

Caring

This is an article about caring, constructed from excerpts from Nel Noddings' 1984 book [Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education](#), with some other quotations and thoughts thrown in.

The individual matters, and he matters more than the society. [Richard Hoggart]

To act as the one-caring is to act with special regard for the particular person in the specific situation. The teacher acting as one-caring might say to the student, "All of this [that we are learning] is of variable importance and significance, but you still matter more."

The danger is that caring, which is essentially non-rational, may too abruptly be transformed into rational problem-solving. When receiving another, we do not *begin* by formulating or solving a problem, but by sharing a feeling; we are impelled to [attentive quietude](#).

If rational thinking *is* to be put in the service of caring, we must at the right moments turn back from generalities towards the individual. At times we must suspend rational thinking and allow time and space for *feeling*.

It might be useful to think in terms of movements between modes. We might switch between a receptive mode which allows us to receive the individual - putting ourselves quietly into the presence of the individual - to a rational problem solving mode, but always returning back to the individual.

There are '*turning points*'. As we convert what we have received from the other into a problem, something to be solved, we turn away from them. We clean up his reality, strip it of complexity, in order to think about it. All this is to be expected and is entirely appropriate provided that we see the essential turning points and move back to the personal. If we do not turn back to the personal, we lose the one cared-for. Indeed we lose ourselves as ones-caring, caring *about* a problem instead of *for* a person.

The one-caring may perhaps begin by thinking, '*What if this were my child?*' In the move toward the individual, feeling can be modified by the introduction of personal facts and histories, and the feelings of others.

Being-in-the-world is essentially care... being with the Dasein-with of others as we encounter it within-the-world could be taken as caring-for. [Heidegger, Being and Time]

The notion of 'feeling-with' Noddings calls *engrossment*. We do not put *ourselves* in the other's shoes, we do not project; we aim to *receive the other into ourself*, we feel-with the other. All caring involves engrossment; our first obligation is to meet the other as one-caring.

We enter a feeling mode, but it is not necessarily an emotional mode. In such a mode, we receive what-is-there without evaluation or assessment. This is not what Sartre termed a [degradation of consciousness](#), although it may be accompanied by an observable change in energy pattern. We are not attempting to transform the person or the world, we are allowing ourselves to be transformed.

It is a lateral move of some sort. It is characterised by outer quietude and inner voices and images, by absorption and sensory concentration. The one engrossed is listening, looking, feeling.

The receptive mode seems to be essential to living fully as a person; we may follow Heidegger in suggesting that care is at the heart of human existence.

Though the ear choose not to hear,
In the heart I echo, clear.
Savage power I exercise,
Transformed I am, to mortal eyes.
On the land, and on the ocean,
Evermore the dread companion,
Always found, and never sought,
Praised, as well as cursed, in thought.

Have you yourself not known Care?

[Goethe - *Faust, Part II, Act V, Scene V*]

In the [inclusive](#) caring relation, the cared-for feels the difference between being received and being [skimmed-over](#). This attitude is not something necessarily *thought* by either, but rather felt. While much of what goes on in caring is rational and carefully thought out, the basic relationship is not, and neither is the required *awareness of relatedness*. From this awareness comes responsiveness.

To accept the *gift of responsiveness* from the cared-for is natural for the one-caring. To *demand* such responsiveness is both futile and inconsistent with caring. The one-caring must the freedom of the cared-for. *She meets him as an individual*. The responsive cared-for, in the fullness of the caring relation, feels the recognition of freedom and grows under its expansive support.

A caring relation requires the recognition and spontaneous response of the cared-for. One can learn to care and *learn to be cared-for*.

Noddings uses the term 'receptive joy' to describe the feeling engendered by the caring relation. If relatedness is our fundamental reality, then recognition of our obligation might arouse anxiety, and so recognition of caring in relation may well induce joy, which may tend to sustain the commitment to caring.

We might follow Heidegger again in placing anxiety, and therefore receptive joy, as real qualities of the lived world, and so perhaps the forms of emotion that reveal most about our basic reality.

Perhaps it is the recognition of something given and received, of sacrifice on both sides, recognised and felt by both. I felt this keenly with some of my students this year when they thanked me after their exams. I had spend a lot of time with these students, had made myself available ([Gabriel Marcel's notion of 'disposability'](#) - being disposed *towards* others, the readiness to make oneself available - comes to mind).

Freud's revolutionary contribution to psychology was not so much his demonstrating the existence of an unconscious, as his proposition that there are two fundamentally different kinds of mental process... [In one] there reigns a quite uninhibited flow towards the imaginary fulfilment of the wish that stirs it. It is unchecked by any logical contradiction, any causal associations; it has no sense of either time, or of external reality...

[Ernest Jones, [The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud](#)]

What we undergo as we experience emotion may be the result of perceiving something that matters to us. To [Magda Arnold](#), emotion is '*the felt tendency toward or away from an object*', induced by the appraisal of an object (bringing to mind [JG Bennett's lectures on like and dislike](#)).

But must there be an object of joy? We may experience a sense of general well-being, or perhaps more than that, without an object. This joy is receptive and reflective - aware of itself and complete without action. Receptive joy might not result from an appraisal of my situation.

We do not control this joy, rather it comes to us. Just as the human other can invade us in receptivity, so can the world in all its affective possibilities come in if we let it. Again, I am reminded of JG Bennett, this time his work on [noticing](#). Joy, as with noticing, is something that happens, that is revealed to us.

Perhaps we can increase the likelihood that it will come to us, perhaps through quietening the mind, being receptive and present to the world. The occurrence of joy as a willing transformation of self points to a receptive consciousness, one that is energised by engagement and enlightened by looking and listening, by receiving others.

In crossing a river, Cura gathered clay and, engrossed in thought, began to mold it. When she was thinking about what she had already made, Jove arrived on the scene. Cura asked him to grant it spiritus, "breath" or "spirit." He grants her request readily, but when she also asked to give her creation her own name, he forbade it, insisting that it had to carry his name. While the two were arguing, Tellus (Earth) arose and wanted it to have her name because she had made her body available for it.

The judgment is finally rendered by Saturn. He determines that since the spiritus was granted by Jove, he should have it in death; Tellus, or Earth, would receive the body she had given; because Cura, or Care, had been the creator, she would keep her creation as long as it lived. To resolve the debate, homo, "human being," would be the name, because it was made from humus, earth.

[Hyginus, [Fable 220](#)]

The one-caring has one great aim: to preserve and enhance caring in herself and in those with whom she comes into contact. To care and be cared for: these are the basic realities of human being and its basic aims.

What we seek is completion in the other - the sense of being cared-for and, hopefully, the renewed commitment of the cared-for to turn about and act as one-caring. What we are talking about is how to meet the other morally.

This moral viewpoint is prior to any notion of justification. For an ethic of caring, we are not 'justified', we are *obligated*, to commit ourselves to maintain and enhance caring.

When natural caring fails, the motive energy on behalf of the other can be summoned out of caring for the ethical self. Ethical caring depends not upon rule or principle but upon the development of the ideal self. It does not depend upon just any ideal of self, but the ideal developed in memory of one's best remembrance of caring and being cared-for.

At the foundation of commitment to nurturing the ethical ideal is *feeling*, a commitment to remain open to that feeling, to remember it, and to put one's thinking in its service. All those who comes under our gaze must be met with this feeling.

What is required to construct the ethical ideal? We must [confirm](#) the cared-for through dialogue and practice.

'*Confirmation*' requires that we receive the other - see clearly what he has actually done, and receive the feelings with which it was done. Out of what may be a mixture of feelings and motives, *we attribute the best motive to his actions*.

Confirmation depends upon, and interacts with, dialogue and practice. We cannot confirm unless we talk and engage in cooperative practice. Listening is essential. One tuned to it, interested in it, committed to it, sees tragic examples of its failure everywhere.

Practice is required. The child in the process of forming an ethical ideal needs practice in caring; he must be allowed to assume increasing responsibility. Practice in caring is a form of apprenticeship, of caring-with. One must have encounters, legitimate opportunities to care, in order to go on caring effectively.

We are realistic; we do not hide from what is there. But we are also idealistic, in the important sense that our attention and educational efforts are always focused on the ethical ideal, on its nurturance and enhancement.

I wish to remind us of three such challenges which I am absolutely sure that they will still be there 50 or even 100 years from now: the question of democracy, that is, of how to live together given that we are different and value our differences; the question of ecology, that is, how to manage to sustain our collective lives on a planet with limited capacity; and the question of care, that is, how we 'carry' others, particularly those who are not yet, or no longer able to carry themselves.

[Gert Biesta, [The duty to resist: Redefining the basics for today's schools](#)]

Nel Noddings, and Gert Biesta, consistently ask us to ask ourselves: *What is education for?* The answer you give, if you have indeed asked yourself this question, will depend on your values. For Nel Noddings, the primary aim of education is to nurture children's capacity to care.

In pointing to the maintenance and enhancement of caring as the primary aim of education, Noddings draws attention to priorities:

Under the ethic of care, we certainly do not intend to abandon intellectual aims, but rather to suggest that intellectual tasks may be deliberately set aside - not permanently, but temporarily - if their pursuit endangers the ethical ideal. We should accept [the student's] attitude toward the subject, adjust our requirements in light of his interest and ability, and support his efforts non-judgmentally. He must be aware always that he is more important, more valuable, than the subject.

The cared-for is encountered as 'Thou', a subject, and not as 'It', an object of analysis. When a teacher asks a question in class and a student responds, she receives not just the 'response' but the student. What he says matters, not whether he is right or wrong.

There are times, especially in teaching, through which we encounter large numbers of children, when we feel upon reflection that we failed to receive others adequately, that we did not act to sufficiently enhance their ethical ideal.

What we must do is to be totally and non-selectively present to the student - to each student - as he addresses us. The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total.

The one-caring as teacher is not necessarily permissive. But she recognises that, in the long run, the student will learn what he pleases. We may force him to respond in specified ways, but what he will make his own and eventually apply effectively is that which he finds significant for his own life. This recognition does not reduce either the teacher's power or her responsibility.

The role of the teacher is to include and confirm, but to influence. She meets the student directly but not equally; the teacher accepts his motives, reaches towards what he intends, so long as these motives and intentions do not force an abandonment of her own ethic.

The one-caring as teacher, then, has two major tasks: to stretch the student's world by presenting a selection of that world with which they are in contact, and to work cooperatively with that student in his struggle towards competence in that world. But the teacher's task as one-caring has higher priority than either of these. First and foremost the caring teacher must nurture the student's ethical ideal. He is learning not just mathematics, he is also learning how to be one-caring.

In this approach, the hope is that we may attain both a higher level of cognitive achievement and a more caring, ethical society.

I have recently been having discussions regarding [collaborative work in the classroom](#). If our primary aim for education is to enhance caring relations, it would seem clear that we as teachers must provide opportunities for students to work with each other, to build a sense of relatedness, and to work with them in developing their attentiveness and receptivity.

Another interesting consequence of a pedagogy based on caring would be our responses to students not acting as we might hope. Nodding suggests:

We might well state general expectations, but we need not enforce these rules with penalties. Indeed, an ethic of caring counsels that we should not assign penalties for infractions of these rules... All punitive moves work against the development of subjective responsibility that is required for continuous construction of the ethical ideal. They give the wrong message about both intellectual work and relations to each other.

This coincides with the questions we have been asking in our department this year around responsibility and the distribution of authority, and thoughts of one of my colleagues (described in [this post](#)) about employing dialogue and patience in working with students to create awareness of possible implications of their actions.

It suggests that we should not force students to be responsive, through techniques such as SLANT, and others described in Lemov's Teach Like A Champion, and that we would be better served working with students to bring them closer to becoming fully committed to caring relationships on their own terms. Only in this way can true reciprocity, and receptive joy, be cultivated.

This also may explain in more detail [my aversion to the zero-tolerance approach](#), which I feel is irreconcilable with enhancing students' ability to care. Students are not met as individuals. Teachers adopting this type of approach suggest they 'care', and that they are providing 'tough love'. This is in direct opposition to a true caring relationship, which should be based on receptivity and tenderness.

This approach leads to an impoverished view of what it means to care, what Noddings would term a 'masculine' rather than 'feminine' view of care, 'sacrificing children in fulfilling principles', resulting in the 'de-humanisation of children through the loss of the feminine':

It may be that much of what is most valuable in the teaching-learning relationship cannot be specified and certainly not pre-specified. The attitude characteristic of caring comes through in acquaintance. When the student associates with the teacher, feeling free to initiate conversation and to suggest areas of interest, he or she is better able to detect the characteristic attitude even in formal, goal-oriented situations such as lectures. Then a brief contact of eyes may say, "I am still the one interested in you. All of this is of variable importance and significance, but you still matter more."

It is no use saying that the teacher who 'really cares' wants her students to learn the basic skills which are necessary to a comfortable life; I am not denying that, but the notion is impoverished on both ends. On the one extreme, it is not enough to want one's students to master basic skills. I would not want to choose, but if I had to choose whether my child would be a reader or a loving human being, I would choose the latter with alacrity. On the other extreme, it is by itself too much, for it suggests that I as a caring teacher should be willing to do almost anything to bring my students to mastery of the basic skills. And I am not. Among the intangibles that I would have my students carry away is the feeling that the subject we have struggled with is both fascinating and boring, significant and silly, fraught with meaning

and nonsense, challenging and tedious, and that whatever attitude we take toward it, it will not diminish our regard for each other. The student is infinitely more important than the subject.