

On the Value of Caring Work

BY CHRISTINE M. FLETCHER

We undervalue work that cares for the weak, young, and old. And when we do value it, we prize it in the wrong way—as a display of our strength and virtues in care-giving. This reflects the individualism and consumerism of our culture, not the Christian Trinitarian perspective.

Last December, I was flat on my back after a cardiac ablation, forbidden to move until the bleeding from the incision stopped. After six hours, I had seen every nurse on the cardiac floor and most from the cardiac ICU. None of them could stop the bleeding. They substituted a ten-pound sandbag for a nurse's hands applying pressure and left me to sleep as I could. Instead of being in charge of my life and able to move at will, I was helpless and dependent.

I found myself in the hidden world of dependency, a place I didn't want to be. I am one of the active ones, I am in control of my life, or so I think. Suddenly I was part of the world of those who are not capable of being active and self-sufficient. I needed the care of others for my basic needs. We all have been dependent as an infant, and will be dependent again as we are struck by illness or weakened by aging. Our society, however, now segregates the dependent and devalues their lives and the work of those who care for them. How did we get to this situation?

In the pre-industrial economy, the work for the means of survival and the work of care for dependents were intertwined within the extended family. Women and men worked side by side, working for their sustenance, training up their children, and caring for their sick and their elders. For instance, when we read the Bible we enter a world where a person's identity was determined by membership in a family and clan which determined the role he or she played throughout life in an integrated economy.

With the industrial revolution, work for sustenance moved out of the home and became labor for wages. Men lived in the public sphere of the economy and politics. Women stayed in the home where they provided "love's labor"—care for dependents. Men worked in order to provide the monetary support for the dependents at home. As money became the defining standard of worth, women's unpaid labor of caregiving was not treated as "real" work, but defined as women's special vocation.

In the 1960s, with the rise of second-wave feminism, women sought equality, understood as an equal chance to participate in the economy and politics. However, the circumstances of work—the long hours and the separation of work from private life—were not questioned. Many women left the home and unpaid caregiving for paid work. As more women followed this trajectory, caregiving was outsourced. Arlie Hochschild describes the result:

> Care work is a hot potato job. Many husbands turn over care of the young and old to their wives. Wives, if they can afford to, often turn it over to childcare and eldercare workers. In turn, many immigrant nannies hire nannies back home to help care for the children that they have left behind, forming a care chain.
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> Underlying this gender/class/national transfer is the devaluation of care. This is based on the idea that care work is "easy," "natural," and—like parenting—not quite real work. Part of what makes care work invisible is that the people the worker cares for—children, the elderly, the disabled—are themselves somewhat invisible. Strangers entering a room may tend to ignore or "talk over" the very young and old.[1]

This globalized outsourcing of caregiving is happening in a culture that has had a limited moral language for reflecting on caregiving. Modern morality was conceptualized as a common life in the public square between equals, who are autonomous and seek exchanges that are mutually beneficial. Alasdair MacIntyre illustrates the weakness of this morality with an image: a man walks into his local butcher shop and sees the butcher suffering a heart attack. He says, "Ah, not in a position to sell me my meat today, I see."[2] We instinctively realize how wrong this response is. A fully human shopper responds to the butcher's need, setting aside his or her own needs. The contrast between the two is the contrast between the ethics of modern capitalism and the ethics of care.

The ethics of modern capitalism presupposes two equal, autonomous individuals who create moral obligation by free choice. It is only because the individuals choose to promise, for example, that they are now bound to act in a certain way. Freedom from restraint is the highest value. Relationships are created and ended by free choice. The individual is autonomous and increasingly isolated in a world of social media and various loose commitments to family, friendships, and communities.

The ethics of care, in contrast, sees that persons are often neither equal nor autonomous. Moral obligation arises from human need as well as human choices: the need of one party calls forth a moral obligation on the part of the other.[3] Freedom is not freedom from restraint but a freedom for the excellence of human flourishing. Some relationships are given, especially the primary identity we possess as a member of a family, and impose obligations upon us. Persons are understood as inherently relational and bound by the tie of common humanity to every other person.

Secular ethicists have begun to fill the gap in ethics that leaves the work of care invisible and unvalued. Eva Feder Kittay, a philosopher who is also the mother of a severely disabled child, grounds her ethic of care in the fact that we are all—equally—some mother's child.[4] This claim to equality is an alternative to the conceptions of equality that dominate our political life and widens the scope of ethical reflection to include all persons, no matter how dependent.

We can find common ground with those, such as Kittay, who recognize the need for an ethics of care. We agree that each of us is some mother's child. As Christians, however, we start our ethical reasoning from a conception of the person as the image of God, a brother or sister to all other persons who are also children of our loving heavenly Father. Our actions are guided by the actions and teachings of Jesus who made our duty to care explicit at the Last Supper:

> After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.
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> *John 13:12-16*

Jesus does not cease being Lord, though he undertakes lowly service; and he commands us to do the same.

We are called to use our gifts and talents, whatever they may be, to serve those around us. This means of course, that some specific kinds of caregiving, such as nursing a baby, are inherently gendered. But it would be a mistake to draw from that example the conclusion that men are not responsible for hands-on care of the young, the sick, or the elderly. All of us are called to be caregivers, men and women alike.

The Trinity, the central doctrine of our faith, tells us not only that we are made for relationship, but also that difference, such as gender, does not mean inequality. When we say God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are

not listing beings in order of importance. That urge to decide who is at the top of the pecking order is a manifestation of the pride and disorder of original sin. Instead of this ranking, in the Trinity we see equality in difference, and difference within equality. Applying that to our lives, we no longer see Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but equal children of God (Galatians 3:28). From our Trinitarian understanding of equality in difference, we can see men and women as equals in the work of God's kingdom, and equally called to care for others. We also see equality between the caregiver and the care recipient as human beings in relationship with each other.

MacIntyre, longing to reestablish some patterns of community life that could foster an ethic of the virtues, famously wrote, "We are waiting not for Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."[5] We do not have to wait for a new St. Benedict; the original can show us how the virtues of care—giving and receiving— are not gendered but human. Benedict of Nursia, a sixth-century Roman nobleman, left secular life to seek God. In his Rule for community life, he conceived of his monastic community as a family. The Rule, written originally for men in the patriarchal Roman society, asks them to give up their privileged position and voluntarily cultivate the virtues of the oppressed.[6] These virtues—humility, patience, and love—are cultivated in the work of care within the monastic community.

The Rule specifies the duties of the common table, of care for the young and for the sick, as constitutive of the community. Benedict makes the most common work of care, feeding each other, of equal importance as the primary vocation of the monk, the praise of God. In the Rule, being late for meals is as serious an offense as being late for prayers. These serious faults are punished by exclusion from the common table and the common prayer in the oratory.[7]

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Mealtime is a daily necessity that requires work by someone. In the Rule it is the duty of each monk in the community in turn. The chapter on kitchen service begins, "The brothers should serve one another…for such service increases reward and fosters love."[8] The chapter goes on to require that the weekly service end with the server cleaning the equipment and providing an inventory for the incoming week's server. Together they wash the feet of the community, a direct and constant reminder of the Lord's example at the Last Supper. Love, accountability, and service in the daily task of providing food

are the glue that turns the monastery (or any family) into a community rather than a collection of strangers.

This communal love is expressed in the care of the sick, too:

> Care of the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may truly be served as Christ, for he said: *I was sick and you visited me* (Matthew 25:36), and *What you did for one of these least brothers you did for me* (Matthew 25:40). Let the sick on their part bear in mind that they are served out of honor for God, and let them not by their excessive demands distress their brothers who serve them.[9]

Benedict reminds the caregiver and the care recipient of the mutual love, based in Christ, which should animate them both.

Benedict was also concerned with the young and the elderly. Children were often sent to the monastery for schooling or to be raised within the monastery. Older monks were bound by a vow of stability to the abbey. Benedict cared for both, providing in the Rule special care and exemptions from the strictness of the discipline, thus bringing both the young and the aged into the community while making special provision for their particular needs.

The Rule of St. Benedict and the lived practice of Benedictine monasticism give us a vivid example of all Christians' call to a vocation of radical love and service. Benedict's reversal of his society's gender norms stands as a way to expand our notions of care. Our tradition is not wrong in stating that women are called to the vocation of virginity or motherhood; but it is incomplete without reminding us that equally all men are called to the vocation of virginity or fatherhood. Motherhood and fatherhood can be lived both physically and spiritually.

Caregiving for children requires parents who are responsive, who offer love and attention. They must have an unconditional commitment to the child, and be non-retaliating. This is an unconditional commitment to this child even if it is ugly, sick, or disabled; it is a decision to make the child's needs and not one's own needs paramount.[10] As we trust in God's unshakeable love for us, we must model the same love for our family. As parents we have a dual obligation: to care for our children and to teach them to care for others. The chores that were a necessity in the days of the family farm served as character training for the young, as well as strengthening the ties between family members. Today, many parents do not see the importance of having the children contribute to the labor of the household, perhaps because that labor has been outsourced to a cleaner or a lawn-service company, or perhaps because it is much quicker to prepare the meal and clean it up without trying to get reluctant children to help. Without everyone's participation, though, family life and the children's sense of belonging both suffer.

Caregiving has its own spiritual dangers. We can become blind to how giving care to someone and being needed by that person feeds our own ego.

C. S. Lewis wrote about this in *The Four Loves* when he described Mrs. Fidget, who lived for others, and you could tell the others by their hunted expression. Her service to others was not true love; it did not consider their best interest. Instead it was an all-consuming need to be needed. Lewis notes that the service we offer in caregiving is a Gift-love, "one that needs to be needed. But the proper aim of giving is to put the recipient in a state where he no longer needs our gift."[11] There will be times when loving parents do not intervene to protect their children from the consequences of their choices, but allow them to learn life's lessons—the only way anyone actually learns grit and resilience.

For caregivers dealing with the severely handicapped or the elderly, the dependent will always need care, and may need increasing amounts of care. This presents a different challenge. The knowledge that things are going to stay the same or get worse is one of the hardest aspects of caring for an aging or a severely disabled person. The failing elderly and the parents of disabled children often report that the physicians they see are brusque and seemingly dismissive. The healers cannot heal, and so they protect themselves from the pain and suffering of disability and aging by getting the patients out of their offices as quickly as possible.

This is pride and not the love we are meant to have toward one another; the only way to purify our love is to be humble. We must put aside our own wants and needs and seek the good of the person we love. MacIntyre identifies what he calls "the virtues of acknowledged dependence." These require us in our giving to be just, generous, beneficent, and not only sensitive to others' suffering but taking action to relieve it. And they require us in our receiving to exhibit gratitude without it becoming a burden, extend courtesy towards the graceless giver and forbearance towards the inadequate giver, and make a truthful acknowledgment of dependence, giving up our illusions of self-sufficiency.[12] His account of these virtues, based on a fuller description of human moral agents than the autonomous adult individuals of much Enlightenment moral philosophy, gives us a description of the work of care which is free from gender stereotyping.

Our society claims that those who are dependent lead lives that are of less worth, and so we have legalized abortion and face increasing pressure to legalize assisted suicide. Our faith overturns the values of the world. The king of the universe appears as a small baby, and puts himself in human hands to be put to death. The powerful people who have all the goods of this world lose the one thing necessary; but the weak, the poor, and the humble inherit the kingdom of God. Our lives and our values are transformed by the coming of Christ and his kingdom, and so we need to transform our thinking about care and dependency.

The gospel commands us to become like children (Matthew 18:3). We are to recognize our dependence on God for everything, our essential neediness. If we are in a period of our life when we have bodily strength and mental

acuity, we can forget this. A sudden accident can render us helpless and remind us of the true state of affairs: every breath we breathe is the breath of God.

All of us are aging, advancing toward a time when we will need the care of others. We do not want to admit this. Our fear of dependency prevents us from accepting ourselves and from caring for others with true compassion. When we recognize our own dependence and fragility, we can care for others, not as an act of condescension, but as equally vulnerable human beings. We will know the truth and the truth will make us free (John 8:32).

NOTES

1 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *So How's the Family? and Other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 30.

2 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1999), 117.

3 Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 55.

4 Ibid., 25.

5 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263.

6 Shawn Carruth, O.S.B., "The Monastic Virtues of Obedience, Silence and Humility: A Feminist Perspective," *American Benedictine Review*, 51:2 (June 2000), 128.

7 Benedict, *The Rule*, chapter 25.

8 Ibid., chapter 35.1-2. The translation is from *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, edited by Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 57.

9 Ibid., chapter 36.1-4, in *RB 1820: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, 59.

10 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 91.

11 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, The C. S. Lewis Signature Classics Edition (London: HarperCollins, 2002 [1960]), 60–62.

12 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 126–127.

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