

With Care

By Henri J.M. Nouwen

Out of his solitude Jesus reached out his caring hand to the people in need. In the lonely place his care grew strong and mature. And from there he entered into a healing closeness with his fellow human beings.

Jesus indeed cared. Being pragmatists we say, "That is obvious: He fed the hungry, made the blind see, the deaf hear, the crippled walk, and the dead live. He indeed cared." But by being surprised by all the remarkable things he did, we forget that Jesus did not give food to the many without having received some loaves and fishes from a stranger in the crowd; that he did not return the boy of Nain to his widowed mother without having felt her sorrow; that he did not raise Lazarus from the grave without tears and a sigh of distress that came straight from the heart. What we see, and like to see, is cure and change. But what we do not see and do not want to see is care: the participation in the pain, the solidarity in suffering, the sharing in the experience of brokenness. And still, cure without care is as dehumanizing as a gift given with a cold heart. . . .

Real care is not ambiguous. Real care excludes indifference and is the opposite of apathy. The word *care* finds its roots in the Gothic *kara*, which means "lament." The basic meaning of *care* is "to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with." I am very much struck by this background of the word *care* because we tend to look at caring as an attitude of the strong toward the weak, of the powerful toward the powerless, of the haves toward the have-nots. And, in fact, we feel quite uncomfortable with an invitation to enter into someone's pain before doing something about it.

Still, when we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness — that is the friend who cares.

You might remember moments in which you were called to be with a friend who had lost a wife or husband, child or parent. What can you say, do, or propose at such a moment? There is a strong inclination to say, "Don't cry; the one you loved is in the hands of God." "Don't be sad, because there are so many good things left worth living for." But are we ready to really experience our powerlessness in the face of death and say, "I do not understand. I do not know what to do, but I am here with you"? Are we willing to *not* run away from the pain, to *not* get busy when there is nothing to do, and instead to stand in the face of death together with those who grieve?

The friend who cares makes it clear that whatever happens in the external world, being present to each other is what really matters. In fact, it matters more than pain, illness, or even

death. It is remarkable how much consolation and hope we can receive from authors who, while offering no answers to life's questions, have the courage to articulate the situation of their lives in all honesty and directness. Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, Hammar skjöld, and Merton: none of them have ever offered solutions. Yet many of us who have read their works have found new strength to pursue our own search. Their courage to enter so deeply into human suffering and to become present to their own pain gave them the power to speak healing words.

Therefore, to care means first of all to be present to each other. From experience, you know that those who care for you become present to you. When they listen, they listen to you. When they speak, you know they speak to you. And when they ask questions, you know it is for your sake and not for their own. Their presence is a healing presence because they accept you on your terms, and they encourage you to take your own life seriously. . . .

This leaves us with the urgent question: How can we be or become a caring community, a community of people not trying to cover the pain or to avoid it by sophisticated bypasses, but rather to share it as the source of healing and new life? It is important to realize that you cannot get a PhD in caring, that caring cannot be delegated to specialists, and that therefore nobody can be excused from caring. Still, in a society like ours, we have a strong tendency to refer to specialists. When someone does not feel well, we quickly think, Where can we find a doctor? When someone is confused, we easily advise him to go to a counselor. And when someone is dying, we quickly call a priest. Even when someone wants to pray, we wonder if there is a minister around. . . .

Although it is usually very meaningful to call on outside help, sometimes our referral to others is more a sign of fear to face the pain than a sign of care, and in that case we keep our greatest gift to heal hidden from each other. Every human being has a great, yet often unknown, gift to care, to be compassionate, to become present to the other, to listen, to hear, and to receive. If that gift would be set free and made available, miracles could take place. Those who really can receive bread from a stranger and smile in gratitude can feed many without even realizing it. Those who can sit in silence with their fellow man, not knowing what to say, but knowing that they should be there, can bring new life in a dying heart. Those who are not afraid to hold a hand in gratitude, to shed tears in grief, and to let a sigh of distress arise straight from the heart, can break through paralyzing boundaries and witness the birth of a new fellowship, the fellowship of the broken.

Why is it that we keep the great gift of care so deeply hidden? Why is it that we keep giving dimes without daring to look into the face of the beggar? Why is it that we do not join the lonely eater in the dining hall but look for those we know so well? Why is it that we so seldom knock on a door or grab a phone just to say hello, just to show that we have been thinking about each other? Why are smiles still hard to get and words of comfort so difficult to come by? . . . Why do we keep bypassing each other always on the way to something or someone more important?

Maybe simply because we ourselves are so concerned with being different from the others that we do not even allow ourselves to lay down our heavy armor and come together in a mutual vulnerability. Maybe we are so full of our own opinions, ideas, and convictions that we have no space left to listen to the other and learn from him or her.

There is a story [*from 101 Zen Stories, by Nyogen Senzaki — Ed.*] about a university professor who came to a Zen master to ask him about Zen. Nan-in, the Zen master, served him tea.

He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

To care means first of all to empty our own cup and to allow the other to come close to us. It means to take away the many barriers which prevent us from entering into communion with the other. When we dare to care, then we discover that nothing human is foreign to us, but that all the hatred and love, cruelty and compassion, fear and joy can be found in our own hearts. When we dare to care, we have to confess that when others kill, I could have killed, too. When others torture, I could have done the same. When others heal, I could have healed, too. And when others give life, I could have done the same. Then we experience that we can be present to the soldier who kills, to the guard who pesters, to the young man who plays as if life has no end, and to the old man who stopped playing out of fear of death. . . .

When Jesus had received five loaves and two fishes, he returned them to the crowd, and there was plenty for all to eat. The gift is born out of receiving. Food came forth out of kinship with the hungry, healing out of compassion, cure out of care. He or she who can cry out with those in need can give without offense.

As long as we are occupied and preoccupied with our desire to do good but are not able to feel the crying need of those who suffer, our help remains hanging somewhere between our minds and our hands and does not descend into the heart, where we can care. But in solitude our heart can slowly take off its many protective devices and can grow so wide and deep that nothing human is strange to it.

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