Caring Too Hard: Refueling When You Are Spent

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Declaration Related to Conflicts of Interest

I declare that neither I, nor my immediate family, have a financial interest or other relationship with any manufacturer/s of a commercial product/s or service/s which may be discussed at the conference.
Secondary declaration

Sometimes I care too hard.
Objectives

• Get honest about *our own experiences* of being caregivers
• Discuss the *consequences* of caregiving
• To look at and think about our own attitudes and behaviors that may *impact our ability to keep on caring*
• To explore some investments in self-care
You know the drill...
Please wait your turn...
Too many of us...

- Provide care as if we could drive a car without ever putting gas in the tank, change the tires, or perform maintenance.
- See ourselves as the sole *Managers of the Universe*, charged with making it all work and with no days off or vacation plan.
- Speak and think unkindly of ourselves in ways that we would not do to others.
It is time to take off my cape...

• Not very slick
• Not very polished
• Very authentic
It is time…

• To get honest about what having a caregiver’s heart can do to us

• To peel away the masks, the capes, and the superhero status that we may so value
  – This may be our identity

• To support one another in our vulnerabilities
  – And to be willing to let others support us
Amy Cunningham: Drowning in Empathy
I have some experience with this

- Pastor for 26 years
- Father of 3 + 2
  - Daddy-duty never really goes away
- Husband who has miraculously and against all odds survived a brain tumor
  - Despite being a wonderful soul and an amazing man, he has experienced multiple cognitive impacts related to memory, confusion, and anxiety
Universe laughing at me

As I prepared to give this talk, he has been in the hospital 2 times in ten days
- This was, it seems, to remind me of how exhausting caregiving can be
- When he is sick, we all are
  Disruptions of schedules
  Changes in diet, activities
  Requirement to refocus, to deal with new realities
It wouldn’t be so bad, except…

I have a **caregiver’s heart**.
What is a caregiver’s heart?

- People with passion feel deeply
- People with passion tend to feel deeply for others (compassion)
  – 13th and 14th century French and Latin, meaning “to endure suffering together”
This doesn’t mean that we necessarily literally take on the suffering of another.

It does mean we *accompany them, stand with them, support them, expend ourselves* for them in their suffering. We become linked to their narrative and reality.
It can seem as if we are living more than one life at a time. Too often it means that we may be pouring out more than we are bringing in.
It takes courage to be compassionate

– Accept our own vulnerability
– Accept our own passion and our ability to feel deeply
– Accept the associated risks of that vulnerability
  • Societal messages that see empathy as weakness, tears as a source of shame
Who needs our compassion?

• **Children**: spectral needs, behavioral needs, medical complexities

• **Other family members**
  – Our children who will require lifelong supports
  – Ageing parents
  – Spouses, former spouses, loved ones who face unanticipated life events (illness, accidents)

• **Friends**
  – Others who share circumstances like ours
It doesn’t stop there

Once people catch on to the fact that you are a good soul, a kind person, with a compassionate ear and a caregiver’s heart, they will seek you out.

– Your mechanic
– The check out person at the store
– Casual acquaintances who share TMI
– Other caregivers (because we are always need someone to listen to us!)
Our access to tragedy

– We learn about the pain of our family and friends as if we were standing beside them.
– We see the savageness of what is going on around the world.
– The news cycle replays bad news for us over and over and over again.
  • Graphic images, heart-breaking interviews
Many names

- Caregiver’s fatigue
- Compassion fatigue
- Secondary trauma stress
- Vicarious trauma
- Mixed/shared trauma
- **Allostatic overload**
  - Wear and tear on our physical beings from stress and emotional arousal
There are consequences to “caring too hard”...
“Caring too hard” may mean acting with such passion and intensity that we cannot sustain ourselves.

We may even end up unable to care for those for whom we feel the deepest compassion and to whom we hold our most profound commitments.
Brene Brown: You cannot selectively numb your feelings. If you try, you end up numb to all of them, including joy.

Brené Brown is an American scholar, author, and public speaker, who is currently a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work.
She continues…

• We work hard to make the uncertain certain
• We perfect ourselves and we attempt to perfect our families and children
• We pretend
  – That we don’t hurt others, because our intentions are so noble
  – That what we do doesn’t matter
Red Flags

Pay attention to what concerns you, concerns others, or when clusters begin to appear
You cannot “Un-See”

Flashbacks or nightmares
Emotional Disconnection

Sadness and apathy
Substance Abuse and/or Substitution

Finding our comfort in things

– ETOH, Drugs

– Food

– Distractions that isolate us (for example, Facebook/social media, cellphones, ideologies, politics)
Shifts in Trust in Relationships

US vs. THEM

• Needing services for those we care for
  – High stakes/risks
  – High investment

• The more “right’ we are, the more “wrong” they are
Physical Symptoms

Hard not only on the soul, but on the body
- Not enough sleep
- Stress
- No breaks

Specific and Non-specific complaints
We isolate

• Nobody else could understand our circumstance, our feelings, or what we are going through
• We don’t want to be a burden on others
  – Whiny, ungrateful, not much fun
What **more** can we do?

The thought of trying to do more is, by itself, overwhelming

Needing to do something more so that we can **sustain** doing something more...
We may have to consider change

“The most creative act you will ever undertake is the act of creating yourself.”

— DEEPAK CHOPRA
The paradox

Unless we act on our own behalf, we may reach the point that we cannot act on behalf of others.

Maybe there is some truth to needing to put the oxygen mask on ourselves first.
Number 10

Take a walk on the beach or in the woods (the route back to your center)
Number 9

Create
Number 8

Find gratitude
NOT because you have to, but to heal yourself

GRATITUDE GAME
- Name a Person You are Thankful for
- Name a Place You are Thankful for
- Name a Food You are Thankful for
- Name a Thing You are Thankful for
- Name Anything of Your Choice

Teach Beside Me
Number 7

Seek out more resources

People
Services
Blogs/podcasts/videos
Books

Include RESpite options
Number 6

Find someone who can and will listen just to you without judgement without trying to fix the situation or YOU
Number 5

Begin to intentionally focus on resiliency and renewal
Not just “one offs”, but practices

*Spiritual*: community, prayer, meditation, ritual

*Physical*: Put yourself in the care of a good practitioner of your choice

*Emotional*: Cry, laugh, sit quietly
Number 4

Ask others what they see in us and what they can tell us about ourselves, our behaviors, and our beliefs.
Number 3

Inventory the positives and the not-so-positives

This demands of us the willingness to look honestly
Number 2

Acknowledgement that we are where we are

Past  Present  Future

Woulda, coulda, shoulda
Put your oxygen mask on first

Put your cape back on to commit to yourself

– Honor your courage to be compassionate
– Honor your skills, generosity, and kind spirit
– Remember that unless you are taking care of yourself, it may not be that others won’t, but indeed, that they can’t
Highest calling

For you have been called to one of the most noble and moral tasks in all of humanity
You who care too much…

You are a caregiver.
"We don't have to do all of it alone. We were never meant to."

- Brené Brown
Thank you for the work you do and for your attendance and participation today!

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