



THE WHO CARES ECONOMY

We depend on care throughout our lives, from child care to eldercare and hospice. During our time of need, we call the workers who provide these services “essential.” We say that care matters. So why are we ignoring a potentially devastating threat to the future of care in Canada?

LOOKING AWAY

don't remember the elevator ride, but there must have been one, because my brother and I were on the second floor of a department store when it happened. We'd already picked up a box of chocolate peppermint bark for a friend and were dawdling, stealing a few more minutes of normal before returning to the tiny apartment where both of us knew he would die. A scar from the miraculous surgery that removed a tumor the size of a tennis ball from the back of my brother's head ran in a pink bulge up his neck and over his ear.

The hair that had returned after chemo was wispy and long. His eyes, still bright, had a touch of wildness in them now, and the right one wandered when he got tired.

My brother tended to forget that he no longer looked like the handsome marathoner he'd once been. And we were having a good time, so when a little girl started playing peek-a-boo with him, he played back, lighting up and shifting in his wheelchair. She giggled and hid behind her mother's leg. He giggled, too, his tight cheeks pulling back as his teeth flashed. The little girl stomped her feet with delight, which startled her mother. The woman looked at my brother, grabbed her daughter by the shoulder, and yanked her away with such force that the child yelped and started to cry.

We put the box of peppermint bark on a shelf where it didn't belong – among plates individually labeled with the names of Santa's reindeer. Looking back, I saw that the child was calming. Her mother, though, looked stricken. I could tell that she was sorry. Her response had been visceral. She hadn't intended to be cruel. I didn't have the heart to go back and tell her what she'd done. Not to my brother – he'd long since gotten used to greeting camp friends who didn't recognize in him the boy with strawberry blonde curls who shot rapids standing in the stern of his canoe – but to her daughter. She could spend the rest of her life trying to convince her child that sick people aren't scary or threatening or repulsive, but it was too late. The little girl whose instinct had been to engage all-in had learned, on a physical level, to turn away.

INVISIBLE POWER

My brother's world in those final months was held together by an intricate web of care – the hospice staff, visiting nurses and personal support workers who showed up every day to listen to his increasingly fantastic stories, give him comfort and offer him dignity. Most were women. This wasn't a coincidence – care work has always been "women's work," historically done in homes for free or in institutions for little pay. Many were new Canadians, including a lawyer from Venezuela whose credentials weren't recognized here. They traveled hours to reach my brother's bedside, part of a contingent of caregivers who, I would later learn from economist Armine Yalnizyan, represents one out of five jobs in the Canadian economy – a force more than a third bigger than all manufacturing, nearly twice as big as construction or finance, almost three times as big as mining.

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Yalnizyan, who is one of Canada's leading economists, winner of the Galbraith Prize in Economics and Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers, argues that the care economy could form the backbone of a new middle class, like manufacturing once did. The care economy, Yalnizyan says, could be a powerhouse. But in order for that to happen, we'd have to value the work and also the workers who do it.

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We entrust care workers with our children, our loved ones, ourselves at our most vulnerable. We depend on them to make it possible for us to work. And yet we treat care as something peripheral, as low tech as love itself, unworthy of transparency, reasonable regulation and decent wages. How could we value so little something that matters so much?

NEW THREATS

We tend to recognize the value of something when our need for it feels personal and immediate. That's why it's the parents of kids with asthma who put up "no idling" signs outside of elementary schools. Surely we would pay attention if the future of care – for our own children, our own parents, our own siblings and ourselves was at risk?

It is, and we aren't.

Yalnizyan has been sounding the alarm about a direct threat to care for a while now. Both childcare and long term care have attracted the interest of private equity firms with abundant capital and a laser focus on the bottom line. Unlike government and publicly traded companies, private equity owes no duty to report, and holds out no promises about quality of care. Their success is measured in financial terms – staffing costs, operational efficiency, profit margins. Human dignity and decent work do not appear on this balance sheet.

Care, in a sense, is getting its due. Private equity firms see value, and they plan to take it. They've begun to invest heavily in care economies in countries across the world, including Canada. Yalnizyan warns that private equity's approach to buying up, restructuring and selling off care facilities could hollow out our care system. In the name of efficiency, working conditions are degraded and patient care relegated to a timestamp, with accountability to no one.

Yalnizyan's solutions are straightforward: mandate transparency about ownership and data about outcomes. Track what happens when care facilities change hands. Establish a workforce strategy that spans childcare, healthcare, and long-term care. Impose common-sense regulations limiting market shares, regulating debt in acquisitions and restricting dividend extraction. That these basic safeguards could be characterized as radical seems to reflect our deep resistance to valuing care.

Those profiting from the deregulation and acquisition of these services might argue that the commodification of care is just a matter of economics. Those buildings and businesses are worth money, and somebody wants it. But I think it's something else, too. In a culture hell-bent on fitness and beauty and strength, those precious workers who keep our loved ones safe are an unwelcome reminder of our fragility.

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BREAKING POINTS

At 95, my mother is stubbornly vital, determined to engage with the world at full volume, with a beer in hand. She knows about death. It stalks her breakfast companions at the retirement home where she lives. It disappears her friends. But she's here, and takes great pleasure in being useful. Which is why, this past summer, she decided to supervise my daughters as they stacked firewood. She was in her element – a boss in yellow sandals with a bulbous rubber toe – wearing a floppy sun hat doused in bug repellent.

For a moment, looking out the window, I saw my mother the way she sees herself. Able-bodied. Wise. Needed. It was a sweet picture of strong women and grandmother wisdom. But then she bent forward to pick up a log with her arthritic fingers. The piece she chose was heavier than she'd expected and an awkward shape. A bulge she hadn't been able to see hung down from it like a barbell, throwing weight into her less solid right hand. She cringed and started to stumble.

Don't drop that log on your foot and break it, I wanted to shout. Don't let a splinter open up your paper-thin skin and cause an infection. Don't fall and break your hip! One daughter yelled out to her, while the other lunged for the wood.

On that bright July day, we were all thinking this: you are one dropped log away from an injury that could have life-altering implications – a hospital visit followed by time in a care facility whose workers are exhausted and underpaid – an infection that wages a battle even you, with your coarse words and fierce vitality, can't win.

As I watched my daughter lean in to grab the wood before it dropped on her grandmother's foot, I was struck by the frailty of our approach. We rush to prevent the fall but fail to invest in the safety net we'll all need eventually. Like my mother, we are all one crisis away from discovering just how thoroughly we've undermined the system we depend on.

Maybe it's time to change how we think about care, the people who need it, and the people who provide it. We can't afford to keep looking away.

I pulled up a chair for my mother, which at first she waved off but eventually sat in, shifting from worker to director. "Save that one for the bottom row," she shouted, pointing to a large, flat piece that would form a stronger foundation than the other misshapen logs. "Not so close," she belted out as I turned to walk back into the house. "Leave room between the logs for circulation. You won't see the rot until it's too late."

This essay is one in an occasional series published by the Atkinson Foundation to amplify the diverse voices that make up movements for decent work and a fair economy.



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