

# Spiritual Support

for **CAREGIVERS** and  
Those Who **LOVE** Them





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Our ministry is supported primarily by the freewill offerings of friends like you. Your generosity helps make it possible for us to offer this inspirational booklet. Our desire is to make Unity literature available to everyone who wants it, especially those most in need of spiritual encouragement.

### Dear Friend,

One of the most difficult yet unheralded experiences of this human journey is to care for a loved one whose health is failing. For months or years, caregivers tend to the needs of others, often at the expense of their own.

Yet some conclude caregiving is the greatest blessing of their lives.

What are the spiritual aspects of caregiving that can make it meaningful? How can caregivers be supported even through their exhaustion and grief?

This booklet has been compiled to support you spiritually as a caregiver and to guide others in the best ways to help you. It is filled with insights, personal stories, and resources from those who have journeyed through all the complicated aspects of caregiving. These writers know how grueling the days can be, but they discovered positive aspects too.

May these lessons of compassion and healing inspire and inform you if you are a caregiver or care about someone who is. Please share this booklet with anyone you know who might feel understood and supported by these stories, poems, and words of wisdom.

Blessings on your caring journey,

Your Friends in Unity

  
World Headquarters  
at Unity Village

# The *Inner Work* of **Caregiving**

By Rev. Margaret Flick



**One of the most transformational** and difficult experiences of my life was caring for my parents who both had dementia. A wild ride barely begins to describe it.

My once-angry father was now sweet but had no comprehension of relationships. He didn't know me or Mom—he just knew whether he liked someone or not. My mother, once sweet, was now angry and somewhat abusive, especially to me and my husband. She knew who I was but not the reality of me.

Caregiving put me in uncharted territory. Being an only child, I was in the role of parent and solely responsible for them with help from my patient husband. I had to take stock of available resources and how we were going to manage all of it.

Even more important was my spiritual management. Here's what worked for me:

First, I had to surrender to a power greater than myself, which I call God. My spiritual life provided the guidance and support needed for my sanity and perspective. I set the intention that this experience would transform me rather than break me. I set the intention that I would love them unconditionally, which was setting the bar really high. Sometimes I succeeded, but often I failed and had to recommit to my intention.

Second, I had to acknowledge they were no longer the people I grew up with. In many ways, they had already left. I had to let go of any expectations that my love or care would be returned. This was important because not only would I face daily disappointment but I was sometimes in denial about their abilities. I focused on the good they had given me and considered this my repayment.

Third, I had to acknowledge the pain of open-ended grief. Each day or week, a function or ability would change or diminish in my parents. I felt deep grief that this was the end of my family. Whenever I was at work or away from them, I dreaded answering

the phone since it might be “the call.” I felt as if I were living in some suspended, altered reality.

Talking with other caregivers was important in handling this ongoing grief, so I started a caregiver’s group at my church for mutual support. Senior centers and hospice also helped as many of them offer groups and resources for grief and caregiving support. Attending workshops and speaking with social workers versed in geriatrics and other specialists gave me useful information about dementia and Parkinson’s disease.

“Jesus made it very clear that God knows what you need, even before you pray. More than that, God doesn’t have what you need. God is what you need.”

—Eric Butterworth, *The Universe Is Calling*

Fourth, and most difficult, I had to face my own limitations and set boundaries for myself and with my parents. Caregiving, although outer-directed, requires intense inner focus. Caregiving, especially for loved ones, brings up resentments, anger, frustration, and guilt. I felt guilty for taking a day off from them. I had codependency issues about being the “good girl.” I was angry they hadn’t planned for their old age or set up a power of attorney or any medical directives.

But being angry didn’t help me or them. Again, I had to accept the reality and move on. I gave myself permission to take good care of myself, such as going on a vacation, or to leave the room if Mom was being verbally abusive.

In the end, setting my intention to love them unconditionally resulted in an internal shift and transformation that has stayed with me. It wasn’t about them—it was about me.

I had to let go of expectations and resentments.

I had to go deep within, accept my own trigger points, and forgive myself.

I had to forgive them. Forgiveness is a powerful force that benefits and blesses all.

I also realized that I had to love myself unconditionally.

Caregiving can be heaven or hell. We choose how we perceive it. I know for sure it’s not about whether they know who I am. It is more important to remember the totality of who they are, beyond this stage of their lives.

No matter the condition, mentally or physically, everyone remembers and feels what it is like to be loved. Sending them on the next part of their journey, forgiven and loved unconditionally, is the greatest gift we can give to them and ourselves.

And we will be changed at depth. ●



# How to Live With the Guilt

By Barbara Bowen



**From the petty to the heartrending**, guilt plagues caregivers. I've been no exception during six years of caring for my 95-year-old mother. Almost every situation has stirred guilt within me. However, I've learned to let intent guide me.

Guilt was probably most threatening when I had to take over the money. Mom, who had always handled her own finances and taught me to handle mine, said, "It's my money!" Still, she was confused as to whether she had paid bills, sometimes paid them twice, was often late, donated to everyone who asked, and fell prey to minor scams.

I faced a hard decision. I knew Mom had worked all her life to provide for herself and me. Should I let her continue to struggle with independence and be vulnerable to scams while I pretended not to see? Easier for me, but not very loving. So, intending to provide positive support, I put hesitation and guilt aside, embraced necessity, and took control of the computer and checkbooks for her protection. Once the change was accomplished, surprisingly, she seemed relieved.

A sense of priorities must be part of intent. Sometimes Mom wants to go "home." She has made it obvious that she means her girlhood home where her "daddy" lives. The first time she asked, I tried telling her the truth: Her parents had both made their transition. She cried for a week and a half and demanded to know why no one told her anything (although she had planned both funerals). Eventually, she forgot her parents had died and asked again to go "home."

What is more loving? To relate the facts and let her mourn all over again—who knows how many times or for how long—or to tell a "therapeutic fib," a lie that

makes her happy in the moment? Nowadays, I cross my fingers and tell her anything but that her parents are dead. I say the car is in for repair, or a storm is predicted, or I need to phone her dad to find a good time to visit. If she asks for follow-up, I figure I can tell her I forgot to make the call, but the request always

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slips her mind before 10 minutes have passed. I could feel guilty about fibbing, but I don't. I have given my mother a gift of peace.

If I feel guilty about the feelings I have—wishing this situation would end, that Mom would make her transition, that my life would return to normal—I surround myself with love. I'm reassured that I'm helping and guided in moments of doubt. I'm sure I am doing or have done my best at any given moment, whatever human feelings may be involved, and I forgive myself for being human.

According to fellow caregivers, after the loved one passes, relief is frequently great—suffering is over, and life is once again the caregiver's own. But feelings of relief bring further guilt. Although I have not yet had to face these emotions, when the time comes, I will apply the same principles. They have worked for me thus far.

Realizing I am helping Mom goes a long way toward dealing with guilt, but it is also important that I live my own life. Guilt sometimes causes problems if friends, family, or employment are neglected. I have to remember that no one can live my life but me, and that means taking care of me. I've found that unless I do, I'm testy. Then I snap at Mom, and that creates guilt too.

So to have the best chance at patience and kindness, I do yoga and write, even if I have to get up early, stay up late, or take a day off from caregiving. And I ask for help. Support groups, friends, community and church organizations, and family are all willing to lend a hand, but they must be asked for specific tasks at specific time periods.

When Mom gave me her power of attorney, she was in her right mind, and she did not doubt my intent. She knew I would do what was best for her. That has not changed. When guilt looms, I remember this.

It is not pleasant to watch Mom lose her faculties and slowly slip away, but remembering and practicing loving intent brings self-forgiveness and peace. Sometimes there is no perfect solution for the problems the two of us face. I intend, however, to make things better for her. And I know I have, even if she can't always recognize it.

I continue to be guided by love, and let guilt wither, untended. ■

