As part of that, we need yet again to address the concept of 'the ideal worker' as someone available to his or her workplace 20 hours a day. It is absurd and damaging not just to carers but to the whole community.

So I repeat - we need to care about care and carers, to care deeply, to care actively.

Our readings today remind us of the centrality of care and the importance that Jesus placed on our relationships with others, on the interconnections between us all, and our obligations to love and care for one another. Always.

Our first reading speaks of the Golden Rule. So well known. It's one of the few Bible passages most people can repeat pretty much word perfect: '*Do to others as you would have them do to you*'. But here Jesus goes further and spells out what that implies and this makes the 'rule' even more exacting and subversive. '*Love your enemies.*'

The American writer, Diana Butler Bass, in her book, *Grounded*, reflects on what followed the events of 9/11. She certainly understood the heightened emotions, especially fear, and could sympathise, but she also found herself troubled by the hyped up emotionalism, the distorted patriotism. Reflecting further on the need for the compassion that lies at the very core of the Golden Rule, she recalls a bumper sticker on a car in the parking lot at Virginia Theological Seminary, where she was teaching at the time:

*When Jesus said, "Love your enemies",
He probably didn't mean, "kill them".*

Our second reading on much the same theme and also well known. It reminds us that Jesus saw service to others, caring about others and actually caring for them, especially for the vulnerable and excluded – those seemingly not worthy of our attention – as the very essence of the life to which we are called. Abundant life is life lived for others. That has always been considered 'a hard ask', even an unreasonable view, of how to live a life, hasn't it. But it is

worth acknowledging that much contemporary so-called wisdom is about the opposite – about finding yourself, treating yourself, seeking to surround yourself with beautiful objects and agreeable people.

And our final reading...

The reading from Annie Dillard, and Richard Rohr's commentary on it, speaks of 'the unified field'. Dillard writes of *'the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power of evil, the unified field: our inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together'*.

And Rohr, reflecting on Dillard's insight, writes of Jesus finding and naming this same idea – 'the unified field' beneath all the contradictions and messiness and confusion of our lives. Rohr argues that *if we do not find that unified field, 'our complex and inexplicable caring for each other', or what Buddhists call the Great Compassion, there is no healing to life's inconsistencies and contradictions. Religion is always, he writes, about getting you back and down into the unified field, where you started anyway.*

In honoring carers and their care of another who needs their care, we are drawing attention to that profound, central wisdom of all the great religious traditions. It is the recognition that we are *'bound together in this bundle of life'*, a vast web of interconnection and interdependency.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes that...

"The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation."

We are called to care. To care deeply. To care actively. For all people, all life, the environment, all creation. We are called to be co-carers, co-creators with God.

So in the words of the Brian Wren hymn,

*Therefore let us make thanksgiving
And with justice, willing and aware,
Give to earth, and all things living,
Liturgies of care.*

AMEN

ⁱ Contemporary reading From Annie Dillard in Teaching a Stone to Talk and Richard Rohr, in his book, Falling Upward (2011), pp.53 & 59.