Revaluing care

by Janette Dill and Scott Dill

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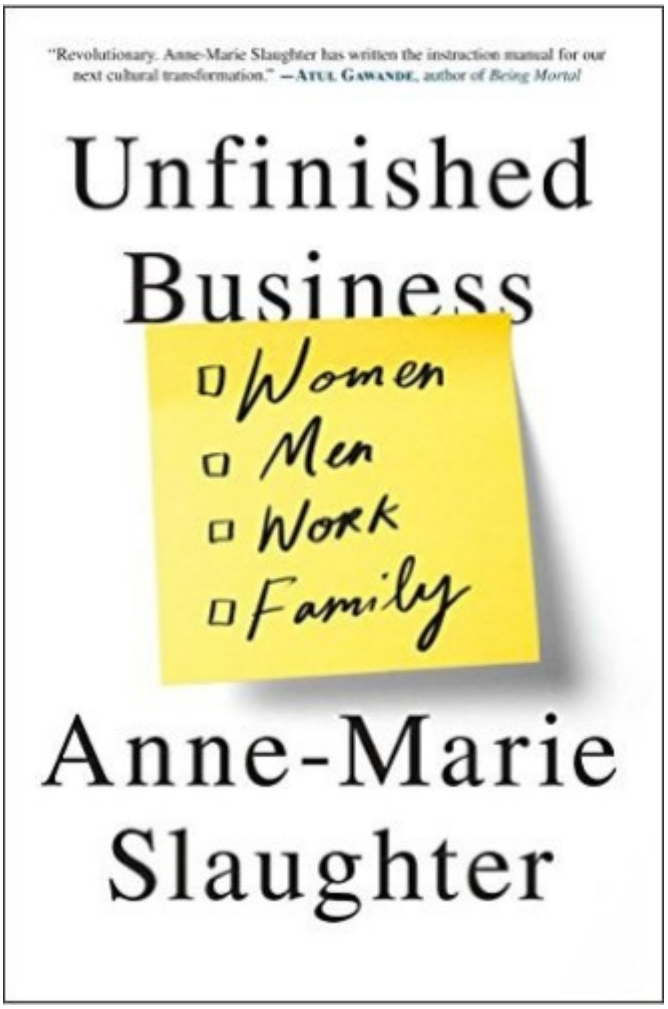
In Review



Unfinished Business

by Anne-Marie Slaughter
Random House

Three years ago, Anne-Marie Slaughter decided to leave Washington, D.C., and her position as director of policy planning under then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. She returned to her academic position at Princeton University because she wanted to be more active in parenting her two teenage sons back in New Jersey. Although she only left one job for another—or as she describes it, traded a demanding, inflexible position for a demanding but flexible one—she was criticized for her lack of feminist ambition, for "dropping out." In response, Slaughter wrote a much-discussed article in the *Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All."

Unfinished Business is Slaughter's contribution to the stale women-in-the-workplace debate. She refreshingly argues that the social value we give to caring for other people is not simply a women's issue: it concerns men, women, and the whole society's common good. "Redefining the women's problem as a care problem," Slaughter writes, "broadens our lens and allows us to focus much more precisely on the real issue: the undervaluing of care, no matter who does it."

Slaughter traces the story behind our society's regrettable failure to adequately value care. For many generations men were considered the family's primary breadwinners and were obligated to spend most of their time working outside the home. A workplace culture of long hours, inflexible schedules, and valorizing work over family limited men's involvement in caring for children, the disabled, and the elderly. As women entered this male-dominated workforce, they too were asked to adopt values that undermined the social significance of caregiving. That women cannot—or will not—commit to the workplace at the expense of their families is thought to be a reason why many women opt out of successful careers, particularly at high levels of organizations.

For Slaughter, however, valuing care is as much about giving men the freedom to be caregivers as it is about freeing women to pursue their careers. A popular narrative in today's culture is that women are constrained by their caregiving obligations, but Slaughter contends that men are equally constrained by work expectations, which leaves them little time for caregiving.

Valuing care means allowing both men and women to say that they want to work less and to spend more time raising their kids or caring for a parent. Caregiving should not be a gender-limited activity. Children will learn this only when both mothers and fathers provide care in the home. Children should grow up thinking that

being patient and faithful—caring for each other—is more valuable than being ambitiously engaged in income-producing work.

As it is, the labor of caregiving is both gendered and devalued. From the woman who feels like a failure because she couldn't handle 70-hour workweeks after the birth of a child, to the father who feels dismissed when he tells others that he is a stay-at-home dad ("lead parent" is Slaughter's preferred term), women and men are both affected by the assignment of greater prestige to those who work in the labor market than to those who are caregivers.

Of course, many people are employed as caregivers, and we see an even greater devaluation of care there. People who provide formal care—child-care workers, nursing assistants, and so on—are paid less than workers in other occupations, even when they have similar levels of education and skills. For example, despite the enormous value and importance of their work, most child-care workers in daycare centers make under $20,000 per year. We suffer from what Slaughter calls a "competition bias," which inanely assumes that the more cutthroat a profession is, the more valuable the work.

Slaughter provides some practical suggestions for recalibrating how we value the work of caregiving. She recommends allowing employees to have more flexible schedules, granting more generous maternity and paternity leave, and placing greater emphasis on worker results rather than time in the office. However, these suggestions are less than satisfying.

First, Slaughter has few ideas for mothers who are not well educated, credentialed, or in demand. In *Unfinished Business* she attempts to address the criticism that her *Atlantic* article neglected middle- and lower-class mothers. She does occasionally talk about the plight of mothers who have to work to support themselves and their families, who are subject to low wages and ever-changing hours, and who face penalties at work when their family life interferes. Yet the bulk of her book is geared toward highly educated mothers in high-prestige occupations.

Furthermore, Slaughter has difficulty acknowledging that valuing care more highly involves spending fewer hours earning income. She acknowledges that she works long hours and assumes that there will be times when long hours are simply necessary for one's career. Although she advocates for everyone to spend more time caring for others, she is unwilling to critique current workplace models for

middle-class occupations in which long hours hours away from home are expected.

On the other hand, Slaughter makes helpful concrete suggestions for changing the way we talk about work. Simple things like being open and honest in the workplace about caregiving commitments, referring to men who have families as working parents, and refraining from asking new acquaintances what they do for a living can change people’s perceptions about what matters. Whom we care for and how we care for them shouldn’t be considered any more private or public than a professional identity.

Bearing one another’s burdens is central to Christian identity even though such values are often ignored or forgotten in our competitive meritocracy. Slaughter has helped initiate a conversation about how society values care.