

A Husband As Caregiver: A Personal Perspective

Some roles in a man's life are chosen: becoming a father, husband, or an employee; while other roles such as a son or brother are unchosen. Still others come about by circumstances of life. In December 2010 my wife was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and circumstance added a new role to my life—caregiver.



My wife's current treatment finds us staying near the treatment facility during the week and traveling home on the weekends. During a recent trip home I rented the movie *Captain America: The First Avenger*. As the movie begins the main character is a scrawny, asthmatic young man who desperately wants to join the military to serve his country during World War II. Time after time he tries to enlist only to be rejected because of his size and medical condition. Eventually he's accepted, gets injected with a special serum, and becomes a superhero.

The character's willingness to step up and meet the challenge brought about by the circumstances of World War II stood out to me. I recognize some application of this character's determination in the present circumstances of my life.

My circumstances recently brought me into a small group meeting of mostly men who were all caregivers to spouses with cancer. During the meeting I was asked about my biggest fear with my wife's diagnosis. After a moment of thought I replied that it was that this struggle would somehow reveal a deficit in my character. A fear that in some way I would not step up and fulfill my role, to fail to be the man my wife needs me to be.

While considering this fear and the difficult role of being a caregiver, I realized that there are several paths which one might follow.

One possibility is to withdraw from the role. There is a natural response of fight or flight anytime one feels threatened. The diagnosis of a wife's cancer is a threat of great pain. Thus, a natural reaction may be to flee the pain. Withdrawing takes many forms from absolute abandonment to burying oneself in work or activity. However, withdrawing only brings a promise of regret with no reduction in the pain. The opposite of flight is to

fight. On one hand it seems that in the face of a serious illness there is some benefit with fighting. To fight the disease, fight for the best care, and fight for the best outcome are admirable pursuits. On the other hand, fighting may turn into another type of withdrawal where the busyness of fighting separates one from relational intimacy and emotional engagement.

Another response may be to stoically go through the motions of fulfilling one's duties and responsibilities. Undoubtedly there will be situations that arise which will call upon one to set aside emotional involvement to address the needs. I am also confident that this type of emotion-less long term response betrays our God given humanness and does not offer the support one should provide as a caregiver.

The last response—and the one I believe to be the most appropriate—is to go all in. Going all in is about engaging the emotional pain, the fatigue, the emotional rollercoaster, the ambiguity, and the finiteness of this earthly existence with one's whole being. Going all in implies wrestling with all the hard questions, facing the uncertain answers, and being fully present with the one receiving care. Going all in is about serving, nurturing, encouraging, and comforting. Going all in is stepping up.

The Captain America character tried over and over again to answer the call until he succeeded. As caregivers, I feel that we should do no less. A caregiver must choose to meet the challenge no matter how many attempts it takes. My personal choice is to fight the natural tendency to withdraw and to avoid stoic responses as much as possible throughout our battle with cancer. My journey as a caregiver includes being at my wife's side during her appointments, treatments, tests, and procedures. My choice is to talk with and listen to her about life's hopes, fears, joys, and frustrations. I also choose to face not only her mortality but mine as well. My choices call for priorities which will take time away from other activities so that I might fulfill my role. These priorities also include taking care of myself with proper diet, exercise, and appropriate respites.

In the end, circumstances may have brought about the new role as caregiver. Unlike Captain America there is no serum which will make a caregiver superhuman. However, one's willingness to go all in will make every caregiver a superhero.

Jeff

Husband, father, caregiver.....superhero