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124 Prayers for Caregivers

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For my mother,
Eleonora Pharo Guntzelman

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The acknowledgments continue on page 142.

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The prayers in part 1 are for the times when you feel privileged and blessed, when you need direction, or when you become aware of the gifts and opportunities for growth that caregiving offers.

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The prayers in part 2 are for the times when you feel exhausted by the burdens of caregiving; when anger, guilt, sadness, depression, and even despair threaten to overwhelm you; or when you feel put-upon, inadequate, and sorry for yourself.

Introduction



Caregivers wear a million faces. Some are professionals who choose caregiving as a way of life. Some are ordinary mothers and fathers whose days are filled with caring for each other and for their children. Here are some examples of people in caregiving situations:

In the tumult of feelings, Jill continues to struggle with disbelief. She had no warning that her baby would be born with cerebral palsy. Three years later it still does not seem possible. Sometimes the intensity of love for her precious little boy is overwhelming. At other times, weariness and anger at her situation make Jill feel like she cannot face him, cannot bathe or lift or feed the unwieldy little body that gets heavier every day.



No matter which choice he makes, Frank will be unhappy. Forty-two years together with Mary have followed “until death do us part.” Now Frank feels “parted” even though Mary is still alive. Alzheimer’s disease has so invaded her mind that now only her appearance is familiar. Every day he looks for a single flicker of recognition. It never comes. Frank feels frustrated and even angry with Mary when she doesn’t respond to his love and care. Frank’s kids suggest a nursing home for Mary to make life easier for him, but Frank knows he could not stand that either. Frank feels caught in a hopeless trap.



Every Thursday Dick volunteers as a hospice lay minister. He loves the work. He meets many families suffering through the approaching death of a loved one. He shares their pain and their hopes. Sometimes Dick feels blessed when people reward him with their confidences and concerns. At times, though, Dick feels exhausted and overwhelmed by the human suffering. That's when he wonders if he is in the right place.



Life is good for Barbara. She feels blessed to have a loving husband. She loves the children. But sometimes Barbara thinks that she will scream if she sees another runny nose to be wiped or diaper to be changed or basket of clothes to be washed or meal to be cooked or house to be cleaned. Caring for her family never ends. Barbara cannot understand how she can love her life and family so much that she wouldn't change them for anything, and yet still get so tired and frustrated.

Perspective

Because modern medicine enables people to survive birthing difficulties, debilitating conditions, and severe illnesses, more of us are being called upon to serve as caregivers at some point in our life. Often caregiving falls into our lap. Sometimes we readily accept

it and go with it. Other times we respond reluctantly and look for all kinds of reasons that we should not be the one to give the care, but then wind up doing it anyway. Sometimes caregiving is thrust upon us in the midst of grief, distress, and rebellion. Some of us are caregivers simply to earn a living. Others of us select caregiving as a ministry.

Though caregiving brings blessings and rewards, it is seldom easy. It usually involves demanding, unpleasant, and exhausting work. Besides the hard physical work, caregivers are dealing with often complex, always mysterious, and sometimes perplexing human beings.

Caregiving stirs a mix of feelings that may be warm and rewarding one day, painful and distressing the next. In providing care, we may struggle more with our feelings than with the physical work involved. The tender moments may warm our heart, but we may be unprepared for the anger, repugnance, guilt, weariness, and despair that can also arise. Shame or guilt may step in when we experience feelings that we think we should not have. In short, caregiving has a light side and a dark side.

Rather than judge ourselves harshly, we need to remember that all kinds of feelings are natural. Accepting them and listening to them might lead us to a new understanding of ourselves. We might befriend our feelings as expressions of our humanity and of the greatness and demanding nature of our task.

In serving others, we may discover that both caregiving itself and our feelings about it are wise teachers that help us to become more fully human.

Praying and Caregiving

Prayer is often described as an awareness of God's presence, and our response to that awareness. God dwells with us and among us, everywhere, at all times, and God is always present in our caregiving. After all, caregiving offers us the opportunity to carry out the biblical commandments to love God and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Prayer may be a powerful source of strength and consolation. While praying, we remind ourselves that God stands with us in our caregiving. We recall that God is never absent in the rewarding times, when everything goes well and we feel full of light and blessing, nor in the dark times, when things are especially difficult. Prayer expresses our wonder and gratitude during the hopeful times, and our need for understanding, support, patience, and guidance in the trying times. Saint Paul told the Romans: "With hope, rejoice; while suffering, be patient; pray perseveringly" (12:12).

Because prayer is an intimate expression of our unique relationship with God, each of us will pray differently. God lives within us; we give expression to God's life in us through our unique love. We need to trust God's presence

and pray in whatever way we find helpful.

Our caregiving can be a prayer in itself, if we approach it with attention and love. We may pray by reminding ourselves of God's presence in the large and small acts we perform every day: handing someone a glass of water, performing treatments that require complex skills, changing diapers, or simply listening. Our prayer may involve reflecting on the events of the day, marveling at our participation in the mystery of other people's lives, or grappling with our feelings of helplessness, anger, or inadequacy. We can ask God for whatever we need, or give thanks for whatever is.

One challenge in our prayer is to make ourselves conscious of the opportunities that are ours. Both the act of caregiving and the emotions and questions that arise from it can be rich sources of prayer; indeed, they can direct our prayer. Perhaps this book can lead us to an understanding of the complexity of the human interaction involved in caregiving. It is hoped that the prayers will also provide support as we struggle to find God in our caregiving.

Using the Prayers

Each of the prayers in this book is composed of a short quotation (meant to provide food for thought), a brief reflection, and a prayer.

You may say a prayer quickly, or you may find yourself drawn to linger over each section.

If you have the time and the inclination, meditate on each prayer.

You might begin by praying the short quotation once. Ponder it. Pray it again several times, slowly and thoughtfully. Let its meaning touch you.

The reflections provide material for further consideration and prayer. Sometimes the questions might invite you to write in your journal or just sit quietly and ask yourself, What is this reflection saying to me right now in my situation as a caregiver?

Finally, God assures us that our prayers are heard and answered. Offer the final prayer, recalling that God is listening to you and caring for you. If you find a particular line inspiring, plant it in your memory and pray it during the day when you have moments of silence. Or pray it as you give care, remembering that each person is sacred.

When Paul advised the early Christians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), he knew that bringing God’s Spirit into every act can make it an act of love. He also realized that only God’s grace is sufficient help during difficult times. The prayers in this book can assist you by giving expression to your longings, fears, hopes, and distress. They may serve as a springboard for the expressions of your own heart. As someone giving care, cherish the knowledge that the loving God is with you, kindling your spirit, warming your heart, and guiding your hands.

What a splendid way to move through the world, to bring our blessings to all that we touch.

(Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, p. 332)

As caregivers we have many opportunities to touch others and to make each touch a blessing. When we leave only blessings in our wake as we care for those in need, we build a better world. Do we have a heart that knows the blessings we can bring to this world?



O God, may the path I take in life be marked by beauty and by blessings to other people. Let me always recognize how fortunate I am to participate in the growth of goodness in this world. I rejoice in caregiving and celebrate the opportunity to help make all things whole.

God, uncover your holy face to us.

(Numbers 6:25)

What does the face of God look like to caregivers? In what sort of situations or in what kinds of people might we find it? How do we know when we have seen God's face, when it has been "uncovered" for us? Or is it always uncovered? If so, the hope in this blessing is that we will have eyes to know it when we see it.



I think that you have uncovered your face to me more times than I will ever dream, my God. But maybe you did not look as I expected you to look. I'm afraid that many times you were so eager for me to see you that you practically jumped in front of me saying, "See me? See me now?" and I went right on because I wasn't looking. Please let me wake up so that I see you in the people I meet, especially in those I care for, and in all of creation.

“Cure the sick. Remind them, ‘The Reign of God dwells among you.’”

(Luke 10:9)

We might tolerate sickness for a short period, but it distracts us from what we consider important in the “kingdom” of this world. Yet, when we are sick or wounded, or when we are close to those who are vulnerable, we tend to drop the delusion that we are in charge, that we are in control. This is when other realities can break into our awareness.



Sickness or need is a loud reminder, O God who is always close, that a different truth operates under your Reign. It's easy to be distracted from you and get caught up in the values of this world. Among the experiences that bring me back to you, the center and holy ground of my being, are sickness and disability. May I make my home with you, O God.

When we listen deeply, the great song moves through each of our lives.

(Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, p. 322)

Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis spoke of coming from God and of going to God and of singing to keep from losing our way (*Saint Francis*, p. 89). Perhaps the times we lose our way in caregiving are when we forget the deep song that speaks of our unity, our love, and our interdependence with one another. But the song of life flows all the time; the Spirit is always moving within us and among us. Do we listen for it, or do we allow the noise around us to block it out?



The music of the universe plays in my soul. Let me be aware of it, Spirit of God. May I slow down and attend to the flow of your grace-filled song. Help me find the silence and peace necessary to hear the music and share it with those who need my care. Let me hear it playing in my caregiving.