

Letters from Madelyn: Chronicles of Caregiver

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I have never heard of anyone aspiring to one day become care giver for another person. It would be difficult to imagine someone knowing all that the undertaking requires approaching it eagerly.

Some "agreed" years earlier when in their marriage vows they uttered "in sickness and in health". Others promised they would never allow a loved one to be "put in one of those places" which is code for an assisted living facility or nursing home. Finding oneself in the role of caretaker seems just to happen. Suddenly it is new reality, that happened quietly while you were doing something else and absolutely had other plans. There is never a good or convenient time for the role to start especially for the care giver.

In the United States, most care givers are women, the adult child or wife of the ill person. There are no degree programs that teach care giving. There are some skills you can be taught such as how to bathe another or manage medications or deal with aggressive behaviors. I wonder if women are just expected to know as part of being a woman. Most family care givers are not compensated for their time and efforts. Some forego paid employment which means they also miss out on benefits, career opportunities and retirement savings.

"Letter from Madelyn" is a compilation of letters written by an older woman living in rural area caring for her ill spouse. Madelyn, the caregiver/author wrote primarily to her daughter, but also to others in her family. **These letters resemble diary entries where the author frankly shares the joys, burdens and exhaustion** that characterize a caretaker's day. Some entries are quite humorous such as when the author needed to explain to her husband why his high school girlfriend could not reciprocate his ardor (her husband did not approve!) And there are other entries about the days she had to clean up after numerous bathroom mishaps. As the dementia and other challenges took more control over her husband the good days were less frequent but there is never a sense of anger or resentment only perhaps disappointment that dementia had stolen her husband. While they were never really apart they were not really together because the disease took him further and further away.

This book is an "easy" read. The style is almost "folksy" and very familiar. There is no medical jargon and the format allows one to pick up and read just a few pages and return later without worry that you forgot an important plot point. It fits easily into one of those stolen free moments that caregivers know to grasp and relish. Caregivers will recognize a companion soul and appreciate knowing someone else understands their challenges and their joys.