



Caregiving and ‘The Rest of the Story’

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Some of us are of an age that we remember the radio broadcasts of the late Paul Harvey who died two years ago at age 90. A favorite feature to his listeners was a segment that he began in his newscasts during the Second World War and ultimately became its own series on ABC Radio Networks beginning in 1976. I suspect that many of us can hear his distinctive voice and cadence even now as he turned from the hard news of the day to a story with a twist.

The stories were allegedly factual, usually interesting, often unusual, sometimes humorous, and, in a sense, typically unpredictable. The unpredictable aspect was a surprise or ‘twist’ at the end. The story or episode always concluded with the tag line, “And now you know . . . the *rest* of the story.” The surprise or twist highlighted or explained the substance of the story and enriched an understanding of the character of the central person or significance of the event. In a sense, ‘the rest of the story’ made the reported episode more meaningful.

During our minutes together this morning, I want to suggest that it is essential that caregivers remember the rest of your story with the person for whom you care. The ‘rest of your shared story’ explains, at least in part, why you are faithfully, lovingly, and tirelessly by the side of your care partner. The ‘rest of your shared story’ reveals much more about the fullness of your relationship together than the title of caregiver that has been appended to your primary role as spouse, child, parent, sibling, friend, or other kin.

The 'rest of your shared story' is a narrative that surely includes moments of breathtaking joy and mountain top experiences that remind you why you now voluntarily embrace the role and duties of caregiver. The 'rest of your shared story' is a storehouse of treasures that remind you that this time of woe is only one season in many you have shared together. And just as importantly, the 'rest of your shared story' is the tale of how your lives came together and the richness that each gives to the other. 'The rest of your shared story' details why and how you are bound together. It is what sustains you during your solitary moments of unspeakable anguish. The 'rest of your shared story' is why, in part, you wish to be nowhere other than next to your loved one during this time of weakness.

Your whole life with your loved one, what I am referring to as the 'rest of your shared story,' is a powerful resource upon which to call. It can warm your heart, lift your spirits, make you smile and laugh, and soothe your troubled soul. 'The rest of your story' can lead you to proclaim to God and all who will hear that you are grateful for all of your days together, including, paradoxically, these days of distress that you share. 'The rest of your story' reminds you that you have become who you are because of the contribution, the fullness, and the completeness your loved one brings to you.

It is easy to understand how caregivers seem to forget the 'rest of the story.' You may have been thrust into a caregiving role without warning. Suddenly a debilitating accident or stroke, for example, rewrote the script you imagined for this time in your life. From that moment on, everything changed. Alternately, you drifted into the role of caregiver as a condition worsened and you began to do more with your loved one what she or he could not

do alone. The threat to your dreams and life together at first could be dismissed or minimized, if not denied, but no longer. The future you imagined is now beyond your grasp.

Whether it happened suddenly or gradually, there came a moment when you realized that from then on 'caregiver' would encroach upon and perhaps obscure your primary identity as spouse, child, parent, sibling, friend, or kin. As the tasks of caregiving became more numerous, time consuming, physically tiring, emotionally draining, and spiritually depleting, it seemed only natural to define yourself by these activities, rather than by the fullness of the narrative that preceded the illness of your loved one. The professionals who provide care and support to you and your loved one reinforce the notion that your role as caregiver now has priority over your primary role as spouse, parent, child, sibling, friend, or kin. Given the strains and stresses you are experiencing, it is understandable how you and others may become preoccupied with what is happening during these days. But like the surprise or twist in the stories told by Paul Harvey, how you are living today, and more importantly why you persevere, cannot be understood without knowing 'the rest of the story.'

Let me suggest to you how important it is to remember and tell 'the rest of the story' throughout your journey as caregiver. At times, you probably feel that life is spinning out of control. You feel powerless and alone. You feel afraid, worried, and broken hearted. You become physically worn down, emotionally drained, and your faith is challenged or lost. You valiantly and sacrificially are dedicated to staying the course; placing the needs of your loved one ahead of your own. At the moment, it is all about her or him, not about you. In short, you may become overwhelmed by all that is happening and all that you are feeling. It is challenging

to make sense of the present. It is painful to anticipate the future. It is difficult to remember the past. But you must remember the past, 'the rest of the story.' It is a key to your survival in the present and your consolation in the future. What you experience now is only one part of the longer narrative of your life with the one for whom you care. These days of disappointment and loss are not all there is!

In your sad moments; in your despairing moments; in your exhausted moments; in your hopeless moments remember the 'rest of your story.' Remember those times, events, and experiences with your loved one that gave you joy. Think about how you have become who you are because of his or her journey with you. Recall the times when your heart overflowed with gratitude for the privilege of being with your loved one. Remember the moments when her or his touch comforted and assured you that life is good. Your memories may lessen these burdensome feelings. They may lift your spirits.

Your memories cannot change what is happening in your life, but they may empower you to meet the next challenge. They may remind you why you are committed to be where you are, why you do what you do, and why this person means so much to you. These turbulent days only make sense because of 'the rest of the story.' All that has come before gives meaning and purpose to all that you are experiencing now. These days are only part of the story. They are an unwanted, but nevertheless, important, meaningful, and ennobling season of life; but it would be tragic if they obscured the rich history of your journey together that has led you to this moment.

Making sense of adversity and finitude has challenged human understanding throughout recorded history. Some of you are of an age to remember the song “Is That All There Is?” recorded by Peggy Lee in 1969. I could sing the refrain to refresh your memory, but then I would be speaking to an empty room. So let me remind you that the lyrics recount several unfortunate events in a woman’s life – the burning of her home when she was a very little girl, her experience of the marvelous spectacle of a circus at age 12 from which she left feeling that something was missing, and the ecstasy of loving a wonderful boy who one day went away and the heartbreak that ensued. After each experience of loss and emptiness, the fatalistic refrain repeats, “Is that all there is, is that all there is, if that’s all there is my friends, then let’s keep dancing. Let’s break out the booze and have a ball, if that’s all there is.”

The song captures the reality of our existence to include times of comfort and security, wonderment and mystery, love and fulfillment, as well as times of loss, confusion, and bewilderment. Understanding the joys and sorrows of life is elusive no matter how hard we try. Disappointment seems inevitably to follow happiness. In our moments of bewilderment, when order in life seems lost, we are tempted to join in the chorus of incomprehension and sing, “If that all there is, if that all there is?”

The answer to this searching question is “No.” Moments of despair, hurt, fatigue, and loss are not all there is. If we remember the ‘rest of the story,’ if we remember all that has led us to this time of caregiving, we may better understand and celebrate that these days of special service are not all there is. We can give thanks for the past and endeavor to discover and experience the unique opportunities for blessings even now as we journey through one of life’s

valleys. 'The rest of the story' helps us to experience these moments in the context of a longer, richer narrative of life in which we learn that sorrow coexists with joy. This is a feature of the human condition that we cannot change.

The search for understanding and fulfillment in life also is documented in the Wisdom literature of Scripture. Qoheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, examines life's injustices and concludes that justifying misfortune and evil is beyond human grasp. He concludes that "Good and bad events are transitory and unpredictable (Eccl. 3: 1 – 10)."¹

The first 9 verses of Chapter 3 are familiar to many of us: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace."

This litany of contrasting moments in life leads Qoheleth to conclude that experience is fleeting and unpredictable. His advice is to be at peace with the world as God has created it. Appreciate the gift of simple pleasures and depend ultimately upon the grace of God throughout each season of life. He counsels in v. 11 that "God has made everything beautiful in its time."

¹ Jack Hakimian, "OT504: The Writings, Critical Analysis #3m Ecclesiastes 3," unpublished essay on Internet.

This ancient claim may be hard for you to accept amidst your current turmoil and perplexity. You may rightly ask where is the beauty in a mind that is in disorder and void of memory. Where is the beauty when bodily functions fail and render one totally dependent upon others? Where is the beauty when death separates us from one loved so dearly, completely, and sacrificially? Where is the beauty? Is that all there is?

My answer and suggestion to you surely is no more satisfying or comforting than all who have grappled with these quandaries, but it echoes the wisdom of Qoheleth and the surprise at the end of the stories of Paul Harvey. Accept that weakness, dependency, and loss are the nature of the human condition. We cannot change that. What we can control is how we respond to these realities. We can remember that the seasons of life also include a time to embrace and a time to love. At a time unlike any before in our lives, we can discover new ways to embrace, love, and find fulfillment in our care for one another.

Your faithful and tender care of a loved one demonstrates that these moments are extensions of the 'rest of the story' with similar potential to be meaningful and beautiful (suitable, Eccl. 3: 11). Your actions with your loved one now are an appropriate and honorable transformation in how you have related to each other throughout your relationship. This is a time or season in which you express care that is suitable to the current situation and needs. In that sense, it is a profound statement of the power of love to bind us together in good times and bad, in strength and in weakness, in life and in death.

In conclusion, when your days are long and lonely, when you are tired and emotions are raw, when your heart is breaking and soul is troubled, when you are overwhelmed and fearful,

when you despair and feel helpless, remember why and how you came to this place and time, remember the 'rest of the story,' be grateful for these precious moments to faithfully love and care in unique ways in which blessings, comfort, and peace may be found. Remember the 'rest of the story.' It will remind you that this is not all there is. These troublesome days may be seen as one season in a lifetime of a relationship filled with more joy than sorrow.

It is my prayer that these days of caregiving provide you with experiences that bless you today, comfort you tomorrow, and evoke your unending gratitude for all of the seasons of life, including this season in which your devotion and care continue to nurture, sustain, and comfort your loved one, and in which you discover meaning and purpose now, as well as in 'the rest of the story.'

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