

January 2007 Community and Care

Remember?

*Modern society has produced many collectives, but few real communities, many individuals, but few real solitaries.*

Last NewsLetter I talked about shared experience: starting in small ways to share things of significance with others, exploring ways to make Christian community more than conversational “fellowship,” taking risks in relationships. Here I want to say something about *care*, because one of the things that distinguishes community from collective is *care*. Along the way, you may learn something about why I am not a Buddhist.

Let’s begin with a quote from European philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Heidegger’s influential book *Being and Time* helped Western philosophy to start all over again thinking about what it means to “be” (have you ever wondered what it means to be?). In *Being and Time* he focussed his attention on human “being.” He argues that one fundamental characteristic of human being is “care,” a concern for oneself and a solicitude toward others. Care is that a state within which our Being itself and all that surrounds it matters to us. As Heidegger puts it, Being “is an issue for us.” Human being,

*“is an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is an issue.”*

Who we are, what we may potentially become, how we “fit” with those who surround us and form us, is something that matters to us. This is what it means for humans to “be.” For humans, our Being is an issue. And Heidegger calls this “care.” Can you see this? Can you identify a concern for self, a solicitude toward others, an interest in the possibilities of your own Being? Try to imagine for a moment how “care” is characteristic of human being.

Now let’s turn to Buddhism. Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa (fifth century A.D.) was one of the great systematizers of Buddhist thought and practice. In one section of his *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification), he comments on a statement of the Buddha regarding the cause of suffering. the Buddha identifies the cause of suffering as “craving, accompanied by concern and greed, concerned with this and that [or ‘seeking delight here and there’].” Buddhaghosa summarizes the Buddha’s meaning in that

*“wherever personality is generated there is concern with that.”*

I think that by “concern” here Buddhaghosa is describing something comparable to what Heidegger was trying to get at with the notion of “care” and with our Being being an issue for us. Wherever personality is generated, wherever we find human “being,” there is concern for this and that. Things matter. We care about who we are. We “own” our thoughts and feelings.

We act in light of what we might become. This is characteristic of us as humans. It seems that both Heidegger and Buddhaghosa are in agreement on this point. But whereas Heidegger simply identifies this as part of our “being,” Buddhaghosa identifies this concern, this “care” as the cause of suffering in the world. Think about it. If things didn’t matter, if you did not have to spend the effort maintaining “you,” if you didn’t *care*, perhaps there would be a lot less suffering experienced in the world. This is what Buddhaghosa argues.

Now let’s turn to a more contemporary philosopher/theologian, Richard Kearney. Kearney teaches philosophy and theology in Boston and in Dublin, Ireland. He draws a great deal from post-Heideggerian European philosophy in his reflections on God. At one point, in his book, *The God Who May Be*, he takes Heidegger to task. Just *how* he takes Heidegger to task is worth noting. He states,

*“Against Heidegger I say: it is not our being that cares for itself, . . . but the good of the persona that cares for being, as promise of endless rebirth.”*

What Kearney means by “persona,” is the face-to-face relationships of others different than us. For Kearney, *care*--which is fundamental to human experience--is not merely a reflection of our own self-concern with ourselves and our relationships with others. Rather care is a fundamentally *interpersonal* and *ethical* reality. Our “being” arises, not simply from our own concern with this and that, but out of the mutual concern of others and ourselves: difference facing difference and forming something new out of this interaction again and again (‘endless rebirth’). With Heidegger and Buddhaghosa, Kearney sees care as fundamental to human experience. Yet Kearney’s contribution is his emphasis on the interpersonal dimension. Care is not just about *me*. Care is about *we*.

It was with all this floating about in my mind that I wrote up one of my sheets identifying an image and caption to be used in the *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. The picture is of a young mother bending over her daughter who has fallen off her bicycle.

*Beyond self-disclosure to self giving,  
smell of Trinity,  
of humanness, for whom things matter,  
we are planted on earth  
to care.*

I had the idea of an image and caption combination like this for a long time. Nothing new. But when I was there actually *looking* at the picture [the image is actually a photo of my friend Kristi and Krisanna, her daughter] and *reading* the caption in light of all that was on my mind, it all struck me with fresh meaning.

Krisanna *matters* to Kristi. If Krisanna were to fall off her bike, Kristi would be *concerned*. Krisanna’s “being” is an issue for Kristi. And furthermore, this kind of concern, this kind of *care*, is fundamental to Kristi’s Being. That kind of care is part of what it means for Kristi to

be. Kristi's care forms Krisanna's Being. And Krisanna forms Kristi's Being. It is basic to human Being. And it is basic *as an interpersonal reality* to human being.

Here, Kristi is not simply offering self-disclosure to her daughter. She steps beyond self-expression to self-giving. And rather than being the *cause* of human suffering, we see care and concern here as the *solution* to human suffering. Rather than reflecting the problem of humankind, care--interpersonal care, the fact that things and others matter to us, that we are bothered when they hurt--reflects the character of a Trinitarian God, a God which in its very Being is a self-giving unity in difference (thus care "smells of Trinity"). How basic, how powerful an idea, how precious is the truth that we are created to care!

As I said above, one of the differences between a collective and a community is care. Collectives gather together, do the same things, perhaps wear similar clothes. Communities *give* themselves for each other. In communities people *matter* to each other. In community we are *an issue* for each other. At times this can indeed be a cause of suffering. But our Three-personed God designed this dynamic to be a means of the relief of suffering. A community wherein the other matters is basic to what it means to be human and it reflects the very character of God. No wonder we long for community!

And so you say to me, "I just can't seem to find community." I ask you, "For whom do you care?" You ask me, "How do I start real community?" I say to you, "Start caring for someone."

May God the Father bless you with riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit