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# Called to Flourish: An Ethic of Care



The first month of the 2020-21 academic year was pretty horrible. The 52 year-old husband of a dear friend of mine died from cancer. Two of my cousin's college-aged children were quarantined (separately, different colleges) with Covid-19. One of the kindest human beings I know

was diagnosed with ALS; another friend's mother received severe burns over a large part of her body in a kitchen fire; another friend's three-year-old son has had to have two surgeries. The two-year old grandson of my sister's next door neighbor snuck through a dog door and fell in a swimming pool and drowned. Three (or four, or five, I've lost count) hurricanes threatened the Gulf Coast where my daughter lives. And, of course, there are the multiple pandemics of COVID-19, racism/white supremacy, and political dysfunction. We have transitioned from living in a collective state of acute anxiety and trauma to a state of chronic anxiety and trauma. It is simply too much; compassion fatigue is setting in. Everyone I know is functioning in overdrive, trying to work from home, homeschool, plan weddings and funerals and have and care for children, and do all of this without any of the normal social support that we would rely on in a non-pandemic world. Many are no longer trying to keep their heads above water, but are struggling to hold their breath instead.

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And yet, we are called to flourish.

*Rooted and Open* is the NECU (Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities) document that outlines the vision of vocation shared by all of the ELCA colleges and universities. Though we live out this common calling in very particular, contextual ways, we begin from the same foundation. That foundational, shared vocation is as follows: "Called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish." This describes both *our* vocation and the vocation we are called to inculcate in our students.

## Called to Flourish

Several years ago, after extended conversation and a period of silent prayer, my spiritual director said to me, "I have an image of an orchid." He paused and then went on, "It is growing through broken asphalt. And not just growing but flourishing." He went on to explain that as this image had come to him he had argued with himself, "That can't be. Orchids require attention and care. They don't just grow. They certainly don't flourish untended." And yet, he said, the image remained. This image has stuck with me. What does it mean to flourish—especially in less than ideal circumstances?

"What does it mean to flourish—especially in less than ideal circumstances?"

In music, flourishes are extra notes; notes that are not essential or necessary to the musical piece, but that give it a little extra something, something beautiful. This is similarly true of rhetorical flourishes—clever, colorful, sometimes comedic turns of speech that are unnecessary, but improve the affective appeal of a lecture or sermon or conversation. Flourishing, in other words, is more than mere surviving. To flourish is another way of speaking of the scriptural/theological understanding of abundant life.

Flourishing—as my spiritual director noted—requires attention and care. This fall semester, Lenoir-Rhyne University, like many schools, has operated with a modified hybrid model. Every class I teach is divided in half and I get one sixty-minute class period per week of in-person instruction with each half of the class. With such a sharp reduction in instructional time (roughly one-third the time with students we had this time last year), it would be easy to hyper-focus on content in order to “get through” everything it feels like we might need to get through in a semester. Instead, I begin every class with a check-in. We remind one another of our names because, with only one hour a week together, sitting spread out, not doing any in-person small group work, and masked, I do not assume the students have had a chance to get to know one another. And then I ask a question that invites everyone to share how they are coping, and hopefully flourishing, during this strangest and most difficult semester we have ever had or even imagined.

In these conversations we have learned about the death of grandparents, the suicide of a father, and the illness of siblings. We have also learned about life-giving artistic, athletic, and spiritual practices that are nurturing and sustaining each of us, often with invitations to teach each other. (As a result of these conversations, one of my students has taught me to crochet. This has been her life-saving coping mechanism; she crochets constantly, including in class. She came to class early one day to get me started on my own, much simpler, project; she and I now spend an hour a week crocheting and talking together.)

This check-in generally takes anywhere from ten to fifteen minutes, which is a significant percentage of our hour together. But in and through these conversations, each mini-section of each class has developed

into its own community. Not long ago, when I came into the classroom one student (one who serves as a pastor already in his congregation) had brought a vial of anointing oil and was showing another student how to give a blessing. Her fiancé is ill and the student-pastor wanted to help and support her. Ten or fifteen minutes a week over the course of the past six weeks has created pockets of communities of care for one another.

## Called to Care

We are called to flourish and we are called to care: to care for ourselves, for one another, and for the world. These two things—flourishing and caring—are directly related to one another. Not only is the flourishing of others tied up in my caring, and my flourishing tied up in the caring of others, but my own flourishing is *of a piece* with my caring for others. Humans are created to live in community, caring for one another.

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Care is one of the “Core Values” at Lenoir-Rhyne University. I imagine this is the case for many of our institutions. “Care” is not an abstract idea; it is an active verb that includes self-care, compassion for others, stewardship of resources (personal and communal), and a commitment to the common good. Creating and sustaining an academic and social environment in which habits of care can be developed and nurtured is one of the ways that liberal arts universities live out their promise of educating the whole person and of transforming minds and hearts, which is also language many of us employ in our institutional mission statements.

The vision of care that our institutions embrace cannot be limited to a concern for self. The self, the individual, does matter. And we are called to be good stewards of our selves—body, mind, and spirit. But this care for



self has an outward-facing orientation. A liberal arts education rooted in the Lutheran theological tradition focuses us not merely on ourselves, but also on the greater world of which we are a part.

Although *Rooted and Open* does not speak of care in a time of pandemic, it does remind us that we are called to prepare—and push—students for “meaningful work and active participation in just, loving communities.”

Care is meaningful work. It is a way of participating in the transformation of the world. As Lutheran institutions of higher education we are shaped by Lutheran social ethics even if we are not individually Lutherans (or even Christians). Lutheran social ethics are based on the belief that we are all called to live out our faith (whatever our specific faith commitments may be) through acts of love and service to the neighbor. Such acts create, nurture, and sustain the very communities that in turn create, nurture, and sustain us. Care transforms. It transforms us, our neighbor, and our world.

In addition to being its own meaningful work, care creates meaning. In her new book, *Untamed*, Glennon Doyle says, “The moral arc of our life bends toward meaning—especially if we bend it that way with all our damn might” (Doyle 34) The work of care is not always easy. It takes time, attention, and energy. But as institutions of higher education our calling to educate is not a call to fill empty heads with important facts. It is to help young adults launch as people who recognize they are capable of changing the world through their own experiences of transformation.

Martin Luther famously said that it is not God who needs our good works, but our neighbor. The Lutheran

intellectual tradition is based, in large part, on a theological understanding of freedom; through Christ we are free from any legalistic requirements to earn God’s love. Because there is nothing I have to do or even can do to make God love me more, I am free to extend this same love to my neighbor. It is in this way that God extends care to all of God’s world. We are invited to be the ripples of God’s care and provision in the world.

## Called to Community

I have read countless self-care articles since Covid-19 began. Most of them, rightly, include the airline/oxygen mask analogy. I am of no good to others if I do not take care of myself first. And this is, of course, true. The theological and vocational problem with the way this analogy is usually used is that it puts the emphasis in the wrong place. We aren’t called to care for ourselves before caring for others as an act of self-protection. It isn’t: “take care of yourself first and *then* if you are able help others.” Rather, we are called to care for ourselves *so that* we can extend care to others. Self-care is not an end unto itself but a means to a greater communal end. It is the act of caring that is primary.

“Even in the midst of social or physical distancing, we are interdependent.”

This past summer Lenoir-Rhyne held an online multi-disciplinary course on Covid-19 that was open to the public as well as to students. At the end of the course, some of my colleagues conducted a survey on behaviors and beliefs around public health and Covid-19. The results of this survey suggested that the more strongly someone believed that wearing a mask helped protect others, the more likely they were to wear a mask. This finding is consistent with other similar research on motivation and altruism. Despite much seeming evidence to the contrary, we are a fairly altruistic species; helping one another is written into our DNA.

We are bound together in community. Even in the midst of social or physical distancing, we are interdependent.

My health depends on you and yours on me. The reality of our interdependence highlights our responsibility for one another. In North Carolina, where I live, early on in the pandemic under our stay-at-home order, which effectively shut down everything but essential businesses, including churches, a small group of churches filed a lawsuit arguing that churches should be exempt, on constitutional grounds, from the order. A federal judge sided with the churches. The churches in this case may have been legally correct that they have a constitutional “right” to gather, but there is an even stronger *responsibility* to act as good stewards of individual and community health.

The ELCA has a rich tradition of writing social statements, which are teaching and policy documents that cover a wide range of social and ethical issues. In 2003 the ELCA approved a statement on health and healthcare, “Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor.” This document articulates that Lutheran Christians are compelled by both love and justice and that “Achieving these obligations of love and justice requires sacrifice, goodwill, fairness, and an abiding commitment to place personal and social responsibilities of love and justice above narrower individual, institutional, and political self-interests” (ELCA 20). Our institutional commitments to justice move us beyond care for ourselves and our insistence on our own rights. They lead us to focus on the neighborhood ecology, the common good, of which we are a small part.

To be in community is to be gifted through and through. In his article, “Gift and Calling,” Darrel Jodock stresses the recognition of our own giftedness. All that I am and all that I have is gift. This includes the myriad communities of which I am a part. Referring to our calling to share our gifts with others, “to become absorbed in the needs of others” (Jodock 11), Jodock says, “This notion that gifts come to us from God through others has a corollary—and this is that God’s gifts reach others through us. Not only are others the channels and means whereby we receive gifts, but we are called to be the channels and means whereby gifts reach others. Our giftedness yields a task, a calling” (12).

Martin Luther lived through a global pandemic of the bubonic plague in 1527 in Wittenberg, Germany. During this plague Luther and his wife, Katie, opened up their home to those who were sick and in need of care. Luther argued that it was his duty—and the duty of all—to do all what one could to improve the circumstances of one’s community.

## Concluding Reflections

We are called to use our gifts in care for one another, for our communities, and for the world, that all may flourish. Perhaps it is hard to recognize flourishing in this time of pandemic, but it is all around us. As I was working on this article, I posed the question on Facebook, “where have you witnessed flourishing during Covid-19?” I received all manner of answers: more time spent learning skills and hobbies, gardening, deepened relationships, churches learning to create genuine online community, even leaders of non-profits (which I expected to be suffering right now) who see flourishing in the quality and depth of the relationships within their communities. One of my students whose grandfather died early in the semester shared with me how grateful she was to have had the time during the pandemic to eat ice cream with him every night. Every night. It’s an extra “flourish” that she would not have taken the time for in a pre-Covid world. And though her grandfather died, their relationship was given space to flourish in his final months.

“Perhaps it is hard to recognize flourishing in this time of pandemic, but it is all around us.”

Flourishing is more than surviving; it is more than just getting by. But it ends up that what we need to flourish might not be all that complex. We are called to active care of and for ourselves, our communities, and the world. It is hard and meaningful work, but it isn’t complicated.

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