Chapter 9

Reflection

Caring During an Epidemic...So Much to Learn and So Little Time

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Hugs
There are pictures of me
Hugging my cousins
But I haven't hugged them in so long
I haven't laughed with them
I haven't played with them
I can talk to them, yes
But you can't hug through a screen
-Hope, age 11

In *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, Nel Noddings (1984) identifies caring as the “the very bedrock of education.” The changes in our lives as the world adjusts to living in a pandemic have led many of us to examine aspects of previously held beliefs and actions. Noddings explores the question of “what does it mean to care,” a discussion that expands my personal beliefs about caring both in a positive sense and in a more critical sense: caring for students I teach, caring about family, friends, pets and students. This past March, caring became a driving concern for me with the abrupt cancellation of in person teaching to online teaching in response to the dangers posed by COVID-19. Several months after the end of the spring semester and preparing for the fall semester, I began to reflect on the differing, more subtle aspects of what caring meant as it was enacted in my private and public life. With distance and time, I have gained some perspective on the ways in which the pandemic has led to a reflection on beliefs about teaching and what caring means for my approach to teaching. Challenges to care encompassed varied aspects of my teaching and professional life: the transition to on-line classes, then my musical life, personal life, and family life.

I share many themes identified in Nodding’s work related to coping with life in general and especially during this time. Reflecting on my reactions to the disruptions focused on caring about students, their learning, wellbeing and interactions with peers was uppermost on my agenda. Noddings suggests a framework of the dimension of caring, emphasizing reciprocity in relations. She argues that focus on achievement primarily in schools may contribute to feelings from children that adults, and especially teachers, do not care personally for them. She asks “How can we reconcile [these feelings] with standards-based education?” This is the heart of
the matter in my mind is a central belief for effective teaching. I’ve taught in higher education for over 20 years, and prior to that twenty years as a public-school teacher in three different states. I like to think, perhaps overly smugly, that I can handle most things, but during the events beginning in March 2020 I was thrown off guard. With the passage of time and events in our country recently I find it a challenge to adequately express my feelings about living within a pandemic let alone address the racial stress, political stress and identifying “what really matters” amidst the horrific events of the past months. How best could I incorporate caring in a new format and yet ensure students were learning what I’d determined was essential?

The teaching drama began (at least for me) as I needed to quickly adapt to online teaching as well as move materials that I use from the school office to my home. I’m slow to figure out changes in technology applications and the panic I felt at addressing such new innovations was, to me at least, seemingly overwhelming. I am a strong believer in meeting challenges in the most positive way I can and teaching online was a challenge indeed. Admitting that I needed help, I found great support from my institution’s technology team. They were so supportive, in fact, that they listened in to my first classes and gave me some much-needed pedagogical advice such as reminding me about “wait time,” the need to slow down when I was talking and reminding me to be clear about directions, and, once I figured out how to send students to their “rooms” with topics related to the day’s class, I found that I could breathe deeply for a few minutes.

As classes picked up, students were settled in their homes, and opening up my first Zoom classroom happened…falteringly, but happened, and believe it or not, my eyes filled up with tears as students came into class. Yes, I had missed them, but also, I was terrified about teaching in this environment and continuing the strong bonds established while in the classroom at the beginning of the semester. I was exhausted and anxious the first few weeks of class, and shared this with the students; they were amazingly patient with what I felt was my ineptitude. Our older daughter, also new to online teaching at another university, kept reminding me that Zoom is “counterintuitive,” although I’m not sure exactly what this means. I’ve never been known for my patience. For me, the most important aspect of teaching is the connection the teacher makes with students and once that is underway it becomes a more effective climate for learning to take place. I was determined not to let students down, and focusing on where they were, both physically/geographically and in other ways, really helped engage them in ways that might not have happened otherwise. I explained my feelings to the students and asked for their input and ideas about how we could most effectively finish the semester; they responded eagerly, saying they were familiar with the class structure but wanted more time to talk, to engage, and to have more time to focus on final projects since they were away from the resources at the university. Final evaluations were very rewarding and students did report learning, and also were supportive of my faltering attempts to create an effective and caring environment online. And incidentally, when it came time to grade their final projects and final exam, I realized that their work was excellent and really stronger than in earlier years…perhaps indicating they were bored at home! I didn’t want to question this, but they were really terrific…and they were reporting from South Africa to Panama and obviously all around the US.

During this time, I was so focused on teaching (four days a week and 150 students in four sections) I didn’t really stop to reflect on the changes in my personal life. We were on lockdown and that made planning for meals and weekly needed supplies, including masses of hand sanitizers and the wearing of masks, interesting challenges. For the next two months I began to realize that wearing jeans every day was all right. For a while it seemed that every time my husband and I looked at our emails, something was cancelled. The changes in our commitments were huge and disappointing for us. As we both are used to having our “own
Lessons from the Pivot

space” at times, learning to do things together was new. For the first several months of the pandemic, we’d look at each other from time to time and say rather mournfully that we should be somewhere else doing something else, and I truly understood the sense of loss he was experiencing.

I mentioned changes in my personal life…and there were several. Firstly, I love playing in orchestras and chamber groups (I’m a violinist with modest expertise) all of which were canceled. But early in the pandemic the orchestra put together a recording of a movement from Beethoven’s 7th Symphony and magically I became a star on YouTube! Well, not exactly, but it was one of the wonders of technology. Then there were my two book groups. For one, I cheerfully passed myself off as an expert in Zoom and organized our Zoom room so we could continue our monthly meetings, and my friends thought I was amazing. Little did they know! Yet another Zoom group sprang up, one led by two energetic members of my college class. We met and talked about life, politics, and other issues of the day. We’ve collectively made new connections: it’s been amazingly rewarding. Thinking about the use of technology, Zoom, FaceTime, Facebook, and other social media has certainly added an element of caring and a new dimension for communicating in my life.

I can’t end without talking about our children and grandchildren who live at a distance. Because of the changes brought with life in quarantine, there’s been extra time left to communicate and we talk to one or the other practically every day. And in May we attended several Zoom recitals…hmmm…isn’t it nice to have a three-minute bit rather than sitting for hours! In a way the technology has led to closer communication and even, dare I say, family harmony…not at all a bad thing. As time went on and the holidays approached, it was tough to think of not being with them, to hug them and to play with them, take walks, and in so many ways enjoy seeing them grow up. They also, at an early age, are learning about life in ways that they never experienced; caring about others, friends, and family takes on new importance for them as well as for the adults in their lives.

In summary, the little things in life become much more manageable when one is dealing with the bigger ways to care, to communicate, to cope and to keep in touch. I find that caring in many ways is the bedrock of what one can strive for: caring for others in ways that make a difference in our lives and that of others. Living within a pandemic has been challenging in many ways and has stripped us of many things we thought we couldn’t do without. I’m hoping to emerge from this life with a newer appreciation of what’s important to our lives and how I can carry on making a difference in the lives of others in more ways than perhaps I have done. Thinking about my teaching has shown that by giving up a more didactical (insert controlling) approach to planning and organizing classes, much can be gained by stepping back a little and letting students have the lead first, then adjusting my expectations to include students’ needs and expectations. Noddings (1992) identifies six centers of care, themes that became more applicable than ever in this crisis. Among them are caring for self, caring for others, and caring for ideas. Today I have reflected on the differing, more subtle aspects of caring mean as enacted in my private and public life. Constant coverage in the news media and the many disruptions in school schedules undeniably created an uncertainty about the future for many and especially those families impacted by financial stress. Noddings reminds the reader that “To care and be cared for are fundamental human needs.” I began this essay with the short poem written by our oldest grandchild just a few weeks ago, poignant and to the point and illustrating what caring is like for children during these challenging times. It is safe to say that hugging through a screen is a challenge for all of us.
References
