Teach us to care and not to care

By Guy Sayles
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Like many cities, Asheville, North Carolina, has a "Before I Die . . ." wall—a large chalkboard with multiple spaces for people to write some of their hopes for the future. Since the wall is on the path I take for most of my downtown walks, I read them several days each week. I've laughed and wept, said "me too" or "not me," and wondered how many of the hopes chalked on that wall will be realized.

Here are some that commonly appear: Before I die, I want to . . .

. . . climb Mt. Everest.

. . . go to Disney.

. . . fall in love.

. . . go to Paris.

. . . find a cure for cancer.

. . . run a marathon.

Some of the most poignant have been: Before I die, I want to . . .

. . . believe in God again.

. . . make peace with my father.

. . . live.

Yesterday morning, I was jarred by this entry on the wall: "Before I die, I want to *stop caring*." My immediate thought was that we die precisely when we stop caring. We can *exist* without love, but not *live*. Respiration and circulation are necessary but not sufficient for genuine life; we need relationship and connection. To stop caring is to die.

Unless. Unless what the writer meant was something like: "Before I die, I want to stop caring so co-dependently, unwisely, and exhaustingly."

I thought about the phrase "Teach us to care and not to care" from T. S. Eliot's prayer-poem "Ash Wednesday."

There are some things about which we are wise not to care: the disapproval of people who do not know us and love us for who we are; the sweet-sounding, sentimentality-oozing but passive-aggressive suggestions of people who want to control us; and the pressure from the system—whether family or workplace or institution—not to buck the status-quo, even when it's unhealthy.

Teach us not to care about these things so that we do not die before we die—so that we can be free to know and be known, to love and be loved. And, teach us to care for the things that cause love and life to flourish: mercy

and justice, freedom and peace, beauty and truth, hope and joy.

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