

A Short Story: How the International Institute for Human Understanding Got Started

Caring Through the Lens of Human Understanding

One day about twelve years ago, a few of my colleagues and I were discussing the preponderance of scholarship on "*caring*" written by our most distinguished colleagues. We knew that many conversations were occurring internationally as to what encompasses and enhances caring. Those discussions gave birth to an institute: The International Institute for Human Understanding (IIHU).

Our premise was unwavering, that human understanding of others, whether groups or individuals, was unequivocally essential to the actualization of a "*caring*" philosophy or a "*caring*" action. Inherent in this belief was the *individual* as knowledge holder, *the knower*, and the *professional as the unknower*. The ownership of what was needed "to care" was given to the recipient of care. The professional held theoretical knowledge, beliefs, prescriptions, protocols in abeyance until the caregiver had come to understand the individual's or group's particular meaning and perceptions about the experience at hand.

We need first to understand the meaning individuals make of their own experiences. As we discussed what the aims of the IIHU would be, we knew we wanted to promote the envisioning of an individual or group as part of a larger context, where this influence is ever present in an existential rhythmic exchange. Persons in their everyday worlds hold secrets, nuances and are embedded in the particular contingencies of their lives. We understood that descriptive and prescriptive theory needed caveats and one very important caveat was the need for a particular understanding of a particular person. In essence we wanted to have an institute that would move *from the general to the specific*, one that critically questioned generalities. Caring then would be based on the *particular understanding* of the experienced world of the recipient of care.

On a pragmatic level we would be the first to acknowledge that this is a time consuming approach to care. Yet, without this basic understanding we also knew that caring would take place in a vacuum, perhaps off base to this particular person and therefore ineffective or uncomfortable. This is how we set about the beginnings of an institute devoted to promoting human understanding.

The IIHU was then founded in 1995 to foster human understanding, civil discourse, and humanitarian models of concern, caring, and justice, especially *as those goals may be encouraged through interdisciplinary work in the health and human sciences* and has

expanded to include all fields where interaction between and among people occur.

Our mission has evolved as a response to alienation, human suffering, and intolerance, and a recognized urgency for human understanding across cultures, systems, and communities. Our ongoing agenda embraces education, inquiry, and service.

We realize that the quest for human understanding must recognize the cultural contexts and social contingencies of meaning. Even as we recognize contingencies of meaning, we hope to encourage ethical responses to diversity and alienation. In our work, we question underlying philosophical assumptions, encourage civil and cross-cultural discourse, and work to encourage and create new humanitarian models of affinity, caring, concern, and justice.

In our 18th year, we are pleased to announce the opening of the Open U, an open university for lifelong learners, to assist others in achieving the understanding necessary for models of compassion, equality and empathy. We are also pleased to report that Patricia Munhall, the founder of the Institute for Human Understanding just served out her most recent term as President, and is now President Emeritus of the IIHU. We are equally pleased to report that Maureen Duffy, one of the co-founders of the International Institute for Human understanding, is currently serving as President of the IIHU.

Patricia Munhall
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