

*Mary Catherine Bateson*

### **A Spade with which to Dig: Valuing Human Occupations**

I am going to start with an example from the Jewish tradition that shakes up the categories of occupations in a way that I think may be helpful. This is an example from the culture of Eastern European Jewry that was essentially destroyed by the Holocaust, the culture of the *shtetl*, although remnants of it can be found today in Israel and elsewhere. The most valued of activities was the study of sacred texts—the study of Torah, the study of Talmud—study, and restudy, and debate of those texts. Men made a lifetime of learning, but they were instructed that it was not appropriate to make of the Torah—the first five books of the *Old Testament*, the teaching or law—to "make of the Torah a spade with which to dig." Scholars were supported by the community but they were not paid for their work as scholars. Indeed, traditionally Rabbis were paid for various administrative tasks, but not for teaching and studying law. Of course, a Talmudic scholar was the ideal son-in-law and rich men aspired to have their daughters marry scholars who would spend their lives learning in this most valued of occupations, unremunerated but fully supported. It was understood, and this is an interesting point here, that the care and feeding of a scholar was more demanding than that of a husband doing some other kind of work. A scholar was engaged in an extremely "macho" task. He was expected to need better food and to be more interested in sex than men who merely worked with their muscles. Whereas a truck driver might want to sleep with his wife once a week, a scholar might want to every day because of this heroic effort.

Now, I offer this model of scholarship to shake up what we mean by work, what we mean by occupation, what we mean by productivity. You have probably all been exposed to the notion that academics do not really work and that intellectuals are enervated. They don't produce any material good and maybe their masculinity is a bit in question (or indeed their femininity). But the Jewish tradition offers a different point of view that says that the highest work of mankind (and it really is just *mankind* in the *shtetl*!) is learning. Doing that through a lifetime has no end to it, but somehow it is fundamental to the life of the entire community. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for work is also the word for worship, just as in the Christian monastic tradition the *opus dei*, the work of God, was the work of prayer. The monks might do some farming or even make liqueurs or something like that to support the community. But the real work, the work that was important, was the life of prayer, which produced no material good nor was it remunerated. It was possible, for many centuries and in different traditions, to sustain the sense of something valuable without measuring it by material production.

Now that I have combined three different categories, learning, work, and worship, let me add play. Piaget says play is the work of childhood. You could also say learning is the work of childhood. But it is not clear either that there is an end to play or that play is somehow useful and important in childhood and then becomes frivolous at a later stage, or that there is an end to learning: in fact there is something very odd about that idea.

If play is the work of childhood, if playing is the central developmental task, then there is something wrong with the familiar meaning of work. We live in a tradition developed from the Garden of Eden story in the Book of Genesis, right up to the industrial revolution, that suggests that work is by definition onerous, burdensome, difficult, a curse on humankind, comparable in awfulness to having babies. That is a terrible idea, actually, that work is a curse. It is also a terrible idea that having babies is a curse. This idea about work has shadowed human experience. Incidentally, I think it has fed into the notion that if something is good for you it has to be unpleasant, which has had such a negative effect on education. For some of us who are very lucky, work is the play of adulthood just as play is the work of childhood. Work and play and learning are all involved in growth and development, and are really

necessary to living a satisfying life. If work or learning is turned into a torment, we're doing something terribly wrong.

What I want to do today is to add another category to these categories of occupation that I've mentioned that seem to me far more similar than we usually allow. That's the category of caregiving or cherishing. The occupation, or activity, of cherishing someone else or even oneself needs to be compared with learning, worshipping, various kinds of work and study and even play. Through history, caregiving has mostly been delegated to women, and as Stephen Toulmin pointed out, over the centuries the unremunerated work that women have done as caregivers has not been counted. It is not included in the Gross National Product (GNP) and there are almost no statistics on it. I am old enough to have grown up before women learned that there was something wrong with saying: "Oh, I don't work, I'm just a housewife"; "I don't do anything, I'm just at home." For some reason, what women did in the home was not taken seriously as work *or* as play, as worship *or* as learning. Yet if you spend your life caring for the needs of other human beings you necessarily are learning from them. Caregiving is not like repairing shoes. Women's work was a free good, because theoretically women did it instinctively. They didn't have to be taught. They would just follow their nature and were not paid for it.

Nowadays, of course, we realize we have to make provision for a lot of things that have been taken for granted. Women's work is in that category. We have to make provision for breathable air because unless we pay attention the air will be polluted. We have to make provision for drinkable water because unless we make provision the water will be polluted. At one time the volume of human waste was small enough so that it would self purify in running water, but that's no longer true.

I am in complete sympathy with women who want the options and the training to do things other than homemaking, women who want the fulfilment and the autonomy of diverse careers. Absolutely. But because society has been so profoundly unaware of the value of the work done by women, we have not yet faced the need for rethinking the provision of care and cherishing that this entails. I believe we are at a time of unacknowledged crisis.

One of the things I hear very often from women is: "I need a wife." Many women are doing two jobs, only one of which is called a job,

while the other is supposed to be a free good, something she does when nobody's looking. Well, when you come home from the office at six o'clock that can be extremely difficult. The much vaunted switch to service industries is partly a monetization of caregiving, a way of outsourcing work that at one time women did for free, work that needs to be done for both men and women. Whether it be the dry cleaners or the fast food restaurants or the psychotherapists we turn to, we need to be cared for. We need to be listened to, to have someone focus her or his concern on us, and listen, even if only for 50 minutes a week. It used to be that men could count on getting that attention, but no longer, and now their wives need it too.

There is a very widespread deficit in society of caregiving, or cherishing. We are addressing this by inventing more and more categories of service jobs that are gradually being recognized as requiring high-level skills and proper pay. Yet we are still stuck on this idea that only production is valuable. All this service stuff, as well as entrepreneurship and management, all these occupations are in some sense seen as parasitical or second-rate especially when done by women. Caregiving is still underpaid. People will not pay someone who cares for their child nearly as much as they will the mechanic who fixes their car.

So we are moving in the direction of turning caregiving into a spade with which to dig, in more and more different ways, necessarily so, as we realize that care is not a free good. It is something that has to be planned for, provided for, supported, trained. We are also going to be dividing it up in new ways, like the division of other kinds of labor.

There is another destructive idea around, that if you need to be taken care of, it means there is something wrong with you. You are an infant and incompetent, or sick, or handicapped, or elderly, or whatever. We believe that normal healthy adult human beings do not need to be taken care of. I want to examine that notion. Human beings have the longest period of dependent childhood, of needing adult care in order to survive, of any mammal. A colt or a calf can stand up in a tottery sort of way within a matter of hours after birth on its own four feet. Right? Now, why is it that we say to human beings, "Stand on your own two feet," when in fact one of the most distinctive things about human beings is that they spend much of their lives unable to do just that. Would it not have been a logical direction of evolution to become more and more indepen-

dent? But that is not how our evolution went; our evolution went in the direction of increasing dependence and interdependence. When you read the books on child development, one of the main things that is emphasized is independence training: how to take this dependent, needy, helpless infant and get her or him to stand on her or his own two feet; to take responsibility for self. This is almost perverse if you think of the millennia of evolution it took to arrive at our extended dependency, because that extended dependency correlates directly with the importance of learning in human adaptation. The calf or the colt is born literally knowing how to walk. It is preprogrammed: the information is already there. But in general, human beings are born without a set of procedures and behaviors with which they can survive. They have to learn and be taught, and this of course is why human beings have been able to adapt to every climate on the planet and over time to develop more and more elaborate systems of behavior. What I want to point out is the direct connection between learning as a human activity and the need for care, the correlation between teaching and the giving of care. We need to rethink how these activities run through the life cycle and how they constitute essential occupations in society.

You know, we do terrible things to babies. A lot of people have the idea that if you can afford it you need to have the baby's own room and the baby's own crib. You want to take a little helpless newborn creature and put her in a bed all by herself in a room all by herself. That is so familiar as a western middle-class norm that it is not easy to realize that as a piece of human behavior it is absolutely extraordinary. Most human beings through history have gone through life always sleeping beside other people. If you ask foreign students, "Have you ever lived alone? Have you slept in a bed by yourself?" they will tell you that, at home, they shared at least a room, probably a bed, with brothers, sisters, grandparents, parents. Sharing is far more common than isolation. It is interesting to see the beginning of independence training expressed as isolation, virtually immediately after birth.

One of the things that we know is that infants and children learn better when they are cherished. I recently heard a term I had never heard before, infant massage. As it happened, I was getting a massage. I felt a need for a little cherishing and there was nobody to give me one at home. The massage practitioner was talking to me about what was going on in the

field and described someone who was giving a course in infant massage. There have been studies in places like orphanages or with infants that were not sent right home from the hospital for one reason or another, employing someone simply to hold and rock and stroke them for an hour a day. It turns out that that stroking makes a significant difference in their ability to thrive and learn and respond to what's going on around them. We need stroking too. I interpret infant massage as more and better stroking, professional stroking, stroking for pay. Some people are inhibited in their ability to express emotion, to be sensuous with an infant. Even as amateurs they may feel better about cuddling an infant if they have taken a course in it. That is part of this feeling that what we enjoy is probably frivolous and maybe immoral. There are also techniques being taught today for systematically rocking infants even before birth.

One of the great ironies is that we have evolved not just to be dependent during a period of learning, but to be greedy for learning. Infants and children love learning. They have, in fact, a built-in motivation, until they get to school and get taught that learning is not fun. Those who talk about the evolution of our species and how we are different from our primate cousins and the great apes emphasize that in some ways we are not so much "naked apes" as "infant apes." There have been experiments with baby chimps or baby gorillas lovingly raised in human families. At first they seem to be so much more responsive, to learn so much more, and so much faster than human infants do, and then they slow down. One of the peculiar characteristics of human beings is that we do have the capacity to go on learning throughout the life cycle.

Sometimes I get kind of discouraged about the capacity of adults to learn. You look at the time it has taken in the US, for example, to get from knowing the dangers of cigarette smoking to actually reducing the how many people do it. Or how long it took for people to start using seat belts, or eating less fat. Somehow, they do not seem to be ready to learn. It turns out that the lead time in the United States for people to modify behavior in a way that will preserve their health is about 15 years. Then, of course, you have new people coming into the population and you have to keep on with the message, so I guess human adults can learn but are slower at it than infants and children. You may have noticed that yourselves.

Here's what I think we have to consider. We have to consider the fact that the demand for new learning over the course of the life cycle is steadily increasing. We live longer, technology is changing, and society is changing in many ways. Whether I have to learn how to change a halogen lightbulb, which I learned to do only a couple of years ago, or whether I have to learn to recycle, or to use the Internet, or to maintain friendly relationships with the next-door neighbor who happens to be from Cambodia, or Iran, or Zimbabwe, I am being challenged to new learning. What I want to suggest is that learning is stressful, and that lifelong learning increases the need for cherishing. When you say to someone, "Stand on your own two feet, nobody's going to look after you," you may be decreasing the capacity to learn. Those who have no one to cherish them may stand on their own two feet, they may cope and survive. But a little loving care will increase their resilience, their flexibility, and their ability to learn new and appropriate patterns of adaptation. These are all arguments for the fact that cherishing is something we steadily need more of. Alas, it is not a free good, not something we can count on having without making provision for it.

Today, we live in an increasingly stressful environment and we need more massages. We need someone to say: "How was your day?" "Would you like a cup of tea?" We all need it, men and women and children. The day has passed when that kind of caregiving was just there, to be taken for granted. The statistics suggest that when in mid life a woman finds herself alone, divorced, or widowed, or whatever, she may, after a period of mourning, have an increased sense of well being. Women friends often care for each other. Many men, when they find themselves in that position, are less happy—for all they have talked about the glories of bachelorhood—and less healthy, living shorter lives, because nobody is saying: "Would you like a cup of tea?" Some of the needed care can be bought—they can send the laundry out—and some of it cannot. Some of it can only be exchanged for care offered in return.

Many of our habits of consumption probably reflect other deficits: a lack of cherishing, a loss of the joy of learning, an inability to play. In this sense, we all need occupational therapy. Not everything can be monetized. We are going to want to move toward a society where what we consume—when we say, "Ah, now I can have what I've been longing for,"—will not be running shoes, or a new car, or a bigger house. Instead

of more and more things, we will embrace occupations: a chance to join a French class or to hear a lot of symphonies or play in a string quartet or get a massage. All of these activities depend on human interactions in one way or another, and many require interaction. I might decide that I want to go out and dance every Saturday night, or that I want to join a chorus and sing. I want to learn to meditate or read plays and poetry with my friends. And in doing all of this we will develop new kinds of communities and networks of mutual caring and support.

The one thing that we simply cannot afford in a world of diminishing material resources is to say that the only human activities that are really respected are those that involve material production. It is the other way around. We are going to have to find ways so that, if the society depends on money, the people that provide the care will have access to that money. Otherwise it is not going to work. We need a society where the two most valued activities in the society are learning and cherishing and we do them for each other: giving and receiving care, teaching and learning. No economic system is going to be viable unless it moves us in that direction.