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Caregiving at Christmas: Five Suggestions for Showing Christ's Love to Those Who Are Caring for an Ill Loved One

The holidays can be an especially trying time—both physically and emotionally—for individuals and families who are caring for a terminally ill loved one. Donna Authers offers from-the-heart suggestions for alleviating those burdens this Christmas season.

Charlottesville, VA (December 2009)—Every year, most of us look forward to the Christmas season for a myriad of reasons: beloved family traditions, memorable meals, gift exchanges, special church services, and more. But what if, for the first time, someone dear to you is ill? What if a close friend or relative finds him or herself in a long-term caregiving role? Suddenly, Christmas might not feel as merry as it once did, and the world might not be filled with quite as much joy.

“Yes, Christmas is a time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. But for those who are caring for an ill loved one, sadness and increased responsibility might make it difficult to want to celebrate anything,” says Donna Authers, 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). “The upcoming weeks are a wonderful opportunity for you to bring good cheer (as well as a pair of helping hands!) to a caregiver’s Christmas season.”

Authers speaks from experience, having served as a caregiver to many, both as a family member and as a representative of ministries and hospice organizations. She points out that this Christmas is likely to be characterized by pain and bittersweet memories for anyone with a loved one who is making his or her final journey. And because time with that special person is limited, family and friends will understandably want to focus on creating cherished memories with their ill loved one. That’s perfectly natural, says Authers, but remember that the patient is not the only person whose final Christmas is affected by illness. His or her primary caregivers are also carrying a heavy burden that might very well cause them to struggle.

“Take a moment to think about how you can reach out and help make a caregiver’s Christmas meaningful and manageable,” Authers urges. “Caregivers are the unsung heroes who perform a sacred duty day in and day out. This is a wonderful time to be ‘God with skin on’ to them and to help bring a measure of peace to their Christmases.”

Below, Authers offers from-the-heart suggestions for supporting the caregivers you know during this special season:

Give a caregiver a break. Admit it: for a number of reasons, Christmas is one of the busiest seasons of the year. There are special meals to be cooked, shopping to be done, and special celebrations and services to attend—all on top of your normal, (hectic) everyday routine. Now, imagine that you are a caregiver who is facing this overwhelming holiday checklist while simultaneously trying to ensure the comfort and health of an ill loved one. You’d probably feel defeated before you even began.

“Christians are urged to bear one another’s burdens,” reminds Authers, “so what better time is there to carve a few hours out of your schedule so that a caregiver can experience some much-needed free time? When you take over her duties momentarily, she will be able to recharge her batteries. Whether she goes to a Christmas party, shops for gifts, trims the tree, visits friends, or just *relaxes*, she will be able to recapture the feeling of normalcy in her life and she’ll be able to return to her duties with a refreshed spirit.”

Provide a spiritual top-up. ’Tis the season when caregivers can be most weighed down by constant demands on their time...so, ’tis also the season to renew their faith. From time to time, we all wonder why “bad things happen to good people,” and doubts of this sort can heavily impact a caregiver’s morale and spiritual health.

“Proverbs reminds us that iron sharpens iron,” Authers points out. “And that’s where you come in. Encourage the caregivers in your life to dispel their weariness by attending a special Advent or Christmas service. (If possible, offer to take over their caregiving duties while they do!) Like all individuals who are feeling worn down and weary, they will find special comfort in the familiar scriptures that tell the story of the Nativity and in singing the carols they learned as children.”

Remember that caregivers need care, too. Caregivers strive to be pillars of support twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The thing is, no one can fill such a tall role without a support system of his own, too. No one needs—or deserves—care more than the faithful caregiver. But persuading him to accept help can often be a challenge! Caregivers are sometimes reluctant to relinquish even the smallest of their duties because they’re convinced that the patient’s well-being depends entirely upon them, Authers says.

“Nevertheless,” she continues, “no caregiver can do it all alone. Whether the caregiver you know is willing to accept help or not, make a point to consistently offer your support. On a regular basis, focus your attention solely on the caregiver. Ask how he is doing; tell

him you're praying for him. Bring him a card or a gift. Make Christmas special for him, and acknowledge the love and loyalty he is showing his loved one.

Make sure that the holiday cheer is good. If you've ever lost a loved one, you know that others' good cheer can make you feel even worse by comparison. This holiday season, it's likely that many caregivers may be uninterested in or even saddened by trees, tinsel, and carols. They might not have time to indulge in Christmas trappings or traditions, or they might be reminded of happier times that are no more.

"Be sensitive to the caregiver's moods and wishes," Authers says. "Will focusing on the more lighthearted aspects of Christmas be a source of comfort or distress? Remember that if a caregiver would rather do without social chit-chat, holiday movies, or lights in the windows this year, that's okay. Remind her that she can always seek some joy from the Christmas message of hope: 'For unto us a child is born.'"

If necessary, adapt traditions. Christmas rituals and traditions may bring comfort to both the patient and caregiver alike. A little Christmas cheer could be a welcome break to the somberness that has permeated the home environment for weeks. On the other hand, caregivers might also be opposed to seasonal merriment imposed on a household burdened with sickness and sadness. It can make a bad situation worse, so don't force the family carol sing-a-long or tree-buying trip if a primary caregiver balks.

"It's very important to temper the Christmas celebrations by keeping in mind their effect on caregivers," shares Authers. "Don't feel that you have to cancel Christmas altogether, but put some thought into what might be most appropriate. Instead of insisting on attending the neighbors' raucous cocktail party, perhaps it might be more beneficial to share a TV or radio broadcast of the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols."

"Ultimately, the Christmas season is going to offer extra challenges to caregivers," Authers concludes. "Help caregivers meet those challenges by showing support, compassion, and love. After all, those are the values that Christmas is truly centered around. Even if we are passing through the valley of the shadow, Christmas is still a time when faith can be renewed and strengthened through the joyful celebration of Jesus' birth."

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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: 978-0-6152458-5-0, \$15.95) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.