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Family and Faith: Hadley Smith's Life of Care Work

Hadley Smith was born in Kingston, Ontario, Canada in March 1962 and has worked a life defined by care work and a deep consideration for other people. Along the way, as her journey weaved through multiple cities, another continent, and work that was invisible, she became a mother five separate times. Her fourth child was me and that is how I know her. Hadley is a worker, a mother, a caregiver, a daughter, a university graduate, and a multitude of so many other identities. Her work life has been defined in service to others. This started with her first job aiding her grandparents, continued in her role as a stay-at-home-mom, carried over to her work as a housekeeper and a janitor, and on to her current unpaid job as caretaker to her parents. She has been married to a former teacher and union executive for forty-two years and is now retired from paid work. Hadley is a white, middle class woman who is descended from a long line of Irish catholicism that she still identifies very strongly with. Her faith shapes her actions as well as views and beliefs that can sometimes seem anachronistic to me.

Before writing this essay I knew the broad strokes about my mother's work, and her life, but I found myself wanting for an appreciation of the course she navigated. I know my mom loves me, and I know that I love my mom, but there has also always been an unspoken barrier between us. She was never the person I turned to in moments of grief, of confusion, or stress. I asked my mother to be my interview subject because I wanted to push past that barrier. This was an opportunity to humanize my mom and explore her motivations, beliefs, and feelings in a way that her and I have never done together. I think our interview went really well. For myself, I graduated, I think, to a more empathetic understanding of the purpose she felt throughout her

paid and unpaid work. For Hadley, I think she was nervous to share but saw the interview as another act of service in a life full of acts of service.

Hadley's devotion to care work and contribution to the care economy is a defining theme of her work life. Kate Power defines the care economy as the daily grind of work that needs to be managed and completed so that life can continue to function (Power, 2020). This is so much of what has occupied Hadley throughout her life. Her first job was the summer when she was thirteen years old and she left Montréal, Québec for Harvey, New Brunswick to aid her maternal grandparents who could not quite keep up with the day to day demands of their life. Hadley and her sister helped to cook, clean, shop and schedule for their elderly grandparents until school returned that autumn. Neither of them was paid for their time but Hadley said she was thrilled just to spend the summer in Harvey, one of her favourite places.

Hadley says that she knew from the time that she was a teenager that she wanted to be a full time mom. She never considered it a job but rather a duty she was called to perform. Her parents, who softly coerced her to attend university, did not always approve of Hadley's choice to be, above all else, a mother. When Hadley told her mom that she was pregnant with her fifth child, she was devastated by the response she received, "you just don't want to work". To her parents, work was only visible and appreciated if it was paid. For thirty years, Hadley performed the unpaid work, the societally underappreciated, and the invisible work of keeping a house running while making sure her children were nurtured. It was her full time job. Her reproductive labour did not directly contribute to Canada's economy, to burnishing Canada's GDP, but Hadley's work allowed her husband to focus on being a teacher and union executive, as well as allowing her children to become consumers and workers in the capitalist economy (Towes, 2024).

When Hadley reentered the world of paid work she did so as with her children firmly centred in her decision making. “No job could ever take precedence over being there for my kids,” Hadley told me. Despite being armed with a bachelor’s degree from York University, Hadley continued to choose care work and jobs that are societally disparaged as unskilled. As Anne Toves described in her first unit lecture, the “sticky floor” means that women are less likely to begin to ascend the ladder in the world of work (Toves, 2024, Slide 26). Hadley stuck to that floor because her role as a mother would always ensure that her paid work was secondary. Multiple times during our interview, Hadley reiterated that since her teenage years she had dutifully imagined herself as mom committed to her family but at other points in the interview she expressed long forgotten desires of pursuing a career in the military or national parks for the “adventure”, or even as nurse so she would have been able to collect a pension.

In chapter ten of Naomi Klein’s book *No Logo: Taking Aim At Brand Bullies*, she writes about the different interpretations of work flexibility as interpreted by bosses and workers. To the bosses, flexibility is an opportunity to hire someone on the cheap at a depressed wage and without benefits, while for the worker it is the chance to work less hours but still maintain a regular schedule with remuneration worthy of their value (Klein, 1999). After Hadley re-entered the paid workforce in 2001, she worked a series of jobs that included running a stall at the local farmer’s market, working as a maid at a motel, working as a housekeeper for a wealthy family, and working as a janitor at the Roman Catholic church. All these jobs were part time work that she undertook in addition to the second and third shifts she worked at home (Power, 2020). For Hadley, the definition of flexible work that she accepted meant that she was never part of a union, that she was always an hourly, part-time worker, and that she retired with no pension. She stressed to me that all her paid jobs gave her the opportunity to care for people in different ways,

and she wanted me to know that she felt valued by her employers, especially the Church and the family she kept house for, and that both employers gave her unasked for raises over the years.

It is important to highlight that the loyalty Hadley showed, the time and energy she provided to her employers, was always more favorable to them. Hadley told me of a time when the family she worked for as a housekeeper tried to give her a raise but she refused, saying she already felt like she was giving her best effort and did not know what more effort she could give to earn the increased wage. Hadley internalized the social devaluation of care work, thinking of herself as only worth so much. In Harvey Krahn's writing about unions he lists control over work and rewards for work as activities that unions organize to control (Krahn, 2006). These twin pillars of union control were never available to Hadley and her work as the custodian at the church poignantly illustrated moments where a union would have been incredibly useful. Hadley was paid for fifteen hours of work a week, however would frequently work twenty or twenty-five, to shovel snow in the winter or help set up for a funeral, without ever receiving extra pay. She told me that "she never asked for overtime". As an employee who only officially worked fifteen hours a week, Hadley was not eligible for a pension, but employees who worked twenty-two hours a week were. Not having that union to advocate on her behalf cost Hadley thousands of dollars of wages and the chance at a pension. Hadley is not mad about this, not at all, because she found so much satisfaction in her opportunity to provide service to others.

There is a quote by John Ruskin that hangs on Hadley's fridge, "the highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it, but what they become from it". Hadley is a maverick in today's world because she has eschewed money as much as she can; she has always and forever distanced herself from measuring wealth in terms of material possessions, and her work has been shaped by her desire to uplift people around her. Throughout the interview, I was surprised by the

sheer depth of her fulfillment that came from jobs that society often doesn't give a damn about. I also want to note that it is easy for me, or anyone else, to read Hadley's story and interpret her paid work experiences as being defined by what Marx would term a false consciousness.

However, Hadley would never describe it that way. She carries no anger for money not received but rather sees herself, I think, as someone who had held tight to uniting values of sacrifice and care for her fellow human. I remember moments, frequent moments, growing up and in the not so distant past when I was embarrassed to say that my mom was a church custodian and a housekeeper. That was shallow of me and this essay is another step in a continuing journey of learning and appreciation for my mom and for all undervalued workers.

References

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