

## *Immeasurable Pleasures and Measurable Injustices: Communicating a Politics of Care*

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Publicly asserting the necessity of slow, careful attention to immeasurable pleasure and immeasurable cares can be a form of political activism in our speeded-up society. If 'caring' has to be defended actively, people need a public, political language for defending it. How do Americans publicly defend attention to immeasurable pleasures and immeasurable suffering? How do they speak in everyday life, about taking care of the world? If our society makes immeasurable caring difficult or invisible, how, if at all, do people discuss this problem while they are caring and being cared for? These are the questions for my project. In examining everyday conversation in care-giving situations, I hope to hear how Americans defend what American culture has generally considered indefensible, or else treated with yearning and nostalgia. We can hear whether people move from privately experiencing empathy and taking individual pleasure in helping someone, to talking about the social cultivation of--and denial of--empathy and care.

I have just begun research, and very much welcome suggestions for sites for fruitful comparison. So far, I have been listened to conversation about childraising, and conversations with or among children, in several sites: a network of youth and social services workers that plans programs that are often aimed at encouraging young people to do community service; a free after-school program for mostly African American, Latino, and Hmong 10-14 year olds; local festivals like Martin Luther King Day, Earth Day, Kids for Peace Celebration, Family Day at the Zoo, aimed at promoting a family and civic togetherness that engages larger social questions; two day care centers; and a set of expensive, arts-oriented classes for young children. I have attended regional meetings and examined public email exchanges of several organizations--for teachers, children's librarians, environmental educators, and care-givers. I also plan on interviewing parents (in groups of friends), to hear how they draw a connection between caring for a particular child and caring about the world. I am also listening to how the children understand care, and how they learn to care about each other and the wider world in the process of talking to their care-givers.

So far, this investigation has suggested five propositions:

- Care is not apolitical. Our society has no room for it, but all societies need it. Asserting its social necessity becomes, itself, a political vision.
- In a society that undermines and dismisses care, caring require public planning and discussion. This planning is, I am finding, most passionately discussed by civil servants who are, by the nature of their work, forced to recognize the lack of social care.
- The process of caring might invite people to converse about what constitutes good care.
- The ways people talk about care affects the care itself. When care is precious and expensive, perhaps it is deformed for both rich and poor.

These proposals suggest questions for research and/or theorizing. Let me expand them, one at a time:

- Care is not apolitical. Our society has no room for it, but all societies need it. Asserting its social necessity becomes, itself, a political vision (Stone 2000).

This is a point that many feminist theorists have made. Care is "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." (Fisher and Tronto 1991, 40, quoted in Tronto 142).

I add that care must be part of a meaning-sustaining web, that somehow makes care and suffering intelligible; one could imagine instrumentally perfect care--beautifully efficient banking systems; or mechanically perfect care--diapers changed every two hours, feedings every three hours, etc. In contrast, the kind of care for which I search 'sustains the world' in all its messy, incomplete, imperfection, precisely by making human imperfection meaningful. Childraising demands passing meaningful dilemmas on to children:

...the educators here stand in relation to the young as representative of a world for which they must assume responsibility although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is...Vis-a-vis the child it is as though he were a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world (Arendt 1975: 189).

The unresolvable dilemma is that adults do wish the world were other than it is; even very young children intuit this (Corsaro 1993). Adults might (as Arendt advises) shelter children from imperfection, pretending to walk on solid moral ground; or adults could, somehow, make this imperfection, this doubt, this shakiness, meaningful.

Meaningful webs of care were once solidly built into everyday life, but now, people have to seek meaning and care, actively. Perhaps people once took it for granted that one lived with kin, in a meaningful tradition that made sense of life--that made meaning by limiting people's horizons. Now, seemingly liberated from traditions, families, space and time.

On the one hand...our potential for autonomous action, our reflexive ability to produce meaning and motivation for what we do, increases. We have available to us a potential for individuation--an opportunity to inhabit the territories of the inner planet as individuals; that is, to become individuals in the fullest possible sense--in the extent unknown to any previous epoch in the history of the human species. On the other hand, however we are exposed to a parallel increase in the powers of control over the formation and transformation of our identities, to an erosion of the margins of our individual independence, and to an intensifying social regulation of our behaviour that tacitly forces us to manipulate our most intimate dimensions (Melucci, 1996: 61; see also Giddens

1993, Z. Bauman 1995, Clarke 1996, Lichterman 1996, on the imperative of this personalized, reflexive form of citizenship and its liberatory potential).

The very power that makes this choice possible can also become an even deeper, more insidious form of control than was ever possible. The question is how people work against the rationalizing tendencies of that power, and in favor of the reflective tendencies. The struggle between the one (good) hand and the other (bad) one that Melucci discusses is not just internal, inside our skin; we have to share this potential for individuation.

Even if, after much struggle, we choose to revive the traditional extended family as our source of care, that will not happen without public discussion about care. Whatever we choose, it is possible and necessary for us to choose to care actively: to create a politics of care (Giddens makes a similar point in relation to religious fundamentalism: it now must defend itself. This defense forces it to acknowledge the existence of other beliefs; it must become a matter of debate, and thus, not quite as fundamental as its adherents believe it to be).

'If care giving is a public social responsibility, then those who do care giving fulfill an obligation of citizenship...(p. 88, Glenn 2000).' But just doing it is not enough to make it good citizenship; good care-giving citizenship must acknowledge that care is not just between one individual and another, but that there is an inescapable connection between face-to-face care and the social web of care--or lack of social care. This requires conversation, to extend the face-to-face empathy outward, to imagine its connection to the wider world.

2. In a society that undermines and dismisses care, care and attention require public planning. This planning is, I am finding, most passionately discussed by civil servants who are forced to recognize the lack of social care.

Without planning, the market takes over all areas of life that do not yield measurable outcomes. Care must be actively defended; it includes planning against corporate take-over. Perversely, it often takes bureaucratic planning to defend free spaces in which people can cultivate immeasurable goods. To prevent Wal Mart from destroying local communities, cities design 'walkable neighborhoods;' planners rationally plan for serendipitous encounters between neighbors. To restore natural prairies, cities work hard to restore the lost balance between different species of weeds. One imagines 'planners' as the last people to defend intangible, immeasurable goods, but in this case, and in many others (Forester 1999, Stivers 1993), rationalization is being used against itself.

To preserve slow, caring time between children and adults, someone has to defend it. Who defends it, and how? In my fieldwork, social services workers who plan youth programs (sponsored by organizations like 4H, United Way, Urban League, as well as the government) puzzle constantly over how to plan spontaneous, freely-given, immeasurable goods. The youth programmers often try to engage children and families in community service, to participate as citizens, to analyze and reflect, and to develop bonds

with people who may be very different from themselves. They want the young people to plan the events themselves, with adults serving only as helpers. These planners' idea is that caring for young people means teaching them to care about the world.

What I am finding is the fascinatingly paradoxical case of civil society being created by the state and other bureaucracies. These bureaucrats' goal is to encourage grassroots, politically participatory citizenship. Many explicitly say they aim to "change the culture" by encouraging youth to care about the world. Similarly, some day care providers endlessly ponder explaining social issues--race, inequality, war, global warming--to young children. Whatever they conclude about how to explain these issues, the point is that they, like the planners of youth services, are holding very open-ended, passionate discussions.

What I am finding makes sense theoretically and addresses a big problem in theories of civil society and the state (Habermas, e.g.). The state is not a monolithic, culturally blank 'system' that works automatically through the media of money and power, but is embodied in smaller groupings, that cohere because people in them talk to each other. Any conception of a good society has to theorize democratic, thoughtful conversation in all sorts of sites, especially in involuntary institutions, not just in voluntary associations that meet after dinner.

As caring becomes more rationalized, rationalized institutions can actively try to become irrationalized! On the one hand, they must plan actively in order to nostalgically reasserting the limited horizons of the so-called traditional family. On the other hand, they must plan in order to wrest control from the forces that make caring a commodifiable choice, to carve out space for measureless care that do not push care into special set-aside moments at the margins of the day.

3. The process of caring for people invites conversation about what constitutes good care.

Caring for children often tempts care-givers to ask, 'Is it better to protect children from politics, not to tell them about global warming and the ozone hole? or is it more 'caring' to allow children to satisfy their curiosity about the wider world, no matter how alarming?' What does it mean, 'to care?' Are 'caring for individuals' and 'caring for society' considered two separate activities? Does doing one diminish the other?

Protecting children from the worries of the world is hard, especially when public issues enter our living rooms every evening at news time (Postman, Katz). And who could deny that children need emotional protection from a scary world? As one parent put it,

I used to listen to NPR in the car, driving from preschool... But then I started to hear this little voice piping up from the back seat: 'What's a partial birth abortion? What does 'committed suicide' mean?' Woop--after that, it's time for the Barney tape during rides home!

The puzzle is how to create good children while the world is not, how to do the impossible: raise good citizens in a bad state.

4. The ways people talk about why they care for others affects the care itself. What reasons do people routinely offer? Do these reasons infuse the caring relationship?

For children whose parents cannot afford it, I am finding that care comes to be considered worthwhile only if justified by 'measurable outcomes;' and children intuit this. I was initially puzzled by something I heard over and over, mainly from black children: at one gathering, a social service worker asked about 50 kids, 11-14 years old, to write on hand-shaped, construction paper cut-outs 'three things you could do to serve your community.' Most wrote 'shovel snow for old people' or 'babysit for my neighbors,' or 'visit a senior center,' but several said, 'I could get a job,' or 'do my homework.' At first, I thought those kids simply had not heard the question. But I heard similar language over and over: many kids said that their community service projects were good because doing it 'keeps us off the streets' or 'out of trouble.'

I realized that this language for talking about service and care made sense. Social service agencies had to justify their projects to funders by marketing them as therapy-like programs with 'measurable outcomes' for 'at-risk youth.' One religiously-motivated black social worker, James, said (in a variation of what he and others often said),

This [week of high-profile community service activity for youth] is to show that we're doing all these things, that kids are not out on the street causing trouble, that we need more money. That's what we're ultimately doing this week for. Maybe [a bit tongue-in-cheek now] we could get police records on lower youth crime that week, that's lower because kids are busy doing community service.

On the other hand, these same social workers often quoted Martin Luther King, Jr., saying, 'Everyone can be great, because anyone can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve...You only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love.' It is blessing to serve, and anyone can do it. One of James' dilemmas was to balance his struggle to counteract measurable injustice, with the idea that people should feel immeasurably blessed no matter where they stand in the hierarchy; to balance his desire to produce children who get good grades and go on to college, with the idea that 'you don't need a college education to serve.' To care well, one must recognize the sacred wholeness of each person; yet publicly justifying a need means pointing to measurable outcomes (Silvers 1997). Thus, youth workers have to speak as if all young people are equally potential 'leaders,' on the one hand; on the other hand, they want to draw out certain kids' especially unique leadership talents that years of underprivilege have buried. The danger of the first approach is inattention to injustice; the danger of the second is overzealous regulation, that glues itself onto every sprout of 'leadership potential' and lashes it onto the social machinery, making it into 'positive youth involvement.'

Perhaps life outside of a caring society deforms intimate care, even for those who are lucky enough to afford the time to care. When care is a precious luxury, inaccessible to

most people, do people talk about it as a privilege, instead of a social necessity? Private care does not force people to conjure up a practical vision of what would be necessary for social care, so perhaps the waiting rooms for the expensive arts classes will offer a good contrast case to the public provisions of care. But I am still searching for conversations I can study ethnographically, to contrast with the public care-giving discussions, and welcome any suggestions for more systematic comparisons.

A politics of care asks how adults can communicate a meaningful, world-sustaining ambivalence in the process of passing it down to children. Such a politics brings esthetic and political judgment together. The question is how exquisite sensitivity to the pain and pleasures of another can itself, form a political agenda (Rorty 1993), how care can be defended politically without becoming instrumental, without always needing to excuse itself by measuring its effect, without needing to apply itself only in order to regulate and control and categorize people; how the 'playing self' Melucci describes can continue to play without turning its back on the world.

#### Footnote

This argument, that even a 'return' to tradition demands an explicit decision, parallels Anthony Giddens' concept of 'fundamentalisms.' Even fundamentalists must actively defend their seemingly automatic, seemingly natural religions, thus implicitly acknowledging the existence of other religions. True fundamentalism is thus no longer possible, because it now always must be an argument with other ways of organizing the universe.