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CI 557: Dr. Theodore

July 28, 2009

***Care for Self: Redefining the Concept of Recreation***

“They don’t care!”

For most adults, this is the universal complaint about American students. The modern, product oriented institutions that process the students of today fail to initiate caring relationships between students and teachers. They fail to teach students how to care about their friends, their associates, their environment, and their ideas. Even though many adolescents fail to care about most anything, each of them does care about at least one thing; *themselves*. Therefore, I believe *care for self* is the most powerful, and affective ‘center of care’ that Nel Noddings suggests we integrate into the curriculum. Furthermore, I believe that teaching kids *how* to care for their selves through redefining what they think of recreation would be one of the most important aspects of self-care.

“In one sense, everything we care about is somehow caught up in concerns about self.” (Noddings 2005 pg. 74) I would strengthen this statement by saying, “In *most every* sense, everything *adolescents* care about is somehow caught up in concerns about self.” The occupation of caring for one’s self is magnified during the stage of adolescence; precisely the time in one’s life in which secondary education occurs. In *Adolescence*, Laurence Steinberg explains that there is specific cognitive growth that naturally makes this age group more self –

aware than others; specifically, *metacognition*. “(An) interesting way in which thinking about thinking becomes more apparent during adolescence is increased introspection, self-consciousness, and intellectualization.” (Steinberg 2008 pg. 65) Since adolescence is a time of increased introspection, (and thus self-caring), then I believe that this period of life is prime for learning *how* to care for one’s self.

Another reason I believe that caring for self is the most powerful ‘center of care’ is that the ability to care for one’s self effectively will naturally lead to an increased ability to extend one’s care into realms outside the self. To care for something outside one’s self, according to Noddings, the carer must experience motivational displacement. She gives a great example of this. “When we watch a small child trying to tie her shoes, we often feel our own fingers moving in sympathetic reaction.” (Noddings 2005 pg. 16) Now imagine if you will, that this child fails repeatedly to tie their shoes. You go up to the child and try to help, only to realize that your dependence on Velcro-strapped sneakers may be a hindrance! If the carer in this scenario had learned to care for themselves, by learning how to tie their shoes, then they would be able to more effectively care for the child.

When we care for others we want what’s best for them. Suppose you had a friend who was on the verge of a mental breakdown. He asks you for advice on how to relax. Since you never learned *how* to care for yourself, your idea of relaxation involves a twelve pack of Coors Light. Wanting what’s best for your friend, you suggest your favorite form of relaxation. Five hours later your friend is indeed extremely relaxed; he’s blacked out. Could you have cared any

better? Could you have cared more effectively if you, yourself, were taught how to care *for yourself*?

I believe that secondary education is the right *time* to teach students how to care for themselves because there is no other period in which students are more pre-disposed to be occupied with the self. From the previous example, I hope that one can see that knowing *how* to care for one's self is vital to effectively care for others. The carer in this relationship might have been more effective if he or she would've learned themselves *how* to care for themselves in the realm of relaxation. That is, the realm of recreation.

I am hard pressed to think of an aspect of self care that can be more beneficial or harmful than one's mode of recreation. I believe that many of the great ills of American society stem from the way in which we define recreation. "Recreation, it is widely believed, is designed to relieve the fatigue of labor and the boredom of everyday responsibilities. Construed this way, recreation is an escape." (Noddings 2005 pg. 89) Escape in this context is an escape from reality. Too often, an escape from reality requires an escape from thought. If we assume that most American's view recreation this way, we might ask; Why is the current definition of recreation harmful? How can we redefine recreation to enable students to learn how to entertain themselves in a more beneficial manner?

I know there are ways to escape from thought that may actually be beneficial. In fact, when I am nearing the end of a long run, my mind turns to a near meditative state. All I can think of is 'forward.' Considering running as a form of recreation defined simply though escape,

one would be hard pressed to find fault in this definition. However, there are many modes of escape that are harmful.

The most prevalent and ubiquitous mode of escape and recreation is entertainment. I am not speaking of a thought provoking song, or an introspective piece of art. I am talking about the mind numbing, ever present mode of recreation that is television. Most teenagers have televisions in their bedrooms. This allows them to turn on, and shut off, (their minds). After a short period of time television induces the brain into the alpha state. This state is characterized by the wavelength of brain waves emitted when one is asleep. This means that the countless hours spent watching the tube, are analogous to countless hours spent in an unconscious or semi-conscious state. The current generation of adolescents are more absorbed than ever; spending more hours a day with the screen than they do their families. Is the escape of reality provided by television a way to truly care for one's self?

Viewing recreation as escape also has some more heinous implications. When one wants to shut off their minds, the most effective way to do so is through substance abuse. How many teenagers slip into alcoholism because they want to get away? How many adolescents are seduced by marijuana because it is their peer group's preferred mode of recreation? How can teachers educate students to view recreation in a way that avoids these pitfalls of escapism?

"Recreation can also be thought of as creating anew, refreshing. ... A well integrated life includes intervals of activity that energize and make us feel whole." (Noddings 2005 pg. 89)

What if teachers taught students to care for themselves by finding recreational activities that renew? If students deeply and philosophically took this definition to heart, I believe that they would avoid the pitfalls of wasting endless hours in the mind numbing trances produced by media, alcohol, and drug addiction.

The good thing about teaching this piece of the curriculum of care is that it can be easily integrated into different aspects of education. For instance, mathematics and physics could be taught by exploring the principles of billiards. Pool provides an engaging, deep, game in which players must develop a high level of skill to succeed. After winning a tight pool match, would one not feel renewed? Another example would involve a wide variety of physical education activities. If schools exposed young people to the joys of cycling, running, tennis, or any other sport, they might find their niche' that provides recreation in combination with physical exercise. There has been no activity studied more intently for its renewing powers than physical exertion of the type I'm speaking of. All in all, I believe there are endless opportunities to teach adolescents healthy forms of recreation when taught in the context of care.

In conclusion, I believe adolescence is the right time to teach students *how* to care for themselves because it is the time in which they most deeply care for themselves. The 'center of care' of self caring is vital because it enables those that learn to care for themselves to more effectively care for others. One of the most important aspects of caring for one's self is how they regard recreation. It may be viewed as a form of escapism that may lead to harmful consequences. Alternatively, it may be viewed as a renewing activity that benefits one's soul.

Finally, it is up to educators to help students realize how they might enjoy themselves, without shutting down, tuning out, and submitting to the form of recreation that values escape.

Kids *do* care. They care for themselves. Educators need to capitalize on this by teaching them in a way that they can come to effectively care for themselves; through recreational life, the occupational life, the physical life, or any other aspect of life. Then maybe America will be a more present, engaged, and optimistic society. Maybe an America that learns how to care for itself will care for others.

References

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Steinberg, Laurence. *Adolescence*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008