Chapter 8

Caring for Strangers and Distant Others

We learn a moral way of life in the inner circle. If our parents are good, loving people, we have a fair start at moral life. An ethic of caring puts great emphasis on the loving attachment between parent and child. It rejects the common notion put forward by Freud and others that morality begins in fear. Morality is affected by fear, but it is inspired by love, and it is demonstrated in loving relations. It is therefore essential that children be cared for and that they recognize and respond to care. With relations of trust and care well established, they may be prepared to care in the wider world of casual acquaintances, strangers, and aliens. But such caring is not easy; the difficulties are many. In this chapter I look first at the difficulties, second at promising ways in which students might be prepared to care.

DIFFICULTIES OF CARING AT A DISTANCE

In Caring (1984), I wrote some paragraphs that upset many readers. I said that one could not help but be obligated to care for starving children in Africa because there is no way for most of us to see caring through to its completion. We might sympathetically send $10 to Oxfam or some other relief organization, but we have no reliable method of knowing whether our money will be used to relieve hunger or to enrich greedy politicians. I still think this is an accurate descriptive account of a major difficulty in trying to care at a distance. I did not mean to suggest, however, that because we cannot really care in such situations, we are not obligated to do anything.

But what are we obligated to do? Here we must move slowly. Perhaps the greatest danger to moral association with distant others is the tendency to sentimentalize. One feature of sentimentalization is the substitution of speech and public affirmation for effective action. We judge each other by utterance of and assent to expressions such as Life is One; We Are All Part of a Living Cosmos; All Living Things Have a Right to Life; Save the Whales; Save the Redwoods; Earth First; No Man Is an Island. Because such expressions seem lovely and right, we like to identify ourselves with people who affirm them. Teenagers are easily swayed by sentimental approaches, and they are sometimes led to commit offenses against one group out of allegiance to another group. Education must address this tendency and press the questions: What are we obligated to do? What should we refrain from doing?

The temptation is to rely on absolutes or an ethical calculus. In world affairs, we often use an odd mixture of the two. We may begin by supposing that all people seek freedom or happiness and that all people have a right to freedom and happiness. In evaluating situations at a distance, we may be unaware that more immediate ends have higher priority for the people we would like to help. Perhaps they simply want to eat or to live free of fear. Perhaps they define freedom and happiness differently. Perhaps the villains we have identified as obstructing freedom are merely misguided, not evil. Perhaps these villains are themselves pressed by customs and structures they did not invent and are struggling to understand. Perhaps they even want to do better. Or, of course, perhaps they are evil. At a distance, we judge not even by appearances but by reports of appearances. It is often so difficult to assess reality that we give up the task and simply take sides.

Usually, if we are well intentioned, we take the side of the oppressed. As we attempt to better their condition (according to our own definition of what would be better), we have to build an argument that will permit the action we endorse. In the last twenty or thirty years, for example, we have often excused the physical violence of oppressed groups on the grounds that they had experienced “economic violence.” Therefore, we say, the oppressed did not commit the first acts of violence. We permit protestors in a good cause to do that which we forbid representatives of the oppressor to do. But economic injustice and violence are two different kinds of harm, and we should not blur them. Nor should we excuse random violence committed by those with whom we sympathize.

This is not the place for a full philosophical analysis of these issues, but it is appropriate to say that such issues must be critically discussed in schools. An ethic of care counsels us to meet each living other in a caring relation. Human beings should not be branded evil
and therefore expendable because they belong to the side we oppose on a particular issue. When we attempt to act at a distance, we have to ask what effect our acts will have on concrete human beings. As we sentimentalize one group to bring it closer, we may deliberately put another group at a distance. Creating a psychological distance is a powerful mechanism of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1988). We can, with spuriously good conscience, permit acts against those distanced that would appall us within our chosen moral community.

A big part of learning to care at a distance is understanding its difficulties and limits. We have to study carefully the language we use. Consider the language used to justify the allied bombing of population centers in World War II. First, there was a language of “supreme emergency” (see Walzer, 1977). Given the state of the “free” world at the time, this rang true. But what does a supreme emergency permit? Suppose the fine young men who participated in the bombing justified by “supreme emergency” had been told something like this: You will disembowel pregnant women, blow the legs off old men, disfigure young girls, castrate firemen trying to protect their city, blind children, drive young and old into mental illness, burn cats and dogs alive. Could they have done such things face-to-face?

But, one might protest, such effects were not the purpose; they were foreseen but not intended consequences. Winston Churchill, however, said straight out that the saturation bombings were making the people of Germany “taste and gulp each month a sharper dose of the miseries they have showered upon mankind” (Walzer, 1977, p. 256). But who had “showered miseries upon mankind”? The children of Germany? Its young pregnant mothers? Its aged, ill, and retarded? Here it was necessary to redefine what was meant by “innocent” in order to escape the charge of waging war on noncombatants and innocents. Many proponents of the bombings declared that no German was innocent because all were involved by association in the Nazi horror. Philosophers, too, have contributed to this abuse of language. Sartre, for example, held each of us responsible for the world we live in. At one level it is true that we each bear some responsibility for the events of our time, but at another level it is totally ridiculous. A child—even had there been a small son of Adolf Hitler—could not be found guilty of Nazi crimes and therefore deserving of horrible retribution.

Closer to home, students need help in analyzing their own use of language and that of groups to which they belong. During my short tenure as a school administrator, I spoke to some middle school students about reports that some of them had stolen things from large local stores. No one said that he or she personally did this, but many confessed that it was true—that “we” do this sometimes. “We rip off some big stores,” they said. “Rip off?” I responded, “Why don’t you just say, ‘We steal?’” Ah. These youngsters had already made a fine and pernicious distinction. “Stealing” is taking from someone who is hurt by the theft—an individual or small storekeeper. Taking from a big, impersonal corporation doesn’t hurt anyone. It is “ripping off,” not stealing. Again, we see the power of distance in moral disengagement and the central role of language in justifying our questionable acts.

Thus we can locate at least two great difficulties in caring at a distance: First, we cannot be present to those we would care for, and thus we cannot be sure that caring is completed. Second, we may cause suffering to those we hold responsible for the pain we try to alleviate. In both cases we are often ill informed (even when we try to collect adequate information), and we rely on abstract arguments and deceptively pain-free language to promote our causes. The perceived pain of people (or animals, or the earth itself) triggers sympathy. Our inability to care effectively—in direct contact with the sufferers—leads us to think and act according to general principles that might not apply and procedural rules that might inflict further suffering.

One purpose of global education and multicultural education is to supply students with knowledge of other people and their customs. We suppose that knowledge will reduce misunderstanding, stereotyping, and the almost instinctive fear of strangers. But knowledge alone is unlikely to establish caring relations. In fact, a number of studies have shown that qualities such as “counselor relationship” or “teacher relationship” are only slightly correlated with multicultural knowledge. Knowing something about other cultures is important and useful, but it is not sufficient to produce positive relationships.

Persons with multicultural knowledge sometimes overgeneralize. Organizations often contribute to this mistake by giving their workers pamphlets or other brief forms of instruction on various cultural groups. Even great universities have made the error of circulating two or three pages to educate their faculties and staffs on, say, Asian-American students. As a result, many people who should know better suppose that all Asian-Americans hate to be called “oriental,” that all Asian-American students study too hard, and that they all defer to their parents on everything. We forget that people vary as a result of a host of group connections and as individuals, too.

The attempt to achieve better relations through knowledge is part of the Cartesian quest for a method that I’ve been criticizing since chapter 1. There is no recipe-like method for establishing relations of trust and care. Those who would care must attend to the other, must
feel that surge of energy flowing toward the other's needs and projects. Caring is a capacity (or set of capacities) that requires cultivation. It requires time.

Knowledge is important, but it is best acquired in relation. It is useful to know something about a group's literature and art, its historical and contemporary sufferings, its myths and images. But students need motivation to undertake such studies energetically. A powerful source of motivation is an invitation from living others. One good reason for studying a particular selection of literature is that people we care about ask us to read it. In relation, we read to find out what people (including ourselves) are going through. In separation, courses incorporating such literature often induce resentment from those who remain outside them and ignorant, and they sometimes result in unwarranted confidence or even deeper prejudice in those who take them.

I teach a course, Women and Moral Theory, in feminist studies. Although the course has been well received and the content is important, there are things about it that worry me. First, the content is so vitally connected to existential concerns that it should be shared with both women and men, but few men take the course. Second, the content arouses considerable anger in many women who discover that they have been lied to and cheated for years. Many feminists feel that this anger is entirely appropriate and, indeed, necessary to motivate women to act. But anger also induces separation, and separation sets the stage for new rounds of abuse.

Those of us involved in ethnic or gender studies need to examine carefully what we are doing and what happens despite our best intentions. Women, blacks, Native Americans, and other groups need opportunities to study their own histories and celebrate their own cultures. When we study together as an exclusive group, a tremendous feeling of solidarity often grows. Majority groups need help in understanding and accepting the need of oppressed groups to claim their own literature, art, and theories of oppression and political action. These special courses play a significant role in the education of women and minorities.

But shouldn't all students be exposed to these studies? Wouldn't it be better if women's studies and ethnic studies were integrated into a core curriculum? Wouldn't such integration ensure the universal worth of such studies? Integration is a well-intentioned recommendation heard more and more often. But abandoning ethnic and gender studies would be a great mistake unless the core to which they were to be assimilated were also abandoned and a new core constructed. The present core is fashioned by principles and concepts that are antithetical to the new studies, and assimilation would be tantamount to destruction.

Let me try to make this clear. If the curriculum were redesigned around centers and themes of care, matters of interest to women and minorities could be included in a natural way. For example, we might tackle the question: How can we produce a new generation better than the present one? Such a theme promotes discussion of a host of subquestions: Should boys as well as girls be educated to provide caregiving? What causes racial tensions, and how do people feel when prejudice is directed at them? Why do all (or most) groups see themselves as genuine human beings and outsiders as others? What do we mean by "better" when we plan a generation "better" than we are? All of the existing disciplines have something to contribute to the study of such questions, but in the new curricula the disciplines would not themselves be central. They would serve larger purposes. As long as the existing disciplines are central, they will tend to overwhelm material injected to revise them.

But the worry about exclusivity and separation remains. It is precisely this worry—that racial and gender tensions are actually increased by special courses—that drives the well-intentioned recommendation for integration. Perhaps the answer to this worry is to ask participants in minority studies to take on the tasks of inclusion and reconciliation. Teachers of these courses should, for example, make it clear that they will protect majority students interested and courageous enough to take them. Teachers and students together should explore ways in which their activities can be shared with other groups and especially with the groups regarded as oppressors. It is possible for such groups to maintain the exclusivity needed to develop a full sense of belonging and also to reach out in an attempt at partial inclusion. Minorities can do this without raising fears of domination. The majority's attempt at inclusion always, by definition, threatens domination and usurpation.

We have been considering the problems inherent in trying to care at a distance—for those literally removed from us by space or time and for those who may be physically near but are still strangers. At a physical distance the main problem is lack of completion; there is rarely a way for carers to receive the response of those for whom they would care. And so despite the best intentions of carers, the relations themselves cannot be properly assessed as caring relations. Second, when we plunge into attempts to care without building a relation, we must depend on a form of abstract or inert knowledge. Thus we often
fail to treat the recipients of our care as individuals. We may also mistakenly suppose that they want to live exactly as we do—that they want the same knowledge, the same kinds of work, the same forms of worship, the same daily customs. Or we may mistakenly suppose that they do not want any of these. Because we are not in relation, our acts can easily degenerate into acts of false generosity. Finally, when we have the power and desire to act at a distance, it is tempting to initiate and control. We are too impatient or too confident or too puffed up with our own righteous sense of responsibility to listen and encourage initiative from the outsiders. We overlook the possibility that others may want most the power to create their own meanings and explore their own possibilities. This is one of the great defects in the present educational effort to give everyone exactly the same education. Reformers assume that they know what others want, or would want if they were sufficiently well informed. Caring at a distance is fraught with difficulties.

Before turning to what we might do to help students meet the world prepared to care, we should discuss a great difficulty mentioned earlier: the temptation to sentimentalize. Unfortunately it is as easy to arouse ill feelings toward strangers as it is to induce sympathy—perhaps easier. Years after bitter warfare it is hard to believe how we dehumanized and hated people who were branded enemies. When we are threatened as individuals or as groups, we tend to place those who threaten us outside the moral community. Once we have placed them there, we can do things to them that would be unthinkable if they were members of the community.

Further, naming one group as outcast or enemy tends often to strengthen the feeling of solidarity within both the inside and outside groups. Just recently, news of the desecration of a Jewish cemetery in France outraged the world. Shortly after the event, two Jewish extremists were apprehended and confessed to committing the crime in an attempt to throw the blame on Arabs and thus unify Jews all over the world in a struggle against Arabs. They sought solidarity in hatred. This event triggered sadness in a people long devoted to living nonviolently within societies that inflicted violence on them. What students should learn from such examples—and many more should be given—is that no group is immune from the temptation to abuse others for its own ends.

We tend to associate all that is good and right with our side, and all that is evil and wrong with the other side. We project our hostility and a host of personal moral shortcomings onto the now alien other. We exteriorize evil in order to destroy it, and thereby we perpetuate in ourselves and in the angry other the very evil we set out to fight so valiantly (Noddings, 1989).

**PREPARING TO CARE**

In the face of so many substantial difficulties in caring at a distance, what are we obligated to do, and how can we educate children so that they are prepared to care? I'll handle the two questions together because, clearly, if we are obligated to do something in the direction of caring, we are also obligated to teach our children how to do this. (We need not insist that they are obligated to do exactly what we will decide to do, for even if our current analysis is correct, they are different people with different relations, loves, and projects.)

First, schools should give far more attention to understanding ourselves and our various allegiances. In chapter 6, I discussed physical, spiritual, occupational, and recreational life in the context of caring for self. But I said there that such a discussion was necessarily incomplete and even a bit misleading because the self is not an isolated entity. It is relational—developed continuously in relation with others. It is with this relational self that we are concerned here.

Why do we tend to draw circles around groups to which we belong and attribute uncomplimentary qualities to people outside our circles? One reason is our deep and natural desire to be in caring relations. We want to be cared for—loved in the inner circle, recognized and respected in a somewhat larger circle, and at least safe to move about in huge impersonal circles. Strengthening our circles of love and allegiance gives us the warmth and love we need, and it also provides protection from those who might harm us.

The problem is that most of the people outside our circles feel the same way we do. They, too, cherish caring relations and feel the need to protect themselves against external attack. When we understand why we draw circles and erect barriers, we can begin to explore the differences between belonging and encountering, between established relations and potential relations. Philosophers, social scientists, and educators today are evincing a revived interest in community as opposed to individualism (Bellah et al., 1985). In many ways this is a move in the right direction, but the idea of community has problems, too.

It is right for students to understand the power of community—that we, as members of a community, act to preserve and improve it; that we are both supported and constrained by it; that we are affected by its habits in ways of which we may be unaware; that however much
we may pride ourselves on individuality, we bear the marks of the community in which we are raised. All of this is descriptive. It is not so far prescriptive; understanding all this does not tell us what to do.

But as we understand, we may assess our allegiance or lack of it and commit ourselves to active and reflective participation in our various communities. Such commitment seems right, and it has long been an important goal of education to induce it. In the language of theologian Paul Tillich (1952), we would hope that each of our students will develop “the courage to be as an individual” and “the courage to be as a part.” We want people to be able to resist the demands of the community for conformity or orthodoxy, and we also want them to remain within the community, accepting its binding myths, ideas, and commitments.

The problem is that communities often act like bloated individuals. Just as an individual may have a personal rival or enemy, so may a community or group. But now the situation is more dangerous because we feel safer acting as a group. So long as we are in a positive relation with some people, we need not be so concerned about our relations with others. To make matters worse, our relations with an in-group sometimes require us to treat others badly, and we are rewarded for doing things to outsiders that would bring retribution and punishment if done inside the group.

Self-knowledge of the sort we are discussing is much more powerful than the inert knowledge of others that we gain from books and lectures. We live with ourselves and have many opportunities to check on the accuracy of our knowledge. Further, we can imagine with some degree of correctness how we might behave in various circumstances if the scenario provided is sufficiently detailed and vivid. But students must be invited to ask questions about themselves, not merely about humans in general.

Too often schools ignore this level of questioning and reflection. Students learn about events in their history class, and they learn something about the human condition in their literature classes; they learn about technological advances in their science classes, and sometimes (rarely) they learn how to calculate benefits and losses in their mathematics classes. But they don’t get to ask the existential questions that might make a difference in their own lives and those of humankind in general.

Let’s return briefly to the example I used earlier in this chapter—the Allied bombing of population centers in World War II. It certainly makes sense for students to learn about the events, to see the human tragedy that occurred as part of a long line of tragedies stretching over all of recorded history. And students should study the rationales that were offered, including the various calculations that might have supported an argument for the “greatest good for the greatest number.” But then they should also ask or be asked: How can people do such things? What makes it possible to do such things? Could I do it? Could I disembowel a pregnant woman face-to-face, deliberately? Could I take a chance that I might do it negligently by, say, driving drunk or recklessly? Could I do it by pushing a button if I were sufficiently rewarded by those I care deeply about?

The purpose of such discussion is not to fix blame, nor is it to reject one’s own group and embrace another (more moral, more enlightened) group. It is to understand and perhaps to resist pressures that lead us as individuals and groups to perform outrageous acts. We need to press speakers to translate their recommendations into the language of living bodies, and then to ask whether we can participate in the proposed acts. If we are prepared to care, we must say: “Speak to me, if you must, in terms of dollars, of territory won and lost, of cities destroyed, of enemies overcome—but also speak to me in terms of shattered homes, crippled bodies, crazed minds, grieving mothers, and lost children. And ask me, make me think about, what I would do—with whom, to whom, why.” This is the language of education for caring.

As we struggle with the problems of caring at a distance, we need not only self-knowledge but an appropriate way of gaining knowledge of others. Abstract, bookish knowledge is insufficient. Some of us are working on a simple idea that may be very powerful. It is imperative to keep the lines of communication open. At every level—between individuals, groups, and nations—when events take a bad turn, it may be better to go on talking to and associating with opponents, even wrongdoers, than to cut them off and withdraw from them entirely. In international relations especially, it may be useful to change our typical stance from one of moral superiority in which we apply pressures and sanctions to nations that misbehave to one of firm and friendly persuasion. From this perspective, we should saturate the potentially unfriendly nation with our presence. Times of tension call for massive exchanges of students, artists, scientists, and other people who can meet each other in caring encounters. These are not the times to withdraw. Such withdrawal creates greater distance, an emotional and spiritual separation that may eventually encourage us to put the other outside the moral community. When that happens, as we have seen, horrible acts often follow. Keeping the lines of communication open can prevent this separation and provide us with direct knowledge of the others whose behavior concerns us.
An ethic of caring does not simply sit in judgment and proceed by accusation and punishment. It is concerned with raising the moral level of relations. It proceeds, where possible, by confirmation. When we remain in connection, we have opportunities to point out and nurture the best in others. Are there limits? Are there those so evil that we cannot possibly find good in them and can only be dragged down by our association with them? I'm sure there must be limits, but again this is a matter for lengthy and frequent discussions. It is not a matter for one person to answer once and for all. Asking such questions opens the door to understanding the vulnerability of genuine moral life and the basically tragic conditions in which we seek goodness in connection with each other.

We live in an age both blessed and encumbered by a new orthodoxy in speech. Ethnic, racial, and gender jokes are out, and for the most part, that is a good thing. We are properly aware that words can hurt badly and even inflict real and lasting harm. But as our language is purged, our fears, misgivings, and dislikes sink into a layer of the psyche that Carl Jung called the "shadow." This is the individual and collective side we deny. Continuous denial does not destroy the shadow. It stays with us, and sometimes creates a spontaneous explosion of verbal or physical violence.

In schools we more often preach than teach in the areas of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. Dialogue is required here, and dialogue ends in questions or in great sadness as often as it does in solutions. The reader will notice how often I've ended paragraphs in questions or confessions of uncertainty. When we are struggling to understand, when we are committed to connection but are unsure how to achieve it, we need genuine dialogue with concrete others. Then we may come to a satisfactory resolution governing this time, these people, this place. Even in genuine dialogue, the end is often uncertainty and the sort of tension that will lead to fresh and more vigorous exploration.

Students and teachers need to discuss issues of interpersonal relations, among them the phenomenon of exclusivity. Many groups today are formed so that people sharing a common heritage or, often, a common oppression can live together, study together, and together reclaim the heritage that has been lost to them. Black students on many campuses prefer to live in black houses. Women at women's colleges protest moves to make their colleges coeducational. On almost all campuses there is increasing demand for ethnic and gender studies. And there is a growing unrest among traditional educators, who fear that their own precious heritage will be lost.

I like to start discussion of this sensitive topic with an examination of earned exclusivity. One would not expect to be allowed to join the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra or the San Francisco Forty-Niners on demand. Membership in such organizations requires a demonstrated talent. Similarly, students merit admission to Phi Beta Kappa and other honorary societies. But here many students are themselves uneasy. Some accept membership only to spend most of their lives hiding the fact that they are members. Their selection causes them both pride and embarrassment.

The question arises: Is membership in, say, Phi Beta Kappa anything like having a position with the Cleveland Symphony? In the latter case, participants are expected to continue to perform at a very high level. Phi Beta Kappa members, in contrast, are rewarded for past performance. But is that all? This is what I urge young people to think about. If the exclusive groups to which they belong pass certain tests, they should be proud to belong, and they should participate enthusiastically. Here are some tests to consider: Are its purposes morally acceptable? Does the organization provide an outlet for like-minded people to promote their own growth? (Are participants encouraged to grow intellectually, athletically, spiritually?) Does the organization reach beyond itself to share what it does with interested members of the general public? Does it do so without exclusionary tests? Does it have mutually beneficial connections with other morally thoughtful groups? Does it promote education or training of the young in its area of interest? These questions should, of course, be answered in the affirmative. There are some questions that should be answered negatively: Does the group exclude on grounds irrelevant to its central mission? Does it espouse projects aimed at harming or preventing the growth of others? All of these questions can and should be used to evaluate membership in street groups (gangs), churches, cults, and recreational clubs as well as honor societies.

Now let's consider groups whose members are not selected by some form of achievement. What shall we say about campus houses for blacks only, colleges for women only, and the like? It would appear on first glance that such organizations might well pass all the suggested tests except one vital one: Does the group exclude others on grounds irrelevant to its central mission? What we see here is exclusion by race, gender, or ethnicity. Can this be acceptable?

I think it can be, but readers and students engaged in this discussion should evaluate my logic. I would argue that we must be aware of power relations in our society as we assess the moral propriety of exclusive groups. When the dominant group tries to maintain its exclu-
sivity, its efforts must be resisted and even precluded by law. But when a minority or oppressed group seeks exclusion, the exclusion may be a necessary part of a morally worthy mission. For example, it seems that many women students do better intellectually, socially, and often even professionally if their colleges are all female rather than coeducational. If the purpose or mission is to promote the intellectual, social, and political growth of women, and if we agree this is a worthy purpose, then the exclusion of persons because they are male may not be exclusion on an irrelevant criterion.

The same sort of argument can be made for the establishment of housing exclusively for black or other racial or ethnic groups. If the presence of people from the dominant white group might work against the growth of blacks, perhaps whites are properly excluded. We do not yet live in an equal society. If we did, exclusion on the grounds of race, ethnicity, or gender would either be unthinkable or of little concern. Under present conditions, the expression “reverse discrimination” is practically meaningless. Discrimination only has practical import when the people discriminating have the power to keep others from sharing in economic and cultural benefits of the larger society. This is often very hard for students from the dominant class to understand. They want to apply the same tests to all groups in the name of equality, but such application can be reasonably demanded only if the groups are substantially equal to begin with.

I would urge minority groups to look seriously at the other questions, however. There should be attempts to reach out, to join with other groups in worthwhile projects, to invite others to celebrations, debates, and evenings of shared cultural events. And, above all, there should be no projects aimed at harming or preventing the growth of others.

So far I have concentrated on problems associated with the sentimental and negative stereotyping of outsiders. I have suggested that much school time be given to the understanding of self, including the groups with which the self identifies. In addition, students must commit themselves to keeping open the lines of communication, for knowledge gained in relation is more powerful and reliable than that gained through second- and thirdhand reports.

These two areas of concentration may help students to avoid searching for villains. When we understand that evil in others is often a projection of evil in ourselves, we may exercise patience and choose persuasion over force. When we accept the fact that our second- and thirdhand information may be faulty, we may take the time to connect directly and gather a reliable base of information.

The lines between our own group and potential enemies are sometimes drawn tighter by our perception of the others as evil, but sometimes the lines are tightened because our friends have already defined these others as enemies. Our allegiance seems to demand that we do likewise. Students might be encouraged to examine voting patterns in the United Nations. How often do nations (including our own) vote with their friends regardless of the issue? Students should be asked to consider such situations and reflect on whether we are acting as loyal friends when we vote with them no matter what, or whether, as Aristotle suggested, good friends have higher obligations.

Part of becoming prepared to care is learning that one may be on the side of both parties in a dispute. Especially when we attempt to care at a distance, we must resist taking sides out of traditional loyalty. It is entirely possible to set aside the question of who is “right” and say honestly, “Look, I want what is best for both of you.” Further we can insist that violence be admonished. “He hit me first” is a reason for violence that we can all understand, but it is rarely a good excuse. Unless an act of violence is employed in defense against an immediate attack, it is at least questionable. Here we see that insisting on clear language—including a translation that describes what happens to human bodies—is essential. It is also essential that we use the same language to describe the acts of friends and the acts of their enemies. If children are mutilated and killed, that fact must be faced no matter who is responsible. But we need not fall into the traditional pattern of accusation, sanction, punishment. We can instead say to our friends: “I see your predicament. I understand what you’re trying to do. But these acts are beneath you. They don’t measure up to your good motives. Let’s find another way.”

Now, let’s consider what we are—or may be—obligated to do to relieve suffering at a distance. It is not possible to care for starving children in Africa as we can for such children in our own community. What can we do? We can try to find out which relief organizations are dependable and make contributions to the one we most trust. This may involve more than abstract study. It may involve at least enough participation to know firsthand that the organization lives up to its stated mission. But this is neither sure nor easy. Sometimes we are unaware of what even those closest to us are really doing. Further, under some conditions even the best organizations fail through no fault of their own. Thus caring at a distance is hard and uncertain work.

We can encourage caring attitudes at the community, national, and international levels. We can endorse the substantial exchange of people considered earlier, a public accounting of results achieved by
relief efforts, the election of officials who seem to care. In all of these efforts we must be wary of mere rhetoric—of settling for sentimental talk.

At a more personal level, students can be encouraged to live moderately. This is a message rarely delivered in schools. More often we try to convince students that they can "make it big in America" if they study and do well in school. I am suggesting that students need to learn how to curb their appetites and to consider the possible effects of their own wealth on the rest of the world. I'll say more about this in the chapter on caring for animals, plants, and the earth.

Before turning to that discussion, we should say something about caring for those who are separated from us by some form of disability. We often experience a sense of distance between "us" and people who are retarded, blind, deaf, mentally ill, immobilized, or otherwise disabled. Here, too, we tend to talk a shallow line—"everybody's equal"—that belies actual conditions and widespread human reactions.

Disabled people may be thought of as "at a distance" because we have difficulty in either eliciting or recognizing forms of response with which we are familiar. A severely mentally retarded person cannot respond to an intellectual discussion, solve mathematical problems, or draw logical inferences. If we try to elicit such responses, they are not forthcoming. Those people who work lovingly and successfully with the severely retarded usually find other forms of human response that are as valuable as reason. (Reason has been traditionally used by philosophers and other thinkers as the distinctively human characteristic.) Laughter, smiles, hugs, and touches of affection are also valuable human responses. So are eye contact and facial recognition. The capacity to feel pain and show relief from pain are important responses. Playfulness; the capacity to make things, however simple; artistic expression; and rhythmic kinesthetic movements are all responses valued by human beings. Beings—human and nonhuman—capable of any of these responses should elicit a corresponding desire in others to make caring contacts.

Nurses and physical therapists could contribute much to the standard education of students and teachers by helping them to understand the wide variety of human responses and how to encourage those most highly valued. Again, there is no fully adequate substitute for direct contact. If our knowledge comes only from books and lectures, it is easy to sentimentalize the disabled and suppose that we need only avoid "prejudice." In actuality the range of disabilities is enormous. Some are so small that we should ask ourselves whether we have invented them to keep our specialists in business. Some, managed sensitively, may be converted into new forms of creativity. Some are so severe and pervasive that most of us would be unable to detect a characteristically human response. Questions arise, then, about the wisdom of sustaining such lives. If we want citizens who can grapple intelligently and compassionately with the horrendous problems of public health that lie just ahead of us, those questions too must be part of an education that accepts the challenge to care.