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## Caring, Showing, Working Wood: On the Caring Dimensions of Woodworking

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### Abstract

Health care education emphasizes a theoretical understanding of care and a cognitive approach to learning, often neglecting the embodied aspects of caregiving. This highlights the need for art educational practices in nursing that encourage embodied reflection, allowing nurses to develop their intuition and practical skills. The purpose of this article is to share lessons drawn from wood workshops to illuminate the forgotten personal and aesthetic dimensions of care and explore innovative ways to reintroduce these aspects of care in nurse education. We examine if philosophical woodworking would make it possible for nursing students to talk and think about caring in different ways than those expressed in standard accounts. Theoretically, our study is situated within care aesthetics. We use five theoretical concepts to deepen

our understanding of the findings generated in the wood workshops: Care, Craft, Making, Responsivity, and Showing. Methodologically, this study is embedded in Participatory Action Research as we fostered a communicative space to generate various forms of knowledge in cycles of action, reflection and learning. Participants were instructed to “show the wood” and while working wood, they shared their reflections and experiences with the participating researcher. Thinking with theory was used as an analysis strategy. The findings reveal that woodworking involved several stages of reflection, including non-intentional and intentional contact-making. We conclude woodworking potentially offers greater opportunities for embodied reflection than common practice-based learning, but further investigation is required with health care students and teachers to test the relevance of our findings for nurse education.

### **Introduction**

As a philosophical woodworker, many times I, Tom and first author, have experienced the love and care involved in the process of working a piece of wood. Inspired by the insightful depths of the practice of woodworking, in teaching at the nursing department I asked myself how woodworking could become part of the curriculum, to invite students to become familiar with invisible dimensions of care, and let students reflect in an out of the box manner on ways in which they care. In traditional health care education, care typically consists of a specific set of uniform competencies that can be acquired by learning textbook theory and accumulating hours of practice focusing on technical and interpersonal skills. In this rather cognition-oriented approach to education, there is only ample attention for embodied and aesthetic activity that is open to spontaneity, to the unexpected, to what moves us suddenly and touches us deeply, beyond regulations and skills. In fact, none of the documents underpinning the Dutch health care education curricula<sup>1</sup> contain words like “perception,” “sense,” “body,” “embodiment,” and “corporeality”. In this study we aimed to create a solid ground for a woodwork assignment for health care professionals to address this missing part in nurse education based on cycles of participatory action-reflection and learning through dialogue (Abma et al., 2019).

The empirical basis of the research consists of a woodworking collaboration with several artists/makers, at the Leyden Academy Care Aesthetic Workshop. The workshop is located in a spacious, bright basement with a few windows, a workbench, and stools in the center. The

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<sup>1</sup> For nursing that is the Beroepsprofiel verpleegkundigen (Professional profile nurses) 2012 and the BN2020 (the current 2015 education profile), for medicine the Raamplan Artsenopleiding (Framework training doctors) 2020.

wood workshops illuminate the forgotten personal and aesthetic dimensions of care and explore innovative ways to reintroduce these aspects of care in the nurse education. Theoretically, our study is situated within a care aesthetic context (Maassen 2023; Thompson 2022). We follow a care aesthetics as developed by Thompson (2022), which focuses on embodiment in caring situations. In the wood workshop, embodiment relates to the momentary look, feel, touch and smell of the wood and to sensory responsiveness. In the workshop, embodiment does not relate to this other important aspect of embodiment, namely body awareness, since, as Drew Leder emphasized in *The absent body* (Leder, 1990), in the attention for a specific task, such as wood working, the body of the worker as a phenomenon, tends to be absent. Five theoretical concepts central to this study will be discussed: Care, Craft, Making, Responsivity, and Showing. We begin with introducing the wood workshop, including the instruction and the methodology to engage participants in the knowledge production process and mobilize various forms of knowledge, including experiential, artistic and embodied knowledge (Abma, et al 2001). Subsequently, we will present the learning experiences and dialogical reflections taking place during the wood workshops. We conclude with a discussion on the implications for further research and the integration of craft in health care education.

### **The Wood Workshop**

Wood chips blanket the workbench, a colorful mosaic of chipped olive, walnut, cherry, ebony, and tulip hardwood scattered amongst them. A variety of hand tools lie at the ready: chisels, hammers, clamps, saws, carving knives, and sandpaper. Brown dust jackets hang nearby, a welcoming invitation for visitors and participants to join.



*Figure 1.* Tom at the workbench.

Between April and October 2023, Nieke, Jorg, Leo, Marjolein, Tamar, Anneloes, and Demis, each individually, visited the workshop. Together in a participatory and dialogical process, we explored if and how a specific process of woodworking can be informative about the ways in which we care. Nieke is an interdisciplinary artist with a fascination for the body, often working in the health care domain. As she developed the instruction with me and took a great interest in the underlying ideas, became the second author of this article. Jorg works in addiction rehabilitation care, where he is responsible for education and development of personnel. He enjoys working wood and making things work in and around the house. In his retirement, Leo has taken up woodworking in his free time. Marjolein is a theatre director and player, who has often worked with older persons with dementia and health care workers. Before she entered the workshop, Marjolein had no experience with working wood, just like Tamar and Anneloes, professional dancer, choreographer and researchers in the health care domain. Demis, finally, is a woodworking craftsman.

We deliberately chose to work with artists and makers and not directly with care professionals or students, because artists are often very well aware of their embodied involvement in making and creating, and of the way their sensory apparatus is fine-tuned (Nieke, Marjolein, Tamar, and Anneloes). This was considered important in relation to the desired reflective content on the care as part of woodworking. Most of the participants also work in the field of health care (Nieke, Jorg, Marjolein, Tamar, and Anneloes), so they were expected to have specific ideas about what (good) care is. Leo and Demis had woodwork as a profession or as a serious hobby, with no professional experience in the health care domain, which was interesting in comparison.

### Show the Wood

The instruction for the wood workshop was on purpose not a priori defined but emerged along the way in collaboration with Nieke Koek. During the first of two sessions we had together we worked wood for about three hours, while having a conversation through which we reflected on what we were actually doing, and how this could possibly become an assignment for students and health care professionals. Because we both were constantly busy working the wood, the conversation developed in quite a unique way, which is also acknowledged by British anthropologist Tim Ingold, in his book on making (Ingold 2014). There he described undertaking various making activities with students, explaining that, as a result, the nature of the conversations between them changed fruitfully: “We all agreed that the quality of the discussions we had while doing things was quite unlike anything experienced in an ordinary seminar, and that they were tremendously productive of new insights” (p. 45).

The main reason for this success is that the conversation is grounded in sensory experience. The conversation starts with sensory experience, and returns there, but can also lead the conversation in a new direction. During the making, the gained experiences form a constant feed for the conversation. For example, while seeing, touching, feeling and smelling the wood, sensing where it resisted our attempts to work it and where it surrendered, so to speak, we asked ourselves what the instruction for students should be. We came up with “follow the wood”, to indicate a responsive attitude, accentuate the relatedness with the material and inspire the search for correspondence with it, just as Ingold (2014) describes the process of making as finding correspondence. However, this instruction leads the maker to focus exclusively on the materiality of the wood—the structure, grain, colors, patterns and more, while, from an artistic point of view, imagination is substantial to making. In other words, the instruction should not only challenge the craft of the participant, but also make it artistic, just as James Thompson (2022) describes care as an artful practice.

During the first session, Nieke worked on a piece of olive wood, whereas I chose walnut, and Nieke soon became absorbed in her woodwork. However, I experienced the wood’s closedness very strongly and felt that it was not speaking to me. I could not connect with the wood, I could discover no trace in it to follow. After about an hour I mentioned that the wood apparently “had nothing in it”. At the end of the session, contrary to this earlier experience, I told Nieke that it felt like the wood was hiding something from me, but I had no idea what it could be. A few days later, I continued working the wood in my workshop at home. After about 10 minutes, I experienced a breakthrough, as though I suddenly perceived clearly what the wood *needed*. I felt a sense of ease coming over me, a sudden confirmation, as if I had finally come to see the direction it wanted to go, what it wanted to become, and what my role in that becoming could be. The exploratory searching phase had changed into a form of

contact that made attunement possible. During the afternoon, while working on the wood and observing what it was becoming, the instruction to “show the wood” came to mind.



*Figure 2. Walnut by Tom.*

“Show the wood” shows similarities with one of the primary moral responsibilities often taught in nursing ethics courses, where students are encouraged to see the human being in or behind the patient, or nursing home resident (Cook et al., 2021; Fawcett et al., 2014). However, the person in question may not show himself or herself naturally under time pressure or in a medical context, or there may be other reasons for the person to “withdraw.” While we recognize wood as a material lacking sentience, the process of working with it can foster a relational connection with students. This transforms their perspective, viewing wood not just as a material, but as a potential source of ‘materialized care’ (Visse & Niemeijer, 2024). Therefore, this instruction seemed very appropriate to learn more about the aesthetics of care through woodworking. Hence, the second session with Nieke, and with all other participants, were guided by this instruction. The instruction lets participants work the wood and, in working it, challenges them to sense and bring to the fore what – in the participants view - it is for itself. The related research question was: What happens in and with a maker in relation to the wood being worked when instructed to “show the wood”?

### **Dialogical Set-Up**

The study design used to address the research question was grounded in participatory action research (PAR). PAR is useful to learn from and reflect on collective actions (the woodworking workshops) to realize practical changes and societal impact (Abma et al., 2017). In this case, we aim eventually to change health care education and enrich it with insights from care aesthetics. While methods and techniques are oftentimes considered the means for empirical data, in PAR the creation of a ‘communicative space’ is found to be of greater importance to generate and mobilize the learning experiences of participants and engage them fully in the process of knowledge co-production. Communicative spaces are characterized by the qualities of a good dialogue: respect for the narrator, a willingness to share one’s own doubts and uncertainties and be transformed by the dialogue and an open-ended process (Abma, et al., 2001). This horizontal epistemology is grounded in a commitment to epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) and is open to all sources of knowledge, including experiential, artistic, and embodied knowledge.

In line with these epistemological notions, we fostered a communicative space where participants talked out loud about their experiences in the making. In this communicative space the reflective, artistic practice creates a social environment wherein participants are able to exist in new ways.

The sessions were dialogical in a twofold manner. First, the person working the wood was in constant interaction with the wood, seeking correspondence with the wood in order to let it ‘show itself’. This is a linguistic, physical as well as imaginative dialogue. Second, participants working the wood were in dialogue with me, the researcher, who meanwhile was working his own piece of wood. I asked questions like “where is your attention aiming at right now?” or, when a participant sighed or responded in a noticeable way: “what happened just there?”. Often, participants asked me similar questions and I shared my experiences.

A language of doing differs immensely from a language reflecting on the acting. They may even be incommensurable. Whereas a language of doing is more of a mumbling, inconsistent stammering, sounds and half words, reflection is fond of contemplative thought and whole sentences with a certain degree of consistency. Although the stammering’s definitely possessed their own musicality, my interruptions and conversations every now and then, aimed at starting up a reflexive process, the production of a reflexive language game. This was for the sake of the research, as well as for didactic purposes, exploring how it can benefit the learning process and constitute a reflective awareness in the participant. Through the practice of woodworking, this type of practice-led research (Smith & Dean, 2009) enabled us to explore unknown ways of experiencing care, and gain new knowledge about if and how such experiences can be effectively communicated in health care education.

All sessions were audio recorded, each of which lasted at least three hours, and the recordings captured many (hammer and chisel) woodworking sounds interspersed with remarks, ideas, mutterings, and short conversations.

Before and after the sessions, I adopted a wait-and-see attitude when it came to sharing experiences so that participants were given space to discover and follow their own paths. I also explicitly avoided explaining the instruction “show the wood” as a metaphor for “showing the human being” as much as possible. I had several reasons for doing this. First, the risk involved in such an explanation is that it might have shaped individual and shared experiences in irresponsible ways, confirming existing images and ideas while excluding new experiences, with a high probability of leaving no room for genuine insights into what caring could be or for the unexpected to appear. Second, seeing woodworking as a means to explain caring for humans instead of understanding and learning from it would have disrespected the practice of making as an independent form of caring, which we elaborate below. That being said, it remained quite difficult in practice to maintain such clear distinctions.

The thinking out loud sessions were tape-recorded after consent and later analyzed and linked to a set of theoretical notions that seemed relevant to further deepen the learning experiences of the participants. This so-called ‘Thinking with Theory’ and plugging-in of theoretical notions has been described by Jackson and Mazzei (2013). Inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, these American methodologists compare the analysis and interpretation of data with connecting one ‘text machine’ to another to produce new text. After an initial analysis, this starts with the question: which text (machines) can I best connect to the text (machines) I have selected, to generate credible and interesting findings? The approach of Jackson and Mazzei (2013) allows for conceiving the continuous interaction between data and theory in a horizontal, non-hierarchical dialogue. Below, we present the key notions we used in the dialogue between practice and theory.

### **Theory in Dialogue with Practice**

For the purpose of clarity, five concepts central to this study need a clear description of their use in this article: Care, Craft, Making, Responsivity, and Showing. These concepts stem from various disciplinary and intellectual histories that can help us to further deepen insights of aspects and dimensions of care aesthetics.

#### ***Care***

According to Joan Tronto's well-known definition of ‘care’, care includes all: “activities we do to remain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible” (Tronto 1993, p. 103). This definition has the same structure as the common dictionary description of



to work something: “to change something to make it suitable for some purpose”, or “to work on something, sometimes to make it suitable for something else”. Doing one thing to achieve or make possible another. According to these definitions caring can be explained as a form of working and vice versa. By definition, the range of activities must be as wide as possible, because no matter how skilled you are, if you perform them with the aim to live in the world as well as possible, they are caring activities. Also, by definition, caring is relational in nature, be it to other people, other living beings, yourself, the environment or any material. One always cares *about* and *for* something or someone, so there is another ‘object’ that one needs to relate and attune to. Caring, understood as a form of working or making opens up the aesthetic dimension of care, a dimension we need if we desire a clearer understanding of what is involved in caring situations in which the body, the senses and imagination are involved. A single focus on the ethical dimension is not sufficient for this.

This interpretation of care as working seems consistent with Heidegger’s notion of care (*Sorge*). For Heidegger, care is a fundamental aspect of our being in the world: “having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining...” (Heidegger 1962, p.75). are all activities in which care, or concern (*Besorgen*), is the common denominator.

But if living in the world as well as possible is the aim, other ways of being can also be fruitful. For example, a Buddhist way of living, creating and working, in which non-intention and indeterminacy are key, as for the American avant-garde composer John Cage. So, besides the notion of care as working something to live in the world as well as possible, care here importantly also contains being sensitive to the non-intentional, as described by Dennis Greenwood (Greenwood, 2007). Greenwood explains with Emmanuel Levinas that intentional understanding of a situation and of another person obscures the importance of the spontaneous response (Greenwood, 2007). In caring relationships, we should also be sensitive to the non-intentional: “The non-intentional is not concerned with evidence or logic, it suggests an openness to ‘appearance’ rather than a preoccupation with understanding” (Greenwood, 2007, p. 228). Later, in describing the concept of responsiveness according to Bernard Waldenfels, we will get into this in more detail.

### ***Craft***

According to Richard Sennett, in his book *The Craftsman*, “craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake” (Sennett, 2008, p. 23). The craftsman is a skilled professional, not interested in wealth, applause, or any other instrumental form of acknowledgement of the public or of the object of his concern. According to Sennett (2008) “all craftsmanship is founded on skill developed to a high

degree” (p. 37). A skilled professional performs his/her controlled techniques and skills as well as possible, does this for its own sake. Next, Sennett critiques western history in that it separated technical skill from imagination, and the head from the hands (Sennett, 2008). This certainly holds for most health care education, wherein a dominant cognitive approach towards learning and development neglects the close relation between the two (Maassen, 2023).

With respect to the woodworking, it cannot be expected that all participants have developed their woodworking skills to a high degree. Some of them have never worked wood at all. Nevertheless, what they did develop during their careers, are four qualities Sennett ascribes throughout the book to the craftsman: the use of imagination, curiosity, a strong engagement with material reality, and, closely related to this, a certain extent of material consciousness. According to Sennett (2008) we become “particularly interested in the things we can change” (p. 201). We invest thought in what we can change, and such thinking, which is material consciousness, revolves around three key issues: metamorphosis, presence, and anthropomorphosis (Sennett, 2008).

An interesting aspect of metamorphosis is that it is about materials that are good to think with. Sennett gives the example of food and clay, and we add wood to this. Every piece of wood has character, is different from all other pieces of wood, every piece accepts your working it to a certain degree, every piece needs specific attention, it tests your skill and responsibility to work it, every piece has its own history of growth and life, and the inside of it is always a surprise. For example, my choice to work this specific type of wood can inform me about myself. My relationship with and attitude towards a piece of wood is challenging on a personal level. Presence is about the urge to leave a mark on materials, which has existed as long as people work materials. Anthropomorphosis is about our tendency to project human qualities on materials. Mostly virtues, according to Sennett, such as trustworthiness, honesty and friendliness (Sennett 2008).

### ***Making***

Tim Ingold (2014) claimed that making processes often do not proceed hylomorphically (*hyle* meaning matter and *morphe* form). By this he means that, in making processes, there is often not an imagined form in the mind of the maker, according to which he/she shapes material reality, even if the intention is to make a particular thing. Making does not necessarily mean having a mental image and projecting it onto the physical reality you are influencing. In fact, many making processes do not even start with a design. For example, ancient cathedrals were never designed in their totality, and no drawings or architectural schemes existed for such cathedrals. According to Ingold (2014), workers simply started building, and if they encountered a challenge or a problem, they solved it locally. People made artifacts long before

the era of design, and Ingold (2014) made the point that the ubiquity of design nowadays leads us to think that making always starts with a *hylomorphic* plan—a mental image of the finished artifact. Instead, Ingold (2014) claimed, we should see making as a process of reacting to circumstances and of responsivity toward what happens and presents itself during the process. Of course, there may be an intention, but the relation of the maker with the material and with circumstances dominate the making process. Ultimately, the maker's interest should be to seek and find *correspondence* with what is made (Ingold, 2014). This holds for architecture, art, anthropology, and archeology, as the subtitle of the book indicates.

### ***Responsivity***

Bernard Waldenfels' (2003) responsive phenomenology aligns with the responsive aspect of Ingold's conception of making. For Waldenfels (2003),

responding embodies an ethos of the senses that extends from great ceremonies down to lovers' play. In the end, the old sentence 'The human being is an animal which disposes of discourse or speech' can be reformulated in the sentence 'The human being is an animal which responds' (p. 32).

Thus, he critiqued the central place of the concept of intentionality in phenomenology. According to Shurts (1991) explaining Husserl, intentionality means that consciousness "is intentional, i.e. it is always conscious of something" (p. 44). This means that consciousness, from a phenomenological perspective, primarily concerns what consciousness is directed toward. Waldenfels (2013), on the contrary, claimed that in everyday life, many things happen to us that we cannot conceive of as "something" and, therefore, not as something that consciousness can be directed toward. Human beings move between "*pathos* and *response*" (Waldenfels, 2013, p. 34). This happens constantly, but it becomes particularly clear when something extraordinary happens.

Waldenfels (2013) called *pathos* what happens to us and moves us suddenly and unexpectedly, touching us. *Pathos* elicits a response. Both happen "beyond meaning and rule. At the point where something challenges us and puts our own possibilities in question just before we get involved in a questioning that strives for knowledge and the will to know" (Waldenfels, 2003, p. 30). There may be moments and situations we experience consciously but are not able to make sense of. This precedes the usual accountability for what we do and say being linked to our intentions (Waldenfels, 2013). In response, I, or somebody else, may start explaining what happened to impose order on the event, which normally calms us. However, there is a difference between a responsive event and responsive content: the content consists of a moral, legal, or factual explanation of what has happened, the event contains more than that. Waldenfels (2003) claimed, "Giving an answer is not exhausted by the answer

given” (p. 31). Thus, Waldenfels (2003) located responsivity on a bodily, sensory, and pre-moral level rather than the level of linguistic communication and understanding, as in care ethics (Tronto, 1993). This whole responsive dimension is unattainable if we focus solely on our intentions.

### ***Showing***

The concept of *showing* has a central place in our work and in phenomenology. In *Being and Time* Heidegger elaborated on the concept of phenomenology based on two components of the word: phenomenon and logos. According to Heidegger (1993), a phenomenon is what shows itself. He derived this insight from the meaning of the Greek word *phainesthai*—which means something showing itself to itself. The *logos* component of phenomenology means to “show” or demonstrate, in and through language, the phenomena under investigation (Heidegger, 1993).

Waldenfels (2003) criticized Heidegger’s conception of showing, a critique that is in line with that on Heidegger’s concept of care, as mentioned earlier: “It is precisely the ‘itself’ of showing itself, the *Sich* of the *Sichzeigen*, that does not appear in what shows itself” (p. 27). This “itself” is inconceivable and eludes understanding, since understanding, as Waldenfels (2003) claimed, is “a peculiarly sublime way of appropriation . . . supposed to be able to let everything appear as itself by overcoming its alienness or otherness” (p. 28). The responsive content of understanding makes it impossible to experience the responsive event, always inhibiting something alien or other. In other words, *understanding* makes it impossible for what appears to a person to show *itself*. The alien is inherent in people’s relationships with others, happening events, their own bodies, and things in the world. We are able to experience strangeness by being responsive to what happens to us, leaving the “answers at hand, embedded in the normality of customs and morals aside,” and responding from a realm that “begins elsewhere” (Waldenfels, 2003, p. 35), enabling us to be creative.

Resembling Waldenfels’s conception of showing and the alien that eludes our understanding, Wittgenstein (1999) claimed that what shows itself is what cannot be said clearly (philosophically or scientifically). Ultimately, what shows itself is more important than what can be said (Wittgenstein, 1999). Nothing about the good, the beautiful, the ethical, or the aesthetic can be said in a meaningful way; these things only show themselves through experience, they are the mystical (Wittgenstein, 1999). According to Wittgenstein (1999), poetry and music show the ethical/aesthetic aspects of life as nothing else can. Despite the fact that Wittgenstein and Heidegger had very different conceptions of language, there is an important similarity between them in terms of showing; both considered the poet and poetic language best able to show ethical, aesthetic, and ontological meaning.

To sum up these five, closely related concepts and indicate their relevance for this study: *care* here is not so much about skill, but about relationality and about being sensitive to what happens beyond our intentions and intended understanding, i.e. the non-intentional; *craft* means being engaged with the material and the possibility of thinking with it; *making* means finding correspondence, not correspondence of a material with my mental projection, but of my attention and choices with the becoming material; *responsivity* is our pre-reflective embodied involvement in the situation, preceding our plans and intentions; which makes *showing* phenomenologically essential to understanding and giving meaning to reality, only if we accept and respect the partially strangeness of what we are dealing with. For the practice of *showing the wood* this means that we as participants are challenged to be responsive to what the wood tells and shows us. By opening up to the non-intentional, we sense what happens spontaneously, with the wood and with ourselves, we let ourselves be guided by this, seek correspondence and share our thinking with the wood, and reflect on our desires and urges to understand, explain and appropriate the wood and the process of working it, to make it into something we want it to be or become.

### Findings

Nieke described her experience during the first session as follows:

For me, working with wood and chisels is fairly new and somewhat uncomfortable. I chose olive wood because the lines stood out so strongly in the grain. I found it rather difficult to start with a straight piece, so characterless, with its machine-sawn edges; it no longer seemed to have anything to do with nature. The organic forms of a tree had been restricted, like a bird that is no longer allowed to fly. The first need I felt in the piece of wood was to follow or expose a few organic lines. In olive wood, these are easy to follow. However, I had yet to discover how to handle this new tool. The very first movement was super exciting—like making a choice that would determine everything else. There is a feeling that you can't reverse it if anything goes wrong. The idea of grabbing another piece of wood doesn't work because, after all, it is *this* piece of wood, with this character and these lines, that you are having an encounter with. You are actually already in connection, even though it is still tender. The first movement also feels like you are hurting the wood. In my imagination, I apologized, but the wood invited, challenged, and reassured me. For a while, I felt somewhat insecure about my actions. Maybe that's when I began to surrender so that the wood could whisper what it wanted. I felt strengthened that you were there, too—that we were in the same situation together, working with pieces of wood that were not yet what they would soon become. The tools, too, were a quest. What does this part do? How do I make sure the wood determines what shapes we follow rather than the tools forcing the shape?

After fiddling for a while, I noticed that whole chips sometimes came off the wood, following its grain exactly. That felt good—that the wood could follow its lines rather than I, or the tool, determining the shape. I suddenly found what I was looking for and quite quickly managed to position my chisels in such a way that I broke off an entire chip of wood several times.

We were in dialogue! The olive wood and I understood each other. Suddenly, things were going well, and there was hardly any doubt. I noticed that I was trying to avoid going too far. This happened once. I chiseled off a piece I'd become attached to, and it felt like a great loss.



*Figure 3. Olive wood by Nieke.*

After some work, I made a rather drastic decision, or rather, I allowed myself to hear what the wood was telling me. It had to be cleaved in two with the axe. There was something at the core that needed to become visible. I gently tapped the axe on a clear, dark line, and then, almost naturally, the wood split in two. It was perfection, and both I and the wood were content. "Right, Woody?" The two parts were slightly different from each other in height, and a corner needed to be removed. Then it felt almost finished. I greatly enjoyed gently sanding it up. In half a day, I had become hugely attached to my olivewood, and she to me. "Right, Woody?"

This process ignores the creative power that we makers learn to wield. It is the power of allowing the material to speak louder so that we can imagine what it should be or become. This goes beyond what I want it to be, beyond my imagination. This is about seeking dialogue with a completely different kind of entity and opening up to it as fully as possible.

It is interesting how much of your sensitivity is deployed when you want to understand wood. It is a kind of whisper language. It even goes beyond what the wood initially shows you. It is somewhere inside, and if you dig too deep, you go past it and are left with only the chips.

Nieke mentioned the dialogue with a “completely different entity,” pointing to the fact that trying to show the wood allowed the wood to be experienced as something other. You share no common language with a completely different entity; you can only listen, be sensitive and responsive, and wait until it reaches out. Hence, the language Nieke used to describe her process of showing is poetic—a language that tries to show the process of showing the wood, as she experienced in the workshop. Visse et al. (2019) recognized something similar:

We saw that, to open up to these mysteries and this kind of phenomenological sensitivity, we must not only follow a cognitive logic, but indeed also and primarily a ‘poetic logic’. Poetic (kataphatic) knowing (Taylor, 1998) and apophatic non-knowing (Franke, 2014) are receptive and indirect, which means being open to what we do not know rather than imposing knowing (Ucok-Sayrak, 2017, p. 307). Practically, one has to live the question through the research process and medium (paper, video, performance, data collection, and analysis) by surrendering to it (p. 11).

In the following, we analyze what Nieke and others experienced, said, and wrote down afterwards, thereby showing how the participants experienced contact with the wood. We distinguish between non-intentional and intentional contact.

### *Non-intentional Contact*

Several participants reported that this way of working wood, as Nieke wrote, went beyond what makers are used to doing. What she referred to was the tendency to start making something by projecting a form onto the material—the hylomorphic tendency—and subjecting it to that intentional focus. Marjolein, just after the beginning of her sessions, mentioned, “I find it really striking, how preoccupied I am with wanting to make something out of it. But when I want to make something out of it, I’m doing something else.”

Demis also noticed this when asked for his initial perceptions. He showed surprise at his own strong felt curiosity and desire to break open the wood and—like Nieke—show the inside to himself.



*Figure 4. Olive wood by Demis.*

Jorg, after working his piece of olive wood for a while, searching for the right words, said, “Unlike what I liked or thought was beautiful when I started, if you follow the wood—a piece of which is now missing, making other layers visible—and if you then talk about what the wood wants to show, then it probably wants to show something different than what I liked about it.” Jorg realized that the start was all-important. Like Nieke, he observed, “It is undeniable that where I started has an effect on what it can become.”





*Figure 5.* Jorg working the wood.

The responsive, non-intentional contact is characterized by an exploratory working process in which sensing, reacting, and searching for possibilities of contact are central. In some places, the wood can be worked easily, while in others, resistance can clearly be felt. These levels of resistance, in relation to their contrasting power, are important information in the process of getting to know the wood. Learning to see which response the wood gives is part of getting to know it (Sennett, 2009, p. 214).



*Figure 6.* Ebony by Tom.

It is unlikely that the hylomorphic tendency is ever entirely abandoned. The struggle between intentions and the non-intentional will not easily disappear. What is experienced is a constant interaction between a mental picture of the form, and the open, responsive anticipation of the form it may become. In a sense, this is a split in attention between directing and going along with something.

For me, the wooden object, while being worked on in the responsive phase, is often experienced as elusive. In being responsive, I try to perceive the wood as it is; meanwhile, I am constantly aware of its partial withdrawal. It is simply not a known object. Nieke sensed this when she remarked, "It's a philosophizing with material." Later in the process, Marjolein observed that she was "constantly working on that form."

What Marjolein apparently needed in this phase of the working process was to "be with the wood". She simply sat with it and, after a while, decided nothing more needed to be done to it. The wood was good as it was. "I can be with it," she said. This indicated a form of contact that said nothing about the wood or about ways to work it but mainly involved the participant's ability to accept and to *ontfermen* (to soften, and be merciful) toward how things are, not acting or intending to solve anything.

Once this dialogical process of responsive anticipation is initiated, the intention of a form often comes only after a breakthrough in contact has taken place. Just like Nieke described in her reflection: "We were in dialogue! The olive wood and I understood each other." The intention of a form is thus, as it were, given by the wood instead of originating from the participant's projection. It is precisely this dynamic caring process of getting into contact, sensitive for the non-intentional, that most participants, once they were able to work in that mode, found inspiring and instructive.

Generally, participants without experience in woodworking did not experience a breakthrough and remained in the phase of non-intentional contact. Since these participants were included because of their reflective capacity and willingness to elaborate, the cause for not experiencing a breakthrough is unlikely to be expected there. More likely their level of skill made them unable to get into, and beyond the surface of the wood. Nevertheless, by staying with the wood in the non-intentional phase for several hours, they had all developed a strong caring relationship with the wood. Only Marjolein – being unexperienced in woodworking - experienced a breakthrough, not by working the wood with tools, but because she adopted a totally different approach, more that of a spiritual caregiver, by simply being present with the object of care. Participants with woodworking skills have actually all experienced a breakthrough, through which a form of what the wood could become presented itself to them.

### ***Intentional Contact***

The next, intentional phase was prompted by a clue from the wood that indicated an opening—a direction for possible showing. Nieke's woodchip coming off, Leo's line to follow, a sound or a color contrast for myself, suddenly prompts you to perceive something in the wood that shows you what it can become. A breakthrough in the contact, and in the way the wood is perceived, occurs, generating momentum in thinking and imagining how to possibly show the wood. This type of clue can be seen as a gesture—which is a poetic word, and actual contact occurs in response to that gesture. In responding, I become aware of the fact that I am adding something of myself to the wood. Something by which the wood is enabled to show... itself? No, by which *I* am enabled to show the wood to myself.

Resembling my experience when I continued with the piece of walnut at home and experienced immediate contact, Nieke said, "Now it suddenly becomes something I would put somewhere; now the thing becomes meaningful to me." In such an experience, one gets to know the wood's becoming. "This is not woodworking but encountering wood," Marjolein stated. In her letter, Nieke also highlighted such an encounter.

Once the clue is perceived, responsive anticipation offers a direction that one can follow. This clue can happen earlier or later, or not at all. For some, it happens after an hour, for others after two hours, and for myself sometimes only days after the end of a session.

Notably, several participants ascribed human characteristics to the material, such as by talking to it ("right, Woody?"), seeing a saw cut as a wound, ascribing feelings to the wood (pain, what it likes and does not like), entering into a caring relationship with the wood, and showing affection. Tamar said afterwards, "The wood moved easily with me, or I moved easily with the wood." However, after working it for a while, when the moving stopped, she decided to cut into her piece of olive wood with a saw, as an experiment, not really knowing why. It soon turned out to be the wrong choice because "when I sawed into it, I did not move well with the wood. It felt like a deep wound," but "eventually, by moving with the wound, I was able to make something beautiful out of it . . . the wound and the movements." In my own use of words, I often observe myself ascribing "a will" to the wood that is beyond my control. This suggests a strongly felt caring relationship with the wood.



*Figure 7. Olive wood by Tamar.*

Confidence in being able to show the wood is important. For Nieke and Jorg, this trust grew while they worked, through getting used to the tools and thus getting in touch with the wood, seeing and feeling contrasts, experiencing different forms of resistance, and getting to know the wood's peculiarities. That the use of violence, of confidently and firmly forming the wood with hard blows of hammer on chisel on wood, in this phase can also be responsive and an aspect of caring, was an important experience for Jorg.

Confidence was also important for Marjolein, linked to her ability to imagine and be with the wood: "When I hold this piece of wood, I feel height, like the sky. Whereas with this piece, I see much more of a kind of core, grounded." Anneloes mentioned confidence as an important ability in the process—not confidence in the outcome, the result, or the actual showing of the wood but in her ability to engage with the process. She has developed this confidence as an artist and saw it as crucial for conducting this assignment.



*Figure 8.* Anneloes working the wood.

During the phase of intentional contact, every participant more or less consciously chooses his/her own focal point in the attempt to show the wood. Leo, for example, worked intensively on the *balance* of the object, he felt the wood needed this to be shown, both during the session and later at home:

I thought the log should stand upright, but there was still an imbalance in shape. I decided it would be better for the log to stand at an angle, so I chamfered the underside in two directions. That improved the balance slightly, but not really enough. At the end of the session, I thought I had finished the piece and would just put it in some oil at home to bring the markings to the fore, but every time I put the piece down somewhere at home, there was still too little balance in it. Perhaps I needed to make sure the piece was even more angled. After trying some makeshift angles to see what it would look like, that didn't seem to be the solution. The imbalance was elsewhere. The obtuse angle in the line pattern created by cutting a triangle over half its thickness on one side seemed to have caused the imbalance. I rounded off the line of that obtuse angle over a greater length. This softened the shape on that side and restored more balance.



*Figure 9. Cherry wood by Leo.*

Leo, Jorg and Nieke shared pictures of the pieces of wood in their homes. Others told me afterwards about the place it had gotten in their homes. Most of them experienced the workshop assignments as deeply inspiring. In their own words,

“A wonderful experience in which time seemed to stand still, and I could move along with what was there.”

“The conversations in between brought depth, enlightenment, and connection.”

“In trying to say things about the working process, I realized how many valuable experiences necessarily remained unsaid.”

“I really got to know the wood.”

“Working with wood can be an opening to the experience of being safe in the uncertainty of not knowing.”



Figure 10. Olive wood at Jorg's home.



Figure 11. Olive wood by Tom.

## **Discussion**

Our research into the potential of woodworking as a form of reflection yielded positive responses from all participants. We wondered if philosophical woodworking would make it possible for health care students and professionals to talk and think about caring in different ways than those expressed in standard normative accounts. Therefore, we studied what happens in and with makers in relation to the wood being worked when they follow the instruction to “show the wood”?

The formulation of the instruction challenged participants to bring responsive seeking and contact-making to the fore as forms of care. The instruction “show the wood” related to a piece of wood is an object, a sawn piece of a specific type of wood, some 15 by 10 by 6 centimeters. In the attempt to show the wood, it appears not to be an object in the sense that there is a clear distinction between the object worked and the worker, the object known and the knowing subject. The wood that shows itself does this only through and for the person showing it, in the experience of it, possibly not at all to another person who is, for example, observing the process. In the process of showing, there is no strict division between object and subject, between the wood and the one working and showing it. Our research, however, demonstrated that in the process of caring as working, showing the wood is fully dependent on the unique relationality that is constituted between the two by a mixture of qualities (e.g. hardness, structure and contrast of the wood, and ability, responsivity, a sensitivity towards the non-intentional, imagination and willingness of the one working it).

Remaining in a mode of responsive exploration proved to be quite a challenge for most participants. Our general tendency to know and act to control the matter at hand is very strong (Visse et al., 2020; Waldenfels, 2013). How to practice an open, responsive stance sometimes conflicts with institutional regulations and structures. In the nurse education program, as well as in nursing theory, similar discrepancies between the lifeworld of nurses and dominant knowledge structures have often been pointed out (Granero-Molina, 2018; Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023).

The “dehumanization” of the object of care (wood) did not lead to inhuman forms of caring. On the contrary, it was clear that the participants developed caring attitudes toward the wood, displaying moral qualities such as openness, presence, reflexivity, listening, and attention. Hence, findings were identified as familiar ways of caring. Being sensitive to the non-intentional, as a caring attitude, contributed to this. Interestingly, the objects of care, not being human, created ample space for participants to reflect on their actions and affinities. While working the wood, the experienced levels of resistance coming from the wood offered insights into participants’ individual ways of dealing with resistance on a physical, responsive level, in which also violence had its place. Wood is patient; thus, caring for non-human wood provided



a unique opportunity for participants to pay exclusive attention to the role of the carer and what the carer brings into play. Simultaneously, we saw several participants anthropomorphize the wood, like Sennett (2009) mentioned this as a form of material consciousness in making, as if caring ultimately (and at least for some, explicitly) requires a humanly perceiving receiver. Interesting for educational purposes is the hylomorphic tendency most participants struggled with. How challenging it is to get into contact with a phenomenon cared for, in a non-intentional way, beyond your prior understanding of it (Greenwood 2007) and the projected form you wish it to become (Ingold, 2014).

Our study confirmed how important it is to articulate and talk aloud while working wood. The added value of reflexive dialogue in the sessions was evident. Engaging in dialogue during woodworking enabled thoughts about working to be released, reflections to be articulated, while being fully aware that various pre-reflexive experiences remained unsaid and/or not understood.

The communicative space shaped meaning in a shared context. In nursing education, actions are often performed in silence and with individual concentration. We experienced, in our attempts to show the wood, that we were not able to articulate and show a great number of movements, actions and reactions. Many things escape objectifying language. We can poetically draw closer, by being open to appearance (Greenwood, 2007), accounting for what withdraws from our knowing and presents itself to our awareness as different, or as other. This awareness of what is and remains other but plays an essential role in caring, it leads to acknowledgement of the need for a different vocabulary to express our (inner) relationships and the world around us; one that is respectful toward the role of the non-intentional.

During the woodworking, a poetic vocabulary came to the fore. Sentences were formed gradually, in search of meaning, with words originating in silence, and creative responses emerged free from the urge to understand. This poetic language had qualities that came much closer to the essence of caring and poetic qualities of care (Visse, 2023) than is reflected by the usual, more factual language used in nursing ethics courses. The dialogues created an affirmative and meaningful space for sharing experiences and reflections, providing room for both what was said and what remained unsaid. While working the wood, the unsayable and what eluded our understanding were constantly present (Waldenfels, 1999, 2004). This offers potential for teaching nurses about what usually cannot be (or is not) put into words but seems essential to share when it comes to our relationships with others, ourselves, and the world.

In retrospect, it could be said that the sessions offer more, or at least different, opportunities for reflection than common practice-based learning contexts allow. This aesthetic activity appears to be eminently suitable for thematizing caring as an embodied activity that includes

all the senses. Considering caring as a form of working or making with a sensitivity towards the non-intentional proved fruitful in this regard. The open format of the assignment encouraged several participants to reflect on their confidence in following the instruction. Multiple forms of confidence came up: confidence in one's own skills, trust in one's own perception, and confidence in the process. For teaching purposes, this is valuable material. Also, the assignment helped the participants to become familiar with what they really cared about and may similarly help nursing students. For example, what was revealed beautifully in Leo's reflection was that the search for balance—something he apparently cared deeply about—is itself a constant balancing act. The value Leo placed on balance showed itself as much in how he proceeded as in what he had said about himself during the session. In fact, this individual answerability applies to all participants. Through each person's unique approach and responsive performance of the woodworking task, each person offered insight into what he/she valued in life and what constituted care. In our attempt to engage in the process of showing—and in our speaking about it—we, above all, showed ourselves to each other and to ourselves.

The concepts central to this study, Care, Craft, Making, Responsivity and Showing, together form a relevant base for alternative ways to think about caring in didactics. The framework balances on the axes of intention and non-intention, of intended, directed action and the possibility of holding back and giving the phenomenon of interest the opportunity to speak for itself, to show itself, whether it be a piece of wood, or any other object, or another living creature. In many caring situations, in practice as well as in the classroom, for health care professionals as well as for teachers, this tension and the ability to shift between the two, is precisely what often is at stake.

What has not extensively been elaborated on in this paper is the role of skills in showing wood. Some participants were skilled at handling the tools, while others were not, or only to a limited extent. Technical skills appear to be of benefit to the process of showing the wood, but not necessarily to building a caring relationship with it through the non-intentional. Related to this is the question of whether and how health care students and practitioners can be trained in the practices of showing. We completed this study with artists and makers who had been trained in the aesthetic skills of perception and illumination; hence, we are eager to collaborate with health care students to find out how their technical skills, curiosity, imagination and material consciousness play a role in the process of showing.

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### About the Authors

Tom Maassen works as a researcher at Leyden Academy on Vitality and Ageing. After having studied philosophy in Amsterdam and Jena (Germany), he lectured at the faculties of medicine in Maastricht and nursing in The Hague, designing and teaching medical philosophy, care ethics and health law. During that time, he noticed a severe lack of attention in the curricula for the aesthetic aspects and qualities of care. Meanwhile, as a woodworker, he developed his ideas about woodworking as a form of care. In his PhD research he further develops his ideas on care aesthetics and its applications in health care education, by performing artistic research and by exploring new art-science collaborations.

Nieke Koek is an interdisciplinary artist working with body awareness as a starting point. The works are not illustrations of what the body can do, but it is examining the condition by which the experience of the body of the audience can be activated. The art works vary from performance to video installation, from wearable to sculpture and involve illustrative elements

of the body in motion. During the second half of 2022 her work was on view in Museum De Fundatie Zwolle in her solo exhibition 'Bodied' ('Gelichaamd'). Nieke frequently collaborates with healthcare professionals, scientists and individuals that have to deal with illness, death and rehabilitation. Through reflective writing and artistic explorative practices, she contributes to various academic research projects. Nieke holds a BA and MA degree and has been teaching at art academies since 2007. Late 2022 she started working as a certified body-oriented trauma coach.

Tineke Abma is Executive-Director of Leyden Academy of Vitality and Ageing and Professor 'Participation of Older People' at the dept. of Public Health & Primary Care, Leiden University Medical Centre. Formerly, she was Professor 'Participation & Diversity' at the dept. of Medical Humanities, Amsterdam University Medical Centre. She has been researching themes closely related to patient participation, participatory action research, ethics, diversity and the arts in the context of healthcare. Her work is aimed at improving the participation and social inclusion of (older) people, especially those in marginalized positions. Abma is the author of many publications and multiple books, including 'Evaluation for a Caring Society' (IAP Press, 2018) and 'Participatory Research for Health and Social Well-Being' (Springer Nature, 2019). Currently, she is a member of the steering committee Arts in Health Netherlands. With a group of 200 stakeholders the committee published a whitepaper on Arts in Health in 2024.

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