

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 21 – Carol Hardison – Care and Grace

A Life of Care and Virtue

And now a personal word,

Carol Hardison brings hope and help to people in need. There is a profound goodness to her. She is devoted to the dignity of every person no matter their circumstance or condition. She leads a ministry of caregivers with empathy and ambition. She brightens encounters with joy.

It is easy to think of her as a rare shining light. But she is as down-to-earth as anyone could be, which means more of us could be like Carol.

As someone who teaches ethics, one of my goals is to inspire students to be more like Carol. Here's what we do in class: We begin by looking squarely at the world. We ask why things are the way they are. Then we ask what is the world we would like to see and what can we do to make it better. We talk about what is the right thing to do and how do we know. We practice persuasion to affect change. We learn to marshal arguments: sharing why we care, taking a position, applying theory and facts, refuting counterpoints, and concluding with why it matters. We learn all these things to prepare for the issues of the world. Students earn their stripes studying course material and sharing insight in class.

At the end of the course, I give a concluding lecture about how our understanding of evil has changed over the centuries, from a religious understanding to a humanistic one. We talk about how evil was once understood as the result of original sin—or separation from God—to a more contemporary understanding of evil as the result of societal forces like authority pressure and fear that create contexts that can overwhelm reason. These explanations help answer the question why good people do bad things.

But we don't leave it there. We then ask how good people could do more good things. We talk about four virtuous practices:

1. Self-knowledge: doing the work of self-examination and doing the deep work of clarifying values, beliefs, and strengths.
2. Mindfulness: stepping out of routines to act intentionally. Meditation, contemplation, prayer, and walking in the woods invite mindfulness.
3. Moral imagination: envisioning a different and better world. Declaring a future desired state sets energy in motion.
4. Moral stretching: practicing acts of goodness that develop moral character. Courage and grace are daily exercises.

But all the ethics courses in the curriculum do not make a difference unless students are inspired by moral leadership in action.

Carol didn't become who she is sitting in class. She became who she is witnessing social justice in action, watching her parents as they invited people in need into their home, actively talking about what is right and good around the dinner table, and observing her parents march in the streets and raise money for causes, all of which led Carol to do the same. Carol participated hand in hand with her parents, moved by their example.

She developed values and gained moral courage. She formed moral character. Leaders embody what they care about, serving as a model for others.

Look again at Carol Hardison. See how she practices virtue. She is a profoundly good person doing good things. She is a light that shines the way for the rest of us to follow.

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