

THE JOURNEY OF CARE

This talk is about how people realize they care and the stages they go through in daring to proclaim it. In preparation, I had the chance to reflect on my life and the journey I've been on and I hope that by the end I can motivate you to do the same. I had many revelations along the way...

When I was younger and found myself in a difficult, frustrating situation there is a song which was rehearsed for me time and time again. It went:

"Oh, I don't like my situation
Oh, I don't like my situation
But that's not my problem,
My problem is relating to the
Self which does not like its situation."

After I'd recovered from wanting to deck the offensive jerk who sang out this reminder I began thinking about the meaning of it and the two realities it made me deal with.

The first is "the self", me. Who am I and, being that person, how do I respond? We all have self images that we aim to live out of. Mine includes trying to be the level-headed, strategic one in complex situations who is also responsible, caring, giving, etc. etc. I don't have any more success at it than the next person. Sometimes, however, I find myself trying to make decisions out of that ideal set of principles to the extent that I ignore my initial reactions or the possibility of an alternate course of action; I program myself out of humanness. Then every once in a while I catch a glimpse of a part of my real self which doesn't jive with my image and I am brought back to the real me...

I don't like anger. I want to stop talking when an argument gets too hot and I will stifle my own anger 'til my ears whistle pretending that I'm incapable of any such emotion. I was walking home from the PATH train one evening; it was dark and cold so I had my scarf wrapped around my face. I suppose I might have looked a little dangerous- these two dogs thought I did anyway. They came running towards me and stopped at my trembling feet, barking and jumping at me. I tried to stay calm and recall what I learned running METRO in the Student House. Staring them down didn't work well in the dark so I just stood there petrified, talking softly. Finally I saw an old woman walking toward me; "Oh, I'm so sorry, it must be the dark", she said and called them off. I walked past her (with my ears whistling) speechless and saw that she had two leashes in her hand. When I was about ten yards away I couldn't hold it in any longer. I turned around and bellowed, "Damn it, lady you should have those leashes on them, they nearly scared the wits out of me!" I couldn't believe it- me screaming at an old woman walking her dogs? So you know what I did? I cried. Eighteen years old, walking home from college and I cried. That's part of the self I have to deal with.

Secondly, I must deal with "my situation". Very often I'd rather not deal with "my situation". I'd much rather be in

someone else's so I have certain gimmicks for escaping. I'll take a long walk by myself, go swimming, or eat. The problems with these solutions are that I arrive back home, I get waterlogged, and I get a guilty gut ache. When I'm back to dealing with the situation again I decide to deal with what is. That is brave enough but I have discovered that the real freedom comes in deciding that the situation is good before plunging into the despair it tempts me with. This is not an easy practice to discipline myself in yet I know that the guilt I bombard myself with after several escape attempts is ineffective and that seeing the possibility allows me to move on.

I've been reading alot of quotes lately, trying to find ones that make sense for me. My sister sent me Robert Frost's, "I've taken the road less travelled..." and last semester in my English course I found some from Virginia Woolf's, To the Lighthouse and from the trip down the river in George Elliot's The Mill on the Floss. The intriguing similarity in all of these is that they use journey imagery: the road, the journey to the lighthouse and the ride down the river. There are loads of literary examples. One story which looks at life in a journey divides it into four phases according to age. The first is birth to twenty, then twenty to forty, forty to sixty and sixty to death.

The first phase can be called the "emerging generation". It is a time for discovering the world you live in, for learning necessary life skills and experimenting with vocation. The twentieth to fortieth years are for further exploration of vocation and of one's role in the establishment of society. Phase III consists of many who have an established place in society- most corporation heads, for example, are Phase III and they are the examples for and trainers of the younger phases. The last phase of life, from sixty 'til death is made up of society's storytellers, those whose wisdom stems from experience and is there to be heard for those who ask.

Since we're dealing with Phase I this weekend, let's take a closer look at that part of the journey. It has been divided into seven sections; alot happens in this phase! Birth to 2 years has been called "imagination" as this is where your awareness of the world is beginning and your time is spent absorbing and being bombarded with an infinite array of images. Three to five is a time of appropriation- appropriation of language, communication, and interaction with other people through confrontations in an environment less protected than before. "Preparation" takes place from six to eight. This is the age where most people learn to write thoughts, solve math problems, and read well enough to go shopping- all skills which will be used throughout a lifetime. Nine through eleven is called interiorization as it is the last period before young adulthood where childhood's awe is combined with learning skills and one becomes overwhelmed at the accessibility of answers. Twelve to fourteen has been called the period of experimentation. People begin to see themselves in a social context and try everything from make-up, sex, and drugs to new attitudes and styles in an attempt to find their true selves. Invention is from fifteen through seventeen; that title didn't make much sense to me until I began thinking

about my own experience. I can remember realizing in my junior year of high school that the first twelve years were almost over. That's when you start getting the "pretty soon you'll be entering the Real World" treatment and you get the urge, especially the last year, to do what you can, while you can. High school juniors and seniors probably spend more time planning events than any other people in the country. Finally, eighteen to twenty, vocation. As the saying goes, I can relate. I'm asking myself, What am I going to do?, What is my life about?, Which of these courses should I major in?, Where do my skills and the needs of the world intersect? Those are necessary questions; I was going to ask you to come back in two years but, despite the intensity of the questions now, I doubt that I'll have a clear answer then either.

Another journey, the one this talk is most concerned with, is the journey to care or, I should say, the journey from knowing you are a caring person to daring to act that out boldly. The first step is realizing for yourself that you are one who cares. I don't know if you've ever tried remembering the first time you realized that. I thought back as far as I could...

When I was six years old my family moved from Lombard, Illinois which is a white, middle class suburb of Chicago, to the south side of Chicago which is not white or middle class. Actually, it's far from being either one of those. It was poor and desolate. Anyway, one day a classmate invited me over to her house. With milk and cookies in mind, I walked home with her and went up to the apartment. Her mother was lying on the couch watching a soap opera. She ignored us so we went into my friend's room. It consisted of two army cots with bare, stained mattresses, a dresser with a cracked mirror and a pan which she used as a toilet when her mother was in the bathroom. Then when we walked back into the hallway I caught a glimpse of her parents room. It looked like a page out of Better Homes & Gardens. There was a huge bed with an orange bedspread, a shag carpet and a stereo. I was too numb to react. My friend's sister came in from school and started talking to her mother about how she'd seen "the father" that afternoon. Her mother didn't believe her and pretty soon they were arguing. I don't remember being scared at that point, just intrigued. Finally her mother said "Okay, go to the room." I had no idea what "the room" was but the girl obviously didn't want to go. She ran down the hall and a few minutes later I saw her run into a room with just her underclothes on. Her mother followed right behind and not even a minute later the girl started screaming. Then I was scared. I looked through a crack in the door and there was the room- an empty, dark space with a hanging light; the mother was standing over her daughter whipping her with an extension cord. I ran like the wind out of there, down the stairs, and through the alley, home. I could not figure out why anyone would do that. I wanted to run back and help those girls but, at six years old, I knew my limitations; all I could do was promise myself that I'd do something to change things when I "grew up". Now I am more grown up; there are still limitations but life is teaching me to work within them. Now I am able to forget that incident but I can't forget that care.

As I got older I began to see more and more concrete ways to care. I could do more for people, I was even a good l'il Girl Scout for a while and there was always something to do in the house- workdays, take care of other children, enablement assignments and other such tasks that I was too young to be sick of. Then the Town Meetings and Youth Forums started happening when I was in the Student House and I realized that the seeking out of ways to care isn't just a response to the need for clean dishes. It is a maturation process in which you learn, situation by situation, how to care more effectively, for more people and by engaging more people. I wasn't aware that this was happening to me. It can be scary when you find that you're actually looking for ways to exert your care. You stop and ask yourself, "Am I sure I want to keep this up?"

That's where resolution happens- or doesn't. For me, it happened this year. I was getting tired of life in Hoboken. I had a one and a half hour commute each way to a school where I didn't know anyone and I was behind in my studies. Nineteen of us were living in three apartments, I didn't have windows in my room and I had dark circles under my eyes. I spent alot of time feeling sorry for myself so I decided to do something about it. I went to the communter service on campus and asked if there were any more alumnae looking for students to house. Well, yes, as a matter of fact there was: a couple living on Central Park West, both law school graduates. I took the number and called that night to talk to the wife. We hit it off right away; she had lived in Japan also and studied Japanese; we even had the same first name. We decided that I should go over that Saturday and see the apartment. I did; it was my image of the ideal for a student. They had a fantastic study, a room for me, a piano and they were not a loud bunch. I told them that I still needed to talk to the people I was living with but that I'd probably move in within the month. Oh, what a fool believes! I talked with the other members of the University CORE first and they were shocked but they did understand the reasons, after all they had the same problems. I was so sure of myself I wasn't expecting much questioning, so when I went out with a few others from the house I was more than a little jolted by the accountability which happened: how can you decide to leave after only three months with the CORE?; you made a year's commitment. Well, I cried alot and talked half as much and we ended with my having four days to reconsider. Well, I went back and forth forty times and then a close colleague said, "Jane, would you stay?", and I knew right then that I was going to stay. I resolved that when I looked back on that moment five years later, that was the right answer for me as someone who decided that I wasn't just out to live for my own comfort- there was much more at stake. That resolution has made infinite difference; the objective situation hasn't changed alot but my attitude and my story about being there have become motivating, not stagnating.

The final step in the Journey of Care is abandonment. It is a daring, often lonely venture especially in this society at our ages where it is in vogue to just care for yourself. A friend of mine recently started working on a security patrol at his school. At the first training session they went around asking everyone to say why they had decided to take the job. At first the overwhelming response was "well, because I need the money". As the meeting continued, people opened up and it became clear that people were there because they cared.

They could have pursued other jobs, ones with less risk involved. They were there because they cared yet no one dared to say so at first. When I was trying to think of an illustration I hoped to find some story exposing my grand act of abandonment but, in all honesty, I must admit that I am struggling with that alot right now. I have to force myself to tell school friends about my life in the University CORE. And I know that if I expose my care I'll have to do it again and again. Abandonment requires perpetual courage and re-deciding. You must constantly expose your care to others and to yourself.

I don't know what you think hearing all of this but I begin to think that I must be crazy to choose to care! What keeps me going, anyway. What does keep me going? First I think of humor and music but surely it's more than that. I return to three words which were thought of way before my time but are still applicable.

The first is faith. Faith allows one to trust in the unpredictability of life and to accept one's inability to control all that affects us. In this technological era where answers are being processed by and for computers, faith doesn't meet the criteria. But, it is in that very search for answers that the need for faith becomes clear. My Chemistry teacher was telling me about his colleagues and others who have been researching the true origins of the earth. This is not a new field; it's long been an intriguing question but there is still no consensus. He told me what happened to most researchers after years of investigation: they turned to religion. They gave up on logic in order to live with trust in something they could not fully understand. I know for myself that without faith I could become consumed with figuring out everything from gross injustice to the cosmic rotation of the earth. Luckily, I can exert myself elsewhere.

The second sustaining force is love. And no, I'm not talking about the guy next door. I'm talking about a motivating force from within, a sustenance which fuels your decision to care and enables others to do the same. It isn't something that just happens- "love at first sight"- it is only the result of deciding that something is worth your life and therefore, the motivation needed is going to come from that situation. Once you have decided to do that the potential for loving your situation is boundless.

The third sustaining force is hope. As we were making the montages for the Wall of Wonder last night I began thinking about the people who lived then. We stand in today with an understanding of the effects of their decisions- we are living with them. But they didn't know; and today we are living that same predicament. Here we are starting tasks, making decisions and devoting our lives for a future we aren't going to be around to see. Some times I wish I worked in a factory on a construction line. Every day I could go home knowing that someone was going to eat that jar of pickles which I put the lid on, I'd know the effect of my expenditure that day. But I haven't decided to live that way. Are we doing what's needed for the future? We don't know; we just move on; we live in hope.

Here I stand with my care, looking for ways to apply it. There are many different role models to emulate. Typically, caring has had very tangible results. You can build buildings, clean a park, paint a house or give your old clothes to charity. More and more though, people are seeing the need for change within people, not just their environment. People

need to see not only how much they can accomplish in one work-day but how much change they can effect in their lifetime. Communities need tools which build long-range models and encourage people's participation. I went to be interviewed by a professor for a job. We were talking about the I.C.A. and he immediately started asking me alot of questions and pushing my answers. I couldn't figure out why he was so interested. We stopped talking for a minute when the phone rang so I was looking at the files on his shelves. I saw one that said "Human Development- Philadelphia"; I couldn't figure it out. He hung up and said, "if you're wondering why I'm so critical it's because I've been doing community development for twenty five years. I have seen many ineffective organizations." He proceeded to tell me about a black ghetto a group was working in. From all of the issues in the community, this group decided that what really needed to happen was for the insides of people's apartments to be painted. So they had a workday and painted rooms- stark white. He knew that that was not the needed action so he is now devoting his life to changing lives, not just places.

We in the CORE have talked about individuals who have "similar ultimate convictions" and about how such people form cohesive groups. A close look at such groups reveals work in three arenas: declaration, manifestation, and formation. These sound like long words for complex activities but they make sense with a little explanation.

Declaration is waking people up to a need. It is providing the means for people to see something which they can be called to. It could happen through a movie, by going somewhere or by having a conversation.

Manifestation is demonstration. You can sit around and talk to people all day long about great visions and possibility but most people will not think twice unless you prove it can be done; for them, seeing is believing. The only solution to that problem is to create something to show people- that is manifestation.

After you have revealed a need to someone and have excited them about the possibility for change they are usually ready to engage- to participate in formation. This is where the people are given the chance to use their creativity- to build.

Each of us is here this weekend because we care. That might be the only thing we have in common but that's fine because we have the tools and the creative energy and the world is ready. Or as we say: These are the times and we are the caring people.

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