**Love letters, sick notes and running on empty: Reflections on well-being in Higher Education**

Last week we sent this note to each other:

**Remember: We do not have endless capacity to do things.**

This act sparked critical conversations around the tensions of the neoliberal university and the nature of well-ness and community in higher education, heightened following the pandemic and ongoing times of crisis. The words of Mays Imad weigh heavy upon us: We are experiencing global agony and there is heartbreak in higher education (2022). We feel it viscerally and at a soul level and ask, *where is the love in what we do and who we are?*

We are reminded of bell hooks who set a vision of education as communal spaces for healing (2016). Healing is relational. We recuperate and recover together as and *in* community. Yet tensions persist within policies and practices in higher education for enacting relational and collective approaches. We typically compartmentalise emotion as distinct from learning and teaching, and we approach mind/body as opposing dualisms.

‘Being’ in higher education can, as a result, feel painfully mechanical to us, and at odds with the relationality we seek. Again, where is the love? (1972). We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling beings that think (Damásio, 2006). Yet our environments tend to favour competition, constant productivity, and automated output. A culture where ‘quantity’ encourages individualism and the ‘hero academic’ who achieves global recognition and prestige all by themselves in isolation and remains abundantly healthy. In contrast, we are drawn to the qualitative and collective cultures of care and compassion. We gravitate towards Yusef Waghid’s critical conceptualisation of caring in higher education as an act of community (2019). This shifts the notion of care away from hierarchical, paternalistic and deficit attitudes towards a reciprocal relational process, and instead of caring *about* and caring *for* we strive for *caring with*.

Collective care requires us to resist the status quo, not eschewing the highly emotive but rather working *through* affect, apathy and exhaustion. Like many we experience guilt around saying no, but we draw on Audre Lorde’s concept of productive guilt which is only useful if it leads to “the beginning of knowledge” (1981, p.9). And so, we focus upon affirmative action, and by affirmative we do not mean ‘positive’, rather we speak of Rosi Braidotti’s idea of affirmative as generative (2019). Affirmative ethics invites us to make the most of our power and capacity to produce different ways of thinking and being, and enact a communal praxis of hope and compassion for others and self.

Self-compassion plays an important protective role in our wellbeing and can knit us together as a society. By nourishing the relationship we have with ourselves, we can re-fill our emotional reserves and have more to offer those that need us. As Kristin Neff theorises, self-compassion is both fierce and tender. It requires a dynamic combination of standing up for our needs, reciprocity, and nourishment. And so, with this final reflection we return to our opening note-to-self that *we do not have endless capacity*. Nor should we.

In the words of Tricia Hersey (2022), rest is resistance.

With love,

Carole and Liz

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