

## Women's Work (UUFDC Message for January 28, 2018)

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Thank you, Donna and Tom, for your wonderful reminders: first, that women have many capabilities beyond childbearing and childrearing, although those are critical to our survival; and second, that we often count on women to “value what we say/ we value: home and family, love and health.”

I belong to the category of women, of course, but I will refer to women in the third person in this talk for the sake of clarity. The kicker is that we (meaning all of us as members of an American society) also need women in the public sphere, as we did in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to carry signs and “march to change the world”—perhaps now more than ever, since human beings seem to be on a self-destructive course.

My concern today, on behalf of women across the world, is both to address the role of caring as a primary value in all lives, and to argue that women cannot and must not be the only ones to express that value. If women are to carry the responsibility for turning the world around, we cannot also expect them to carry the whole responsibility for caring. I will talk soon about what is meant by caring.

First, however, I want to take up Sojourner Truth's point. We have known in the U.S. at least since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century women's movement (think “Seneca Falls,” 1842) that women have many capabilities that are effective in many ways outside the home. Truth be told, in the south, slaveholders knew this long before the Civil War, when women on both sides ran the farms and plantations as men fought. Black women in the south had been not only housemaids and caretakers but also field hands, working from dawn to dusk picking and carrying crops, for two centuries by then. As people moved across the country after the Civil War, we learned again that women could not only milk cows and churn butter but also run ranches and saloons. Later in the century, it became clear that women could organize all sorts of activities on behalf of suffrage, organize strikes and form unions as factory workers, establish the nursing profession, graduate from medical schools and law schools, create compelling sculptures and paintings. After 1920, they could enter legislatures and assume government positions, found the social work profession and educate women about birth control, lead the fight against

lynching, ad infinitum. During the world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women did “men’s work”—not only on the factory floor, but as we saw recently in *Hidden Figures*, at the highest levels of service to their country. After WWII, they entered the professions in increasing numbers despite the media campaign to keep them at home.

In this history, every time women demonstrated their abilities outside the home in large numbers (as in the wars), they were discouraged from moving beyond the so-called caring professions or jobs in the service economy. So, when they began to go into medicine, they were advised to be general practitioners or to specialize in Ob/Gyn or Pediatrics rather than, say, surgery. Teaching positions were open to women in elementary and secondary schools long before they were in colleges or graduate schools.

Somehow, when we think of “women’s work,” the common denominator is caring. And somehow, these jobs or professions are less well-paid and less prestigious—designed intentionally, perhaps, not to threaten men (women have often been warned not to “take jobs away from men”). This is a paradoxical phenomenon in a society that professes to value equality *and* caring (think of the inscription on the Statue of Liberty: “give me your tired, your poor”).

Clearly, there is *absolutely nothing* wrong with women working in jobs that require an ethic of caring. If women had not kept this ethic alive in a society that is ever more concerned with monetary profit, I hate to think where we would be now. Perhaps there would be no restraints at all on the current business model! Caring is a positive value in any society. The philosopher Nel Noddings, whose book *Caring* (1984) has long been a touchstone for me, argues that it is *crucial*. She finds that the human inclination toward morality comes from the experience of being cared-for and from caring. It is *fundamental* to human life in groups, where we must learn to behave ethically toward one another.

One can argue, and many women agree, that women are better able to care for others, that it comes more *naturally* to them. Some would say that it is because women have children, but that is not the whole story. Women who do not have children are often similarly inclined. This may be because girls do not have to separate from their mothers to the same degrees boys do in order to find appropriate adult role models in their lives. Or it may be because of any number of

societal factors that condition girls and women to learn the skills of caring. Dolls, for example, are part of a huge industry devoted to this project. The hours that women spend on housework may hone skills in paying attention and living in the moment with joy that make them better able to care.

Although a tendency to care for others is probably innate to human beings, we know from recent studies of autism and attachment disorders that it doesn't always develop. Some women do not naturally care primarily for people; apparently the women who become CEOs of our big corporations are not much inclined toward caring.

On the other hand, there is *nothing* that should stop anyone, male or female, from developing the innate ability to care, and many men do this quite gracefully. I would point to my husband, Chuck, as one of these men, who learned it from both of his parents.

So what IS caring? It is first a kind of *attention* to another person. The one-caring becomes engrossed in the other's situation, receptive to the other's plight. It involves a *commitment* to do what one can to help that person thrive. The one-caring sets aside personal goals for a time and puts the other's welfare ahead of his/her own. Caring involves displacing one's own motives to serve another purpose. That displacement happens naturally between a parent and a child, but it becomes an ethical stance in relation to those outside one's immediate circle. We feel another person's need and respond by saying "I must."

This sounds straightforward enough, but when we stop to really think about it, it becomes an amazingly complex activity! It may be love in our closest personal relationships, but it doesn't always require that *kind* of intimacy or relationship. On the other hand, it is different in *degree* from "caring about," say, art or a philosophical principle. Although societal conventions may develop around caring, it isn't a rule-bound activity. If it is done simply to follow rules (as in "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother"), it may not be caring at all. Caring may become something more like "caretaking" when we pay the bills for someone but don't pay attention to them as persons. It may break down if we impose our ideals or principles on the other person when they are capable of sorting out their own needs and desires.

Wow! This is a tough ethic. Maybe women are the superheroes for having sorted this out for so long.

Two more things need to be said. Caring is not a matter of self-sacrifice. It presupposes self-caring. Otherwise it does not work, or not for long.

Also, in order for the act of caring to be completed, the one-cared-for must reciprocate in some way. Human babies have the capacity to respond to the one-caring—to give a mother the essential feedback that she is appreciated. Otherwise, it is difficult for the one-caring to continue to care. Caring requires *dialogue* with the one-cared-for (insofar as that is possible), or within the surrounding society, to understand other's needs and to know when they are being met.

Caring, however “natural” it may seem, is a kind of activity that gets better with practice. Women are often highly practiced in caring; they often make good models and teachers for caring. *But there is nothing about caring that precludes men from doing it.* It is an ethic that all human beings have developed or relied upon over a long period of time.

Noddings asserts that men can practice caring even though they may have developed different ethical priorities from women. She uses the story of Abraham and Isaac to epitomize the usual approach of men, which the psychologist Lawrence Kolberg confirmed in his studies. That is, men tend to make ethical decisions based on an abstraction. In the Biblical story, God, perhaps the ultimate abstraction, requires Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and Abraham is ready to comply, putting his obligation to God before the love of his son. He is rewarded for his loyalty with God's mercy.

In experiments conducted by Kohlberg at Harvard and later experiments conducted by the psychologist Nancy Chodorow, women often refused to put a principle before the person in need, requiring more information about the situation, looking for other options than the one given, even being willing to break the law to avoid putting the one-cared-for at risk.

While Kohlberg concluded that women had only arrived at stage three on his six-point scale of ethical development, Chodorow concluded that women had a

different scale! Noddings goes further. She argues that the capacity to care lays the essential groundwork for ethical development.

Caring should not be women's work alone. It is too important to be the property of one gender. Besides, women in our current age are called upon to use other abilities, as Tom says, "to run the gears that drive our lives" and to "march to change the world." In my view, we all desperately need the women who know how to express concern for persons over profit; to develop a public ethic that comes from caring for individual persons; to take these commitments onto school boards, county boards, corporate boards, legislatures, positions of leadership up and down the ballot, and so on. To make this possible, others will have to take on more of the ethical work of caring. Many of these others may well be men.

If it is less "natural" for men to be the one-caring, how will they learn to do so? The first step, of course, is to do what Tom has done in his poem—*embrace the value* of caring. Noddings argues that caring is THE sine qua non of our lives together on this earth. The second step is to *learn caring behavior*—if examples are not readily available from experience. The third step is to *practice* caring by making commitments to other individuals, by trying to fulfill them, by dealing with the results—which are not always what one hopes for—and by increasing one's understanding of the ethic of care. The fourth step is to *help create an environment in which an ethic of caring is the behavioral norm*.

Caring for persons is different from caring for principles. It involves seeing the person as s/he is, seeing her/his needs and taking some action, however small, to help fulfill them, without expectation that the action will bring glory to the one-caring. Such actions happen most easily with an inner circle of relatives and friends, but they may happen with anyone with whom the one-caring is *in contact*. Contact may take many forms: face to face, in writing, through electronic media, and so on. The world is becoming smaller, ever more closely connected through circles or chains of relationships.

There are many ways to practice caring in this Fellowship and many who are well-practiced in caring from whom all of us can learn. The Caring Committee is central to our Fellowship, and it can always use more members.

So in honor of International Women's Day (celebrated on March 8<sup>th</sup> each year), I am asking you to think again about women's work. Might we honor the work of caring that women have done so faithfully for centuries by expecting *everyone* to *learn* to do it, expecting everyone to adopt *an ethic of care*? I hope it is not too late.

As Noddings observed in the Eighties, when there is a sharp division between private and public spheres, if women do not feel that their caring abilities are acknowledged, they may stop caring. On the other hand, women with strong self-images may insist on caring in public life as a public value. Men may find in this opportunities for self-renewal.

What do you think? I look forward to our discussion—if not after the coffee hour, then whenever the spirit moves you.