



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Nothing is Permanent

Rachel Mackintosh © 8 March 2026

In 2017 the tide was in.

It was a tide of transformation.

One small second-hand car dealer in Invercargill sold 40 cars in a month. In Invercargill.

The women who bought those cars each had one less worry. The stress of wondering if the car would get them to their next job without breaking down evaporated. The tension leading up to the six-monthly warrant of fitness check eased. They could all breathe more easily. They could replace a tyre if it went bald. It was a transformation.

The second-hand car dealer also experienced transformation, as his income increased dramatically in that month. Because he and we are all part of an interdependent web. And he went out to dinner more often, and the local restaurants' takings increased, and so on, and so on ...

The tide was in because the government had agreed to fund the transformation after the Supreme Court ruled that care and support work had been historically undervalued because it was predominantly performed by women. The ruling was the final decision from a claim for pay equity under the *Equal Pay Act 1972*.

For those women who bought new cars, and for other care and support workers, there were other transformations.

The following quotes all come from an academic publication by Julie Douglas and Katherine Ravenswood from the Work Research Institute at AUT:  
*The Value of Care*

One care worker reported:

I went to the dentist after not having been to the dentist for about 6 years. My husband has just retired and I was able to buy him for his 65th birthday, a pair of spectacles because we haven't had glasses for about 15 years.

The car transformations, the dentist transformation and the spectacles transformation were all practical, as people's material lives improved.

The tide was in and the tide brought transformations that were spiritual and emotional, as well as practical. Because anyone is transformed when their communities — their society — goes from considering them all but worthless to recognising the value of the skills, effort and responsibility involved in their work.

Another support worker said:

Rather than being, just, 'I'll do it right out of High School in between jobs', it is actually to me, I look at it as a career path... but actually now my career, for me, is to be a support worker and that feels really nice for me to say that and people really acknowledge it.

And, in the words of another worker, this is what we, the communities and the society, were acknowledging:

We are working with very vulnerable people, we are not delivering parcels. We are working in often very stressful environments and dealing with people who are also very highly stressed and sometimes chronically stressed because of what is going on in their lives.

The method for establishing undervaluation was to measure the skill, effort and responsibility of the female-dominated job. Then to measure the skill, effort and responsibility of comparator jobs done mostly by men. This is the comparator method: to find a male-dominated job where the skill, effort and responsibility measure the same as the female work.

By this method, you can compare the value of quite different jobs. And when you find that male work of equal value to female work is paid much

more highly, this gives you your answer, and it gives you the monetary undervaluation.

So, in 2017, the tide was in.

Almost instantly the tide started to go out again. Workers had their hours cut, employers stopped employing the most qualified care workers, favouring those on the bottom of the new pay scale ...

Employers reported that they had not been part of the settlement and that there were practicalities which made it difficult for them to deliver pay equity.

And there was an end date: after 2022 there was no guarantee that the pay rates would rise again. The Government funding had a time limit.

Against this undertow, a joint working group of employers, unions and government convened to bring the tide in again. The outcome of that working group was recommended new legislation to produce true pay equity.

Alan McDonald, from the Employers and Manufacturer's Association, made a submission on the resulting *Equal Pay Amendment Bill*. He wrote:

The intent and spirit [of the joint working group]... was to produce a relatively easy pathway into a Pay Equity claim ... It was agreed a collaborative approach between employers and employees was the most desirable outcome and this would be achieved by minimising potential roadblocks in the Pay Equity claim process for both employees and employers. That intent and spirit of goodwill from all parties was behind the changes recommended ...[changes] that made it easier to begin the claim process and [we] agreed that rather than proscribe the comparators to be used, they would be negotiated by the parties to the claim – again with the intent of making it easier to reach a claim agreement.

And so, with goodwill from all parties, the tide started to come in again, and in 2020 that Bill became law, creating a framework and a pathway for all future pay equity claims.

Thousands of social workers, nurses, teacher aides enjoyed huge increases in their pay, and the spiritual comfort of knowing that wider society could see the true skill, responsibility and effort of their work.

And the time limit came for care and support workers, who raised a new claim in 2022 under the new legislation, to secure pay equity for good. The tide was rising slowly as the negotiation process continued.

In May 2025, the government pushed the tide out with a rapidity only seen when there are major earthquakes.

In less than 48 hours, without consultation, without advice, without any of the normal democratic processes involved in lawmaking, they repealed the 2020 legislation, cancelled 33 active claims — including the claim of care and support workers — wiped out all review processes that make settlements sustainable, raised the entry bar for claims to an impossible level, severely limited what comparators could be used, and declared that no new claims could be brought for 10 years after a settlement. And they saved \$12.8 billion that would otherwise have gone to transform the lives of underpaid workers.

And because we are all interconnected, private radio station Newstalk ZB provided an amplification for the main narrative tool to sell the repeal to the public. That tool was to ridicule the comparator system.

Heather duPlessis Allen “explained”:

But the problem is, it really isn't. It isn't comparing apples with apples, it's often apples with oranges.

For example, librarians. Librarians are currently trying to get a pay rise by comparing themselves to traffic engineers.

Now, no disrespect whatsoever to librarians, but the Dewey Decimal System is not that hard. I'm pretty sure that most of us could learn to do it and become librarians in about 20 minutes flat.

I think it takes a little bit longer to train up as an engineer who specializes in designing and planning and constructing and operating and maintaining a transport system.

And the same goes with the admin health staff who are trying to compare themselves to mechanical engineers, and the same goes with the social workers who are trying to compare themselves to air traffic controllers. You can see the trouble here, right?

The narrative is essentially that it is ridiculous to compare jobs that are different. Apples and oranges.

But we recognise equal value of different jobs all the time. If I say that the job of a senior doctor and a senior lawyer are worth about the same salary, I am willing to wager that nobody will find that ridiculous. And yet, isn't that oranges and apples?

Yes.

In fact I am also willing to wager that an analysis would find that the jobs are apples and oranges and that the main similarity between them is the historical preponderance of penises in both workforces.

And the similarly high pay.

So the tide is out.

The reaction to the cancelling of the process and the ridiculing of the system has brought together communities who might otherwise often find themselves on opposing sides of an argument.

A group of former MPs from right across the political spectrum, led by ex-National Party MP Marilyn Waring, formed the People's Select Committee to do the job the government should have done, and interrogated the 2025 legislation.

Their report was released on 24 February this year.

In that report we hear the voices of many New Zealanders, a cavalry riding to the support of underpaid and undervalued members of our society.

Dame Judy McGregor, former Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner:

The process used to pass this legislation created a new low in New Zealand's constitutional history with its extraordinary disregard for the time-honoured checks and balances for effective legislation..... We have the breathtaking spectacle of government ministers pulling out the bricks of parliamentary democracy ... and legislative integrity. Thousands of women are now condemned to poverty wages.

Dame Silvia Cartwright, former Governor-General: "I predict that this issue will become something of significance internationally and we can't ignore our international reputation."

Tracey Martin, head of employer peak body the Aged Care Association:

We willingly participated in the claim because we believe those caring for older New Zealanders deserve to be paid in a way that reflects both the real cost of providing that care and the true value of the work that they do. Yet while we were doing that the government was already moving behind closed doors to get cabinet approval to end all current pay equity claims including ours. No discussion, no public input. Working groups were kept in a holding pattern with repeated excuses further straining already under-funded providers.

And from care worker Vicky:

Vicky said his L4 Care role was clinically like that of a nurse, but his pay was similar to that of a warehouse worker who did not have to face death threats nor have responsibility for someone's life. "We are treated like shelf packers instead of health care professionals."

The recommendations of the People's Select Committee include the repeal of the 2025 legislation and the restoration of a system that can bring justice and that can be transformational.

So the tide is out. The low tide has exposed jagged rocks that may tear us up.

In the People's Select Committee, the low tide has also exposed the richness of the life that teems in the rock pools. We can see people working together, adding their diverse voices to the tide that must rise.

Nothing is permanent, including low tides.

What can we do to bring the tide in again? As Unitarians, we value love, equity, transformation and justice. What will you do?

Amen

### **Meditation / Discussion Questions:-**

- What have you heard that struck a chord/made you uncomfortable/reassured you?
- What will you do to live our values of justice, transformation and interdependence?