

10-14-2016

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Recommended Citation

O'Rourke, Kate (2016) "We Are Worth More: Caregivers Unite to Amplify Their Voices," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 3, Article 7. Available at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps/vol3/iss3/7>



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WE ARE WORTH MORE: CAREGIVERS UNITE TO AMPLIFY THEIR VOICES

Kate O'Rourke M.Ed., DT, CEIM

Abstract

Kate O'Rourke is an alumna of the Center for Partnership Studies' Caring Economy Advocates Program, an online certification course in which participants examine how economic policies shape caregiving practices and influence gender equity and social wealth. In this article, she shares her experiences as a grassroots community organizer facilitating dialogue among caregivers within a partnership-based, popular education model.

Key words: advocacy, caring economy, Center for Partnership Studies, community activism, domination-partnership continuum, gender equity, popular education.

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I am a graduate of the Caring Economy Advocates Program, an online seminar program that equips grassroots community leaders with language to facilitate open discussion about the role of caregiving in the economy. [<http://caringeconomy.org/advocates/>]. Like many of my fellow Caring Economy Advocates, I play many roles: writer, performer, “warrior mama” (as I like to call myself), and lover of humanity. When I was in college, I switched my major from dance to creative writing, to psychology and anthropology, until I finally settled on education. I thought that being a teacher would allow me to be creative *and* satiate my curiosity about human nature. Plus, I was sure I'd always be able to get a decent, middle-class job with benefits.

I was wrong. Before my teaching position in Chicago was cut, I was buried under regulations created by bureaucrats who had never met my students, yet insisted that I teach them a certain way. I also experienced public education increasingly coming under attack, with shrinking staff, growing class sizes, and mass closings of public schools.

After I gave birth to my daughter, I went back to work doing home visits with families through a federal education program called *Early Intervention*. I discovered an underground world of caregivers - many men, but mostly women - who are literally shaping America's future, but doing it for free. Caregivers receive no tax credits or social security benefits to keep them afloat, and their crucial, life-giving work is almost invisible.

I realized that it wasn't enough to lament that a woman only earns 79 cents to a man's dollar (National Partnership for Women and Families, n.d.) because many women, and men, spend their days doing unpaid work in the home, or are working around the clock to juggle jobs and caregiving. And yet, we can measure the work of caregiving, and its effects. If we were to include unpaid caregiving and household work in our economy, our GDP would grow by a whopping 30-50% (Caring Economy.org, n.d.). The United States currently recognizes destructive activities such as weapons production and building prisons as boosts to the economy. If we factor the work of caring for human beings and our planet into the economy, we can literally make care count, and make huge gains in shifting our paradigm from a system of domination toward one of partnership.

In the Caring Economy Advocates Program, we delve deep into work by cultural historian Riane Eisler, who wrote in *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* (2007) that "The devaluation... of caregiving is our inheritance from times in which women's bodies and women's work were male property.. [and] women, and anything associated with women, were basically invisible in economic thinking" (p. 77) The Caring Economy Campaign crystallized my feelings about this deep inequality, helping me turn words into action. I facilitated two events at a local library called *We Are Worth More*, in which caregivers from many walks of life got together to share their stories and articulate their enormous value to society. We served a meal at each event to remind caregivers that they deserve to be cared for, too. Everyone went home with links to local and national groups that advocate for the rights of those who care for society's most vulnerable people.

I also facilitated a workshop at *Commonbound*, a gathering for The New Economy Coalition, in Buffalo, New York (see Figure 1). The workshop was called *Power to the Parents*. Using a popular education framework in which everyone teaches and everyone learns through mingling, team-building, and spontaneous dialogue, we examined principles of partnership

and a caring economy. This fall I will host a *Power to the Parents* webinar with the Caring Economy Campaign. We will practice doing the inner and outer work required to open ourselves to receiving more, and amplifying our voices to speak up for partnership. We'll also share resources, including links to allies around the world who are collaborating to make our planet more just and sustainable.



Figure 1: Playing Pass the Power at Commonbound, the New Economy Coalition gathering in Buffalo, NY, July 2016

In the true spirit of partnership, I create a loosely structured container for every workshop, and that container is always filled by the stories and wisdom of the participants. I have also been conducting interviews with caregivers (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: Quotes from interviews with caregivers (permission to quote and use photographs)

I'm looking forward to turning future events into labs for citizen journalism and activist art, in which caregivers can interview one another and share their findings in blogs and social media. We hope to create spoken word performances to spread our voices far and wide. Most unpaid caregivers have never been in the military nor carried a union card, but oh, what a world it will be when we unite and mobilize our ranks to insist once and for all that we deserve economic security!

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Kate O'Rourke, also known as Kate Duva, is a mama, teacher, writer, performer, developmental therapist, infant massage instructor, & community organizer. She facilitates caregiver advocacy workshops as well as collaborative playgroups for families of children with developmental differences, where parents grow as teachers and leaders. She is a certified Caring Economy Conversation Leader. Her ever-evolving website can be found at www.prosocialpower.org and you can reach her at kate@prosocialpower.org. For more information about the Caring Economy parenting webinar *Power to the Parents: Reclaiming Our Voices, Our Worth and Our World*, see <http://caringeconomy.org/parentingwebinar/>