

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: her devotion to the dignity of every person no matter their outward circumstance or condition, the intelligence and empathy and ambition she brings to leading a ministry of social workers and care givers, the joy and compassion she brings to every encounter.

It is easy to think of her as a rare shining light; someone apart from lesser mortals. But she isn't. She is a regular person. As down to earth as anyone could be. Which, I think, means, a lot more of us could be like Carol.

As someone who teaches moral philosophy, one of my goals is to inspire students in my class to do good in the world. To become more like Carol.

Here's what we go about doing in class: we begin by looking squarely at the world. We explore all sorts of pain and suffering. We ask why things are the way they are.

Then we ask what is the world we would like to see and what we can do to make it better. We talk about what it means to be good. What is the right thing to do. And how do we know. We practice persuasion to effect 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 debating 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. Developing a deep knowledge of who you are, your values, beliefs and strengths.

2 – Mindfulness: stepping out of your routine to act intentionally. Meditation, contemplation, prayer and walking in the woods all invite mindfulness.

3 – Moral Imagination: imagining a different and better world. Jesus of Nazareth's 'Sermon on the Mount' and Martin Luther King, Jr's 'I Have a Dream' speech are acts of moral imagination.

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 witnessing social justice in action, watching her parents as they took people in need into their home, actively talking about what is right and good around the dinner table, observing her parents march in the streets and raise money for causes, all of which invited 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; the most powerful form of leadership there is.

Look one more time 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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