

SPIRITUALITY AND CAREGIVING

by Hanni Epp, MA, LLP

The e-mail said: “There has to be more to giving care to our Mom than helping her to bathe, preparing her meals and taking her to doctor’s appointments. She doesn’t talk much, and rarely comes out of her room except for meals. My wife and I both work and when we come home -- between taking care of Mom, making dinner, and getting ready for tomorrow -- there’s no time left. We had a full life before Mom came to live with us. Now we hardly ever get out. I want to be a dutiful son, but the burden is weighing very heavily on me right now. Can you help?” -- Richard M.

About Richard . . .

Richard is a supervisor in a small manufacturing company that makes automotive parts. His wife Jane works as a dental hygienist four days a week and until recently had always kept the fifth day to run errands, meet with friends, etc. They have a small circle of friends that they used to see regularly, and periodically they attended a local church.

Three years ago, Richard’s mother had a stroke, and could no longer live alone. She needs help with bathing, preparing her medications, and a number of other daily activities. Richard and Jane have modified their home so that Richard’s Mom has her own room and bath with an easy-access shower. So far, they have managed their mother’s care on their own. Because Richard’s job is only 5 minutes from his home, he can come home quickly if there is any emergency. Richard’s Mom wears an emergency response button on a chain around her neck, and he is the first to respond. Lately, there have been a few emergency calls, and late night incidents that have taken extra attention, and caused Richard to think about what may be coming next.

What Are the Issues?

For purposes of this article, let me use a definition for spirituality given by J. Miller in 1994 in a paper entitled “Spirituality”. He states in part, “Spirituality is the act of looking for meaning in the very deepest sense, and looking for it in the way that is most authentically ours...” He goes on to affirm that while not everyone is religious, in the sense of sharing a communal faith system, everyone is spiritual.

Richard and Jane were very willing to care for their Mom. It was a commitment they had made years ago; and when the time came, they were glad to take her into their home. However, in considering the benefits and rewards of giving care, they had ignored thinking through the sacrifices entailed. Richard and Jane have some resentment that they have little time for themselves, and have lost connection with their friends and their way of life.

At the same time, there is concern that Mom is alone too much during the day, and not getting any social contact with her peers. Richard and Jane have concentrated on taking care of Mom’s medical and physical needs, but have not taken time to attend to the emotional or the spiritual needs of their Mom or themselves.

So, where to start? As always, we begin with reviewing Mom’s physical and medical status, to ensure her safety and wellbeing. An interesting result is often that this activity can open the way to a more spiritual approach to giving care.

- It’s possible that in-home help, at least part of the time, would benefit the family. Mom could have help with her personal needs and have companionship, while Richard and Jane could feel some *relief* in the amount of time they need to be available. It would be valuable to schedule evening help once a week so that they could have an evening out. This would be a great way to begin taking better care of themselves.

- If there is an Adult Day Center available, it might be a wonderful way for Richard's Mom to receive attention while also socializing with her peers. She would get out regularly and have new activities to look forward to. Often this kind of involvement can lead to feelings of hope, a precious spiritual quality.
- Reconnecting with their spiritual center will bring many benefits. For some people, prayer, meditation and daily readings help to calm and bring peace. For others, spiritual connection comes in the form of journaling, music, art or being out in nature. For Richard and Jane, rejoining their faith community may be the right beginning.

There, they may find others who are caring for a loved one and in sharing with their peers, Richard and Jane may find new ways to cope. They may also find volunteers who might stay with their Mom while they are attending services. Pastoral care may be available in their home for their Mom, too.

There are many ways to receive spiritual nourishment, whether we seek it in a faith community, in nature or wherever. The point is that we seek it, and thus refresh ourselves, so that we may continue to give.

What's next...?

Richard and Jane take their evening meal together with their Mom. During this and other times they are together, they might start conversations about memories or events from the past. It might open the way to helping the family, especially Mom, to find meaning and value in her life experiences. There may also be some opportunities for acceptance and forgiveness for events that happened in the past that would otherwise go undiscussed. These moments can contain spiritual gifts of immeasurable value.

For some additional ideas, see the Tips on Spiritual Practices for Caregivers article by Reverend Rebecca Ebb-Speese elsewhere in this issue of *Mature Lifestyles*. Also, check out last month's *Mature Lifestyles* for the Caregiver's Corner article on Holistic Caregiving.

Last thoughts...

Spiritual practices can help us to refocus and bring balance and perspective to our lives. It has been shown that when we make spirituality a priority in our lives, we experience reduced stress and depression. We become open to the possibility that caregiving can bring spiritual gifts to our everyday experiences. These gifts may include a newly found or appreciated closeness and intimacy or even a reaffirmation of the importance of relationships so easily overlooked in the stress and bustle of everyday life. As a result, caregivers often express a deep sense of personal fulfillment – a spiritual satisfaction in finding they have been able to keep their commitment.

References:

www.caregiver.ca

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Caregiving: The Spiritual Journey of Love, Loss and Renewal. B.W. McLeod. 1999. Jossey-Bass.

“The Spiritual Gifts—and Burdens—of Family Caregiving”. K.J. Doka. Generations. Vol.

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More resources

If you want more information about resources, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. The Network's web page (www.caregiverresource.net) can provide you with information about programs and services, fact sheets, and a

questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616) 456.5664, or (888) 456.5664.

If you have a question you would like to see addressed in a future article, feel free to contact Hanni Epp at: Caregiver's Corner, West Michigan Caregivers Alliance, 233 E. Fulton, Ste. 222, Grand Rapids, MI 49503, or e-mail at Hanni@wmichcare.com.

Column written by Hanni Epp, MA, LLP, therapist and consultant in private practice at West Michigan Caregivers Alliance. Hanni is also a member of Caregiver Resource Network, a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Be sure to look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of *Mature Lifestyles*.