Review of "They still pick me up when I fall: the role of caring in youth development and community life."

By Diana Mendley Rauner

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the successful effort to restore billions in food stamp and child nutrition programs cut in Reagan’s first omnibus budget, which was passed, it must be noted, by a Democratic Congress.

These imperfections are but quibbles about an otherwise very readable and clear account of the often complicated and dry federal budget process. By isolating the Food Stamp Program for such treatment, King makes the budget process more understandable as it pertains to policy issues in general. But his work is about far more than the federal budget process and the recent fiscalization of government. Budget politics is, first and foremost, politics and, therefore, about self-interest. While the ambivalence that elected officials manifest toward ending hunger may be borne of competing interests—fiscal restraint and human compassion—true leadership ultimately is about transcending self-interest for the public good. King has helped us understand why a nation virtually unconstrained by resources remains limited by elected officials who do not exhibit the moral leadership to bring an end to hunger.

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In the words of Diana Mendley Rauner, “this book is a call to action to anyone who works for and worries about the next generation” (p. 1). Rather than reciting alarming statistics to emphasize the dire status of America’s youth, Rauner pursues her mission by presenting six inspiring examples of youth programs run by adults who commit themselves to nurturing the best in young people. Despite great diversity in settings and programmatic offerings, the central purpose of each program is to facilitate caring relationships that serve as contexts in which young people can learn skills, concepts, and values in preparation for adult roles and responsibilities. The articulation and elaboration of this basic theme, the importance of “caring” in the lives of young people, is the larger goal of the book. Rauner endeavors to give the concept of caring new power and meaning as a broad, overarching framework to summarize both what young people need for healthy development (care from others) and what we might wish them to become (caring individuals). Ultimately, the book aims for a broad reexamination of the way we interact with young people in several increasingly complex levels of contact: in our person-to-person exchanges, in our professional capacities, in the messages and actions of our organizations, and in our values and priorities as a society.

The book’s attention to safe, supportive, and inviting contexts for adolescent growth corresponds to an emerging movement among youth workers, researchers, and policy makers to understand and promote positive youth development. During the 1990s, for example, a major initiative undertaken by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development examined the role of major American institutions—families, schools, youth-serving organizations, health-care providers, and the media—in meeting the fundamental needs of adolescents as they make the transition into healthy, constructive adults (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century [New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1995]). The proposition that caring can serve as a conceptual foundation for linking diverse influences on positive adolescent socialization and development has its origins in the Lilly
Endowment’s Research Grants Program on Youth and Caring (Robert J. Chaskin and Theresa Hawley, *Youth and Caring: Developing a Field of Inquiry and Practice* [Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 1994]). Seeking a theoretical anchor for its grants on youth issues, the Lilly Endowment funded several studies and commissioned numerous papers to initiate a new, interdisciplinary field of inquiry focusing on young people and caring within the social contexts of family, school, community, and society. Practitioners and academics joined in this project, which entailed defining core concepts, debating philosophical values, exploring ways of measuring care, examining how caring behavior is cultivated, and investigating the benefits of caring environments. The Lilly Endowment’s research agenda was coordinated by the Chapin Hall Center for Children, where Rauner is a senior research associate.

*They Still Pick Me Up When I Fall* attempts to integrate the conceptual work on young people and caring with the practical concerns of its intended audience—parents, youth workers, and policy makers. To emphasize that the need for care may be less obvious but no less important beyond infancy and childhood, the book concentrates on the “organized, intentional care” that community-based programs offer to young people in the middle- and high-school years. Youth development programs have been part of the local and national fabric for decades. Viewed as an informal network ranging from grassroots groups to widely known organizations such as YMCA-YWCA and Campfire, youth agencies provide a context for normative socialization and development second only to public schools in the number of children served (Jane Quinn, “Where Need Meets Opportunity: Youth Development Programs for Early Teens,” *Future of Children* 9, no. 2 [1999]: 96–116). The book features exemplary programs that are consistent with a positive youth development philosophy stressing the provision of opportunities and supports to help young people gain competencies and skills that foster healthy adjustment as they mature. Rauner incorporates the experiences and comments of program participants to provide concrete descriptions of behaviors, practices, and policies that reflect caring in action.

To lay the foundation for her case, Rauner defines caring as a practice involving three interacting components: attentiveness, responsiveness, and competence. In this heuristic model, caring is predicated on awareness and sensitivity to the needs, concerns, desires, opinions, and life conditions of others. “Responsiveness” is the motivation that impels one to act based on this understanding of the other person. “Competence” refers both to the process—the general skills and attributes associated with successful attentiveness and responsiveness—and to the result—how well care actually addresses the other person’s particular needs and desires. Although Rauner states that “the final, and in a sense, most important quality of the caring process is the interactive nature of its three components,” her description of how this occurs is vague: “attentiveness prepares a way for responsiveness, and responsiveness demands competence, they each circle back to one another” (p. 23).

The initial conceptualization of caring seems overly broad and insubstantial, but Rauner intends it to be an organizing principle that can encompass all variety of caring actions. The meaning and value of caring gradually takes on weight as she uses examples from the model programs to illustrate its many manifestations. For instance, she explores how caring within the context of an ongoing relationship is characterized by mutuality, trust, and boundaries. She examines how caring behavior can be cultivated through expectations, norms, and experiences so that it eventually develops into a guiding ethic for relating to others in social situations. She also highlights the manner in which organizations can sustain care through their practices, structures, modes of communication, and values. To augment her observations, Rauner draws sparingly from
literature in the fields of psychology, sociology, education, and particularly moral philosophy. Her references to theory and evidence pertaining to interpersonal relations, organizational dynamics, and societal influences contributing to youth development are brief but relevant.

Unfortunately, the book comes up short in addressing what might have been its centerpiece: what does organized, intentional care actually accomplish? Acknowledging the many difficulties in measuring a multifaceted concept of care as well as the limited amount of research investigating the impact of care on youth development, Rauner implies the research challenges may be too great and urges the “leap of faith required . . . to believe that intentional care can have similar effects as the spontaneous, naturally occurring care that occurs in families and other settings” (p. 89). In the end, Rauner suggests that caring has inherent value as a social good even if it cannot be shown to have instrumental effects on desired outcomes.

It is clear that much more sophisticated research is necessary in this area, but Rauner does not mention recent progress in defining and measuring youth development constructs and demonstrating the beneficial results of youth development programs. In her comments on mentoring programs, for example, she omits any reference to the impressive findings of the most careful and comprehensive experimental study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America yet conducted (J. B. Grossman and J. P. Tierney, “Does Mentoring Work? An Impact Study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters Program,” *Evaluation Review* 22, no. 3 [1998]: 403–26). In fact, most youth development programs subjected to rigorous, high-quality evaluations have shown dual benefits—enhancing positive functioning while reducing adolescent problem behaviors—as Catalano et al. and Roth et al. have argued. Better use of the research literature could have bolstered Rauner’s thesis because numerous studies of youth development programs converge on the same conclusion; stated succinctly, “Young people need access to safe places, challenging experiences, and caring people on a daily basis” (Roth et al., p. 427). Furthermore, comprehensive reviews of successful programs identify the same guiding philosophies Rauner stresses in her illustrative examples. Successful programs listen and adapt to the needs of young people, provide individualized attention, give opportunities for participation in culturally appropriate activities, maintain high expectations, promote positive social values, and create environments in which caring adults support and empower young people in their development of competencies, as the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development and Roth et al. have concluded.

Of course, Rauner has set out to do more than provide a definitive summary of youth development programs. In presenting the book as a call to action, her stated purpose is to advocate social and political change that creates for young people “a world infused with and organized by care” (p. 135). This activist orientation becomes even more apparent as the closing chapters focus on attitudes and beliefs. Rauner makes appeals based on moral and ethical arguments to place a premium on caring not only in the personal sphere but also in communities, public institutions, and society at large. This project is termed “subversive” because “a culture of care rests on values of mutuality, interdependence, and sharing of burdens—values that challenge many of the assumptions that undergird our existing institutions” (p. 133). In other words, an ethic of caring is inconsistent with prevalent self-focused, self-absorbed attitudes stressing individuality, competition, and personal fulfillment. Rauner also observes that caring has been devalued as it has been “privatized” and “feminized,” that is, relegated to the family and viewed as a feminine activity. To rescue caring from its marginalization in public life, she calls for a cultural shift from independence to interdependence and from rights to responsibilities.
In the final analysis, *They Still Pick Me Up When I Fall* contributes to the civic dialogue about how we prepare the next generation for adulthood. As endless school reforms demonstrate, it is extremely difficult to reach consensus regarding our goals and aspirations for young people and then to determine the best means to encourage their fulfillment. Rauner’s articulation of the concept of caring may provide some coherence in this process by suggesting a common language and a core set of values. In addition, the focus on community-based programs reinforces the importance of opportunities and supports for adolescent development beyond the domains of family and school. The book is particularly effective at the applied level, with the compelling accounts of successful programs giving a fresh perspective on the best practices for working with young people in organized settings. By accentuating the positive and the possible, Rauner has produced a book offering promise, hope, and inspiration for people who care about and who care for young people.

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Notes


Much has been written about the plight of the homeless—their characteristics, their reasons for being homeless, and the success of programs responding to their situation. Families, the focus of this book, are a growing group within the homeless population, and they present a distinct set of issues for social services. *Parenting in Public* makes a unique contribution to the literature on homelessness by focusing on services to homeless families at the personal level, that is, how to treat homeless parents, particularly mothers, on a day-to-day basis within shelters. In particular, this book describes how homeless parents confront the responsibilities of raising children within a system that may treat parents themselves as children. It examines policies and practices in the shelter system that affect parents’ abilities to parent and care for their children. Hence the title *Parenting in Public*: if one accepts public assistance in any form, then one is subject to public scrutiny.