

A special place

If you're already in this special place, you know the truth.

All of us, one day will be one of two things: someone who is cared for or someone who does the caring.

It is not easy to be in either position. And it's especially tough if you're caught in both positions at the same time.

To be cared for is not easy.

Especially at the beginning, all of us have to decide whether we want to accept help. Accepting help requires us to recognize our personal needs and figure out how to deal with the loss of pride and loss of control that may accompany help.

Even when things become very difficult, asking for help seems like a last-ditch plea. We tend to wait too long to reach out. We tend to wait too long to tell others that we're tired, worn out or just in need of a break. We tend to wait too long and then face caregiver stress and potential burnout.

Ironically, primary caregivers, those of us who are looking after an ailing child or aging parent, often find it most challenging to turn to others for help.

A wife whose husband is seriously ill feels like a failure even though she knows she needs help with the cooking or the housework. The caregiver faces feelings of guilt even though the work may be overwhelming, even though the resources might be available without cost.

Just before our first child, a boy, was born, we lost my mother to cancer, after caring for her in our home for a year.

When our son was a toddler, he began losing his hair, and eventually he lost it all. At the same time, my wife's parents both became afflicted with memory loss, dementia and eventually Alzheimer's. My father had also fallen victim to schizophrenia.

Between young kids, ill parents, and a new marriage, my wife and I discovered what it feels like to be squeezed from all sides.

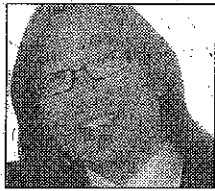
Caring for someone can be a great joy and a great sacrifice.

We become used to the daily rituals, accustomed to the selfless sense of duty, but as our loved one becomes more ill or requiring more care, it can be very difficult to share the load.

My wife and I felt important during those years. Our actions felt critical; our senses were continually on high alert.

At the same time, we recognized very quickly that we were falling apart.

When one of the children would cry at night, we would grit our teeth in anger and frustration. It was three in the morning. Someone would need to wake up soon.



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we wondered if the tiredness would ever leave our bones. Eventually, we sought help.

Our friends helped us in innumerable ways. The birth of our second child was greeted by an entire community of friends. My mother's funeral was attended by a fleet of home-care support workers, hospice volunteers and medical professionals.

My wife's parents' affairs were supported by family members, friends, social workers, nurses and doctors.

In short, we survived because we accepted help.

Sometimes, help was a casserole left at the front door. Or an offer of baby-sitting combined with movie passes. A ride to the doctor's office. A neighbour mowed our lawn; another shovelled our driveway; another listened to me wail about the unfairness of it all.

Even with all this help, we were so worn out that I cannot remember some years. I have a hard time remembering my students during those years. I worked on auto-pilot.

Caregiving is a balancing act. It requires dedication to the loved one, but it also requires a dedication to self-awareness.

You need to monitor yourself and understand that if you don't take care of yourself, then the whole system faces jeopardy.

I never realized that taking care of yourself could be so challenging.

Eating well, exercising, those things are difficult enough without having to think about one's mental wellness and energy reserves.

I became adept at talking about myself as if I were a car. I needed regular maintenance. I had a gas tank that needed filling, and if I felt like the needle was nearing empty.

I immediately tried to find some time for myself, to do those activities that would recharge me, nourish me and prepare me to be strong.

My wife, who is much stronger than I, more resourceful and way better at most things, showed me that being a caregiver, despite the stress, despite the exhaustion, can be one of the most rewarding things we ever do.

When you give love without any conditions, it is like your heart muscle expands and your ability to feel the great joys of life are intensified.

While I remember the tough times, I mostly remember what I learned, not about myself, but about my family: Beckett, Clementine, Piet, Kayo, Sook, Ji Won and Alberta.

To give care, to receive care, to support those in need in whatever small way we can, is one of the great rewards of being alive.

I never thought that cleaning a toilet, reading to someone or eating an ice cream cone on a picnic bench – I never thought that these things were really all that important.

I thought my life was to be dedicated to writing books, teaching and thinking about big ideas.

But I was wrong.

To love and accept love is more challenging, more creative and more rewarding than anything I ever imagined.

Thank you to all those who care for others. And to those who accept care, thank you for receiving our care with dignity and understanding.

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