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Being Good for Something: The Intersection of Care and Critical Theories (Chapter 7)

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Balancing Care and Excellence in Higher Education

A Festschrift in Honor of Jeffrey W. Cornett

Edited by

Carolyne Ali-Khan and Daniel L. Dinsmore

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Cover illustration: Balancing in the web of life, Jacksonville. Photograph by Carolyne Ali-Khan, 2022

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CHAPTER 7

Being Good for Something

The Intersection of Care and Critical Theories

Carolyne Ali-Khan and Hope E. Wilson

Abstract

Miles Horton (1990) differentiates being good from being good for something. Being good for something requires an understanding of place, power, and agency. It also requires being deeply and fully present. Working for and with Jeffrey Cornett was an experience in learning how to be good for something and simultaneously learning how to collectively bring active care into a department, college, and the broader world. In this chapter we discuss Jeff's commitment to both. We examine how Jeff forged the intersection of care and critical theories. And we share a few examples of moments in which Jeff built community.

Keywords

being good for something – care – human value

1 Throwing Down the Gauntlet

> It's not enough to be good, you have to be good for something. (Miles Horton, 1990)

What does it mean to be good? When the iconic critical educator Miles Horton connected being good and being good for something he threw down the gauntlet. Being *good for something* is not the same as being good, (even morally good) it is being good in situ, being good in the here and now, while connecting every personal here and now, to the here and now of others. Being good for something requires that we move beyond reactive and individual acts that are good, to instead think of good as inherently proactive and collective. It is being good with teeth. A commitment to good for something pushes us to

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consider the context of a world in which suffering is commonplace, a world that desperately needs us to be good, with and for each other. Being good for something also demands that we know exactly who and what that something is. This requires an understanding of place, power, and agency. It also demands that we are fully present as we attend to and work toward the immediacy of a better world. Working for and with our department chair, Jeffrey Cornett was an experience in learning how to be good for something, and to collectively bring active care into our department, our college, and the broader world.

To illustrate Jeff's commitment to being good and good for, we begin our chapter with an example. At the first departmental faculty meeting of the year, when a new faculty member was to be introduced to the group, Jeff would have a surprise waiting. After introducing the new faculty hire, he would start playing the school song of their alma mater, asking them to sing along. To do this Jeff had taken the time to research where each of us came from, he had considered how best to address the stress of being new, and often in a first academic job. He had considered how best to bring laughter and levity into a formal academic space to diffuse the stress of a first meeting. He had also considered how to help new faculty bond with colleagues through shared laughter and shared activity, without engaging in the traditional tropes and mechanisms of icebreakers. In short, from day one of our careers working with him, Jeff demonstrated the kind of care and unconditional regard that was for both the individual and a broader goal. We are not the only ones to note this, (e.g., see Kayaalp & Lastrapes, Chapter 6, in this volume). He was good for us, our meetings were good for us, and from the first moments of our new jobs, he supported each of us in a quest to help us be good for something. For Jeff, that something was intrinsically connected to ensuring that care – for each other as professionals and as human beings – was at the forefront of all of our interactions. Although he was and is a renowned scholar, in those first meetings he met us on a personal level, as he drew not from scholarly works or academic procedures but from popular culture (through song) to bring us into the fold and foster a culture of care.

In this chapter, we share a few examples of moments in which Jeff built community. We elaborate on how he forged the intersection of care and critical theories, connecting what it means to be good and to be good for something.

1.1 *The Complexities of Care* (*i.e., Being Good for Something*)

Being good for something is more complicated than it might seem. For example, in our teacher education classes, we sometimes ask students to analyze a teacher-in-the-school movie, from a social justice standpoint. Students often choose Freedom Writers (2007), they think of it as a film that illustrates how an

educator can be good for a community and save students by delivering them to their better angels. They valorize the story, which they conceptualize as a tale of triumph and redemption. In their view, the film fights back against stereotypes. They see it as a "true story," one that exemplifies how a single individual (whom they see as much like them) can "make a difference," and through their efforts right the wrongs of an unjust world. We often have a difficult time helping students to begin to understand how the film is enjoyable as a movie but problematic as a message, they do not see how it is rife with race, class, and gender stereotypes and ladened with deficit understandings. They do not notice the absence of positive black role models in the film, nor do they question the absence of any portrayal of care that happens within communities of color. And they do not come to us with a lens that would illuminate how films such as this one, are set in neighborhoods that look the way they do because they have been abandoned by economic infrastructures (in effect infra/structures of care) that our students take for granted in their own more middle-class lives. It is difficult for many of them to be able to see how in this genre of teacher-savior films, communities of color are implicitly blamed for their struggles. And how the stories in films are disconnected from history so that audiences are led away from broader questions that might prompt them to ask about the policies and practices that created the levels of disenfranchisement that are responsible for the struggles of the protagonists in the first place. Overall, it is difficult for our students to see how films such as these (e.g., Dangerous Minds [1995], Finding Forrester [2000]), belong to a tradition of middle-class savior narratives that do more harm than good. We do not blame our students for seeing only the good in these types of films, and we are grateful to them for being open to a more critical and political perspective, but we are unsettled by the narrative these films offer. Yet students feel good watching them, they revel in the human connections that are made between teachers and students. They equate *feeling* good with *being* good. In contrast, we posit that feeling good is nice but may be counterproductive to a project of equity. Feeling good is not the same as being good, and being good for something requires a deep and sometimes uncomfortable dive into more than a feeling, it requires peering closely at structures of inequality. It also requires examining our roles in those structures.

Problematic ethics aside, in this genre of film the relationships between educators and students are at the heart of the narrative. These films speak to what we value as a society and how we want care and compassion to be at the heart of the relationships between adults and children in schools (Ali-Khan, 2011). There is a deep disconnect between what we value about teaching in popular culture (and at the box office) and what appears to be valued by educational institutions more broadly, which increasingly mandate emphasis on

measures of accountability in school leadership, teacher education programs, and educational policy. State standards and school district curriculum policies leave little space for teachers to delve into the kinds of emotional connection and care that draw people to the box office in popular films. We believe that many public-school policies – such as those that require that teachers should only give students side hugs (if they are allowed to consensually touch students at all) – rest on the assumption that almost all touch and most forms of embodied and corporeal, is inherently morally suspect. Such policies are unsettlingly predicated on the idea that teachers are sexual predators in waiting. It is these kinds of fears about intimacy and care that work directly against deeper and more holistic human connections (White & Ali-Khan, 2020). The kinds of systems and policies in schools that actively discourage teachers from physical connections to students are in our minds parallel to teacher education programs in which preservice teachers are pushed to emphasize content and control, without equal consideration of the less measurable social and emotional components of teaching. In both cases, the emphasis away from all that is more about being human than about transmitting facts, leaves little room for teacher educators to prepare students to be the kind of teachers that care for students on every level, the kind we cheer for on silver screens, the kind that Jeff modeled daily.

Jeff cared for each of us, *and* he cared for the structures that housed us, (i.e., our college and teacher education as a whole). His care was specific, it superseded rhetoric, went beyond feel-good moments, and followed through into actions. Here are just a few of many examples: Jeff brought in a vacuum to get rid of the dust bunnies in our offices, inquired about our spouses and sweethearts, remembered each of our birthdays with a song, and even knew the names of our cats. We once caught him rapping (which was not a genre that he naturally gravitated to) to say goodbye to a beloved administrative assistant, he stretched himself to reach us. His interactions with us were radical in higher education, as he was willing to break down the formalities of the institution, to relate to each of us on a human level. In this he modeled a path of care that we have found is often missing at all levels of our educational system.

Collectively, the authors of this chapter have taught for 52 years. As we think about our teaching experiences, we find that all too often educational systems seem to treat students as nothing more than numbers in a dataset, inconveniences to step-lock curriculum, or blank slates onto which we can imprint the standards measured by high-stakes tests. Susan Ohanion (1999) explains this phenomenon as an administrative tendency to not know the difference between a child, and a scope and sequence chart. For us, her insight rings true. Our systems enact policies that dehumanize the children in our classrooms,

e.g., limiting their access to the restroom, restricting opportunities to express their thoughts aloud, and shaming them for the clothes that they wear. To be a "good teacher" in many elementary schools, includes being able to prove that your students can line up and walk down the hallway, without talking, in a perfect line, with their hands behind their backs. In middle schools across the country, lunchtime is silent, with no conversation allowed. Police officers in high schools roam the hallways and are often perceived as viewing each child as a potential criminal (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). Over and over, we see examples of how the institution of school has privileged control and accountability (for both behavior and academic achievement) over care and kindness.

This draconian trend does not affect all students in our educational systems equally. In comprehensive public schools, the less privileged the group of students, the more regimented and less humanized the policies (Welsh & Little, 2018). An observation of schools will, in fact, reveal a world in which two different American educational systems exist. In low-income neighborhoods with most students of color, more didactic teaching methods and scripted curricula, restrictive disciplinary policies, and harsher punishments for offenders (Welsh & Little, 2018). This leads to the school to prison pipeline, and the further disenfranchisement of large segments of our population (Archer, 2009; Barnes & Motz, 2018). In wealthier (and Whiter) schools (e.g., those in White-flight suburbs and elite private schools), students are more often engaged in critical thinking and discourse and experience relative freedom in their movements and actions throughout the school. The students in these schools are more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt when facing disciplinary review (Wallace et al., 2008). It is as if we are raising two sets of future citizens, one habituated into lockstep subservience, and one primed to lead and reap society's benefits.

These systems of inequity affect classroom teachers, as well as their students. Teachers of disenfranchised students have less room to provide leniency in disciplinary matters and fewer freedoms in curricular choices and lesson planning. Teachers in more privileged schools have more opportunity to develop more holistic and humane relationships with their students. As a result, they have greater job satisfaction and retention (Papay et al., 2017). These hierarchies in education systems are not limited to PK-12, they are endemic, they persist into institutions of higher learning, in which some faculty are valued more than others, paid more, respected more, and allowed to be heard. Jeff, through his democratic actions and radical care, resisted, confronted, and subverted these systems.

Jeff's care and kindness (both for individuals as well as for the institution) was predicated on a sophisticated understanding of power. His care was both lived

and theorized – Jeff spoke passionately about care, in particular the importance of Nel Noddings conceptions of care theory, while he modeled a life of care. For him care was enacted, practiced, revisited, and taken seriously every step of the way. In short, Jeff did not simply preach care, he also modeled caring and being cared for. He allowed himself to be cared for, in one example allowing a small group of faculty and staff to convince him to go to a hospital and be driven there (also mentioned in this volume, see Cornett, Chapter 9). In this acceptance of and demonstration of vulnerability, and by publicly accepting help, he allowed our community to participate in active caring. This subverted traditional power structures; it brought the truth of shared human vulnerability into an institution that rarely acknowledges anything less than the facade of perfection. As an administrator and department chair, he illustrated that care sometimes requires that we destabilize and frankly ignore hierarchies. He showed us that care could trickle up, down and sideways, to include us all.

To expect care and kindness to be true in classrooms (between teachers and students) when it is untrue in administrative practices (between principals and teachers or administrators and faculty) is at best unrealistic or superficial, and at worst deeply hypocritical. Jeff offered us a different reality, one in which we could contemplate moving outward in what we think of as concentric circles of care. In the ways he cared for us and allowed himself to be cared for by us he modeled care that is rarely found in schools across the country. In many PK-12 spaces teachers can be (and often are) disciplined when they have a cup of coffee in their classroom, arrive a few minutes late to a faculty meeting, or wear clothing deemed unacceptable by their administration. Jeff recognized that these types of rigid disciplinary tactics, both in teacher education and when directed towards teachers, become institutionalized and passed down into the ways in which teachers are socialized to interact with students. He knew that these practices also stand in direct opposition to the rhetoric of care that is espoused in most schools, a rhetoric that suggests that we should give of ourselves to our students, but care little for ourselves in return. Through his actions he illustrated a deep and embodied understanding that to expect teachers to enact care when they are not cared for is both unsustainable and unjust. Jeff showed through his actions, his strong belief that teachers have the right to expect and demand to be cared for as valuable members of the workforce, both individually and collectively. This level of care was deeply concentric and rippled out in numerous directions, Jeff was proud of the fact that our department was entirely unionized (union membership is optional at our university), as this also illustrated our commitment to collective care. Because Jeff cared for each member of our department and reminded us to care for

ourselves, he gave us the space to widen our own circles of care and to become more caring towards each other, our students, and the community.

Aligned conceptually (although not deliberately) with Paulo Freire (2005), Jeff also – through his actions – reminded us that we must strive to be authoritative but never authoritarian. In *Letters to those who dare to teach* (2005) Freire argues that an educator must neither be permissive (thus abandoning the learner) nor authoritative (thus creating the kind of intellectual dependency that results from being overly trained and evaluated). Instead, he suggests that democratic authority should be dialogical (and rest on the sharing of knowledge) and that it can transgress epistemic boundaries by connecting "content to be taught" to "life itself" (2005, p. 114). For Freire this endeavor was inherently pleasurable, "in their scholarly daily lives, which they constantly subject to critical analysis, they live the difficult but possible and pleasurable experience of speaking to and with learners" (p. 114). There are three important ways that Jeff's leadership aligned with Freire's democratic educator:

- He was neither authoritative (enforcing his will upon us) nor permissive (and not as invested in rigor as much as in care).
- He connected the word and the world, "content" to "life itself," and stories to practice.
- His leadership rested on care and pleasure, as much as it did rigor and excellence, (as he modeled a level of social and emotional sophistication that was both authentic and deeply professional).

Like any skilled practitioner, Jeff made this look easy. Our departmental meetings were fun; they were democratic spaces; he took pleasure in interacting with us. Laughter, as much as critical and professional discourse, was a key component of our community of practice. In talking about our department to outsiders, we often found ourselves verging on exuberant hyperbole. We were happy to be in those meetings because in them we experienced authentic care and relationship, which is highly unusual in institutions, but (as we learned from Jeff) not impossible.

2 Human Value

Jeff trusted everyone to be the best that we could be and cared for us unconditionally, even when we were not at our best. With each of us he believed in our capacity for pedagogical, social, and emotional growth. Each faculty member who entered the department left a better teacher, scholar, and human being

under his leadership. Roger Bergman, 2004 (p. 152), explains how care can change us:

> much is a stake beside the immediate need being addressed. The carer's sense of herself as a caring person is at stake. The cared-for's sense of trust in the world as a safe and reliable place and of herself as a centre of value worthy to be cared for, is at stake. In this way the caring self, the ethical self, the ethical ideal, is made possible, established, maintained or enhanced. In the single act of giving and receiving care, the self of each person is confirmed.

In the quote above, Bergman discussing the work of Nel Noddings, connects care back to individual identity and human value. Similarly, Jeff through his interactions with us (whether private or public), made clear that each person's value lay in their capacity to trust and care. The mission of our department was *Care and Excellence* and unlike most of the missions of institutions and organizations this was neither a box to be checked, nor a discussion only occasionally revisited. Caring and being kind were baseline expectations, placed almost before anything else. Jeff asked questions that illustrated care, he made a point of inquiring, listening, and responding to us as faculty members; he also made a point of asking, listening, and responding to us about our students. Without crossing professional boundaries or confidences, he shared his life with us in return. In these acts of *giving and receiving care,* aligned with Bergman, he modeled and created trust as care.

Care for students is the mantra of all educational institutions, but care for all community members is rarely attended to in institutional space. Indeed, those who are at the edges of those who have power (e.g., office workers and extended families of those who work in the institution whose lives are indirectly but powerfully impacted by the policies), are generally forgotten in the mantras of care where "students first" is largely unquestioned. Jeff led us in a common understanding that everyone is valuable, and vital to the functioning of a department. Through his lens the value of a person lay not in professional accomplishments and accolades (although those were certainly acknowledged and celebrated) or external measures of worth, but in how we each interacted with others, including those who are less visible in academic and workspaces.

Jeff expected each of us to treat everyone with unconditional regard, and by recognizing the humanity of all individuals (fellow faculty, administration, students, staff, community partners), he knew that we could create a community of care and better the whole. He modeled unconditional regard not only in departmental leadership but also in small, but meaningful ways. Jeff

memorized the names of each of his students before classes began by printing out the roster with their ID photographs. He spent time chatting with the custodians as they ended their early morning shifts cleaning our workrooms. Each year he reminded everyone to have our hurricane supplies ready and let us know when a storm might be approaching. It was important to Jeff that we not only cared about each other, but also cared about our students and our community and that we incorporated care into our everyday practices.

Through Jeff's leadership, as faculty we built a micro-community at UNF that rested on valuing humility, mutual regard, and trust. It is our experience that a room full of professors, people who have earned the highest degrees in their fields, often think they know more than the rest of the room, (a sin that we too have been found guilty of) and we know that it can be difficult to practice humility. However, the leadership and community norms that Jeff built modeled mutual respect for our colleagues' expertise; he encouraged us to trust each other and to want to listen. This, in turn, allowed each of us to learn and grow from our interactions. Rather than develop adversarial and contentious dialogs, we learned to cultivate opportunities to listen to diverse points of view. Instead of bowing to any intellectual chain of command, he acknowledged the contributions to the whole of each of us in faculty meetings, asking about our expertise during discussions, listening thoughtfully to our contributions, valuing them, and generally making sure that we understood that, for him, we were precious, both individually and collectively. He challenged us to consider thoughts and ideas outside of the paradigms of our graduate studies, listen to and grow from the expertise of our colleagues, and adapt and change the ways in which we approached our disciplines, while still honoring our own expertise and advanced knowledge. Ultimately, we learned through Jeff that we could come to consensus, and this process was not only in the best interest of our students, department, and community, it was also germane to our own growth personally and professionally.

Over the years of collaborations, our department ebbed and flowed, and each faculty member experienced ups and downs in our personal and career lives. Through all this Jeff supported each of us even when we were not at our best. We learned from him that it was safe to be vulnerable and that the response to human frailty was love, not admonishment. When we were having a rough time, he noticed if we were tired or looked sad, he reminded us to laugh, he asked about our families, he made phone calls to check on us after hours, and he knew and loved our children. Eva Kittay (2002) argued that learning to trust when vulnerable is a profound and valuable lesson, particularly in a society that prizes independence. Jeff taught us trust, in part by never looking for what we did wrong and never framing our frailties and failures as

such. He focused on our strengths and encouraged us to see ourselves the same way. Through his actions he reminded us that our value lay not in the metrics that we might be assessed by, but also by the care and compassion that we showed to others and ourselves. Jeffrey Cornett reminded us that we have a moral and ethical obligation to consider human value as we examine the complexity, ramifications, and implications of all our pedagogical decisions. For him our worth was not tied to a narrow definition of what we produced, we were instead valued, assessed, and understood by our ability to play nicely with others, in this he held us to the ideal of *being good for something*. He reminded us that real success lies in our ability to be good for each other, in every step of our professional lives.

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