

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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## *Books*

### **Digital Humanitarians**

By Patrick Meier

Review by Lucy Bernholz

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
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# BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTABLE TITLES

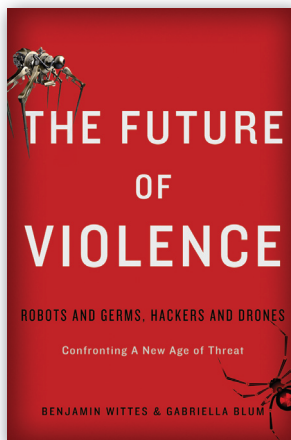
## Danger Ahead

REVIEW BY MARINA GORBIS

**M**y fellow futurists and I often lament that being a futurist is a stressful occupation. Two new books—*The Future of Violence*, by Benjamin Wittes and Gabriella Blum, and *Future Crimes*, by Marc Goodman—make it easy to see why. Both books describe a growing list of technologies that, even as they deliver a dizzying array of benefits, make us more vulnerable to threats than ever before.

“Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse,” the Greek playwright Sophocles wrote. That pronouncement came to mind as I read about how easy it would be for students in a lab to use gene-splicing technologies—the same technologies that scientists use to treat crippling diseases—to recreate the smallpox virus and quickly spread it in highly populated urban areas. Reading about robots was equally stressful. Today we use robots in operating rooms to support surgical procedures and on battlefields to scan the terrain and to deliver supplies. But what happens when these automated tools fall into the hands of criminals who decide to reprogram them for nefarious purposes? Then there is the technology that enables and underlies all of the other new technologies: the vast and ever-growing digital network that connects devices in our homes and offices and, increasingly, on our bodies. Such devices continuously collect and transmit data and then store those data on remote servers that are highly vulnerable to digital stalkers, data aggregators, and members of cyber-crime syndicates. To be sure, these devices empower us. But the more that everything we touch, carry, and wear becomes part of a network, the less secure we become.

If you are thinking, “Well, I can just get rid of my iPhone, close my Facebook account, and stop banking online,” then I have bad news for you. Even if you never touch a computer or a mobile phone again, you are still vulnerable. Unless you plan to flee into the woods and never drive a car or take a bus



**THE FUTURE OF VIOLENCE:  
Robots and Germs, Hackers and Drones—  
Confronting a New Age of Threat**

Benjamin Wittes & Gabriella Blum  
324 pages, Basic Books



**FUTURE CRIMES:  
Everything Is Connected, Everyone Is  
Vulnerable, and What We Can Do About It**

Marc Goodman  
392 pages, Doubleday

or fly in an airplane, you cannot escape the global information network. Our basic infrastructure—including our utilities, our transportation systems, and our energy grid—is now a part of that network and can't function without it. Herein lies a paradox of contemporary life that both of these books urgently bring to our attention: Democratized access to information and universal connectivity go

**MARINA GORBIS**, executive director of the Institute for the Future, is the author of *The Nature of the Future: Dispatches From a Socialstructured World* (2013).

hand in hand with democratized insecurity and universal vulnerability.

Wittes, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and Blum, a professor at Harvard Law School, point out that the technologies we use are not just technologies; they are platforms. By itself, a platform does not produce anything, but it creates a common set of procedures and specifications for human activity. Each new platform enables an increase in networking by opening new ways to connect people, places, and organizations. Like all good futurists, Wittes and Blum put our current predicament into historical perspective. They cite an earlier platform innovation—the 80,000-kilometer (50,000-mile) system of roads built by the Roman Empire across Europe, the Near East, and North Africa. These roads, Wittes and Blum note, “allowed Rome to move troops around the empire quickly and thus to project power into the far reaches of her domain. They allowed commerce and human mobility. They operated, in short, as a giant platform for Rome’s expansion and the projection of her culture over a huge geographic area, a platform for growth, communication, and human interactivity. They were the closest thing to the Internet the ancient world had.” Along with increasing trade and cultural exchange, however, the roads increased opportunities for banditry. In fact, banditry spiked to such a level after the assassination of Julius Caesar that parts of the network became almost impassable. In response, Rome mounted a brutal security campaign that consisted of executions, searches, and the stationing of sentries along the roads. And it worked. Within a year, the empire was able to restore order.

That analogy illustrates the critical dilemmas that we confront in the new world of technological platforms. Even as these platforms open up opportunities for growth and creativity, they also serve as venues where new types of banditry can take place. As a result, we are now grappling with the need to develop systems of regulation, policing, and surveillance in order to minimize cyber-banditry. How do we balance the use of these measures with the goal of protecting

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liberty and personal privacy? Indeed, what does personal privacy mean in a world where we freely share personal information and leave an often deliberately public digital trail across various platforms?

To help us navigate such challenges, Wittes and Blum suggest that we view certain core values of democracy—liberty, security, and privacy—as existing in a state of “hostile symbiosis.” They borrow that concept from earlier writers, including the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley and the science fiction writer H. G. Wells. Quoting Wells, they note that the tissues of the human body are “all of the same parentage, all thriving best when working for the common good, and yet each ready to take advantage of the rest, should

but from the commercial imperative to sell us diapers, toothpaste, and other bounties of the market economy. In online communities, for example, we willingly share our personal health information in order to gain knowledge and to improve health outcomes. Yet there are armies of unregulated data aggregators that routinely glean that information and then sell it to pharmaceutical companies and other organizations so that those entities can market something to us. (Former Vice President Al Gore and others have referred to this process as the “stalker economy.”)

Many of the platforms that we use every day, from Facebook to OKCupid to WebMD, are ultimately little more than a means of extracting our personal data. In the adver-

tising-based model that powers most of these platforms, we are the product. And that model exposes our data not just to legitimate companies but also to the forces of Crime Inc.,

as Goodman labels it—an increasingly well-organized and well-financed global network that steals large amounts of personal data for commercial and political purposes.

Goodman offers several well-conceived proposals for combatting Crime Inc., ranging from efforts to crowdsource security work to the use of competitions and prizes. He also issues a call to establish a Manhattan Project to fight cyber-crime—a bold project that would “draw together some of the greatest minds of our time, from government, academia, the private sector, and civil society.”

His call has urgency. We are quickly approaching the point at which our new platforms might become unusable, just as the roads of the Roman Empire became impassable until imperial authorities engaged in a huge effort to improve security. Both books, therefore, are essential reading not only for policymakers but for anyone who seeks to understand how we can maintain a healthy symbiosis in the new world of technology platforms. ■

## Not-So-Ordinary Altruism

REVIEW BY BARBARA H. FRIED

**I**n “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” an enormously influential article published in 1972, the philosopher Peter Singer posed the following hypothetical: You are walking by a shallow pond and see a young child drowning. You could wade into the pond and save her, but doing so would ruin a \$500 pair of shoes. Are you morally required to save the child? If, like most people, you answer yes, then Singer has another question for you: Why are you not under an equal or greater moral duty to contribute \$500 to fight global starvation—an act of generosity that could save 10 lives or more? If the point of helping others is to help *them*, and not to make ourselves feel good, shouldn’t we give where our money will produce the most good? There are powerful psychological reasons why we are more inclined to save the child in front of us than we are to save a nameless, faceless child 8,000 miles away, but are there *moral* reasons?

In recent years, Singer has taken his case—and his discomfiting questions—directly to the public. Those efforts have helped inspire the Effective Altruism (EA) movement, a worldwide network of people who have made a commitment to fight global poverty and disease. Many members of EA have pledged to give a significant percentage of their future income to that cause. *The Most Good You Can Do* is Singer’s latest outreach effort on behalf of EA. It’s partly an evangelizing effort and partly a how-to guide for the converted. To my mind, the book is less than wholly successful on both fronts, for reasons that highlight the challenges that EA faces as it seeks to become a mainstream movement.

EA is not an easy product to sell. Its core belief—that if we can save someone else from death at a trivial cost to ourselves, we are morally obligated to do so—is widely if not universally shared. But EA asks us to extend the logic of that belief to places where most of us don’t want to go. It urges a level of charitable giving

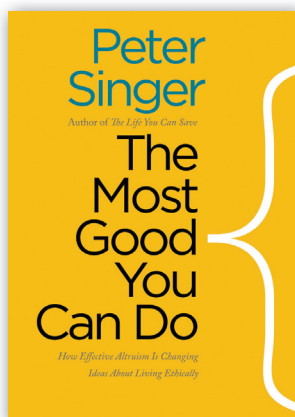
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### *Democratized access to information and universal connectivity go hand in hand with democratized insecurity and universal vulnerability.*

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opportunity offer.” For Wittes and Blum, the same dynamic applies to the relationship between liberty, privacy, and security. We live in an age when “any entity can theoretically attack or defend you,” they write. “It is a relationship of profound mutual dependence yet, simultaneously, mutual danger and hostility.” To maintain a state of mutual benefit, therefore, governance approaches need to focus on regulatory efforts that allow for “elaborate adjustment” (to use Wells’s term). Wittes and Blum do not give concrete prescriptions in that regard, but they provide a much-needed intellectual framework for policymaking in an environment defined by technology-based platforms.

*Future Crimes* covers a lot of the same territory as *The Future of Violence*, albeit in much greater detail. It also highlights another dimension to the relationship between security, privacy, and liberty. Goodman, a security scholar and consultant, vividly shows that much of our loss of privacy results not from high-minded concerns about security,



**THE MOST GOOD YOU CAN DO:  
How Effective Altruism Is Changing  
Ideas About Living Ethically**

Peter Singer  
211 pages, Yale University Press

that is many times greater than what most people currently give. It asks us to be guided not by emotion but by reason in choosing how and where to give. And hardest of all, it asks us to care as much about the lives of distant, unidentified others as we do about a drowning child whom we happen upon.

For Singer and other EA members, many of whom are committed utilitarians, the moral demands of EA are compelled by, and limited only by, the logic of utilitarianism: We should help others until further help will do more harm than good overall. In the past, Singer urged people to give away up to 10 percent of their annual income. (He urged people who are mega-rich to give more.) In *The Most Good You Can Do*, he pulls fewer punches on this score. The book offers as exemplars several people who have lived in accordance with the stringent morality of EA. Singer calls them “ordinary,” but most of them have made what readers are likely to regard as extraordinary sacrifices. One of Singer’s “ordinary” altruists gave away most of a multi-million-dollar fortune, retaining only enough to yield a \$60,000 annual income for him and his family; he even donated one of his kidneys to a stranger. Singer clearly hopes that such examples will inspire others to follow suit, but I suspect that they will have the opposite effect on most people.

Singer’s metric of goodness also derives from utilitarianism: We should act so as to increase the aggregate welfare of society. In practice, that standard gives priority to saving lives, and it measures success by the number of lives saved. In *The Most Good You Can Do*,

Singer pulls no punches about the implications of this principle, either. He argues that it’s morally indefensible to give money to build a new wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or to supply guide dogs to the blind, when it could go toward anti-poverty efforts that would save hundreds if not millions of lives. But that isn’t a battle that EA can win, and it isn’t a battle that EA needs to win if its goal is to increase aid to the global poor. Waging that battle also comes at a high cost. It sidetracks people into arguments over utilitarianism as a moral theory and leads them to ignore the substantial common ground between utilitarianism and common-sense morality—common ground that Singer’s “shallow pond” example brilliantly highlighted. And by insisting that reason is morally superior to emotional empathy, EA can be read to insist that effective altruists are morally superior to everyone else. Singer, in this book, doesn’t shy away from that implication—not a strategy likely to win friends and influence people.

These problems are practical, rather than moral, in nature. But for a movement dedicated to *effective* altruism, they are important. The core message of EA is as powerful now as it was when Singer first pressed it 40 years ago. The central challenge for EA, as it works to go mainstream, is to translate that message into a call to action with broad appeal. ■

## Stolen Future

REVIEW BY BILL SHORE

**I**n *Our Kids*, Robert Putnam revives the lost art of bearing witness. He goes beyond raw data and listens to those who are otherwise voiceless in our society. By blending portraits of individual people with aggregate data, he gives us a remarkably clear picture of inequality in the United States. That accomplishment alone makes for a worthy read.

But the same generosity of spirit that fuels Putnam’s empathy causes the book to fall short in accounting for the powerful forces that have made widening inequality a fact of American life. If Putnam had written

**BILL SHORE** is founder and CEO of Share Our Strength and chairman of Community Wealth Partners. From 1978 to 1987, he served on the senatorial and presidential campaign staffs of former US Senator Gary Hart, and from 1988 to 1991 he served as chief of staff for former US Senator Robert Kerrey.

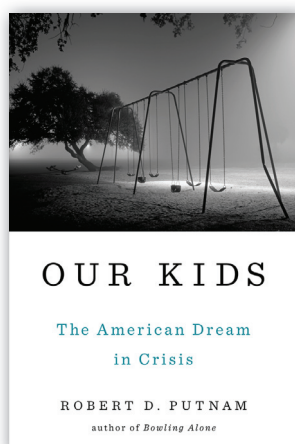
a similar book about “our climate,” it would leave the impression that the earth had merely drifted closer to the sun; it wouldn’t cover the human decisions and actions that have caused global temperatures to rise.

The town of Port Clinton, Ohio, where Putnam graduated from high school in 1959, is Ground Zero for his study of “the American dream in crisis.” He notes that 75 percent of his fellow graduates went on to attain a higher level of education and greater economic security than their parents had achieved. Because of socio-economic trends that range from the decline of manufacturing to residential sorting, that is not true of more-recent graduating classes. Complementing this decline in social mobility has been a decline in social solidarity. The book’s title reflects the time—now long gone—when people used the phrase “our kids” to refer not just to their own children, but to *all* kids in their community.

Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard University, ably uses demographic data to reorient our view of what’s gone wrong. The collapse of the working-class family that started to affect African-Americans in the 1960s, he notes, began to affect white Americans in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, there has been a sharp decline in the ratio of US children overall who grow up in two-parent families, and the distribution of those children divides sharply along class lines. The proportion of kids with college-educated parents who live in single-parent families is less than 10 percent; for kids with working-class parents, it’s close to 70 percent.

What echoes loudest and longest in my mind, though, are the voices of the young people whom Putnam features. Consider David, an 18-year-old from Port Clinton whose father has been in and out of prison. “I’ll never get ahead!” David writes on his Facebook page. “I’ve been trying so hard at everything in my life and still get no credit at all. Done.” Or listen to Andrew from Bend, Ore., whose attitude toward the future reflects his comfortable upbringing: “My dad always reminds me every day how much my mom and my dad love me. ... Some of my





**OUR KIDS:**  
**The American Dream in Crisis**  
 Robert D. Putnam  
 386 pages, Simon & Schuster

friends give me a wisecrack like, ‘Andrew’s parents say they love him again!’ But it’s like, yeah, that’s how I want it.”

In the book’s final chapter, Putnam imparts a lesson that he probably didn’t intend. He offers a list of proposed social programs that is so familiar that many readers will be able to mouth the words as if they were listening to a golden oldie: Increase the earned income tax credit. Invest in early education. Expand child care options. Promote mentoring. Other parts of the book hold up a mirror to our society, and this chapter is no different: We are too timid, and too oblivious, to advance new or bold ideas about fighting poverty and inequality.

Even in Putnam’s capable hands, compelling research data and moving human-interest stories are not sufficient. They don’t help us to understand the economic and political forces that perpetuate the crisis that Putnam describes.

Inequality has not widened on its own. Imagine walking into your house one evening to find drawers and closets emptied, furniture overturned, and nothing of value left. Would you conclude that socio-economic trends were responsible for that state of affairs, or would you note that a specific person or group of people had ransacked the place? Would your remedy be to encourage neighbors to think of every house as “their house,” or would you want to find and stop the perpetrators before they struck again?

Millions of poor children are suffering because of decisions we have made—decisions about how we tax and how we spend, who is

first in line for support and who is last. On our list of priorities, we’ve put children’s needs so far below tax loopholes, entitlements, corporate bailouts, defense spending, and foreign intervention that no one actually has to say “no” to kids. We can take the easy option of shaking our heads sadly as we explain that there just isn’t anything left for them.

Putnam’s compassion for “our kids” is infectious. Here’s hoping that his book will help generate the political will to do more for them. After all, everyone likes to say that “children are our future.” But the call to change how we treat them will be more effective if we clarify what happened: The shabby house where they live didn’t just deteriorate, it was robbed. ■

## Always on Call

REVIEW BY LUCY BERNHOLZ

**W**e humans have been helping other humans ever since we first walked upright. For most of the subsequent millennia, proximity has determined how much help we could provide in any given situation. Over the past century and a half, technologies that range from the telegraph to the airplane have expanded the reach of our response. But how and when we could respond to a crisis still depended on how near we were to it. Over the past half-decade, however, our ability to help others has begun to escape the constraints of time and distance.

That’s because new technologies—from ever-ready digital sensors to social network platforms, from smartphones to readily available satellite imagery—are making the world an ever-more-connected place. Some have likened the result of this expansion of digital connectivity to a global circulatory system. In *Digital Humanitarians*, Patrick Meier suggests a different anatomical metaphor: He posits the emergence of a new “nervous system” in which billions of people are able to contribute information to a shared network of digital data.

The book covers many different

**LUCY BERNHOLZ** is co-leader of the Digital Civil Society Lab at the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society (PACS). She is also a visiting scholar at PACS.

technologies, but they share two critical characteristics: They generate digital data, and they extend almost everywhere. Meier argues that access to these technologies helps us to be more humane. They help us reach out, offer assistance, contribute our skills, and extend the scope of our compassion. All around the world, people are using the resources at hand—high-skilled data expertise, free social media accounts, expensive satellite imagery, off-the-shelf drones—to help in moments of crisis. In the book, Meier recounts the successes, failures, and hard-won lessons of this dispersed group of risk-taking innovators.

Meier himself has spent the past five years working with others to deploy digital tools in almost every kind of disaster. When an earthquake struck Haiti in 2010, he was in Boston and his fiancée was in Port-au-Prince. The stress of not hearing from her led him to begin collecting news reports, text messages, and tweets about the situation in Haiti. To gather those disparate bits of information into a single picture, he organized them using an online map. He then recruited volunteers from his personal network, and they jumped in to help him manage the flow of digital data.

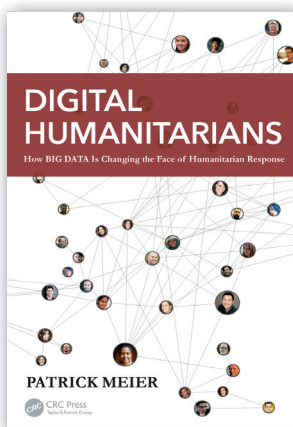
Other humanitarian crises followed—an earthquake in Chile, a fire in Russia, a revolution in Libya, political unrest in Kyrgyzstan, a super-storm in the United States. Far-flung volunteers like Meier mounted a digital response to each of these events. In many cases, participants in one effort laid the groundwork for those who stepped forward to help in another crisis. The digital output of each event (crisis maps, crowdsourcing platforms, FAQs) became fodder for the next action. This cycle of adopting a tool, adapting it to a task, and then moving on to the next challenge is a central feature of digital humanitarianism.

Meier’s loose-knit network eventually turned into the Standby Task Force, a group of volunteers who remained on call to help with mapping, social media filtering, and other urgent digital chores. The group honed its use of crowdsourcing and microtasking (breaking tasks such as tagging photos into a series of one-click actions). The upshot

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of these efforts was a resilient, remarkably powerful, “always-on” network that could sift through huge streams of tweets or text messages. In time, the Standby Task Force evolved into Digital Humanitarian Network, a more structured entity that focuses on complementing the work and extending the reach of various UN and NGO partners.

In tracing the rapid development of digital humanitarian action, Meier tells a story that matters to all of civil society. At first, the new digital humanitarians met with skepticism and resentment from established humanitarian organizations. In five short years, the two parties sprinted through several stages—combative distrust, arrogant dismissiveness, hesitant collaboration—before reaching a point where they can pursue shared goals in a spirit of co-creation. It has been neither easy nor pain-free. But every segment of the social sector is going



**DIGITAL HUMANITARIANS:  
How “Big Data” Is Changing the Face  
of Humanitarian Response**

Patrick Meier  
187 pages, Taylor and Francis Press

through some version of this story, and everyone in the sector can learn something from Meier’s account.

The best parts of *Digital Humanitarians* are those that show how humanitarian institutions, independent volunteers, and leading digital companies reinforce each other’s

efforts. The tale that Meier tells is one of complementarity: Digital humanitarians are not replacing established aid organizations or government agencies. Instead, humanitarian aid has become a dynamic ecosystem that encompasses amateurs and experts, one-off participants and long-term professionals, drone operators and satellite imagery analysts. The global digital “nervous system” provides the context in which they do their work.

This emerging system is also a source of new and pressing challenges. The use of digital tools to serve humanitarian goals—often by volunteers or for-profit businesses with an informal commitment to humanitarian work—raises critical ethical questions and creates a need to establish new codes of conduct. Meier’s most compelling contribution, in short, is to demonstrate that we must develop a policy framework for humanitarian action that assumes a digital context. ■

## The MIT Press



**DESIGN, WHEN EVERYBODY DESIGNS**

**EZIO MANZINI**

translated by Rachel Coad

“In this extraordinary new book, Ezio Manzini challenges us to imagine a future that is more ecologically and socially resilient and more desirable to live in. Through compelling examples of local social innovation around the world today, Manzini shows that it is possible to begin to change the way we think and live, to change how we relate to each other and the world around us, and in the process begin to make the world anew. This book arrives at a critical juncture in human history and provides a way forward.”

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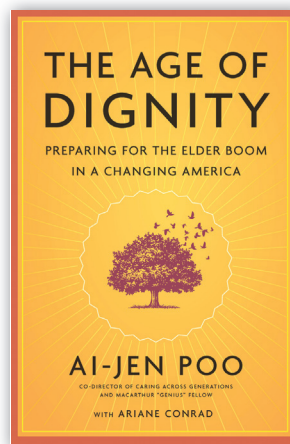
# A New Vision for Elder Care

REVIEW BY MEIKA LOE

**A**i-jen Poo begins *The Age of Dignity* with a story about her grandfather. She discusses the guilt that she feels because he spent his final months of life in a nursing home—an experience that was “lacking in comfort and beauty.” That story sets up a book that is part personal narrative, part demographic warning, and part call to action. “As America ages, many of us are grappling with the dignity with which our grandmothers, the suns of our universes, will live,” Poo notes. In response to that problem, she offers a simple vision that many people will want to support. Care, she writes, is “the solution to the personal and economic challenges we face in this country. It doesn’t just heal or comfort people individually; it really is going to save us all.”

Poo, who is director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, has been organizing caregivers and other workers since 1996. I became aware of her efforts when, in 2010, she spearheaded the successful campaign to pass the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in the New York State legislature. In 2014, she became a MacArthur “Genius” Fellow, and in 2012 *Time* placed her on its list of the “100 Most Influential People in the World.” After years of organizing domestic workers—a labor force that was historically excluded from US labor protections—Poo now aims to organize all Americans to help create a more caring society. “A new society-wide caring infrastructure will enable us to minimize our reliance on the old and often dehumanizing institutional model,” she writes.

The first section of the book introduces readers to a system that is on the brink of failure, and she focuses on three groups that depend on this system. Most important are members of what she calls “the elder boom”—a trend caused by the aging of the baby boom generation and by the fact that Americans are living longer. There are now



**THE AGE OF DIGNITY:**  
Preparing for the Elder Boom in America  
Ai-jen Poo with Ariane Conrad  
226 pages, The New Press

more senior citizens in the United States than at any other time in history, and the over-85 demographic is the fastest-growing age group in the country. Poo argues that an aging population is actually a blessing. “It is time that we really see and listen to elders,” she writes.

The second group includes members of the so-called sandwich generation. One in eight Americans, most of them women, is juggling responsibilities both for children and for aging loved ones. Increasingly, Americans spend more time caring for elders than they do for their kids. In addition, as families become smaller, each member of the sandwich generation has fewer siblings with whom to share elder care. The current system of informal care is a holdover from a time when life expectancy was about 60 years and when families could rely on women to provide uncompensated caregiving labor. Now that so many adults between the ages of 35 and 60 are stretched so thin, that system cannot last for long.

Caregivers, the third group that Poo discusses, make up the fastest-growing workforce in the United States. Their work, although it is in great demand, is difficult and unstable. One-quarter of domestic workers are paid less than the prevailing minimum wage, most do not receive benefits or sick leave, and many experience abuse on the job. Poo wants us to honor this labor—and, more specifically, to improve their access to child care, transportation, and job training. “Turning caregiver jobs into dignified jobs will have a ripple effect of society, on the

**MEIKA LOE**, professor of sociology and women’s studies at Colgate University, is the author of *Aging Our Way: Lessons for Living from 85 and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

economy, and on our spiritual health,” she writes. “By doing so, we can affirm the dignity of people at every stage of life.”

Today, Poo contends, we face two possible futures—one marked by increased social polarization, and one characterized by an acceptance of interdependency. Most Americans, she believes, will embrace the latter option. They belong to what she calls the Caring Majority. “In my work,” she writes, “care has emerged as the connective tissue that can keep our diverse interests aligned.”

In the second part of *The Age of Dignity*, Poo details current efforts to empower this Caring Majority. She advocates building a Care Grid, as she calls it—an infrastructure of support, partly public and partly private, that meets basic needs and brings quality care to every home. One existing effort that fits her vision is PACE (Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly), an initiative supported by Medicare and Medicaid that delivers subsidized in-home care in 13 states. She also offers examples from Germany, Japan, and other countries where the care infrastructure is shifting for the better. Many of these examples highlight relationships between middle-aged people and their elders. I wish that Poo had also devoted attention to discussing programs that build partnerships between those who are 25 and younger and those who are 85 and older. There is a lot of untapped potential in such programs.

*The Age of Dignity* ends with an exercise that involves closing one’s eyes and imagining an ideal future community. In a course that I teach on the sociology of aging, I ask students to engage in a similar exercise, and by and large their visions of an ideal future match the vision that Poo presents in this book. They too seek intergenerational connection, and they too find that they belong to the Caring Majority. As part of the course, students develop semester-long partnerships with local elders, and they are amazed by how much they have in common their older partners. Both groups—the young and the old—yearn for a “circle of care” (to quote Poo) on which they can depend throughout their lives. ■