

# A Context for Hyphen-21

The statement that - if we want Community Care to succeed - we need to care for the care workers, is still perhaps a controversial one. If Community Care is a purely material operation concerned with providing services, then how can merely indulging the “shop assistant” benefit the “customer” ?

But Community Care is not in reality just the provision of services. It is also the sustaining of relationship, the maintenance - even the creation - of community. Front-line care workers spend their working lives opening themselves in relationship to people on the edge of Society, in extremes of distress and dislocation. The difficulty of doing this well and constantly cannot be over-estimated. For everyone’s sake, we need to nurture the vulnerability and creativity that makes true relationship possible. Somehow we have to make the ground of relationship surer underfoot.

The issue could not be more central nor the context wider. It can be said - without controversy - that the survival of humankind depends on whether people and Societies can improve their relationship with one another, and with the Earth on which they live.

That is a reality statement about a central issue. Putting it into effect, of course, is a different story. We can say readily that all we have to do is wake up to our reality and act upon it sensibly. But can humankind act sensibly ? If we wish for a future we are bound to.

Here is another plain and ordinary reality statement : connection through relationship cannot be conducted from the mind alone. The whole self has to be engaged. True relationship is an art and a risk. It can’t be achieved through policy, commandment, law (although to a degree these can of course help or hinder). Neither is true relationship encompassed by some facile notion of “goodness,” sweetness and light. It needs bottle. It requires imagination, exposure of the heart, great strength, honesty, passion, restraint and resilience. Real relationship takes it out of you.

The painful and difficult skills of relationship therefore have an importance for all of us. All work at whatever level that is based on honest relationship must be supported, for all our sakes, in all ways possible.

The paradox is that, in times of anxiety, of tumultuous change, of the continual and ever more rapid break-up of the familiar, it becomes harder and harder to open yourself honestly to relationship. On the contrary, the pressure to close up, shut down, block off, merely hang on to dead husks in the storm, gets ever stronger. The more we need to support and encourage relationship skills, the harder it gets to practice them.

In the same way, the more we need to learn from those who are expert in relationship skills, the more we seem instead to belittle, harass, deny and silence them. This is important and meaningful. The people who make their living from relating to people in distress have to be artists ; but we have made them functionaries ; in cutting them off from their creativity, we are cutting ourselves off from our only hope.

If we continue to treat care workers just as mechanistic operators, requiring them at the same time to work under greater and greater pressure, then not only are we putting Community Care at risk, we are putting Society at risk. Conversely, in helping care professionals reclaim the true

value, sense and significance, of what they do, we are reasserting the central principle upon which civilised Society is based ; we are helping to save ourselves.

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