

What Does It Mean To Care?

The word care has become a very ambiguous word. When someone says: "I will take care of him!" it is more likely an announcement of an impending attack than of tender compassion. And besides this ambiguity, the word care is most often used in a negative way. "Do you want coffee or tea?" "I don't care."

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 advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share 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.

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 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.

– Henri Nouwen