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Peace in the Valley: Seven Ways Caregivers Can Face Their Fears and Better Help Their Loved Ones Take That Final, Sacred Walk

Caring for a loved one who is approaching the end of his or her life is one of the hardest things you'll ever have to do. However, it is possible to approach this period of time as the wonderful gift it is. Author Donna Authers offers both comfort and advice that will enable caregivers to do just that.

Charlottesville, VA (September 2009)—“I’m dying.” These are words that most of us dread hearing from the people we love. However, death is an inescapable part of life—and if it hasn’t happened already, chances are you’ll be called upon to help a parent, spouse, friend, or other loved one through the valley. Yes, it can be a terrifying prospect. But according to Donna Authers, it’s also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: to help your loved one make the most of his final years, months, and days...to help him take the next step without regret...and to create priceless memories for you to cherish.

“The illness and decline of someone close to you, especially as the end draws near, is one of the most testing times in your life,” says Authers, herself an experienced caregiver and author of the book *A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying* (A&A Publishing, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-6152458-5-0, \$15.95). “Still, it’s important to know that serving as a caregiver can reward you with a rich, full experience. Death will always bring sadness, but it does not have to be characterized solely by pain and sorrow—it can also be accompanied by faith, grace, and love.”

Authers—who grew up overshadowed by a paralyzing fear of death due to the early loss of numerous family members—first experienced the trials and joys of caregiving when she spent time with her beloved grandmother, Angelina, in the last months of her life. Through Angelina’s wisdom and example, Authers was able for the first time to witness a peaceful passing and experience “good grief.”

“My grandmother’s faith strengthened my own, and I was able to realize that I haven’t seen her for the last time,” recalls Authers. “Grandma taught me so much about living a full,

selfless life with no regrets—not only through her life, but also through her death. Learning those lessons took courage on my part: the courage to face my fears, and the courage to continue loving Grandma even though I knew I would lose her soon.”

Since that time, Authers has served as a caregiver to many others, both as a family member and as a representative of ministries and hospice organizations.

“Through my experiences with the dying and their families, I’ve learned that there are two groups who need to be considered: the person receiving care, and the people who are giving it,” she says. “Focus on your loved one, but don’t ignore yourself and your own needs in the process. Remember that both of you are still alive *at this moment*, and use the time to draw even closer together.”

Helping someone make his or her final life transition is an intimate and profound privilege, whether you are the primary caregiver or not. And while there is no single formula to follow during this bittersweet time, you can take steps that will enable you to provide support to your loved one without feeling unnecessarily frightened or burdened by stress and anxiety. Being a caregiver isn’t easy—but it is an experience you can’t afford to miss.

Taken from *A Sacred Walk*, following are several important thoughts for all caregivers to consider as they spend the last bit of precious time with their loved ones:

Strive to be “God with skin on.” In today’s busy, competitive world, the “still, small voice” of reason and love can easily be drowned out, and those who are hurting often have to maneuver life’s minefields without the support and companionship they so desperately need. Even before you are called upon to care for a loved one in need, you can serve as a caregiver to those whom you encounter in the ebb and flow of daily life.

“Being a caregiver isn’t something that begins only when a loved one needs your help,” stresses Authers. “The skills you’ll use to walk a friend or relative home are practiced and honed every day—something I call being ‘God with skin on.’ You never know which of your coworkers, friends, or acquaintances might need a pair of helping hands or a nonjudgmental listening ear. By developing patience, kindness, gentleness, and other selfless qualities, you’ll be ready to help when someone you meet has been unpleasantly surprised by life. And you’ll be able to step in without hesitation and put those skills to use when someone you care about is beginning his or her final journey.”

You need care, too. When you’re a caregiver, you might feel as though you need to have all of the answers and show no sign of weakness. After all, you’re supposed to be the pillar of support, right? Wrong, says Authers. Your patient isn’t the only one who needs care—you do too. The

responsibilities on your shoulders are immense, and they—like grief—are more bearable when they are shared.

“Receiving care isn’t a luxury, as many people think,” explains Authers. “It’s a necessity. Quite simply, you *can’t* do it all by yourself. Take advantage of the consistent and reliable aid your support network can offer, and don’t be afraid to reach out if you need more. Those who are close to you can help you regain your balance after a traumatic event rocks your life. Even the little things—a meal prepared, a chore completed—can make a huge difference in your stress level.

“Also, keep in mind that sometimes your family and friends may not be the right people to help you,” she adds. “They may be too emotionally involved, or they might not have the expertise you need. Sometimes a pastor, a counselor, or a volunteer who represents a caring organization might be best able to give you the support you need. Remember, the more at peace you are, the better you’ll be able to cherish the time you spend with the loved one for whom you’re caring.”

Hospice is for the living. It’s a surprising statement, isn’t it? Most of us associate “hospice” with the final act of dying. The reality, though, is that the dying process can last weeks or even months, and it can pass through multiple stages. According to Authers, many people fail to realize that hospice facilities often provide support services to patients, caregivers, and family members throughout this journey, long before the patient is “ready” for hospice.

“Hospice care is superior, and it provides welcome support that a hospital can’t,” asserts Authers. “For example, when my mother was in the final stages of cancer, she gained new friends in Helen, a volunteer who visited her at home, and in Carol, her nurse. Although Mom no longer had years ahead of her, she was still very much alive—and the relationships she formed with these two wonderful women cheered her up and comforted the rest of us. We knew that Mom had a medical professional who cared about her on call, 24/7.

“Working with hospice can also take the responsibility of dealing with practical details off the shoulders of caregivers so that they can focus solely on their loved one,” Authers continues. “Many hospice facilities provide volunteers who will run errands or provide respite care when family members need a break. Some even provide medications, house calls, and grief counseling. Research what your local hospice offers—don’t overlook this invaluable source of support!”

Don’t treat death as a secret. No matter how strong a support network your loved one might enjoy, her inner fears about dying may linger, and it’s important to make sure that they don’t remain unspoken. One of the greatest services a caregiver can offer is identifying those fears and making sure that they are alleviated. For example, these fears might include fear of the process of dying, fear of loss of control, fear of the unknown, and fear that life will have been meaningless. **(Note to editor: See attached tipsheet.)**

In addition to talking to your loved one, make sure that affected family members and friends are aware of what to expect as death draws near. By dispelling misconceptions, you will enable everyone to focus on the tasks at hand, and you’ll also help ensure that unnecessary fears of death are not perpetuated.

“Talking about your loved one’s impending death and helping him confront his fears about it are difficult, emotional tasks,” Authers warns. “You might wish to sweep these issues under the rug because they’re so painful, but resist that temptation. Easing the fears of a dying loved one, as well as the fears of family and friends, will ultimately bring the fullest measure of peace and closure.”

Anticipate what your loved one needs. As your loved one takes his final journey, he’ll probably need more physical aid than he once did—but his spiritual and emotional needs will be different, too. To ease the burden, don’t just ask what you can do to help. Anticipate it. According to Authers, those who are ill might be unable to think of or articulate exactly what they need or want, or they might be uncomfortable expressing it.

“Your contribution might be preparing meals, vacuuming a neglected house, or coordinating a ‘driver pool’ to assist with transporting a patient to her doctors’ appointments,” suggests Authers. “These practical acts of kindness are some of the greatest gifts you can give.

“Don’t underestimate the value of your time, attention, and presence, either. Be sensitive to the desires and fears of the person for whom you’re caring, and treat her as *herself*, not as someone who is dying. Try to make her final days relaxing, affirming, and reassuring. Listen to her patiently if she wants to talk, and above all, make sure she knows just how important she is to you.” (Note to editor: See attached tipsheet.)

Harness the power of forgiveness. Mental health professionals tell us that the number one inhibitor to finding peace is our inability to forgive. Forgiveness releases the hold the past has on the present, and it acts as a soothing balm to the soul. Perhaps the person for whom you’re caring needs your help and encouragement in reconciling with others. Maybe there are even issues between the two of you that need to be addressed. Don’t hesitate to help restore the lines of communication. Doing so can dispel many of the regrets your loved one may be holding onto, and it can keep anger and resentment from being his legacy.

“It’s bittersweet when people wait until they are on their deathbeds to restore a broken relationship,” observes Authers. “Sweet because a burden is being released, and bitter because it didn’t happen sooner. Ultimately, though, working through disappointing relationships and situations encourages physical, emotional, and spiritual growth. When forgiveness, reconciliation, and love are present, even the fear of death can disappear.”

Practice “good grief.” As a caregiver, you know that you will experience a great deal of grief when your loved one passes away. Chances are, you’re experiencing grief already. Don’t try to avoid those feelings, even if you want badly to do so. Instead, learn how to grieve well. “Good grief” does not mean that you won’t feel sorrow and hurt—you will. However, by letting yourself experience the feelings of sorrow, pain, hurt, loss, and confusion that are bound to come, you will be able to embrace life once more with a stronger faith and a renewed sense of purpose. It is important to note, though, that after the initial shock of a terminal diagnosis has worn off, you should try to behave normally around your dying loved one so as not to unfairly burden him. Make sure you have others to help you work through your grief.

“I learned the hard way that when you try to stifle grief or hurry it along, you only prolong its sting and confuse yourself,” Authers shares. “Grief manifests itself in different ways for different people. Express your emotions when they rise up, and be thankful for your tears—they are a blessing because of the love they represent. And remember something that my mother told me when she was dying: ‘Things will be different from now on, but different doesn’t mean it won’t be better.’ Cherish the memories you have, and have faith that you will see your loved ones again.”

“Always remember, the work that you are doing as a caregiver is sacred,” concludes Authers. “Letting go of someone you love is excruciating, but you can protect yourself from debilitating grief by replacing your fear with new memories. Make them right until the end. Remember what you have learned from those who have died, and cherish the love and the laughter that you shared. Recall and be grateful for the help you received along the way. And finally, know that you have provided a service of inestimable, eternal value.”

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About the Author:

Donna Authers lived in fear of death from childhood well into her adult life, the result of an unusual number of tragic losses in her family. That fear was finally broken by her grandmother’s faith, which marked the beginning of Donna’s calling as a caregiver to others as they, or their loved ones, prepared to leave this world.

Donna has a passion for applying her natural caregiving skills to help bring hope and healing to hurting people. These skills have been honed through use and her leadership in Stephen Ministry and Community Bible Study. She is a gifted teacher and, as such, has trained and mentored many other volunteers to develop their own caregiving skills to serve others. Over the years, Donna has been regularly invited into the homes of many families learning to accept death and has accompanied them throughout the grieving process. She has worked closely with hospice organizations, counselors, social workers, and clergy, and has been an advocate for others dealing with the medical system and government agencies.

Donna graduated from the University of Pittsburgh. After meeting her husband, Roger, on a business trip to Paris in 1991, she retired in order to volunteer full-time, and has never looked back.

For more information, please visit www.asacredwalk.com.

About the Book:

A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying (A&A Publishing, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-615-24585-0, \$15.95) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.