



The High Cost of Caring

By Eleanor Vincent, MFA

Elder care is a booming business. Perhaps you know the statistics. Population experts estimate that more than 50 million Americans—about 17% of the population—will be 65 years or older in 2020. As one friend of mine says about the wave of retiring Baby Boomers: “Geezerhood is right around the corner.”

Here in the year 2008, we rapidly aging boomers are taking care of *actual* geezers—our frail, elderly parents. Nearly 22 million American workers are caregivers for their parents or loved ones. I’m too busy keeping up with the latest fall, flu, or fever to worry much about my own old age. My 87-year-old father keeps me as watchful, heedful, and worried as I was when I was a single parent of 2 daughters. But unlike raising kids, there’s no bright future to look forward to.

The American Association of Retired Persons says that informal caregivers are the backbone of the nation’s long-term care system, contributing an estimated \$350 billion in 2006. That’s almost as much as the total spending for the Medicare program (\$342 billion) in 2005. The personal cost to caregivers is high. A recent study by the Family Caregiver Alliance found that family caregivers are at risk for many physical and mental health challenges, including higher levels of stress, frustration, and depression compared with the general population. In addition, informal caregivers exhibit harmful behaviors, from increased use of alcohol or other substances to higher than normal levels of hostility. They are also in worse physical health than noncaregivers, with chronic conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and arthritis occurring more frequently.

How can we take care of those we love without losing track of ourselves? I asked this question repeatedly when my brother, sister, and I found ourselves hovering over my father’s hospital bed as he was recovering from cancer surgery late in 2007. Dad lives in an assisted living facility in northern New Jersey, while I live in California and my brother and sister live near Cleveland, Ohio. From a financial standpoint, none of us could afford to pay New York metropolitan area hotel bills for more than a week. But the workings of the human heart can’t be tallied on a spreadsheet.

My frail elf of a father still has a booming voice and a hearty laugh, yet weighs less than half what he did in his prime. A strong wind could blow him over. Dad gave us our baths on Saturday nights, singing his own special version of “Oh say can you see any bedbugs on me?” He made us search for the hidden “Nina” in the Sunday *New York Times* Hirschfeld cartoons. He challenged us to excel and berated us when we fell short. One Christmas he took us in search of a tree to cut down ourselves, 3 little kids breaking through snow crust up to our waists, laughing the whole way, our father in the lead with a saw in his hand. How do you turn your back on the one who made you who you are? Who shared his passions, his workaholic dedication to the arts, his love of chocolate and Broadway musicals, and his quirky sense of humor? The short answer is, none of his kids ever would.

So there we stood at his bedside, cranky and sleep-deprived, giving him ginger ale through a straw, reading the latest Harry Potter book to entertain him, feeding him hospital Jell-O and chicken broth. And somehow still laughing. Well, except when we weren’t. When he was having a bad day or the nursing staff refused to answer the call button, we had to become hard-nosed advocates, demanding that our father get the care he so desperately needed. I survived by knitting like a maniac and taking frequent walks in the surrounding neighborhood, shuffling the bright gold leaves underfoot. I don’t have any answers. You find balance where and when you can.

I’m very lucky. I work for a company that has a generous family leave policy. Three of the days I was with Dad were paid for by my employer. Two were vacation days. Different states have different rules, but California’s are quite generous, although most of what you get is partially paid time. Some of us can’t afford to take it. So we suck it up and do a double shift – caring deeply for our work, and taking care of the ones we love. If that describes you, find a way to keep your health and your sanity. Keep daily pleasures in your life. And know that there are a lot of us out there, caring.

Eleanor Vincent is the author of the memoir Swimming with Maya: A Mother’s Story (Capital Books, 2004). She lives and writes in Oakland, CA.