

# Caring for Aging Parents

BY DENNIS R. MYERS

Eldercare is becoming increasingly distorted by the rationing of health resources, institutions paternalistically controlling the care recipient's treatment, the fragmenting of relationships between generations, and the desire to preserve life at all costs. The books reviewed here go "against the stream" by drawing upon biblical instruction and personal faith to guide caregivers who make hard choices in the crucible of parent care.

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**M**arie is fifty-six and recovering from triple bypass surgery. She calls with urgency in her voice, deeply concerned about her eighty-three-year-old mother, who lives alone in the same city. "Mother is going downhill fast. She's not eating right, and getting around is more and more difficult for her. I want her to move to a place where she can get the care she needs, or even move in with me. It would be so much better for her. Every time I try to bring all this up, she gets so upset with me and says she is doing just fine. She is so stubborn and hard-headed! I love her so much and I am afraid for her. I am just at my wits end. What am I to do?"

Marie is one of twenty-four million caregivers searching for answers to caregiving dilemmas. Though parent care is normative for mid-life, and a rite of passage for every family, the care-giving role often comes suddenly, catching us in a web of uncertainty, shaking strongholds of identity, and scattering delusions of immortality. For the Christian caregiver, motivated by the commandment to "honor your father and mother," the words of Paul in Colossians 3:12 are instructive: "clothe yourselves with compassion,

kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” How do we “clothe ourselves in compassion” when the recipient of our caring rails against loss of autonomy and personhood? How can personal autonomy be preserved in the context of increasing dependency and loss? On what moral basis can decisions be made that threaten a parent’s sense of independence and personhood? How can we assist family caregivers with everyday decisions, and

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enable them to cope with the personal consequences of parent care?

The four books in this review furnish substantive guidance to caregivers who must make hard choices in the crucible of parent care. The authors draw upon their caring experiences, personal faith, and understanding of Scripture to speak empathically and ef-

fectively to the dilemmas associated with caring for an older parent whose capacities for autonomous living are compromised. Peter Jeffery, in *Going Against the Stream: Ethical Aspects of Ageing and Care*, (The Liturgical Press, 2001; 282 pp., \$24.95), constructs a sturdy ethical framework for caregiver choice-making within an environment of increasing dependency. Harold Koenig and Andrew Weaver, in *Pastoral Care of Older Adults* (Fortress Press, 1998; 98 pp., \$16.00), prepare pastors and other professional caregivers for the counseling and care management issues associated with family caregiving, while Grace Ketterman and Kathy King, in *Real Solutions for Caring for Your Elderly Parent* (Servant Publications, 2001; 140 pp., \$9.99), offer caregivers an inventory of practical information, including prescriptions for their own self-care. Houston Hudson’s *Circle of Years: A Caregiver’s Journal* (Morehouse Publishing, 1998; 118 pp., \$10.95) contributes an honest, real world perspective on parent care through the lens of his five-year caregiving journey with his mother.

Among the explosion of materials, media, and Internet resources currently available to assist the family caregiver, these books are exceptional in that they address family caregiving within the perspective of biblical instruction and Christian faith practices, and contribute, in a powerful way, to enhancing the efficacy of caregivers.

#### **CHRISTIAN COMPASSION AND AUTHENTIC AUTONOMY**

Eldercare in our culture is increasingly distorted by the rationing of health resources, institutions paternalistically controlling the care recipient’s treatment, the fragmenting of relationships between generations,

and the desire to preserve life at all costs. Since these provide a defective foundation for caring, Peter Jeffery proposes that we substitute a wide range of “upstream” cultural innovations grounded in Judeo-Christian values, a new “moral platform upon which the care of the elderly in the twenty-first century could be based” (p. xvii).

Jeffery’s philosophy of eldercare recognizes that Christian compassion infuses a spiritual quality into caregiving and leads the professional carer to a deeper empathic understanding of the care receiver. For example, the caregiver may assume that the older parent desires cure or rehabilitation when the care receiver really wants their caregiver to “believe in their potential, to value their life experience and to recognize that they have something to contribute to treatment” (pp. 46-47). The compassion Jeffery has in mind draws heavily on the person-centered approach of Carl Rogers, in that the caregiver takes on the pain of the care receiver. It is a gift of self, and a “sacrificial exchange of the best years of one’s life for the worst years of another” (p. 65) that transforms both caregiver and receiver.

Since loss of autonomy is at the heart of care with older persons, the recovery of authentic autonomy serves as a guiding ethic for compassionate caregiving. To the extent possible, older receivers of care should be offered meaningful choices. Decision-making opportunities should go beyond mastery of tasks and permit expression of personhood. Even in the face of declining competence or impaired autonomy, Jeffery asserts that moral caregiving discovers the realm wherein authentic autonomy can still be enacted. Paternalistic control by caregivers, though based on beneficence or good intentions, constrains authentic autonomy and provokes passivity and resistance to care initiatives.

Jeffery’s contribution of an ethical framework for eldercare cannot be overvalued. He accurately diagnoses the most problematic barriers to humane care for older persons and carefully engages the central ethical dilemmas of eldercare. However, the role of faith communities is not well-developed, and Jeffery does not explain how professional and family caregivers can “take on the pain” of the care receiver, while maintaining a “detached” yet personal relationship with the receiver. Though the idea of authentic autonomy holds some promise for indicating when constraint is proper, Jeffery would do well to provide more illustrations of how this theory works in actual cases.

## **COUNSEL FOR CAREGIVERS**

Harold Koenig and Andrew Weaver surveyed congregational leaders to determine the fifteen most common eldercare concerns to include in their guidebook for pastoral counselors and professional caregivers. Koenig, a specialist in psychiatry and renowned for his seminal research on religion and aging, and Weaver, a clinical psychologist and ordained minis-

ter, highlight the fact that the pastoral role includes helping “both caregivers and elders recognize the mutuality of meaning, purpose, and joy in the reciprocity of caring and being cared for” (pp. 62-63). Pastors link caregivers to opportunities for rest and renewal, and to agencies that promote companionship and provide assistance with the activities of daily living. They provide counsel and spiritual support crucial for carers who experience emotional upheavals, family distress, or lack awareness of community care resources. Their primer on biological aging, depression and grief, and Alzheimer’s disease is particularly helpful, as are the authors’ recommendations for congregational involvement in caregiver education and support. This quick reference for professional caregivers also enlightens the family caregiver on enabling older persons to deal with dependency, selecting a nursing home, and effecting reconciliation between caregiver and parent after a difficult nursing home placement.

Grace Ketterman, a psychiatrist and pediatrician, and Kathy King, a counseling psychologist in private practice, are a mother-daughter team committed to encouraging and informing family caregivers. They complement the pragmatic theme of Koenig and Weaver by offering practical advice on preventing and ameliorating a parent’s excess dependency, as well as safeguarding grown children from the effects of caregiver burnout. The chapter on encouraging independence while setting limits addresses how to balance autonomy with the realities of physical and mental challenges. In response to the question, “How can you monitor and be involved in the details of their lives without being intrusive, patronizing, or controlling?” (p. 14), Ketterman and King recommend caregivers become familiar with parents’ lifestyle and daily patterns before challenges to their independence emerge. Furthermore, they recommend blending parental independence with care provision according to the principle of minimal assistance. Illustrations of how to mix independence and assistance are provided in the context of everyday challenges like transportation, social involvement, sustainability of the home environment, and maintaining physical wellness.

### **THE REWARDS OF PARENTAL CAREGIVING**

Houston Hodges shifts the focus from advice-giving to endowing parental caregiving with heart and voice. *Circle of Years* invites us into his own parental care story. As this pastor cares for his mother over a period of five and one-half years, he discovers the “reversal of the care transition” becomes an “opportunity to enjoy harvest time, the closing of the circle of obligation that started life, when you were totally dependent on those who gave you birth and cared for you” (p. ix). His journal narrative illustrates how the ethic of authentic autonomy can be applied. Betty Hodges enjoys sitting at the table and enjoying a cup of coffee after her meal in the care facility, even though staff and her impatient son are ready for her to return

to her apartment. Her “talisman against the loss of her independence” is that she can say “Two more sips!” (p. 59). The accounts of caregiver distress actually can engender in readers the kind of intellectual empathy suggested by Peter Jeffery. Hodges confesses in a journal entry, “I have the collie-wobbles again, the hurting stomach that means I am not in charge and don’t know what’s next and am afraid. I think I’ll play more ocean music” (p. 41).

*Circle of Years* is a rare and invaluable contribution to the literature of parent caregiving. It is a source of encouragement for those who care and a useful, illustrative resource for lay and professional caregivers. It also provides a model of how ethical issues are actually expressed in everyday caregiving.

What, then, are the rewards for Marie and other caregivers who compassionately embrace the independence of an older parent and simultaneously minimize the risks associated with declining capacity? Is it the joy of expressing gratitude for a lifetime of a parent’s unconditional love, a “well done” for faithfulness to the call to honor father and mother, or the deepening of compassion? Whatever the benefits, the most precious of all may be the memorable moments of parental affirmation and blessing that occur during the journey. Hodges sums it up well: “There are other intrusions of wonder and grace in this life to decorate its gray-tinged walls with bursts of beauty. There will be a conversation, unexpected and at random, where memories of childhood long past come fresh as tomorrow morning.... There will be a delightful morning...when truth and compassion are running high...(when) through the fog of forgetting will come a crystal-clear word of love” (pp. 52-53).



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