



Vintage Care

What wine culture teaches us about showing up

By Paula Bandy

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A basic viticulture principle quietly governs everything else: the vine does not ask. It cannot tell you when stress accumulates or water arrives too late. Nor when heat tips from beneficial to damaging. The signs are there for those paying attention early enough to respond.

Exceptional wine requires this level of attentiveness. One mustn't wait for a crisis to announce itself. You walk the rows of grapevines, noting the subtle shifts and intervening before damage becomes visible to others. Care in the vineyard is always offered— never requested. And yet, in our human lives, the opposite logic applies.

We rely on a phrase that implies generosity but requires little action: Let me know if you need anything. It appears in texts, emails and social posts, especially when someone is ill or struggling. It reads as kindness, but the statement quietly transfers responsibility away from the community and onto the individual.

In wine, that approach would be considered neglect.

During a recent illness, people in my local circle knew I was sick. And yes, the usual “get well soon” arrived on social media, yet no one delivered me soup. No one offered to walk the dog or pick up groceries. Instead, there were fleeting messages— thoughtful in tone, but distant in practice.

“Let me know if you need something.”

The issue with that sentence is not malice. It assumes clarity, energy and strength during a time when the affected individual is most lacking these faculties.

Anyone who has worked in a vineyard understands how stress compounds quietly. Opportunities for gentle correction have often passed by the time a vine is visibly failing.

Effective care begins early, when intervention is simple. Wine culture practices something we have forgotten: attention is responsibility.

In the vineyard, you carefully observe while walking the rows. You act before something dramatic happens, because waiting would be risky. The work is steady, often unseen and rarely praised.

This is how real care works in human life as well.

Dropping off food and handling errands because you remember how important these kind acts were when you were sick. Stepping in early, before illness turns to exhaustion, requires energy and decisions.

Help appearing when needed was once quite common, particularly in agricultural and rural communities. People operated on awareness rather than permission.

Somewhere along the way, we replaced attentiveness with language.

Now, care is expressed with short phrases— “get well soon,” “thinking of you” and “sending prayers.” While these words are not wrong, they resemble the surface-level vineyard treatments applied too late in the season. They offer the appearance of care without changing conditions.

In wine, a visible response is not the same as an effective one. A vineyard doesn't recover because someone acknowledged stress but instead after conditions were altered— adjusted irrigation, provided shade or changed the approach. Words alone don't lower the temperature or restore balance. Neither do they, on their own, ease human suffering.

The surrounding world contracts when one is sick. The house grows unnaturally quiet and small tasks become more challenging. Even identifying what might help requires energy that simply isn't available. In those moments, asking is burdensome.

During my recent illness, the most meaningful, caring act I received did not come from nearby, but from a distance. My son, who was working in Cancún, Mexico, FaceTimed me as he took a long walk down a beach we once visited together. He turned the camera toward the water, sand and steady rhythm of the tide. For a few moments, I was no longer sick and alone. I was transported somewhere else entirely. That small act changed the conditions.

Wine teaches us timing matters. A delayed intervention can resemble indifference. Responsiveness is not intrusive when rooted in attentiveness rather than control. In wine culture, we often talk about stewardship— of land, vines and tradition. Winegrowers value stewardship over reaction and assume responsibility without instruction. Vineyards require ongoing attention, not episodic concern.

Culturally, however, we increasingly consider care something that must be requested, articulated, justified— almost like a service ticket. If no request comes in, no action is required.

But vines do not submit forms.

And neither does suffering.

Real care is inefficient. It requires time, attention and inconvenience. Care resists automation, requiring us to step beyond comfort and certainty. It's a tangible offering— a feeling.

That is precisely why it matters.

Wine reminds us how the most important work often happens before anyone else notices a problem. By the time damage is obvious, something essential has already been compromised. If wine teaches us anything, it is that attentiveness is not optional— but foundational.

Why don't people ask for help? Perhaps because we've made it so hard to ask. The real question is: why have we, as a society, grown so comfortable waiting to be asked?

I believe it's because offering help requires vulnerability. It involves observation, paying attention and showing concern. Genuine caring demands a willingness to act without guarantees or praise.

It's the steady work of tending and nurturing relationships, whether community, personal, family or business.

Food left at the door.

A task handled without discussion.

A presence that arrives early enough to matter.

Viniculturists have always understood this. Winemakers craft wine meant to be shared.

It's time we reclaim that wisdom from the vineyard and bring it back into our daily lives.