

“Without care in the world, none of us will be free.”

-Tricia Hersey

Dear teachers,

As a teacher, I am feeling the collective strain taking up space in our bodies, hearts and minds. I am writing to you, my respected peers, at a time of professional groundlessness. We find ourselves with a Sophie's choice we were not prepared for and making decisions based on an emergent understanding of our new reality. Despite the uncertainty of our current situation, I see an opportunity to look at our profession with greater vulnerability and authenticity. In this self-reflection lies the possibility of contributing to an overdue shift in how we perceive the intricate, essential nature of caring for one another.

What does care mean? According to *Fisher and Tronto* (1990) care is:

A species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (p. 40)
Fisher and Tronto's definition of care provides a lens for how to understand teaching.

Teaching is an activity that hopes to maintain, continue, and repair. Teachers are the life force of this activity. Teachers and care are inextricably linked, and yet, we lack a shared understanding of what this relationship means. In this lack of clarity, we lost sight of the intentional and collective care that is required to maintain our wholeness and health, and in turn, we find ourselves in the red.

Despite the paltry care that teachers receive, and many other human service professions for that matter, the labor of care persists. How do we make care happen day in, day out? In the past, I did not give this question much thought, it just came with the territory of my responsibilities. The labor of care is on us - emotional, mental and physical, regardless of our own reserves or physical safety. In a pandemic, this consideration of care is now unavoidable and urgent.

As teachers, our work is about caring for the well-being of children and young people, which prepares the ground for learning and growth. This is the narrative I tell myself but under the light of the Covid pandemic, I began to ask myself, how in all honesty can care be central to my practice as a teacher? No matter how earnest my intent, how do I care if it depends on the individual dose that I supply? Educational philosopher *N. Noddings* (2005) states, "caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of behaviors. I have put great emphasis on caring as relation, because our temptation is to think of caring as a virtue, an individual attribute" (p.17). Noddings's understanding of care offers an alternative to the individual labor of care that we as teachers often feel.

Care cannot be in the hands of one person. It must be an intentional and collective commitment that is reflected in the totality of schooling, beginning with the private, relational experience of school and carried into the public domain of policy and administration. All these parts are of equal importance, together they are the sum of how we move and feel in school spaces, what we transmit and what we bring to life or not.

Teachers, we are quick to feel culpable and to defend ourselves. This is the result of trauma in our profession. Perhaps you are thinking, I am kind and loving with my students. I work hard to create community in my classroom, buy supplies out of pocket, work long additional hours, and hell, is remote teaching not the biggest testament to how far I will stretch and labor to keep serving students. The heroic examples of care for our students is evident, but that's not the message here. I am imploring us to make a deeper, collective shift. I am asking us to step out of our own way and set aside the validation that often comes from feeling sacrificed.

Where is the possibility of healing and care in this picture? Education is an ideal conduit for care and can shift our misguided notions of care as an individual experience. This begins with teachers reexamining our relationship to the work and peeling back the layers of trauma, bureaucracy and administrative quagmire, to get to the otherside where care lies, in the earthy, human forms that teaching takes. Ultimately, we are the stewards of an ethic of care within schools and pass it on to our students. We invest our professional lives in caring for others, because teachers believe in the long run of human life. We know that what we give each other today, might be what sustains us years later.

The intentional and collective care we require begins with the acknowledgment of a need. Followed by being open and willing to shift our attention toward a new understanding of care. My desire is to continue this inquiry into care and to further investigate how we might reimagine care in schools. I am leaving some open questions here for us: What would it mean if teachers experienced care as something dynamic that shifts between our personal, private and public spheres? What would it look like to have a framework for care that guides our work and supports an ecology of care within schools?

With gratitude,

Lisbeth Olivia Woodington