

## Understanding Care in Contemporary America

Robert N. Bellah

Posted by permission of the publisher: Further distribution, posting, or copying is strictly prohibited. Copyright © 2011 by Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC. All rights reserved. Originally published in Susan S. Phillips and Patricia Benner, eds., *The Crisis of Care: Affirming and Restoring Caring Practices in the Helping Professions*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994, pp. 21-35. <http://www.press.georgetown.edu/book/georgetown/crisis-care>. Some of the following material is taken from *The Good Society* (Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, NY: Knopf, 1991).

Almost two and a half years ago we heard a presidential inaugural address that called for “a kinder, gentler America.” There is not much evidence that we are becoming kinder and gentler – indeed there is a good deal of evidence that we are becoming less so. Before addressing some of the cultural tendencies and social practices that make kindness and the practices of caring increasingly difficult in our society, I want to say something about the semantics of “caring.” The distinction needs to be drawn between caring as a sentimental psychological attitude and caring as a responsible practice, aware of its own limits.

Allan Bloom and other neo-conservatives have attacked the language of “care” and “caring” as part of the self-serving vocabulary of the new class, of which the helping professions form a significant part, that is, bleeding-heart liberals who like to see as many people as possible as victims. My own sense is that the neo-conservative attack on care and caring is itself cynical and contributes to the decline of caring practices. Yet, the neo-conservatives do have a point. Genuine caring is a practice based on moral commitments with which certain subjective feelings may or may not be associated, but it is not primarily a psychological orientation. Genuine caring does not see those in need primarily as victims. Genuine caring involves a profound sense of moral responsibility, but it does not imagine that caregivers have the technology or the power to heal all wounds and cure all ills. I will return to these issues.

The *cultural* tendencies that I see as endangering practices of care seem to be located in a broad spectrum of American culture, especially middle-class culture. This tendency is expressed best in an ideology of radical individualism that my co-authors and I analyzed in *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), but that I would like to illustrate with some examples from Robert Wuthnow's excellent book *Acts of Compassion* (Princeton University Press, 1991), which has the significant subtitle *Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves*.

One ameliorating tendency in our utilitarian society is the recognition that individuals do, after all, have feelings and that these feelings should be expressed, yet we must question some instances of how limited the range of feelings is that is being emphasized. One of the major motivations stressed by volunteer agencies that encourage people to give time and money to helping others is that such activity will "make you feel good." Wuthnow describes an advertisement for a well-known international relief agency recently carried in a Christian magazine with a large national circulation.

At the top was the familiar face of a needy child, dark skinned, with large, sad eyes. Beside her picture in bold, black, underlined letters half an inch high was the word SPONSORSHIP. Below this, filling up nearly a quarter of the page in equally huge letters were the words "It'll Make You Feel Good." But in case the reader might have missed this message or not understood it, the ad contained more. Three times in quarter-inch bold section headings the message was repeated. "You'll Feel Good ... knowing that Jesus' love for children has been demonstrated through your compassion. You'll Feel Good ... knowing that you're

touching this hurting world.” “Please become a sponsor today,” it concluded:

“You’ll feel good about it.” (p. 86)

Many volunteers recount that occasionally help at a soup kitchen or with Meals on Wheels “really makes them feel good,” sometimes asserting that their volunteer activity is more for themselves than for the people they help. A volunteer fireman says, “I don’t do this to help people. I do it to make myself feel good about helping people.” Another of Wuthnow’s subjects said, “If I stop to help somebody cross the street, I do that because I want to feel good. It gives me that feeling that I’ve done something good for the day.” The same person ventured the opinion that selfishness and compassion “are really the same thing.” One may wonder whether we should take such assertions at face value, since Americans seem almost ashamed to admit they might do anything out of altruistic motives.

But the stress on “feeling good,” as Wuthnow argues, may actually endanger the relatively high commitment to volunteerism in our society. He points out that when asked what makes them feel good, Americans usually rate quite a few activities higher than helping others and that a great deal of helping others involves hard, often painful work. It may involve what it has almost become taboo in America to mention, sacrifice. Indeed, Wuthnow found out something quite revealing about the meaning of sacrifice to Americans today. Forty-two percent of his national sample said that a major reason to be a kind and caring person is “I want to give of myself for the benefit of others”; but when in a subset of the sample Wuthnow changed the wording to “I want to sacrifice myself for the benefit of others,” the percentage dropped from 42 to 15 percent. It is hard to imagine Jesus, as Wuthnow notes, saying to his disciples, ““Take up your cross and follow me – it’ll make you feel good”” (p. 87), but some televangelist has probably already said as much.

The poignant reality of helping others is that it often does involve sacrifice and by no means always makes one feel good. Wuthnow quotes Albert Schweitzer as saying, “Anyone who experiences the woes of this world within his heart can never again feel the surface of happiness that human nature desires.” One can never forget, wrote Schweitzer, the anguished faces of the poor and the sick. Mother Teresa expressed the same view when she said, “Real love is always painful and hurts: then it is real and pure” (p. 105). Such an understanding resonates with the great religious traditions of the world, but it does not sit well with the feel-good morality of contemporary Americans.

Wuthnow draws significant conclusions from the fact that the language of sacrifice has tended to drop out of our vocabulary: “To say that caring does not require time and energy, to deny that one can become worn out in doing good, to obscure the fact that real dangers and risks may be necessitated is simply to lure people into a false understanding of caring that unlikely to prove enduring. Furthermore, if caring does not entail sacrifice, it may result only in token support that does less for the recipient than it does for the giver” (p. 105)

One rather startling finding of Wuthnow’s study is that the single variable that correlates most highly with engaging in helping activity is knowledge of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Chapter 6, pp. 157-187). He makes no causal argument but just notes the power of narrative in shaping consciousness. Here, too, the news is not all good, for knowledge of this parable declines the younger the cohort. Furthermore, among those over 30, knowledge of the parable is positively correlated with years of education. While Wuthnow found many who could recount the parable quite accurately, he also found that for others it served as a kind of Rorschach test, revealing more about the consciousness of the subject than the content of the story. As one might imagine, there were more than a few who told of a Samaritan who found a stranger lying injured

by the wayside, helped him, and really felt good about himself for doing so. And then there was the version of one informant that tells volumes about our society today: “It is, she says, ‘[a story] about a gentleman who finds someone by the side of the road and is injured or hurt in some way and he goes to help him and ends up getting injured himself’” (pp. 178-179)

Interestingly, almost all Americans, however accurately they can tell the story, identify with the Good Samaritan. Wuthnow points out that in the early centuries of Christianity it was quite common to identify the self with the traveler beaten and abandoned by the wayside and to see the Good Samaritan as the Christ figure. To see ourselves as caregivers is hard enough; to see ourselves as needing care seems to be even harder.

Having briefly discussed some of the cultural tendencies that endanger practices of caring in our society, I will now address some of the social pressures that have the same negative consequences. The daily press is not always the best sources of information about our society, but good journalists often are good sociologists and their observations may on occasion shock us into the recognition of important facts. What follows are the opening paragraphs of a story by Gary Blonston in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of September 22, 1991:

Whatever white-collar America once assumed about getting ahead, trusting employers or simply staying employed, the reality of the 1990s is becoming clear:

The deal is off.

“There was and implied contract: ‘You give us your loyalty, we’ll give you security,’” says executive-network organizer David Opton of Weston, Conn. “That’s not true anymore.”

Instead, as corporate America shrinks, consolidates and otherwise cuts costs, it is squeezing more people out of work – and more work out of people –

than ever before in the careers of managers, office staff and business professionals.

White collars are proving no more bullet proof than blue ones. Glass offices are turning out to be fragile fortresses, experience and expertise flimsy weapons. The rules have changed in the office, and as the bulk of the working population moves toward mid-life and midcareer, that means millions of people are feeling uncertainty at a time they had envisioned to be most secure.

“The recession we’re in right now is more than just an economic recession,” says Robert Gilbreath, a corporate restructuring consultant in Atlanta. “It’s a social and cultural recession.”

“There’s been a corporate shift in values. It used to be a sign of failure to cut those people. Now it’s a sign of corporate machismo. It’s gone from a negative to almost a positive.”

The German sociologist/philosopher Jurgen Habermas (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, tr. Thomas Burger, Cambridge: MIT Press, [1962], 1989) has divided institutions into two groups in a way that may help us understand what the *Inquirer* reporter is describing. Habermas speaks on the one hand of the lifeworld (which includes the family, the local community, the church, and the realm of non-governmental public opinion) and on the other hand of the systems (chiefly the market economy and the administrative state). Institutions involved in caring would belong primarily in the lifeworld, but, like other lifeworld institutions, have become increasingly influenced, or, as Habermas puts it when he becomes critical, invaded and colonized by the systems. What Blonston describes as happening in the corporation is today also happening in HMOs and in universities.

Looked at historically, the purpose of the systems is to support the lifeworld, to carry out for the lifeworld more efficiently some of the things that will make the lifeworld better and more fulfilling. The economy and the state are there to serve us, or at least that is what we thought should be the case in a modern democratic society. But problems arise when means become ends, when the instrumentalities that should service us, should help us live richer lives, actually press us into their service and make us their agents rather than the other way around.

I want to concentrate on the danger to the lifeworld in America that comes from the market economy, as our example of corporate restructuring indicates. We have long been aware of the danger to the lifeworld coming from the totalitarian state, in such societies as communist Poland, as eating up the substance of society. I want to suggest that the market economy can also “eat up the substance of society.” It can “colonize the lifeworld,” as Habermas puts it.

Indeed I will argue that the greatest threat to our lifeworld, to real community and to genuine practices of caring, comes not *only* from a state whose power becomes too coercive (we can never underestimate that danger), but from market forces that become too coercive, that invade our private and group lives and tempt us to a shallow competitive individualism and undermine all our connections to other people. We know that we need to limit the state. I want to argue that we need to limit market forces as well when they become imperialistic and threaten to dominate our lives. Indeed I would argue that there is such a thing as market totalitarianism that parallels state totalitarianism and is a real threat to us in America today.

Since the mid-1970s Americans have been tempted to think that the market economy will provide the freedom that in many ways seems to be slipping away from us in contemporary society. One powerfully influential version of this view comes from the teachings of Milton Friedman and the school of economics he founded, teachings that claim descent from Adam Smith but

have lost the moral consciousness that Smith, who spent most of his life as a professor of moral philosophy in Edinburgh, brought to his subject. In the view of Friedman and his successors human beings are exclusively self-interest maximizers, and the primary measure of self-interest is money. It is this philosophy that has been motivating American business for quite some time.

Yet the reality is that American business has not become more competitive, but less so, not stronger, but weaker. In the relentless pressure to think only of the bottom line in the short term the corporation itself has become cannibalized. Unlike our chief competitors, Germany and Japan, we think less, not more, about how we can include everyone in the corporate culture. Ideology and self-interest combine to create an economy that requires more hours of work from more people just to stay even with the cost of living. The real pressures of the job culture and the anxieties they create make it less and less possible for Americans to attend to and care about all those lifeworld structures that make life worth living.

What the relentless effort of Americans to think of human beings as autonomous interest maximizers who also occasionally want to feel good ignores is a truth that most human societies, including our own not so long ago, were quite aware of: namely, that human beings are not autonomous atoms, that human beings exist in and through relationships and institutions or they don't exist at all. It is simply absurd to expect a young person growing up amidst violence and poverty, hopelessness and lovelessness, to "just say 'no'" to crack cocaine, without any role model or any institution to support such a personal decision. It is absurd for a government employed psychotherapist on an Indian reservation to diagnose a youth living in a household riven by violence and alcoholism as a "narcissistic personality" in need of psychotherapy, a real example recounted to me by a Native American. Narcissism is a natural response to not being loved and not being cared for and all the psychotherapy in the world will not make up for the absence

of a loving family and a loving community – indeed it may only burden the youth with one more demand to solve his problems all alone. T. Berry Brazelton, the well-known pediatrician, claims that he can tell in his child-development clinic at Boston’s Children’s Hospital which infants at nine months of age already feel a sense of failure. He also says that with the right kind of nurturing such infants can be turned around, can believe in themselves because others believe in them.

Let me turn then from describing the cultural and social structural forces that create a crisis in caring today to some of the recommendations that the authors of *The Good Society* suggest in the conclusion of our book, which we entitled, “Democracy Means Paying Attention.”

*The Good Society* sees serious problems in both our culture and our society. Indeed we have the temerity to call for radical change both in our central values and in our major institutions. But our analysis is less grandiose than that summary implies. Our argument is that the endowment of every one of our institutions, from the family to the nation state, to the international order, is eroding and that the quality of our life is suffering as a consequence. A value system that insists relentlessly on maximizing individual interest does not replenish that endowment but only depletes it, depletes it for the weak at home and abroad and for all future generations. We do not minimize the danger. We would agree with Vaclav Havel that the advanced world is embarked on a course that can only end in what he calls “megasuicide.” But we believe what is needed to reverse the course is not some new theory or new plan or new “paradigm” as is so often said, but much simpler things, things that might appear quite naïve, such as paying attention.

From the time we were children we were told by our parents and our grammar school teachers to “Pay attention!” Even though we have grown inured to this injunction and shrug it off, there are few things in life more important. For attention is how we use our psychic energy, and how we used our psychic energy determines the kind of self we are cultivating, the kind of

person we are learning to be. When we are giving our full attention to something, when we are really attending, we are calling on all our resources of intelligence, feeling, and moral sensitivity.

While paying attention, attending, is very natural for human beings, our attention is frequently disturbed. One of the most obvious features of psychotics is that they suffer from “disorders of attention” in which they have no control over the thoughts and sensations that come flooding into their minds and cannot consciously decide to focus their attention on objects of their concern. But all of us suffer, though less drastically, from such disorders of attention. When we are doing something we “have to do,” but our minds and our feelings are somewhere else, our attentions is alienated. In such situations of disordered or alienated attention our self-consciousness is apt to be high. We may suffer from anxiety or, today’s common complaint, “stress.” Working hard at something we care about, giving our full attention to someone we love – these do not cause stress. But studying a subject we’re not interested in and worrying about the grade, or doing things at work that we find meaningless but that the boss requires and we must do if we don’t want to lose our job, or just being overwhelmed by more than we can cope with to the point where we feel fragmented and exhausted – these cause stress, these are examples of alienated attention. We attend but fitfully – inattentively, so to speak – and therefore we are not cultivating our selves or our relationships with others. Rather we may be building up strong desires to seek distraction when we have free time.

Unfortunately, many of the distractions we hope will “deaden the pain” – alcohol, restless channel-flipping TV watching, compulsive promiscuity – do not really help, for such distractions too are forms of alienated attention that leave us mildly, or sometimes severely depressed. We have not exercised the potentialities of our selves and our relationships, and so we have not reaffirmed our selves in the larger contexts that give our lives meaning. If, after a stressful day, we

can turn our attention to something that is mildly demanding but inherently meaningful – such as reading a good book, repairing the car, talking to someone we love, or even cooking the family meal, we are more apt to find that we are “relaxed.”

Attention is, interestingly enough, a religious idea in more than one tradition. Zen Buddhism, for example, enjoins a state of mindfulness and open attention to whatever is at hand, but Zen practitioners know this is always threatened by distraction. “Each act must be carried out in mindfulness,” observes the contemporary Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. Each act is a rite, a ceremony,” he writes. “Raising your cup of tea to your mouth is a rite. Does the word ‘rite’ seem too solemn? I use the word to jolt you into the realization of the life-and-death matter of awareness” (*The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1987, p. 4). Mindfulness is valued because it is a kind of foretaste of religious enlightenment, which in turn is a full waking up from the darkness of illusion and a full recognition of reality as it is.

This idea, common enough in Eastern religions, has analogies in biblical religion as well. God revealed himself to Moses from out of the burning bush as “I am that I am” (Exodus 3:14), and Moses had a hard time getting the children of Israel, distracted by their golden calf, to see the radical truth that had been revealed to him at Sinai. Jesus preached a new reality, a Kingdom of God that he declared was at hand, though most of his hearers could not make it out. Jesus said, “having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?” (Mark 8:18), but many were too distracted to see or hear. As in the religious examples, we mean to use attention normatively, the sense of “mindfulness,” as the Buddhists put it, or “openness to the leadings of God,” as the Quakers say.

So far we have considered the issues of attention, of disordered or alienated attention, and of distraction, from the point of view of the individual. Self-control and self-discipline have a lot

to do with whether we can engage with life or simply attempt to escape it. But people do not deal with these questions all by themselves, nor can one alone develop a self able to sustain attention. We live in and through institutions. The nature of the institutions we both inhabit and transform have much to do with our capacity to sustain attention. We could even say that institutions are socially organized forms of paying attention or attending, although they can also, unfortunately, be socially organized forms of distraction.

Americans place a high valuation on family life. But if the family is only “a haven in a heartless world,” a place that provides distraction from the harshness of the rest of our lives, we are certain to be disappointed. For families require a great deal of attention to function successfully. Despite romantic fantasies, marital love is not a narcotic that soothes all wounds. Attending to each other, expressing our deepest concerns and aspirations and listening to those of the other, are fundamental in a good marriage and crucial to the satisfaction it provides. But if we only expect to be attended to and we don't attend to the other, because we've had too hard a day or whatever, we sow the seeds of marital discord and deprive ourselves of the real rewards of marriage. The fact that married people live longer than single people suggests that marriage provides a kind of attention that is very important for human beings.

Attention is important between marriage partners, but it is fundamental for children. Infants who do not get attention, in the sense of psychic interaction and love, simply cannot survive, even if they are fed and clothed. And the quality of attention that children get has a great deal to do with how they turn out. We have already noted T. Berry Brazelton's work on newborn children to show how important such attention, such care is. In short, I think that attentive homes breed attentive children.

Today there is a crisis with respect to giving and receiving attention in the family. The care of everything and everyone, especially children, is suffering because there's not enough time. Although the solution to this problem involves changes in the larger society, in the short-term there is the immediate obligation on the part of everyone in the family to restore the centrality of attention and care.

But the task of restoring family life, whatever form the family may take, cannot be the family's alone. As Arlie Hochschild has recently pointed out, a "job culture" has expanded at the expense of a "family culture" (*Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*, NY: Viking, 1989). Only a major shift in the organization of work and in American public policy with respect to it will enable us to regain a balance between job and family. It might appear at the moment, when economic competitiveness is such an obsession, that Americans "can't afford" to think about the family if it will in any way hinder our economic efficiency. Nothing could be more shortsighted. In the long run our economic life, like every other aspect of our common existence, depends on the quality of people. How effective will our economy be if it depends on a generation of listless, anxious people unable to concentrate on anything very long and unconcerned with planning a coherent life for themselves? There is literally nothing more important than the quality of our young people, yet American public policy consistently refuses to *pay attention* to this fact.

The current difficulties of the American family have a great deal to do with how isolated it is, geographically and socially. There is much talk about the various "experimental" forms of the family today – two-earner households, single-parent households, same-sex couples with children – as well as "traditional" families where husbands work and wives stay home, but there is a great deal that all these families have in common and that makes it difficult for all of them to

sustain family life. As the theologian John Snow (“Families in the Fast Lane to Nowhere,” *Episcopal Life*, May, 1990, p. 18) puts it:

In all these cases the absence of generational rootedness in a certain place with a long term commitment to its community and economic life makes money – cash flow – the primary source of security.

With professional people there is the added security of insurance, health insurance and pensions. For the rest there are welfare, social security and medicare. In all cases the bottom line of security is money, not extended family and community.

For some families there is no bottom line at all. They may be found in shelters, and some of them are healthy young people with small children and no addiction to drugs or alcohol, sometimes with jobs, yet unable to afford rent in such cities as Boston or New York. They lack even an address.

What Snow is suggesting is that stable and attentive families need commitment to a place, which in turn requires locally and regionally coherent economies.

A new look at localism, at decentralization, at what the American philosopher Josiah Royce called “provincialism,” in a positive sense, at what Lewis Mumford called “settlement,” would be valuable for much more than family life. Localism does not imply any abdication of the responsibility of the federal and state governments for the general population – it does not insist on the devolution of major responsibilities to underfunded wavering “points of light.” But it does envision that the government would support and expand local efforts where they exist – a summer program for teenagers sponsored by the black church in a depressed neighborhood; an effort by workers to buy out and renovate a plant whose owners wished to relocate in Brazil –

and also help create such efforts where they don't exist. In Catholic social teaching this is known as the principle of subsidiarity, about which there is some diversity of interpretation. As we use it, subsidiarity implies that higher-level associations such as the state should never replace what lower-level associations can do effectively, but it also implies their obligation to help when the lower-level associations lack resources to do the job alone.

When we think about how money has become so central a measure for everything in our society, including personal worth, and remember that money in most of these contexts is a source of distraction rather than attention, we come face to face with the central paradox of American history. The individual was, in the eighteenth century, embedded in a complex moral ecology that included family and church on the one hand and on the other a vigorous public sphere in which economic initiative, it was hoped, grew together with public spirit. Without overlooking its many injustices, we may note that it was still a society that operated on a humanly intelligible scale. Both the economy and the government were sufficiently small-scale as to be understandable to the ordinary citizen. Looking back from our present position we can see that citizens then were faced with two possibilities, which we may denote as "cultivation" and "exploitation." The pattern of "cultivation" (which we could also call "taking care of") that some Americans for a time did embrace (and others never really abandoned) involved the creation of regional cultures in some degree of harmony with the natural environment, where individuals, families, and local communities could grow in moral and cultural complexity. But the temptations of exploitation in so new and so rich a country proved irresistible. Unfortunately, much of the history of the United States is the history of exploitation, not cultivation, exploitation of the American people, exploitation of the North American continent, and exploitation of the world.

The pattern of exploitation was destructive to both the natural environment and the life of the community. It appealed to that aspect of the tradition in which individual accumulation, measured in money terms, came loose from other social goods and became an all-consuming concern, undercutting even the devotion to self-cultivation and the family. And this pattern of exploitation led to the development of large economic and governmental structures that grew “over the heads” of the citizens and beyond their control, making a mockery of the most fundamental principle of American political philosophy: government by the consent of the governed.

We took up the idea of attention as initially a matter of individual psychology. As we followed it, we moved to ever larger social and cultural circles: from self-cultivation, to concern for the family, to our local communities, to our national life and life in the world. Attention and distraction, the disturbance and destruction of attention, occurred at every point. Everywhere attention had to do not only with conscious awareness but with the cultivation of human possibilities and purposes, whereas distraction was a response to fear and exhaustion, leading to shallow escapism in some circumstances, to defensive efforts to dominate and control through power and money in others.

Institutional change comes only as a result of the political process. An attentive democratic politics is not some extraneous demand that busy and harried citizens may ignore or attend to fitfully out of “liberal guilt.” Our argument is that if we are going to be the kind of persons we want to be and live the kind of lives we want to live, then attention and not distraction is essential. Concerns that are mostly deeply personal are closely connected with concerns that are global in scope. We cannot be the caring people whom our children need us to be and ignore the world they will have to live in. We cannot hide from the fact that without effective democratic intervention and institution-building the world economy is accelerating in ways that are tearing our

lives apart and destroying the environment. Moral discourse is essential in the family; it is also essential in the world. There is no place to hide. It is time to pay attention.

A term closely related to attention in our moral vocabulary is responsibility. Toward the end of the conclusion of *The Good Society* we call on the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, partly because he absorbed and creatively reworked some of the best social science of his day, to help us to think about the social meaning of responsibility. For Niebuhr responsibility is ultimately responsibility to God, although it involves us in a radical relation to the whole world. As he put it:

In the critical moments we do ask about the ultimate causes ... and are led to see that our life in response to action upon us, our life in anticipation of response to our reactions, takes place within a society whose boundaries cannot be drawn in space, or time, or extent of interaction, short of a whole in which we live and move and have our being.

The responsible self is driven as it were by the movement of the social process to respond and be accountable in nothing less than a universal community. (*The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, New York: Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, 1963, p. 88)

There is a remarkable resonance between the thinking of H. Richard Niebuhr and Vaclav Havel. We feel very close to Havel in some of the things he has been saying. For example, in February of 1990, after he had been President of the Czechoslovak Republic for only three months, in a speech to a joint session of the United States Congress, he said:

[T]he salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility....

We are still a long way from that “family of man”; in fact we seem to be receding from the ideal rather than drawing closer to it. Interests of all kinds: personal, selfish, state, national, group, and if you like, company interests still considerably outweigh genuinely community interests. We are still under the destructive and vain belief that man is the pinnacle of creation, and not just part of it, and that therefore everything is permitted. There are still many who say they are concerned not for themselves but for the cause, while they are demonstrably out for themselves and not for the cause at all. We are still destroying the planet that was entrusted to us, and its environment. We still close our eyes to the growing social, ethnic and cultural conflicts in the world. From time to time we say that the anonymous megamachinery we have created for ourselves no longer serves us, but rather has enslaved us, yet we still fail to do anything about it.

In other words, we still don't know how to put morality ahead of politics, science, and economics. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions – if they are to be moral – is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success. Responsibility to the order of Being, where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be properly judged. (*Congressional Record* – Senate, 136 [13], p. S1313)

In the idea of responsibility as Niebuhr and Havel express it, an ideal central to a valid notion of care, there is an implicit contrast to what we might call the paradigm of control. If we have learned anything in the twentieth century we have learned that we cannot control the world – not with grand political theories, not with vast wealth, not with overwhelming military power.

History is full of surprises. It is just those most devoted to control who are the most dumb-founded – I think of Robert McNamara during the Vietnam War, an almost tragic figure when he had to recognize that his control strategies were leading only to catastrophe. Yet we are ceaselessly called to responsibility, to respond with all our intelligence and wisdom to the new conditions that challenge us. Responsibility does not mean action for its own sake. In one of his letters to his wife Havel points out the foolishness of thinking that when “nothing is happening,” nothing is happening. Here I think of Eugene Peterson’s admonitions (in his book) about seeming “not to care” because we are recognizing that more is involved than we can control and that sometimes silence and waiting are more important than frenetic action.

I want to end on a note that is shared with my four co-authors, with whom I have worked on two books for that last twelve years, and that note is hope – hope, not optimism. When I look at the big numbers I am not optimistic. Hope is related to faith and to responsibility rather than control. Our hope is, of course, shared with millions of others all over the world, and that cannot but be heartening, but it ultimately is based on trust that, against all the odds when we view the world in cold calculating terms, God is good, God is love, Being itself is trustworthy.

*Robert Bellah delivered the above essay first as a talk at “The Crisis of Care Conference” at New College in Berkeley, California, October 4-6, 1991. A question and answer period followed. Sam Porter transcribed the Q & A from an audiotape produced by Perpetual Motion Unlimited, Boulder, Colorado.*

**Q (male):** ... a little bit about distinguishing between hope and optimism. Could you give us two or three minutes?

**A:** Well, hope is of course a virtue, a quality of character. It is a theological virtue, even. It’s closely related, of course, in New Testament religion, to love. My point is that it ultimately derives from a relation to transcendent reality—where we recognize that we can’t do it ourselves. And that means, whether you’re a doctor or a nurse or a teacher or whatever you are—a parent, anyone. We’re responsible to do what we can but we cannot control the world. And hope recognizes that fact.

Optimism is based on the notion that somehow there's some inevitable capital "P" progress, some inherent force in modern science and technology—or whatever the ideological contents are—that makes us confident that everything is going to be okay. It's all going to turn out right. Everything's going to be fine. And I think the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century gives plenty of evidence that that kind of optimism is very shallow.

We live at a moment in history in which some remarkably good things have happened. And we shouldn't neglect that. The fact that nuclear destruction has receded significantly—certainly not entirely—from our horizon is a wonderful, freeing moment.

But if one takes seriously the world in which we live—the desperate poverty that increases in the third world, doesn't seem to get better but just gets worse; the ecological problems that face us.

Democracy—there isn't any other game in town now. All the others are out. But it reminds me of that spiritual: everyone talkin' 'bout heaven ain't going there. Everybody talking about democracy ain't going there either. That's a long row to hoe—and we haven't made it in this society!

The notion that democracy is somehow inevitable in purely human terms is an example of optimism. But faith and hope about democracy, which I share very deeply, nonetheless recognizes how enormous the barriers are, everywhere—including right here.

That's the difference I was trying to get at.

**Q (male):** I was curious about what you think about—or how the recent proliferation of recovery programs fits into the picture that you've just been talking about.

**A:** Well, anybody who has read *Habits of the Heart* knows that the authors of that work and its successor have more than a few reservations about the therapeutic vocabulary that surrounds us.

I have no doubt that recovery programs play an important role and I certainly don't want to be flippant. But when I hear a whole set of related terms—co-dependency, dysfunctional families—when I hear a leading popular exponent of this way of thinking declare that 98 percent of Americans are dysfunctional, I say, 'Isn't it wonderful that the therapists have discovered original sin.' Although, apparently, they think the therapists are the two percent that are not dysfunctional.

What I'm trying to say is that I think we are all in recovery. I'm dysfunctional. Who isn't? What is this paradigm that is being held up to us of perfection?

That we need to help ourselves and others when we're in a bad place – and if these programs can bring a sense of support and community and openness, and listening, just listening—that's wonderful.

But I think if we get caught in a whole vocabulary that seems to translate some very profound moral intuitions into a psychological level that doesn't really go very deep—then I have some reservations.

So, that's an effort to give a nuanced answer to that question.

**Q (female):** I much appreciated your book *Habits of the Heart* and I appreciated again *The Good Society* ... realistic in its thinking. And you see the problems that demand a community's response—interdependence—and the problems that need that kind of response, macro processes, cultures. We have thought and you have analyzed, and many others, the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, which have been broad based coalitions in society which have achieved unparalleled advances. Martin Marty analyzes, in some of his writings also, individualism and its increasing tolerance of everything, along with you. It's okay as long as it doesn't effect me. Do you have any answers as a sociologist how we can bring about again one of these broad based coalitions?

**A:** Yes. Well, we live in a time of enormous transformation. All of our most central institutions—certainly the family, the relations between men and women—have been called in question. And much of that calling into question has been justified. We've lived with a degree of injustice that I think we now recognize is intolerable just as we recognize that in race relations.

Unfortunately, just at the moment when we became more aware of higher demands for our treatment of each other with genuine love, genuine respect and genuine care between men and women in the family and outside the family—in the workplace as well as the home—we got caught in a stagnation of our society. To some extent, the whole advanced world but peculiarly strongly in American society.

And when we haven't been moving ahead in so many ways with the structural problems that plague us, I even think it's fair to use the analogy—although our problems are of a very different level than those of the Soviet Union—that we have for 20 years or so have been in a Brezhnevite period—an unwillingness, ever since Nixon became president, to challenge the central power structures of our society. An unwillingness which has led to the kind of complacency and gradual eating out at the center of every one of our institutions just as it did in the Soviet Union.

So we've combined a period of new ethical demand—and new ethical understanding—with a period of social and political stagnation. The result is very chaotic and very troubled.

And a great many people—who can face neither the difficulties of the society we live in nor the challenges of personal growth that are required in a new world of deeper respect for people that are different from oneself—opt out, do their own thing, claim the right to do anything they want, who else is to judge?

I mean of course this kind of thing is characteristic in periods of dramatic social change always in history. So I'm not surprised by it.

I think what we have to do is recognize what is genuine and what is false in the great changes that we've seen in our society [and] in the great changes we have *not* seen in our society. In some ways, the sixties were our Prague spring just like it was the spring in Czechoslovakia—and then we went back into the icebox. Many of the issues that were raised in the sixties we haven't faced, we haven't dealt with. And the pain and penalty of that is evident in our society at every level.

So, all I can say is that the things that you're talking about are very much on the agenda. I don't see how we will get out of our present morass without a new social movement that will lead to some profound structural change. But I don't see that social movement coming together quite at the moment.

In that kind of situation I think the best thing to do is not engage in frenetic activity but to prepare ourselves as individuals, as congregations, as communities, as families so that when the moment comes, when Rosa Parks doesn't move back in the bus and suddenly a civil rights movement appears that no one quite expected at that moment. Or when, God forbid, something like [what] happened in August in the Soviet Union happens, there will be enough citizens ready, prepared to rise to the occasion, to behave nobly and well in defense of the deepest values.

In a period of confusion, then, I think we should be building our local communities, our face-to-face relationships, our churches—all forms of public discourse—so that we can move to meet the big difficulties that presently the power structure and the political structure simply evade.