



A Context for Hyphen-21

If “Care in the Community” is to succeed, we need to care for the care workers. We need to show respect for and give support to the skills and principles they deploy and by which they work.

To some people, those two statements will seem self-evident. But to many of our generation, they will not make sense at all. How dare scarce resources be allocated to the mere *providers* of services, and not their recipients? And anyway, care of any kind merely creates dependency.

Further, and perhaps above all, if Community Care is a purely material operation concerned with providing services as a kind of business, then how can merely indulging the “shop assistant” benefit the “customer”?

But in reality Care in the Community cannot be just the impersonal provision of material services, or artificially restricted transaction based on some commercial model. It involves the sustaining of healing relationship, the maintenance - even the creation - of community.

First-line care practitioners spend their working lives opening themselves in relationship to people on the edge of Society, in extremes of distress and dislocation. The difficulty and achievement 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, or – put another way – from only the left hand side of the brain. The whole self and being has to

be engaged. True relationship is an art and a risk. It can't be achieved merely through policies, directives, laws (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 and boundaries and knowledge as well as empathy and positive regard. 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 people who are expert in relationship skills, the more we seem instead to belittle, harass, deny and silence them. This is important and meaningful. To a significant degree, the people who make their living from relating to people in distress have to be resilient artists ; but we have made them over-burdened 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 and many vulnerable people 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 would be reasserting the central principle upon which civilised Society is based ; we would be helping to save ourselves.

Rogan Wolf
1998 (revised 2017)