

# Care

**Excerpts from Henri Nouwen's book *Out of Solitude*. Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest who taught at schools such as Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. In 1985 he resigned from Harvard to join L'Arche in Toronto where people with handicaps and disabilities lived with their assistants in Christian community.**

“And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.” (Mark 6:32-44)

“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 the brokenness. And still, cure without care is as dehumanizing as a gift given with a cold heart.

What does it mean to care? Let me start by saying that the word care has become a very ambivalent word. When someone says, ‘I will take care of him!’ it is more likely an announcement of an impending attack than of a tender compassion. And besides this ambivalence, the word care is most often used in a negative way. ‘Do you want coffee or tea?’ ‘I don’t care.’ ‘Do you want to stay home or go to a movie?’ ‘I don’t care.’ ‘Do you want to walk or go by car?’ ‘I don’t care.’ This expression of indifference toward choices in life has been commonplace. And often it seems that not to care has become more acceptable than to care, and a carefree lifestyle more attractive than a careful one.

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 have’s toward the have-not’s.

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 much advise, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share in 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 stand in the face of death together with those who grieve?

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 and to trust your own vocation.

Our tendency is to run away from the painful realities or to try to change them as soon as possible. But cure without care makes us into rulers, controllers, manipulators, and prevents a real community from taking shape. Cure without care makes us preoccupied with quick changes, impatient and unwilling to share each other's burden. And so cure can often become offending instead of liberating. It is therefore not so strange that cure is not seldom refused by people in need. Not only have individuals refused help when they did not sense a real care, but also oppressed minorities have resisted support, and suffering nations have declined medicine and food when they realized that it was better to suffer than to lose self-respect by accepting a gift out of a non-caring hand.

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 by 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 to care, and in that care 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, to receive. If that gift would be set free and made available, miracles could take place.

Why is it that we keep that 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 is it so

hard to express thanks to a teacher, admiration to a student, and apprehension to the men and women who cook, clean and garden? 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 in 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.

By the honest recognition and confession of our human sameness we can participate in the care of God who came, not to the powerful but to the powerless, not to be different but to be the same, not to take our pain away but to share it. Through this participation, we can open our hearts to each other and form a new community.

When Jesus had received five loaves and two fish he returned them to the crowd, and there was plenty 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.

Then we can become contrite, crushed, and broken, not just by our own sins and failings, but also by the pain of our fellow human beings. Then we can give birth to a new awareness reaching far beyond the boundaries of our human efforts. And then we who, in our fearful narrow-mindedness, were afraid that we would not have enough food for ourselves, will have to smile. For then we will discover that, after having fed more than five thousand, there were still twelve baskets of bread and fish remaining. Then our care born out of solitude can become a sign of our faithful expectation of the coming day of complete joy.”

#### Relevant Scripture

Matthew 11:28	“Come to me all who are weary....”
James 1:27	“Religion that is pure and undefiled....”
Galatians 2:10	“they asked that we remember the poor....”

#### Questions:

1. Who comes to mind in your life when you think about someone who really cares about you? What qualities do they possess that Nouwen discusses here?
2. Based on these excerpts would you say you are more concerned with caring for others, or conveniently trying to “cure” their problems? Do you, in some way, look down on the ones you “care” for, or are you walking beside them without always being able to “cure” them?
3. What keeps most people from caring if it’s a universal capability?
4. How does Jesus care for us? What has he done for you and promise to do for us all?