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NOBODY SAID IT WAS EASY

In which I examine the pitfalls of caring.



If you have ever made a resolution to do something, something that is right and good, something you really want to do in the service of people you love, but something which is going to invade your time on a frequent and regular basis, you will know that the enthusiasm can fade away pretty quickly when the reality sets in.

Someone said to me when I explained how I spent my days during the period of caring for my father-in-law - 'It's like a having a baby again'. And so it was, but minus the cuddles and chuckles and the smell of Johnson's baby powder on the peachy soft skin.

Consider this scenario and see if it rings any bells:

To answer the telephone on a Sunday afternoon and hear her Father's voice was alarming and meant disaster. She gave the number and he said, 'Is that you, Angela?' which irritated her. Who else could it be since her voice was that of an adult





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female and no other adult female lived in the house? In ways like that she was cruel to him.

'Yes, of course,' she said, curtly, though she had caught the despondency in his voice and interpreted it correctly with great speed. 'Is anything wrong?' Because she was a Trewick by birth, Angela knew that this was the expected thing to assume.

'It's your Mam.'

Naturally. It always was. Nothing else made the stomach lurch with such violence.

'What's happened?'

'She's took bad. I took her breakfast in, bran and that, got her up, got her dressed and nice, said she wouldn't bother with her hair but I said oh no we're not starting that game and I did it, best I could like, anyways I got her going and I thought hello her mouth's a bit funny but she says she's all right, bad tempered like, and anyways when I came from getting a loaf - I had to get a loaf or I wouldn't have left her - anyways she says she wants to lie down so I took off her slippers and she lay down on the settee, but her colour was bad mind' -

He had to be heard out. Even if she could have brought herself to, Angela would never have interrupted. She listened almost dreamily, absent minded, picking at a bit of fluff on her sleeve. Perhaps he would go on forever and nothing need be done.

- 'anyways she tries to get up to go to the doings and she was away, down in a flash, head missed the fender by an inch, like a log, couldn't move her and she's shaking and her face all screwed up - what a business - oh dear - so I grabbed the poker and banged on the wall for Mrs Collins and luckily she was in and got the message - anyways she came and between us we got her back on the settee - she's deadweight, you'd never think, till you come to lift her - and Mrs Collins says straight away "she's had a stroke, Mr Trewick" and by god she

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was damned right, the doctor said “she’s had a stroke” soon as he’d seen her, and I must say he came quick, just a young fellow but very nice, “she’s had a stroke” he says, but that was yesterday – what a night – and now this morning she’s worse, a bit of pneumonia got into her the doctor says’ –

‘How awful,’ Angela said. He had paused too long for breath for her to ignore the break. ‘Poor Mother.’

‘Poor Mother all right,’ Father said, ‘you’re dead right there – thought she was a goner – but anyways I’m managing and we’ll see how she goes – the doctor’s coming back this afternoon and he’s given her pills and everything, course she can’t hardly swallow, can’t speak either, it’s a job getting anything into her but I’m managing and Mrs Collins is very good’ –

‘I’d better come down,’ Angela said. There was no alternative. She despised herself for the grudging way in which she said it, but Father did that to her.

Extract from *Mother can you hear me?* By Margaret Forster

‘Father did that to her.’ What we do to others we never know. The best of relationships is tainted with sin. There is manipulation; there is suspicion of manipulation; there are messages spoken and unspoken, understood, resisted or misunderstood.

In this chapter we are going to look at some of the hazards of caring for the aged parent. We shall open a window on what might be going on in the mind of the person who wipes the dribble off Dad’s chin. It is not a pretty sight and I am not talking about the dribble. As God said to Cain, ‘Sin is crouching at your door: it desires to master you ...’

Now, I know there is pleasure in service; there is delight in making someone comfortable; it is truly better to give than to receive. I also know my own sinful heart and I think it is fair to assume that I am not the only sinner on the



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planet. In taking on the care of an elderly parent we need to keep an eye on our own emotional responses and deal with them, not deny them.

1. The five bad boys of caring

So here are the five bad boys of caring, running amok behind the closed door of your smiling face. If you are a carer and have never faced these beasts, you are farther along the sanctification road than I am. But watch out, they might be lurking yet and waiting to get you.

A. Anger

You can feel as if your life has been hi-jacked. You planned to read the newspaper/ watch Neighbours/ embroider a cushion/ make a casserole/ or just go to work and you get a phone-call.

You could have been winning the Nobel prize for literature but you are pushing a wheelchair.

The more you attempt to meet needs the more you perceive that the needs are endless. The loneliness of the old lady you visit is a gaping bottomless pit. It doesn't matter how long you stay, when you get up to go she says:

'Are you going already?'

And then comes the accusatory comment:

'I know you're very busy.'

Followed by the twist of the knife:

'I'm such a nuisance to everybody.'

And inside you feel a kind of rage, that nothing would be enough. It is not gratitude you want, although appreciation is nice. Possibly you crave the recognition by your parent that



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what they are asking is huge and that actually you had no choice. And your head is full of furious little speeches; now and then you rant to your friends about how unreasonable it all is. You make promises to yourself that you will not do this to your own children, promises which you are unlikely to keep.

But beyond that, the anger is directed not at your parent but at God. You feel that He has stitched you up and prevented you from following your own agenda. And you mourn the loss of the life you might have had.

B. Being a martyr

So you suppose you had better do it. It's ghastly and tedious and miserable but someone's got to do it and as usual, the finger is pointing at you. Deep, deep sighs. It is Saturday afternoon and you are watching a football match on television when the phone rings. Pulling a face lined with premonition, you pick up the phone. Your family hear your end of the conversation which goes something like this:

'What is it you want?'

'You want me to come round?'

'I'll come round now.'

'I was watching the football, but it's OK I'll come round now.'

'No, don't phone Mary. I'll do it. It's got to be done. It better be done now. Give me five minutes.'

'No. I'm coming. I'll be there. Just give me five, OK?'

The receiver is replaced. Lips are set tight as you reach for your coat, shout goodbye and doggedly make your way. You are fed up about missing the football (but secretly not as much as you first thought because England were losing and it wasn't that good) and now you are hugging the idea that

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you are better than Mary because you are dealing with this at an observable cost to yourself. Already you are rehearsing the story for your friends and you emerge the noble hero.

'I had just sat down to watch the football, cup of tea in my hand ...'

You are proud of your sacrifice and enjoying the right to be angry with just about everybody, because you had to do it and no one else offered.

C. Control

The fact is, to continue the story of the interrupted football game, you didn't want anyone else to offer; you made sure no one else had the chance to offer. This is because you are going for superhero status. You think if I take this on I am going to be brilliant at it. People will be impressed at my superb self-sacrifice (memo to myself - must slip it into the conversation).

Now in order to be that good you have to be very controlling. You control who else is busy around your parents. It looks like a demonstration of your concern for their welfare, but actually it is not about them it is about you. You fear lest others should be seen as more helpful to your parents than you are. You are jealous lest others rise in their affections or are seen as more dependable. You hate being indispensable but you also love it and don't want to share that no 1 slot with anyone. You want to be the one they need for their comfort in old age. Perhaps you fear they'll leave all their money to the cleaner.

This feeling of your importance to the whole set-up is your pay-off for all you have given, which has been genuine and well intentioned. How the human heart, since Eden, craves glory, if not of one kind, then another.



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D. Drudgery

Some levels of care, especially the daily variety, can be mind-numbingly tedious. The washing and the dressing and the servicing of physical needs are repeated so often that you can do them on automatic pilot. You clear up a mess and next time you arrive, there it is again. It can be depressing to do the same menial task so often and to consider that this now makes up your life – the days stretching out like an American interstate, mile on dreary mile towards the distant horizon. You start reading the death columns in the newspaper and note with alarm that most deaths seem to occur when people are in their nineties. You do the maths. How long can you sustain what you do? And of course the prospect is only for further degeneration and decrepitude, yours and your parent's.

Even the weekly visit or phone-call can be very tedious, especially if there is any dementia or particular obsessions.

The same conversations are rehearsed:

'Did you see Carol Vordermann's dress on Countdown?'

'No, I don't watch Countdown. I'm at work.'

'She wears the most peculiar outfits.'

You sit and listen stroking a hand, and smile and make sympathetic noises, staring into the middle distance, trying to think of a change of subject. You surreptitiously glance at the clock and wonder when you can decently make a move. You are bored and you fear it shows.

E. Exhaustion

You have set yourself a heady pace and it is taking its toll. Helping Dad out of his chair is physically exhausting – he's a big man and his legs do not take his weight. You are rushing from A to B, squeezing in a visit between going to the dump

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and collecting your daughter from orchestra practise. You are being asked a lot of questions. You are trying to work out who will get Mum to the dentist and what will happen when you go on holiday. Every bone in your body aches and you are close to tears a lot of the time.

Mentally and physically you are exhausted and you do not respond well to the comment by your mother that you look tired and her well-intentioned question:

'Are you sure you are not overdoing it?'

2. Why those bad boys must be faced

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews includes this stirring injunction:

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (Heb. 12:14-15).

The expressions 'make every effort' and 'see to it' tell us that a struggle is involved here. It is much easier to be cross with everybody than to live at peace with them.

Relationships of all kinds challenge us at the very heart of our sinful nature; they expose our basic tendency to be selfish. We will never be perfectly holy, but holiness should be our aim. And if we are not bothered about holiness, then it is likely that we don't know Christ at all, because He is bothered about it - that is why He gave His life.

The thing about those five bad boys, anger, being a martyr, control, drudgery and exhaustion, is that they are great pals and when they get together they cause trouble. They are not all sinful in themselves - it is not a sin to be tired nor to find certain tasks tedious - but when



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exhaustion and drudgery join forces with the others they become demolition partners. Here are some things they demolish:

- Goodwill – what you started out of a heart to honour your parents and Christ has now become cold duty which can, unchecked, turn love to hatred.
- Peace of mind – when we choose anger or being a martyr and carry that spirit around in us as we tend to our elderly parents, the Holy Spirit is grieved and Satan is given a foothold. We rightly feel troubled.
- Joy in service – God loves a cheerful giver and it is a joyous and liberating thing to give (money, time or energy) out of a full heart of thankfulness to God. There is massive happiness in this, which those who serve self or money would never believe. But when we are grudging and resentful, all of that joy evaporates.
- Relationship with God – our own horror at how much time we are spending on our parents has inflated ourselves and our importance. God has diminished to the very edge of the picture – even perhaps out of it altogether – and ourselves and our needs are right in the centre. This is a very unhealthy place to be.

And here are the weapons of mass destruction that the bad boys, working together, manufacture:

- Bad temper – we are on a short fuse and respond to simple and harmless requests with irritation, which will show. My father-in-law suffered with itching, the source of which no consultant could ever identify, and his frequent plaintiff request to anybody passing his chair was, ‘Rub my back, will you.’ I rubbed his back all right, but there was

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sometimes a complete lack of tenderness in the ointment. It was somewhat fortunate that the harder I rubbed the better he liked it.

- Violence – it is now well documented that old people are often physically abused, even by their offspring. We might all think we would never do that, but put those bad boys together and it could happen one day. A nice Christian believer like you could one day be driven over the edge to do the unthinkable.
- Walking out –Yes, weariness in well-doing can lead to such massive discouragement, with yourself as much as anything, that you give up altogether. You get your bag: 'That's it; I'm off.' What pain that can cause to your vulnerable parents. What guilt you will carry. How will that relationship be restored?
- Bitterness – the verses in Hebrews 12 warn us about the root of bitterness. This is a most pernicious plant, sown by the seed of unchecked anger. We look around us and see others having, apparently, an easy ride. And we hate them for it. We consider that we have been dealt a dreadful hand and we think we deserved better. We are cynical about people, even when they try to help. We impute the very worst of motives to them. We imitate a hedgehog for prickliness and untouchableness and then blame those who leave us alone, even though we have encouraged them to do it.
- Blaming – ever since the Garden of Eden human beings have looked round for someone to blame. On my bad days, I blamed my father-in-law, my mother-in-law, my husband, and of course God Himself. And in every case the relationship was soured. Not only so, but I was self-righteously telling myself lies, and believing them. When we murmur at God's wise decrees or distrust His



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providence in this way we are dethroning God, and guess who the usurper is!

Do you see now why anger, being a martyr, control, drudgery and exhaustion must be faced squarely and dealt with? They are extremely dangerous. Do not deny their existence and let them continue their work, like undetected terrorists making bombs in a terraced house in Wapping. Send in the armed response unit!

3. How to handle those bad boys

Practical strategies I will suggest in the next chapter. But there is a much deeper response and it has to do with the way we think. When the apostle Paul says in Romans 12 'be transformed by the renewing of your mind' he is not encouraging us all to study with the Open University. Rather he is underlining the truth that it is the way we think about things which truly will shape our behaviour. Christian doctrine is not to be shut up in dusty tomes in the Bodleian Library and only referred to by learned academics - it is absolutely crucial for every believer in Jesus Christ to understand the truth about God, His character and work. Otherwise we cannot understand or relate properly to the world we live in. Renewing our minds by filling them with the truth about God and about ourselves will have a transforming effect on the way we live.

So here follows the briefest of resumes of aspects of the character of God which will, if served up and ingested regularly, beat those bad boys out of sight. For a fuller treatment I recommend, seriously, an intake of Jim Packer, Wayne Grudem, John Calvin or any of the puritans.



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- God is sovereign. He is sovereign over the whole universe. He created it and He sustains it. He is intimately connected with it and He directs all the affairs of men. Nothing happens in the world without His permission. That includes you and me, our parentage, our location and situation today and every day. Relax – you are not general manager of the universe. The universe is in much safer, wiser and more capable hands than yours (Dan. 4:35; Rom. 11:33-36).
- God is good. The goodness of God is enough to make you weep. Every day the sun rises and you have light and warmth. You have breath and energy. You have food and clothing. And this is what God does for millions upon millions of humankind who never give Him a first thought, let alone a second one. Not only so, but as God writes human history He does so with a good end in view. He is not like those malicious gods of ancient Greece who just played around with humankind, taunting them and wasting them for fun, rendering their lives pointless. He has planned and executed the redemption of humanity from the mess they have wilfully and rebelliously created for themselves. This good purpose includes you if you have put your trust in the one God sent to achieve this redemption, Jesus Christ. Now having gone to all that trouble to rescue you, God is not now callously going to abandon you to a series of random and painful events to upset you. In His goodness He has planned for your goodness. That process might involve some pain, – is anything of value achieved without pain? – but the pain and difficulty comes from the hand of a loving God. And the pain and difficulty is temporary; the best of happy endings awaits and it is permanent (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28-32).

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- God is all-powerful. God is the one who can. He makes things happen; He reverses outcomes; He delights to do the impossible. Frequently it pleases Him to do this kind of thing in answer to the humble requests of His beloved children. His power raised Jesus Christ from the dead; His power caused us to reach out to Jesus for rescue; that same power is a resource available to His people so that in weakness they find that they have strength (Luke 1:37; Eph. 1:19-20; Ps. 121:2).
- God knows. He knows what you did today and He knows what you will face tomorrow. He knows about your tears and sighs and struggles and sins. If blame is to be apportioned, He will do it justly and at the right time. He knows your frame and your frailty. He never sleeps so that you can sleep in safety (Pss. 139:1-3; 121:3-4; 103:13-14).
- God is gracious. His love for humans is an unrequited love, demonstrated in the sending of His Son. He gives us what we don't deserve – forgiveness and the assurance of a home in heaven. This immense gift is free (although it cost Him a lot) and available to recalcitrant rebels, offensive offenders (Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:1-5; 2 Tim. 1:9).

Please forgive the shortness of that summary. One could go on and on and I was tempted to. But the point I want to make is that even a minor meditation on the character of God will impact the responses I have described as bad boys in this chapter. They will start to shrivel and slink away in shame. How can self-importance be sustained when we think about the greatness of God? He is the centre, not me. How can we be angry when we consider the goodness and the grace of God? If we start getting on our high horse and



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ranting about what we deserve, won't we dismount and shut up when we recall that what we actually deserve is something a lot worse than cleaning up poo from a carpet? How can we keep up a stupid martyr act when we remember that God sees and knows all things? How can we grasp for control and glory when we recall that God is king and the glory is His? Even drudgery is lifted when we make it our goal to please Him. And exhaustion is reduced when we appreciate that God is not a cruel taskmaster. He not only permits, He commands regular rest. He also promises strength for each day and is able to supply it.

There may be some repenting to be done over ungodly and resentful attitude. But God is an extraordinarily forgiving God. He is the Father who watches the road for the sight of His returning wayward son and runs to meet him. There is truly no-one like Almighty God.

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? (Micah 7:18).

It is undeniably true that the person who cares for an elderly parent may frequently suffer at the hands of an ungrateful, grumpy or manipulative old man or woman. It happens; it is the kind of thing that people do to each other. But the recipient of God's free pardon for a debt of sin he or she could never pay, is in a good position to forgive the ill-humours of old age. Indeed Jesus reminded Peter (Matt. 18:21-35) that there is really no comparison between the abuse God has suffered at our hands and the abuse we might suffer from a fellow sinner. And yet God has let us off. We are thus required to do the same. No ifs, no buts, and as often as necessary.



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Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you (Col. 3:13).

