

Caregiving as a Spiritual Gift
Ann Catlin, OTR, LMT

I recently had the privilege of presenting at the National Association of Health Care Assistants annual convention. More than four hundred nurse assistants from thirty-two states gathered in Tulsa to learn and renew, not to mention to have a little fun together. I was struck by the heartfelt dedication these folks have to caring for our nation's frail. What's the attraction to this career? The pay? Hardly. The median annual salary is about \$24,000. The easy work hours? Doubtful. I've seen people work double shifts when a co-worker is sick. Others work two jobs to make ends meet to support their families. The status? That's not it, either. Nurse assistants are often perceived as low rung on the ladder. Still, year after year, they show up each day humbly caring for the needs of others. Each of us will, at some point be a caregiver. A loved one becomes ill. A friend goes through a crisis and we step in to help. A parent grows old and needs help with managing everyday activities. Many of us can point to this kind of experience that was a catalyst to a career in eldercare.

I've dedicated my life's work to serving people living with effects of aging, disease or disability. People ask me, "Isn't it hard to do that kind of work—don't you get drained?" "It's so sad, how do you handle it?" Others say, "It takes a special person to do what you do—I don't think I could do it." Well, I assure you I'm no more special than anyone else! I can tell you I'm learning gradually to recognize the gifts of being a care companion and seeing that it is as much a part of my spiritual journey as anything else. The work of caring for our elders is not separate from a spiritual practice-- it is one.

Every person we touch is a teacher. I've had the privilege of learning from hundreds of people in rehabilitation hospitals, nursing homes, psychiatric facilities and hospice care. Some lessons stand out. I met "James" while interning as an occupational therapy student at a rehabilitation hospital in Chicago back in the late seventies. James was in his twenties, as was I. He had been shot in the back, leaving him with partial quadriplegia resulting from an incomplete spinal cord injury. Part of my job was to teach him how to dress himself again. His condition required him to dress in bed- not an easy task for an able-bodied person much less for somebody with paralysis! One morning I was watching him struggle to put on his shirt and in the background his radio was playing a song by the Commodores called Still, a song about lost love (some of you will remember it). The song somehow connected us in that moment. James lay back with tears running down his face. Feeling helpless, I simply stood by his side and listened, feeling profoundly moved. You see another part of his story was that his wife was divorcing him. She didn't want a life with a disabled man. James taught me that sometimes there are no words and that sometimes we simply can't do anything except be there. From that day forward we were not only therapist and patient. We never spoke of that morning but we both knew we had shared in something that connected us deeply. I can't hear that song without thinking of James and giving thanks for that lesson in how to hold space for another person's grief.

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There is a paradox to *caregiving*. When we give even small kindnesses we become a care-receiver. I can't tell you what you may receive but I can share some of the gifts and insights that I've accepted.

Never underestimate the power of small acts. What may seem insignificant to you often is just what is needed at the time. Putting a blanket around the shoulders of someone who is cold; moving the box of tissues within reach; opening the curtains to let sunlight into the room. The simplest things make a big difference. I once knew a gentleman in a long term care facility who loved having his feet massaged. He usually had slippers on when I arrived but after the touch session he asked that his dress shoes be put on. I took the extra time to help him on with his shoes, which required a shoe horn. He always sat up a little straighter when those shoes were on. I think he felt seen for the man he was and not just an old man in a nursing home.

Lighten up a little. Who says that caring for someone facing a serious condition has to be serious all the time? Humor is a natural expression and there are things that happen that are ironic or downright funny. It's ok to laugh and enjoy moments together. I know a woman with dementia who is most of the time mildly upset and angry. "A pill" the staff fondly calls her. I like to tease her for her toughness and she always melts into laughter and we both enjoy it.

There's a little royalty in all of us. One of my favorite quotes is a Scandinavian proverb that says, "Address the royalty and the royalty will respond". I've noticed when I treat people with respect and dignity that I get it in return. I once got a referral for Compassionate Touch® sessions for a man who had been admitted to a skilled nursing facility just the week before. A nurse told me I might want to wait to see him till after he'd had a shower because of body odor and made a derogatory comment about his obesity. What I "heard" through her words was that this man was being judged and that he was seen as offensive. I had my session with him about fifteen minutes later. When I entered his room he was sitting on the edge of the bed, drooped shoulders and staring at the floor. There wasn't anywhere to sit except next to him. When I asked if I could sit there, he said, "If you can stand it." I sat next to him and we talked a little. I noticed something on his wall that caught my attention. It was a poster for a bluegrass band. Turned out he played banjo in this band and as he talked about it his mood lifted a little. I happen to like bluegrass and we enjoyed the connection. Somehow I turned the subject to offering him a gentle back massage and he accepted. As I rubbed his back he tearfully shared with me how much he missed his wife who had died just months before. Treating this man with dignity was something that wasn't hard at all. I visited him several more times and hope that I was able to model non-judgment for others who took care of him.

I need to be around other people who serve as a mirror so I can see my own reflection. None of us live in a vacuum and we're all in this world together for a reason. I'm an

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introvert by nature and I have to actively remind myself of this one. We are mirrors for each other all the time but we have to remember to look and pay attention to what we see there.

Those I've cared for have taught me that there are ebbs and flows; beginnings and endings; and, most certainly, change. I have a greater acceptance of the inevitable turns my own life will make even though I may not know what to expect. But whatever happens I'll be grateful for people who care.

"You will find that the mere resolve not to be useless, and the honest desire to help other people, will, in the quickest and delicatest ways, improve yourself." John Ruskin

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