



The Enormous and Underrated Value of Care

By Tracey Nicholls



In 2020, I learned the elasticity of time. How every new day arrives with so much need for adaptation and emotional processing that the day before it feels like it happened 10,000 years ago. How the “old normal” of what I have taken to calling “the before times” can be imperfectly resurrected by rituals we used to participate in without concern, but which now seem worryingly, potentially harmful—my sister-in-law blowing out candles on her birthday cake, for instance. Are we still allowed to share birthday cake?

In 2020, I learned the visceral life-saving power of care. How much all of us who are managing to navigate the pandemic are being given that gift of being able to manage by—and at the expense of—a newly-recognised class, the “essential workers” whose jobs require them to care for us. These are the people who keep our hospitals functioning, the people who keep our grocery stores open and make it possible for some of us to move our consumption online, the people who keep freight trains and long-distance trucking going, and—in island nations—the people who work at our borders and our ports. They are also people on whom our lives depend: factory workers who make personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitation workers and janitors at hospitals, bus drivers, meatpackers, and farm workers.

2020 makes me think of the poignant conclusion American journalist [Barbara Ehrenreich](#) drew, a generation ago, from her experiments with trying to live on a minimum-wage job in Bill Clinton’s America (spoiler: you can’t—not in any way that encourages human flourishing). Speaking of the

attitude she thinks we ought to adopt with respect to “the working poor”, Ehrenreich insists that “the appropriate emotion is shame—shame at our *own* dependency . . . on the underpaid labour of others.” Presenting this exploited and neglected segment of the labour market as “the major philanthropists of our society,” Ehrenreich explains that “[w]hen someone works for less pay than she can live on—when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently—then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life.”

I have considerable sympathy for the view that those of us who live well should indeed feel great shame in the face of all the people who provide us with the things we are not able to provide for ourselves. Every paved road, every functional traffic light, the towel I used after my morning shower; I couldn't provide these for myself no matter how many bootstraps you might give me. But writhing in shame is neither a productive attitude nor an interesting one. It will not absolve our past heedlessness of our dependence on people whose labour is essential—and is devalued so that it can be affordable for us. It will not build a world in which all of the people we now see as necessary are adequately valued.

It has been a really hard year. But oddly, I still find bits of hope and consolation in the fact of this being a truly global experience, possibly the first of my lifetime. Every year is hard for the people who get cruelly sorted into underclasses and marginal subject positions. And there are events so devastating that they reach even into pockets of privilege and become a country's (or a region's) shared experience. But this? Everybody, everywhere, has been touched by this pandemic somehow. While the impacts are of course differently distributed, we are all grappling with the same crisis, and I can't help but wonder whether this might be a moment in which we—all of us, as human communities—can start to see the enormous and under-rated value of care. So many of the people who have been shoved to the margins of global power structures—whole countries of the global south, indigenous populations within wealthy global north nations—have been revealed as people on whom our multinational inter-connected lives depend, or as “elders” who have a lot to teach us about community survival.

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The first piece I wrote for *The Elephant* was an [analysis](#) of strands of decolonisation theory that are resonating today through the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). Black Lives Matter began as an African-American activist movement to honour blackness and to protest the culture of policing implicated in the killings of unarmed black boys (Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown). Less than a decade after its emergence in the United States, the movement marked 2020 as a year of global protest against American policing in the wake of the killing of yet another unarmed black man, George Floyd. I noted in that first piece BLM's commitment to “unapologetic blackness” and to building inclusive, intergenerational solidarity against state-sponsored violence, both locally and around the globe. I noted too the unmistakable echoes of decolonising theorists Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter in BLM calls for solidarity with (for love of) the men and women of colour whose lives have been taken from them.

Both Fanon and Wynter take on the discursive politics of domination that render our social worlds places where people of colour combat a perception that they must prove their humanity—or, even more toxically, learn that they cannot ever prove this humanity of theirs conclusively enough to establish themselves enduringly as persons of value. In her analysis of these ongoing struggles for recognition, Wynter indicts Eurocentric-North American epistemological commitments to hierarchy

and to the belief that those at the top of the hierarchy are both the most worthwhile and the most fit to survive. For her, the monetisation of everything in our social worlds results in a warping of our capacity to see humanity, and the consequent capacity to see the value in all human lives. To cast her point in the language of the lessons of 2020: we must rethink what counts as value, in order to learn how to care (better).

Going back to what I wrote in 2019 after living through 2020 brings me that sense of elastic time I cited at the outset as one of this year's lessons for me. I see in all of the pieces I have contributed to *The Elephant* a thread of awareness that survival and solidarity are linked. But it has taken the events of this past year for me to fully appreciate how much decolonisation theory and social-justice activism depend on care—both the practice of care work and the theorising of ethics of care. And it is only in retrospect that I see so clearly why empathy-building has been (has needed to be) such a central goal of the Black Lives Matter and #metoo movements that I was writing about here and elsewhere throughout 2019. Empathy can be built into solidarity, which (when well directed) manifests as the care that keeps us alive. This observation, I should note, is conceptually a restatement of critical race theorist and Occupy Wall Street activist Cornel West's dictum that justice is what love looks like in public.

Black Lives Matter has been doing this empathy work—asserting that black lives are indeed among all the lives that matter—through protests and online awareness campaigns that confront and contest police narratives of criminality and justified response through pushing into public consciousness the names, faces, and life stories of individual persons of colour who have been killed. Their success in building a solidarity that can withstand law enforcement's hostility and the public's apathy was made evident in 2020; George Floyd's name, face, and story have been in the foreground of the protests that have taken place in countries as far away as New Zealand.

In similar fashion, the #metoo movement invokes traditions of solidarity and community-building that very clearly aim at normalising and propagating empathy, and are embedded in its very name. "Me too" was the catch-phrase around which Tarana Burke, an African-American community activist against sexual violence, built her outreach efforts (which, years later, were introduced to the global online world through actress Alyssa Milano's tweet, just as news stories of Harvey Weinstein's sexual predation were first being published). Burke's explanation of this catch-phrase that became, first, a community-organisation project, then an online archive of survival testimonies, was that it was the phrase she wished she had had the presence of mind to utter to the first young girl who disclosed a story of sexual abuse to her. In my 2019 [analysis](#) of the "black roots" of "me too", I argued that this phrase needs to be understood within the context of African-American musical and linguistic conventions: a call demands a response. "Me too", I noted, is a response resonant of these African-American call-and-response traditions, traditions that build relationship and community through recognition of shared perspectives: "me too" ... "you too?" ... "yes, me too."

Frantz Fanon, one of the most fiercely beating hearts of decolonisation theory during the days of postcolonial independence that birthed the Third World, knew the importance of both empathy and care in building independence movements and new nations. His account of how Algerian independence forces reached the point of realising that their war against French colonisers would succeed (*L'An V de la révolution algérienne*, published in English as *A Dying Colonialism*) is rich with examples of both. Pan-Africanism, in all its variants, is built on appeals to "feeling with" (the literal meaning of "empathy"). What is new—what 2020 has given us—is an archive of heart-breaking examples of the need for care labour and the politically transformative power of care as an orientation towards others. I think, for instance, of the singing and music-making on balconies around the world as community responses to "lockdown isolation", and the heroic decency of hospital workers who connected people on their deathbeds to loved ones via iPads so they didn't die entirely alone.

Those of us who are gleaning inspiration and encouragement from online streaming during lockdowns of 2020 might recognise “black traditions” of care work as they are modelled (imperfectly) in Netflix’s *The Queen’s Gambit*, through the supporting character of Jolene. The show has been criticised for its instrumental use of its most significant character of colour; Jolene is present in the story only as a source of care for the white girl whose life is the story’s focal point. That criticism is fair—Jolene is not drawn with as much nuance as she deserves, nor is her story given adequate weight—but there is something I see in the show’s presentation of her that goes beyond these criticisms. Yes, as a character, she is subordinated to Beth, the centre of the story. (And yes, that is a criticism that needs to be levelled against the show; it ought to bother us that black characters in the show are personified only slightly more than chess pieces.) But it misses the power of what I saw in *how* Jolene cares. This power of her care is notably (perhaps only?) on display in the scenes where she comforts Beth after the death of the man who taught her to play chess.

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I’m not at all certain that I would have seen those scenes the way I did if I had watched the show without having lived through 2020. Through this lens, however, I see something about the way Jolene was able to acknowledge the dark, unfair elements of life and death and was able to comfort with clear eyes (characterising the main character’s unexpected grief as “biting off more than you can chew”) that has stayed with me as emblematic of the orientation to care that I think we need in the wake of 2020.

In the white-dominated, (post)British-colonial cultures that raised me, there is a standard response to grief and trauma that involves dismissing or downplaying the trigger incident (it’s not so bad) and encouraging minimised emotional reactions (stiff upper lips). Jolene’s care in the face of grief does neither of those things; she can acknowledge the devastating, shattering experience of grief that Beth is undergoing and can sit with Beth through it. In this model of care, grief is not nothing, or a little thing, or not so bad. And the person who is grief-stricken is not broken, needing to be fixed. The grief-stricken person has been wounded and, in their healing, needs care from others—needs empathy and the authentic comfort that we find in solidarity. All of this strikes me as true of trauma as well as grief, which is why I see “how Jolene cares” as an attitude so well suited to our pandemic times.

All of us who have experienced 2020 have shared a year which has been traumatic for many. Practicing “how Jolene cares” is a project of acknowledging these individual traumas in our ongoing encounters with those who carry them as burdens. And it is a project of searching for ways to give practical, basic-needs-oriented care—not in the triage-inflected levelling-down of care to the barest necessities that characterised so many rushes to lockdown in 2020, but with attention to the other’s needs-within-their-healing-process that, for many of us who have wrestled with either grief or trauma (are they always distinct things?), is the ground out of which trust might be nurtured and grown and is the first nascent re-connection to a world that has been so wounding. If sustained practice of this care model also teaches us to see how much care we are receiving from others every day, all the time, it has the potential to be radically transformative—in exactly the way that Fanon and Wynter’s decolonisation theories urge.

At the very end of 2019, [I wrote a piece about Haiti](#) in which I offered an extended digression on a New Year’s Day tradition that builds and celebrates solidarity (January 1 is also celebrated as Haiti’s independence day, the anniversary of its decolonising declaration of itself as a free black nation). This tradition, the making and sharing of a gourd-based soup known as *joumou*, is a ritualised act of

care through food, intended to inspire Haitians to re-dedicate themselves to each other in the coming year, and to build upon the promise of human dignity that was the Haitian Revolution. In that piece, I urged readers of *The Elephant* to honour the spirit of Haiti's New Year's Day tradition, and to recognise the role that Haiti's revolution has played in creating a world that slowly—incrementally, but undeniably—is becoming less hostile towards blackness. Returning to my discussion of *joumou* with 2020 behind us, I want to bring to the fore the idea of food as love—something I think I elided in my earlier discussion of food as political symbol.

Many years ago, as a much younger woman, I waitressed in restaurants. I hated being treated like a servant by restaurant patrons, but there were many aspects of that work that I enjoyed and that have stayed with me over the years as behavioural habits. The thing I loved the most about waitressing was being able to bring someone a steaming plate of hot food on a cold day. (This was when I lived in Canada; there were many cold days.) That act of giving one person something they need to sustain their life and well-being was always a deep pleasure for me, because it always made me feel deeply connected to all my fellow human beings. This, I think, is the essence of what is being ritualised in the Haitian tradition of sharing *joumou* on the first day of the new year. Giving care—giving love, giving what is needed to sustain life—and receiving it can, at its most powerful, form connections among the people in a particular care-interaction that can also weave them all together into a larger community.

When I first discussed the idea for this article with my editor at *The Elephant*, his judgement was that he too thought “we should end the year with some empathy.” It took a long time to pull together my thoughts—so long that I rendered an end-of-year wish for empathy outdated. What I now offer readers instead is my profound hope that we can begin 2021 with empathy enough to make the new year one in which each of us is empowered by the care that we receive, and by the care that we give.

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