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Taking Care of Grandma

by Mary Jo Pedersen, Rev. Thomas Greisen, and Rev. Ronald Wasikowski

My grandmother died a couple months before her ninety-fifth birthday. She had been in a nursing home for six months, following a serious stroke which left her partially paralyzed and unable to speak.

For several years her five children, all retired, had taken turns spending most of the day at Grandma's apartment—cooking for her, visiting, helping her maintain a measure of independence. During the last six months of her life, they took turns spending much of each day assisting in her care at the nursing facility.

It was fortunate that there were five children able to share the responsibility for my grandmother's care. It took a lot of cooperation, coordination, and sacrifices. In those last months, my father, his brothers, and his sister were on the phone with each other almost nightly—discussing, comforting, reassuring. It took constant attention and effort to keep a family (in this case, a family of families) functioning as a unit.

The mission of the church has always included a sensitivity to and care for those people most vulnerable: poor, infirm, unborn, elderly, physically or mentally challenged people. As a result the church has opened hospitals, orphanages, nursing facilities, and so on, calling for care for those in need.

This granddaughter tells us how her “family of families” adopts this same mission and ministry for one of their own. The chores these five children performed—spending most of the day at Grandma's apartment, cooking for

her, visiting with her, helping her maintain a measure of independence—are vivid examples of domestic ministry.

Unlike the larger church, both parish and universal, this type of home ministry is seldom recognized or affirmed in any official way. But there is little doubt that such actions are holy. As this granddaughter points out, the personal schedules of her father, aunt, and uncles needed to be coordinated, and sacrifices needed to be made. The dispassionate manner in which this story is told may indicate that this family of families lived with a very basic assumption: We are family; we take care of one another, especially the one who is most in need.

In addition to the care of their mother, these brothers and sister are comforting and reassuring each other on a daily basis. This too is a form of domestic ministry. Throughout the ups and downs of the illness, these family members were on the phone with each other almost nightly. This family, when not doing something for their mother, was being a source of support for one another.

The care and commitment of this family were not thought of as extraordinary or worthy of praise; they just did it.

(This article is an excerpt from the authors' forthcoming book *More Than Meets the Eye: Finding God in the Creases and Folds of Family Life*. Look for the book from Saint Mary's Press this fall.)

Fundamentals of a Caring Encounter

At one time or another, each of us is called upon to offer genuine emotional care to someone who is hurting. When you find yourself in a caring encounter, keep the following fundamentals in mind:

Caring comes before problem solving. The outward solution may be simple and logical, but the emotions behind it are usually complicated. Be sure to fully receive the problem before jumping to solutions.

Remember that you are on holy ground. When the conversation becomes serious, be sure to give full integrity to the moment. Don't take words too literally; rather, try to pick up on the subtleties that underlie the words. Trust enough to listen deeply.

Be a nonanxious presence. Your demeanor can be either an anxiety booster or an anxiety breaker. Stay calm. Be conscious of your own feelings about the issue and the persons involved. If it's getting too far under your skin and you know you're about to explode, call a time-out. Take a break. Come back to it in a short while.

Recognize the power of silence. We may feel like we're not helping, but often our silence drives a person or child deeper into their unspoken layers of being and forces them to put words to their silent material. There are those who listen and those who wait to talk. Be a listener.

He Wears His Heart on His Sleeve

by Leif Kehrwald

"Tell them to like their kids' pets," said Nicolo.

"Yeah, and make sure they give their kids enough to eat," chimed Luke.

This is the parenting advice my sons offered to me once as I was preparing a session for parents. Although not too helpful for my presentation, their advice told me what was important to them. I was never able to befriend our cat, Cleo, but I did increase our boys' meal portions.

Seeking advice from your own offspring might be a bit risky as it is surely biased in their favor. Yet it's amazing what we can learn from our children, whether seeking their input or observing their behavior.

For example, have you noticed how young children are in constant motion, and yet, aside from bumps and bruises, their bodies are relatively free from aches and pains? In contrast, we adults spend most of our day sitting—at a computer terminal, behind a desk, in the car, and so on, and we chronically complain of hurts and afflictions.

The lesson: the human body is designed to be used, every last little muscle. Kids instinctively know this, especially in church when they can't be still for all the doughnuts in heaven. Yet we adults continue to overuse our brains and underuse our bodies.

We also can learn lessons of the heart from our children. When Luke was eight or so, I remember telling my wife, "You know, Luke really wears his heart on his sleeve." His emotions were, and still are, always close to the surface. He was, and is, quick with a smile and abundant with hugs. He held a daily goal of collecting at least twenty hugs. He wasn't embarrassed to kiss me in public (some things end with the onset of adolescence), nor was he embarrassed to rage in public. He was, and is, easily offended because he takes what he hears at face value.

Unfortunately, Luke's adorable eight-year-old personality made him a great target for terrorism by his big brother. Nicolo, twelve at the time, would easily lob lame ammunition to get his goat, while Luke's return fire had no real impact.

The result: the wounded and tearful Luke came running to Mom or Dad seemingly a hundred times a day. As my patience wore thin, I found myself saying: "Look, Luke, some big brothers can be terrorists. You just have to toughen up and live with it."

Then it hit me. I'm telling him to tuck his heart away and develop thicker skin, discounting his most appealing and endearing qualities. I'm also discounting his natural ability to truly care for others . . . from the heart. "Grow up! Don't be a cry-baby. Be more like an adult."

Meanwhile, aside from his terrorist tendencies, I realized that Nicolo was trying to emulate me: logical thinker, always in control, mature, organized, and very adultlike. Be careful with your emotions and don't allow yourself to be vulnerable.

How cold and boring! But there I was, trying to get Luke to behave and, worse yet, feel the same way.

Although every dad wants his son to be like him, I realized that my lesson was to grow up and emulate my youngest son. Remaining cold, calculating, and cutting might make me productive in society, but certainly not

appealing. Luke challenged me to let my heart slip out for some fresh air, and to run the risk of connecting with and caring for others.

I remember trying to explain to Nicolo how his brother wears his heart on his sleeve, hoping that if he could understand the unique, radiant nature of his little brother, he might lighten up himself. Not a chance. The parent lecture, of course, never works. However, as I learned my lesson and modeled more emotion, vulnerability, and genuine care, Nicolo did eventually go easier on his brother.

Tips for Raising Caring Kids

Share your feelings and allow your children to comfort you. Young children have tons of natural empathy. When you share your feelings and burdens appropriately, your children then feel free to nurture and care for you.

Solve problems together. Once the feelings have been shared and received, be a family that works together to seek solutions. Nobody has to do it alone.

Join a parent support group. Show your children that you value the help and support that other friends can give. Receiving care is just as important as giving it.

Help children experience the full cycle of forgiveness and reconciliation. When hurts go unattended, we all tend to tuck our heart deep inside so that it doesn't get wounded again.

Stress cooperative play. Our Western society supplies more than enough competition.

Tell stories. Lots of 'em. Do your children know who your heroes are? My hunch is that your heroes are people who truly care. Start with those stories and see where they lead.

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