

**Review of *Compassionate Activism: An Exploration of Integral Social Care*, by Mark Garavan**

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Mark Garavan's *Compassionate Activism* is highly relevant to comprehending and acting to transform the social roots of unsustainability in modern societies. As I have argued elsewhere (Evans, 2012), when we question and seek to address the crisis of unsustainability that permeates and degrades all facets of socio-ecology, we are called upon to address relationships of domination and exploitation that both embody and perpetuate social and environmental destruction. Garavan's work promotes social praxis that explicitly seeks to eliminate oppression at both interpersonal and societal levels. Well-grounded in a wide-ranging body of relevant social theory and practical experience, *Compassionate Activism* highlights social care as a centrally important avenue for action toward a more just and sustainable society. Garavan focuses on both interpersonal and societal/structural relationships as key sites for social transformation. The integral social care Garavan advocates is open to all: professional providers of social care, educators, and family and community members everywhere.

Although Garavan does not claim his work is *about* sustainability *per se*, he explicitly situates integral social care as a critically important aspect of an overarching social project that entails the healing of individuals, society, and socio-ecological systems everywhere. In offering an accessible, well argued, and theoretically grounded approach to engaging in liberatory praxis, Garavan has authored a work that sustainability educators and practitioners will find both inspiring and eminently useful.

Garavan begins by arguing that people are fundamentally social beings who cannot survive or thrive without being cared for and caring for others. While the common sense logic of modern social and economic systems fosters the belief that we are atomized, fundamentally rational beings seeking fulfillment solely through material accumulation and consumption, Garvan counters that social care is part of the very fabric of being human. According to Garavan, our impulses and drives to engage in relationships of social care point to an intrinsic goodness within persons which forms a foundation upon which we might construct a more just, fulfilling, humane, and sustainable society.

Garavan draws on the theories of psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1967) and educator Paulo Freire (1970/2000) in developing the concepts of integral social care and compassionate activism. In the process, he also highlights direct applications of these concepts in both the professional realm and the day-to-day lives of people everywhere. According to Garavan, integral social care "is defined by its attention both to the interpersonal dynamics of authentic and liberating relationships and to the socio-political causes of social need" (p. 73). He draws on Rogers (1967) in arguing that the process of integral social care at the interpersonal level involves non-judgmental acceptance of the other and engagement in authentic dialog that assists the individual in defining and seeking his/her own development/transformation as a free subject in society. According to Garavan, compassionate activism describes "the spirit, values and praxis that should inform integral care" (p. 195). In practicing compassionate activism, Garavan insists that caregivers avoid fostering unequal, paternalistic relationships of care and instead conceptualize and practice social care as a mutualistic endeavor undertaken by equals -- a relationship that deepens the humanity of both the caregiver and the recipient of care.

In developing this argument, Garavan notes that the dichotomy between caregiver and care recipient is a false distinction. Within one relationship and across multiple relationships (even in professional practice), these roles are not fixed. People often inhabit the role of caregiver and recipient of care alternately or even simultaneously. Furthermore, integral social care directly benefits both the caregiver and the cared-for by deepening their humanity. This deepening entails liberating the potential for both to participate in healing themselves, others, society, and the natural world.

In developing the concepts of integral social care and compassionate activism, Garavan highlights social construction as a process that manifests in both the individual and society at large. He argues that individuals both shape society and are shaped by it and that, therefore, in order to fully care for individuals and promote their liberation and the full flowering of their humanity, we must engage authentically in liberatory social praxis at *both* the interpersonal and societal levels. According to Garavan, individual psychological challenges and barriers to liberated and liberating social agency typically derive from socially constructed harm visited upon the person. Therefore, the full liberation of the person entails transforming damaging, violent systems of social power that treat people and planet as objects to be exploited in service to powerful interests.

Here, Garavan draws on the pedagogy of Freire (2000) who argued that oppressed people could advance their own freedom and personal efficacy through a dialogic process of demystifying the sources of oppression and engaging in liberatory social praxis. For Garavan, the transformative liberation of the individual is inextricably bound up with the work of eliminating social oppression. Therefore, the compassionate activist must work both to foster mutually humanizing relationships at the interpersonal level and to eliminate oppression that flows from concentrated, self-serving systems of social power.

Garavan's insistence on authentic communication as foundational to integral social care is mirrored in Habermas' (1984) notion of communicative action through ideal speech acts. The difficulty in realizing such authentic communication, as theorized by both Habermas (1984) and Garavan, is the precondition that the interlocutors approach each other as equals. As Garavan explicitly acknowledges, we live in a world fraught with deep inequalities and entrenched concentrations of social power that are highly resistant to transformation of the very social systems that have fostered their dominance. When authentic communication is undermined by vast inequities at the social scale, how might we initiate societal transformation that is necessarily constructed upon authentic communication and mutualism? Perhaps the answer is, as Garavan seems to suggest, that we must begin someplace, anyplace where we can mutually foster the deepening and strengthening of our own humanity.

Such work is indeed possible. Another question is whether or not a humane society up to the task of averting the worst effects of the converging crises of sustainability is possible to create within the requisite time frame. Like Vaclav Havel (1990, p. 180), Garavan suggests that we focus our attention on doing what needs to be done, rather than on the likelihood of achieving the desired outcome: "Compassionate activism cannot avoid engagement in the mess an circumstance of today. It must do so guided by its adherence to its core values rather than to any claim of foresight or superior knowledge about what is to come" (p. 195).

Garavan's concepts of integral social care and compassionate activism merit considerable attention in sustainability circles. *Compassionate Activism* offers us a fresh perspective on authentic and visionary social engagement in a time of growing systemic violence and oppression of both people and nature. I highly recommend Garavan's work as reading for professional social care practitioners, undergraduate and graduate students, and anyone interested in the theory and practice of sustainability.

## References

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