

Book Review: The Caregiver's Tale: Loss and Renewal in Memoirs of Family Life

Contributed by Michelle Estile

Book review of *The Caregiver's Tale: Loss and Renewal in Memoirs of Family Life*.

Burack-Weiss, A. (2006). *The Caregiver's Tale: Loss and Renewal in Memoirs of Family Life*. Columbia University Press. 208 pages, \$22.50 paperback.

Ann Burack-Weiss brings almost four decades of social work experience and teaching to examining the family caregiving experience through published memoirs in *The Caregiver's Tale*. Rather than viewing family caregiving as an anomalous event, Burack-Weiss considers it to be an integral part of family life. According to the National Caregiver's Association, over 50 million people provide care for a disabled, ill, or aged family member or friend within any given year.¹

When studying the professional literature on family caregiving, Burack-Weiss observed an emphasis on the concepts of stress and burden. Conversely, memoirs written by caregivers expressed more depth and complexity. Ultimately, Burack-Weiss accumulated and examined more than 120 memoirs, which covered a broad assortment of styles, situations, and relationships.

Some authors were seasoned writers, as in the case of Isabel Allende writing about her daughter's coma. Sidney Winawer, in contrast, utilized a co-author to detail the story of his wife's cancer. Social worker and adoptive mother Patricia Broadbent and her daughter Hydeia co-wrote an account of Hydeia's diagnosis of, and subsequent life with, HIV.

Burack-Weiss used narrative analysis as a lens for identifying common themes among the diverse voices. In each memoir, the relationship story and the situation story (of the specific illness or impairment) intersected within the individual author's story.

The Caregiver's Tale is divided into three sections. In Part One, the author addresses the most common situations that require caregiving: cancer, dementia, HIV/AIDS, and mental illness/chemical dependency. Burack-Weiss provides overarching themes for all caregiving situations, but describes aspects particular to each illness. Cancer, for instance, carries less stigma in society than other illnesses. Dementia can be harrowing for family members forced to watch loved ones deteriorate cognitively and emotionally. Using examples from the memoirs, Burack-Weiss delineates the struggle to make sense of the diagnosis and the caregiver role.

In Part Two, the author shifts the focus onto the relationships represented in the memoirs. She points out the special losses of parent caregivers who mourn the end of an imagined future for their children. Sibling caregivers face survivor's guilt and uncertain expectations regarding caregiving. Couple caregivers fight to preserve the dignity of their ailing spouses. Adult children caregivers range from adoring caregivers to estranged children who provide assistance within a fractured or ambivalent relationship.

Finally, the "memoirs in brief" section offers a trove of resources for social workers and clients. Practitioners can recommend memoirs to clients as encouragement through the voices of others who have lived to "tell the tale." Social work students interested in hospital social work, gerontology, and family dynamics will also find valuable references. Social work educators may recommend the memoirs as auxiliary texts on narrative analysis, grief and loss, and resiliency. A helpful appendix categorizes the memoirs by situation and relationship for quick reference.

Burack-Weiss closes by naming ten steps commonly taken by families moving through the caregiving experience—from grief and mourning to living in the moment. She raises topics for further study, including friend care and less common care situations. *The Caregiver's Tale* is a unique and valuable contribution to the social work literature and offers a deeply human view of the "crystallized love" of caregiving.

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¹<http://www.nfcares.org/who/stats.cfm>