

Knapp: A Caregiver's Reflection on Atlas

Wicked Local Newton

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I have been a caregiver for numbers of loved ones. Most were old and all were unable to care for themselves towards the ends of their lives. During these “watching-over” years, I made forays into diverse and unfamiliar places, and struggled with frightening uncertainty. I took on these jobs not understanding where they would take me, how tough they would be, and the intensity of assault on the core of my being. Each circumstance was different and filled with emotional contradictions –sadness and joy, anger and love, fear and enlightenment. As I took care of people, I managed other things – work, school, family – too many tasks with a scarcity of time. Simultaneously, I felt supported and cared for, yet alone and lost. Although others tried to help with a few parts of what seemed a puzzle with infinite pieces, I was the one handling countless, disorienting events. (Mom needs photo for DMV handicapped sticker. Oh no! Can't park in handicapped spot – no sticker yet. Parking space too narrow. Can I get her heavy body into wheelchair?! Can I push her through chaotic lot without being hit by crazy driver?!)

My experience was not unique. I am one of millions who has assumed the job of caregiver. Each of us can describe this journey in words but language alone can't express how it feels. I remember a sunburst of insight on one particularly difficult day. “Wow, this is what Atlas must have felt like!” relieved that I had discovered a potent image for that all-consuming task of care-giving. I'll try to explain.

First, though, sit down or stand up in a quiet place. Close your eyes. Imagine you are Atlas – that forsaken Greek god-figure who was tricked into carrying the whole of the universe for eternity. Feel that enormous, seething load pushing down on your shoulders as it compresses your body so you can barely move. Experience the fierce ache in your arms as you try to keep stable the gigantic, teeming package. Realize that you can't ever move from this spot because if you shift your position some important piece could tear off and barrel away. Look forward (that's the only direction because you can't turn your head). You see an object speeding towards you and know that you should pay attention. But you agonize, “should I try to capture it and shove it into that living mass or should I let it rush by and say, with resignation, “I'm already doing the best I can with what I've got?” You assess the situation and know if you try to grab the object, you will stagger to reestablish your precarious balance, during which you might drop something and feel bad about it. There is no winning and little peace.

I don't know if the Atlas metaphor reflects your experience – symbols are personal - but it worked for me. His challenge provided a context for a responsibility that I did not comprehend before I took it on. It helped me understand the physical and emotional complexity of a circumstance where you are all at once in control but paralyzed by conflicting options.

Through the years as I cared for people, I wondered, why it felt so hard. After all, birth, living, and death are parts of normal human progression. Ultimately, I realized that taking care of the frail was difficult

partly because I had no experience, no intimate role models to seek advice from, and even if I did have someone to go to, I didn't know what questions to ask. It was hard also because medical, social, housing, and transportation systems were uncoordinated. Each interaction with one system led to follow-up somewhere else, resulting in more work and confusing answers. Finally, it was hard because sometimes I had to make decisions that may have contradicted a relative's wish. I tried to make rational choices but, even so, there was usually a heavy burden on my conscience.

In spite of the hardships that care-giving brought I am grateful for having done it. It helped me understand the process of aging, how systems do or do not work, how decision-making is not a straightforward path, how each situation and person is unique, and, most importantly, that those who care for others need endless compassion. I would not have given up this experience for any other. It broadened my knowledge and helped me clarify who I am. Unlike Atlas, my responsibilities had a natural ending from which I could move forward having learned more about living (and dying) than I could have ever imagined. I am thankful to have gained a little emotional wisdom which is now permanently and profoundly etched on my spirit.

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