What is Care?

The multitude of definitions, meanings, and interpretations of care can fill volumes. Care is service, affection, or concern; it is one of those things or all them. Care describes a manner of doing things, as in carefully; as well as, expresses feelings for another individual, to care for. Care can mean many different things, but what does it mean to care? Everyone has an expected standard of care that varies with the caregiver; how one is raised, and in which, culture roots the standard of care we expect from others. Beyond this, care itself is complicated because it is multifaceted.

To give care is to address the three essential parts of human beings with thoughtful consideration, respect, and genuine kindness. These parts are the physical body, the mind, and the soul; these aspects of humanity are often viewed as separate from one another, or together as an omni-self. The physical body acts as a container for the mind and the soul of an individual; because life is abrasive, keeping the body healthy and capable are the keys to having a long life. The body, though, works in tandem with the mind; mental and emotional health is a necessity to a fulfilling journey. Lastly, the soul, which generally has a spiritual connotation, can be synonymous with an individual’s essence. (While not everyone is religious, it can be agreed there is something in one person’s experience existentially different from another’s.) A person’s essence is all encompassing; it is their temperament, bad habits, quirks, etc. It makes every experience singularly unique. Caring for a person holistically is very complicated because
caregivers have different ideas about which element of humanity is most important. The text *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, by Anne Fadiman, and Taggart Siegel’s film, *The Split Horn*, illustrate the various ways one can care for another, and how care across cultures is not only complicated, but arduous.

The Hmong families, of both texts, have an inclusive cultural expectation of the care they are to provide for their families. Their lifestyle is an all encompassing cyclical system simply conveyed as “Medicine [is] religion. Religion [is] society. Society [is] medicine” (Fadiman 60). The entire Hmong culture revolves around the soul and the spiritual realm; for example, Fadiman elaborates on this point with the metaphor of a Hmong man going to a clinic with an upset stomach, but “he is actually complaining that the entire universe [is] out of balance” (Fadiman 61). In *The Split Horn*, Paja Thao, his wife, and thirteen children are documented as a Hmong family living in America. After arriving in America, Paja suffers from depression. The cause of his unhappiness lies with his children’s lack of tradition, which Paja interprets as a lack of love for him (Siegel). The Hmong believe the most common cause of illness is “soul loss”; they focus on treating the soul to fix the ailments of the body (Fadiman 10). The Lees, of Fadiman’s text, had ventured beyond shamanism, which had helped Paja and secured him his children’s affection, to western medicine for their epileptic daughter Lia (Siegel; Fadiman 23). The medical practitioners of Merced Community Medical Center wanted to save Lia’s body to save her life, but western medicine is highly invasive and many procedures go against Hmong traditional beliefs. MCMC was asking Foua and Nao Kao Lee to choose Lia’s physical body over her soul, using medicine they could not understand (Fadiman 46-47). That said sacrifice, even when disguised as compromise, can alter the value of care. *What has to be sacrificed? What is gained from the sacrifice? Who makes the sacrifice?*
The tensions between the Lees, and the MCMC doctors’ beliefs caused both parties to sacrifice the most optimal care for Lia. The struggle between the two not-so-opposing parties boils down the debate between Sukey Waller, psychotherapist, and Bill Selvidge, doctor, about whether the soul or life is more important; much like the Lees, Waller believes the soul is more important, and Selvidge is in line with the MCMC doctors, life (Fadiman 277). While both parties wanted Lia to live, each had different means of achieving this goal. These doctors were caring for the most loved daughter of the Lees, so how could they focus on healing Lia’s body without giving precedence to her soul (Fadiman 23)? By caring for one’s child, a doctor is caring for the most precious part of that parent. Due to frustrations with the Lees’ lack of compliance to the medicine regime, Neil treated the Lees’ less empathically than they deserved; Neil knew that he did not treat Foua with compassion, and can recall only hugging her “a handful of times” (56). The disconnect between the Lees and the doctors of Merced allowed the one to criminalize the other’s techniques as abuse; because Foua and Nao Kao did know, and love Lia, they were able to discern that the medicine prescribed to help her seizures were affecting her negatively. Fadiman describes the medicines Lia was taking as “far from innocuous” (Fadiman 50). To the doctors though, these medications were the lesser of two evils; if the seizures persisted, Lia would develop and live the rest of her life with brain damage. The side effects of medications ranged from lower I.Q. scores and hyperactivity to bleeding gum tissues (Fadiman 50). In the Hmong culture epilepsy can be a door to shamanism; the medical personnel of Merced were not only fighting an honor bestowed Lia, but their methods of healing her caused more issues (Fadiman 22, 225). Both parties had different ideas of quality of life (and afterlife), but when Neil had Lia removed from the loving care of the Lees, he was exercising power the family could not match. His removal also highlighted how he valued Lia’s bodily health above all; in foster
care Lia did take her medication regularly, but seized more than she ever had at home (Fadiman 87). Lia’s emotional unhappiness manifested itself in her physical condition of epilepsy. The staff of MCMC never saw how Lia ran to her parents before she seized or how she was inconsolable in the Kordas’ household because no one was capable of comforting her in Hmong (Fadiman 38, 86). This blindness allowed Nao Kao and Foua to become star parents after Lia’s “big one.”

Care is an act of love. The Lees adored Lia, and Neil and Peggy value life. This led each to push strongly against the other’s way, but after the “big one,” and Lia being “lost,” their goals shifted and made them more palpable to each other. The MCMC staff was capable of seeing how well loved Lia was when their objective of her having an active life was no longer possible. In the same way the Lees had no cause to distrust the doctors caring of their most loved daughter because after Lia was “lost” she returned home to them; Lia once again became the solely the Lees responsibility. Similarly, in the documentary The Split Horn, the care of the parents fell to the children; Paja was depressed, showing both physical and emotional signs. He attributed his condition to soul loss; his children had abandoned the traditions that made Paja. He felt abandoned (Siegel). The Thao children failed to care for their father, not only in the traditional Hmong sense of caring for elders, but in any sense. They failed to connect to him much like MCMC failed the Lees; the Thao children cared about Paja, but did not care for Hmong culture. How could that line be drawn? How could they forsake their heritage, but not their father?

Western ideologies have a way of becoming grander rather than what they truly are, which is a cultural understanding. There are epistemologies, not cold hard facts, but the misconception of western ways reigning supreme draws a line. On one side is this way and beyond the line is the “other” with their that way (Hall 16). The children in the Split Horn suffer
in a way that their father does not; Paja will always be Hmong. Everything about Paja is Hmong, but his children have assimilated into western culture. The line drawn is this or that, but the Thao children aren’t either; they are both now. Instead of creating the Prius of American and Hmong, they were asked to choose; for example, a son of Paja adopted Christianity because his wife was Christian, but when they divorced he gave up Christianity. He did not go back to his Hmong cultural beliefs because his identity had been boiled down to his person rather than the rich cultural background he once held (Siegel). He is acting inside American culture, doing American things while racially being Hmong much like the Black British Stuart Hall mentions (Hall 18). This “Black British” did not dissolve lines creating a dialogue between these Blacks and the English, but rather separated them; similarly, the Thao children did not let the American and Hmong in them create a discourse to blur or erase that line, but instead it divided the family.

If new epistemologies could surface more fluidly in society, humans could care for each other with more earnest compassion. These new forms of knowing can be applied as a Venn diagram to bridge the gaps between the cultures, rather than bubble between cultures making a gap an abyss. When this knowledge is a hybrid of cultures, it reaches more people in each separate sphere rather than the few that can gather in the middle. If there had been knowledge and understanding between the Lees and their various American doctors, they could have been allies in Lia’s care rather than antagonists.
Works Cited


*The Split Horn*. Dir. Taggart Siegel. PBS, 2001. Film.