



# Engaging Aging

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## Reflections on Caregiving

*by Sister Bernice Feilinger, SSND, Baltimore, MD*

How does a math teacher become a caregiver? What does it mean to serve in that capacity within a religious community? Reflecting on my role for the last 19 years with our sisters, I realize that my past has helped to prepare me. From the example of my parents who were caregivers for their parents, to visiting hospitals with my father; from helping to care for my sister and mother at home, to the example of caring religious superiors; from experiences as a Dean of Students living in a dorm, to serving as provincial councilor, working with our aging and infirm sisters, I was being formed in the skills of caregiving. These are some of the guidelines that have helped me along the way.

### Each Sister is an Individual

Try to get to know each Sister as a person. Learn about the life she led before illness or advanced age changed her, and share this information with the staff. In planning her care, do not presume the Sister lacks understanding. Instead, keep her engaged in decisions to the extent she is able. In order to build trusting relationships, I visit the Sisters frequently, often sharing meals with them. Being present for the little things prepares the way for bigger decisions to come.



**Building Community** Help create a sense of community and keep the Sisters informed about each other without “worrying” them. Celebrate events to keep them involved in the life of the broader community. The caregiver must see all as equals among equals, including those who are difficult to engage or unable to verbalize.

**Considerations of Self** A caregiver needs to be flexible in her own life. She will have to juggle demands of the role with her personal life. In the face of unending ministerial needs, it can be hard to accept the fact that she can neither be there for the Sisters every time, nor solve every problem. Keep learning and stay informed on health issues to better understand the responsibilities of a health agent. Cultivate supportive friendships that foster an understanding of the demands of the ministry. Be gentle with yourself and you will be gentle with others.

*(Continued on page 2)*

*“Too often... as a Church and as a society we have not provided adequately for the needs of caregivers. As more people provide care—and as more people receive care for longer periods of time—we must respond to this new reality.”*

*“Blessings of Age”  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

## **Reflections on Caregiving** (Continued from page 1)

**Interactions with Staff** Get to know the physicians and help them understand the Community's philosophy of care. Know your staff. Respect, appreciate, and communicate with them. Enable them to take moments for renewal, even if only to close the door for a few minutes. Share your responsibilities evenly and you'll last longer in ministry

**Blessings** The caregiver role is demanding and challenging but it also has boundless blessings. I have received valuable lessons on aging by sharing the lives of my Sisters. I am better able to define what is really important in life. A little wiser about letting go, I find myself with friends here and in heaven whose intercession I call on daily.

**Sister Bernice is the Local Leader of Maria Health Care Center, Baltimore, MD**



**Sr. Bernice Feilinger**

## **Prayer of the Caregiver** by Sister Denise Callaghan, SSND

*She never asks me to cure her...*

*Only to care.*

*She needs to know that I understand*

*And can sense something of her pain.*

*She simply needs me there where she can feel my hand in hers*

*And lean against my strength.*

*She is not alone and that is a marvelous consolation*

*When illness comes and the compassion felt is real.*

*Love has held us for so many years*

*And love bonds us still.*

*Jesus, dear healer, be my strength ,*

*my wisdom, my peace...*

*Help me to do all that I can do*

*And then to let go.*

*Teach me to live with the questions*

*That have no answers,*

*The needs that have no end.*

*Help me to give, knowing that always,*

*I receive.*



***This prayer was presented to Sr. Bernice by Sr. Denise Callaghan, SSND, who passed away in 2006.***

## The Vocation of Caregiving

*by Sister M. Peter Lillian DiMaria, O. Carm.,  
Director, Avila Institute of Gerontology, Inc.*



As I have an opportunity to travel throughout the country, I am privileged to meet so many people dedicated to the elders of our society. I think each of us can take much pride in the many ways we continue to serve our elders. I have seen some wonderful innovative programs that are truly person centered. Many programs enhance the strengths and the uniqueness of each human being. I find the time I travel allows me to reflect on so many blessings the Lord provides daily. I have a chance to really listen to His words through so many people.

On one of my recent travels, I had the opportunity to meet a gentleman in an airport who had a knapsack tucked neatly in his wheelchair. This older gentleman spoke to me about many of his escapades as a young man. As he was speaking to me, he became distracted and for a brief moment showed a little panic because he was unable to find his knapsack readily. As soon as he found it, he smiled and said, "This knapsack contains who I am, I have lots of cards and pictures." I stated that I was sure each one of those cards and pictures had many stories and memories. He agreed and I asked him to share some of them with me.

As he spoke, he relayed that he was returning home from "burying his brother." His eyes filled up a little but as I asked him to share his memories he began to change his expression. He conveyed stories about each card. The time passed swiftly as I listened to his stories. After a while, he said he was grateful that he had the time to speak with me. I told him I would pray for him and thanked him for the opportunity to fill in a void as I waited for our plane to depart.

As I reflected on our time together, I began to think about the many residents we serve and the many stories each of them carries deep within the knapsack of their soul – especially our residents who have memory impairment. How often we find that a picture, a "card," a sweater or some other object evokes conversation for one who has memory impairment. I thought about how important it is for us to be present to another person – a presence that validates the person and accepts the person for all they are and have yet to become.

We, the caregivers, have a very important vocation. We are the connection for many people because we can continue to tell their stories when they no longer can. I thought about this gentleman – he shared much about himself during those 30 minutes. I thought if he were dealt a disease that caused memory impairment would someone be able to help him reconnect to his very soul? Who would relay his stories about each of those cards and pictures back to him? Who would provide him with that connectedness that still allows him to understand his purpose?

Our caregiving is a beautiful vocation for so many and it should never be overshadowed by the demands we experience. Our ministry can be a challenging puzzle. My hope is that we never see any challenge as an obstacle, but rather as a stepping-stone. My prayer is we continue to confront challenges with courage, rather than fear, because in doing so, we will find the pieces to the puzzle that provide a unique picture that the Lord has called each of us to serve.



**The Avila Institute of Gerontology** is the education arm of the Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm. It is a not for profit organization providing high quality, affordable educational programs on Gerontology. The Institute provides regional seminars throughout the United States and Ireland bringing expert speakers to present self-improvement, innovative programs, and the latest studies in the geriatric field. Each program is designed to meet the specific needs of the organizations they serve. For more information contact: [www.avilainstitute.org](http://www.avilainstitute.org)

## Giving and Receiving

by Sister Janice Bader, CPPS, Executive Director

*It is more blessed to give than to receive.* When did you first hear that? Perhaps as a child at your mother's knee. Perhaps from a teacher in elementary school. Whatever the circumstances, you probably learned this lesson at a very early age.

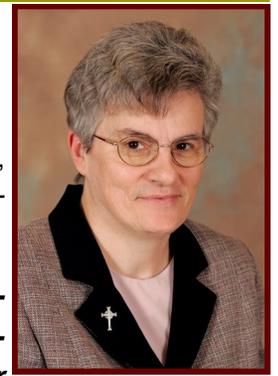
Care-givers, the focus of this issue of *Engaging Aging*, surely are living examples of giving. They serve tirelessly without counting the cost, often on call 24-7. Whether these care-givers are lay staff or community members providing for the needs of their own sisters or brothers, their presence and concern are vital to the well-being of the frail elderly.

Though they are selfless in their giving, the greatest among care-givers know that they also need to receive. They need to receive not only to replenish their own spirit, but also to respect the dignity of those for whom they care.

Wendy Lustbader, in her book, *Counting on Kindness—The Dilemmas of Dependency*, says,

***“Frail people are generally denied chances to give something back to their helpers or to their communities. Their offers are refused with statements like, “You don’t have to do that. We’ll take care of everything.” Helpers mean well, without realizing how urgently people in their care crave a tangible counterbalance to their dependency.”***

We salute all of you who serve both as care-givers and care-receivers. Your ability to enter in a mutual relationship of giving and receiving is the greatest gift of all. May you be blessed in abundance.



## Resources and Reflections Re: Caregiving

***Finding and Keeping Direct Care Staff: Employer of Choice Strategy Guide for Long-Term Care and Home Care Providers.*** This booklet is available on website for the Catholic Health Association of the United States @ <http://www.chausa.org/resources/>

***124 Prayers for Caregivers*, by Joan Guntzelman. Ligouri Press, 2003.** This small paperback is a wonderful resource for prayer and reflection. Each page contains a quotation from Scripture, a reflection and prayer that speaks to the blessings and challenges of caregiving.

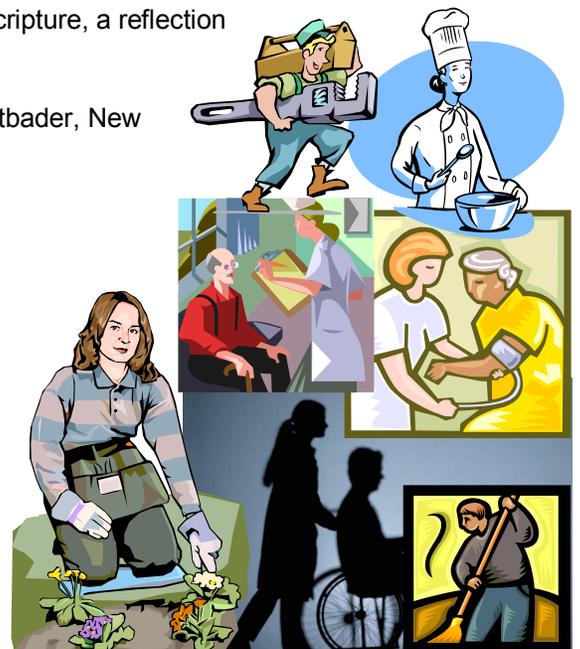
***Counting on Kindness, The Dilemmas of Dependency*** by Wendy Lustbader, New York, The Free Press, 1991.

## Weblinks:

Catholic Health Association: Elder and Continuing Care  
<http://www.chausa.org/Pub/MainNav/ourcommitments/ElderCare/>

National Network of Career Nursing Assistants  
<http://www.cna-network.org>

The Rosalynn Carter Institute for Care Giving  
<http://rci.gsw.edu/>





***A Bit of a Surprise*** “I was called to the Capuchin way of life and to be a Priest. I simply want to keep doing that.” Listening to Father Gary Stakem, OFM Cap, there’s no doubt that he’s accomplishing his mission. A member of the St. Augustine Province of the Capuchin Friars, Fr. Gary communicates an easy sense of joy in his laughter while telling his story.



From 1956 to 1974, he served as a missionary in Papua New Guinea. “It was a bit of a surprise,” he said. “At the last minute, I was asked to change places with the person originally assigned to go there.” As he would do throughout his life, Fr. Gary went and stayed, believing “the Lord was behind it all.”

Returning to the United States in 1974, Fr. Gary was elected to the Provincial Council. He went on to serve as the Local Superior at the House of Theological Studies in Washington, D.C., and from there, on to various assignments including: an appointment as Pastor in Herman, PA; parochial ministry in Cleveland, OH; and living in the formation house of the Province. Listening to Fr. Gary share his life, one gets a sense that he has kept that ability to be surprised in every place he has served. It speaks of an unassuming presence, open to the gifts of life wherever they are found.

Since 2000, Father Gary has been living with five other Capuchins in St. Mary’s Friary, Herman, PA, ministering to the people of the parish and the surrounding area. “It’s a joy to be with the friars and the people. In community, I’m the oldest one,” he remarks, pausing to laugh, “but I don’t feel old. In fact, I feel pretty good!” When asked if he ever worries about aging, he responded, “The years just come. I don’t worry about them. Life keeps moving on.” And so does Father Gary, dismissing comments from people who say he “does too much.”

Father Gary now serves in replacement ministry, “helping out in parishes, visiting the sick in their homes and in hospitals, visiting the people, working with groups such as Teams of Our Lady and Secular Franciscans, doing the books...” and the list goes on.

“I’m just blessed,” says Fr. Gary, “to be called here to the Capuchins and the Priesthood. Along the way, sometimes things have been a bit of a surprise. Now, I’m satisfied with living the life here, right now, and contributing as best I can.”



***Our thanks to Fr. Gary Stakem, OFM Cap, for his generous sharing of photographs and time in a telephone interview. This article was written based on Fr. Gary’s sharing.***

**We encourage our readers to send photographs and ideas for our special feature “Aging Engaged” to [engagingaging@verizon.net](mailto:engagingaging@verizon.net)**



## From the Editor's Desk

*Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pittsburgh, PA*



"It's all about love," she whispered. A slight smile, an easy shrug of her shoulders, and she was on her way down the hall. I stood perfectly still, watching the tennis balls on the legs of her walker inch their way along worn linoleum tiles. From somewhere in the cloister, sounds of a bell drifted through the muggy air, and gradually, others began to file by in silence, moving toward the chapel for Evening Prayer.

Long days of facilitating a workshop for a religious community had boiled down to this: a passing encounter in the hallway. With four simple words, a contemplative nun had explained to me her community's reason for being. "It's all about love," she'd told me. Personally, the sum and substance of her more than seventy-five years in a cloistered monastery were about love: desired and attained; hoped for and held; lost and found. Collectively, this love formed the very core of their existence as a community, capturing both depth and breadth of experience. It underscored struggles of loneliness in the midst of solitude; impatience in the quest for charity; discomfort in the balance of pleasure; humility in the face of diminishment; humanness in the desire for holiness.

Throughout the country, scores of men and women religious – contemplative and apostolic - live a life aimed at union with the Divine, a life "all about love" in accord with all creation. And we do it, as my father used to say, "while still standing on the green side of the grass." That's not always easy. But "easy" is not our preferred way of life. Ours is a lifestyle that does not equivocate. Ours are choices that cannot be explained away. Day after day, in a personal, hidden manner that assures an absence of acclaim, religious proclaim in resounding silence the challenging choices of self-emptied love.

But collectively, it appears to be getting harder. Communities everywhere seem to be struggling with the issues of aging and care of senior members. Consider these statistics from NRRO:

- **The annual cost of care has escalated from an average of \$8,500 per person in 1985 to over \$33,000 in 2007.**

- **The average cost of skilled care exceeded \$51,000 in 2007;**
- **Of the 650 religious institutes that submitted data to NRRO in 2008, 258 institutes have 40% or less of the projected need;**
- **Fifty-six percent of the members of the institutes reporting to NRRO in 2008 are between the ages of 60 and 79.**

These are harsh realities to see, and even harder to face at the end of a life spent entirely in service to God and God's people. What is the invitation being extended to us? What sense are we to make of the situations that confront us?

I still tend to think "it's all about love." But now, the balance between giver and receiver is being tipped a bit. The decades, and sometimes centuries during which we were able to care for our needs and those of others are changing. We find ourselves in situations that cause us to be recipients of care often extended by people who may be relative strangers. Who are these people walking the halls and grounds of our motherhouses, provincial houses, friaries, monasteries, care centers, and retirement facilities?

These women and men are our caregivers. Whether skilled in nursing, dietary, maintenance, grounds, or housekeeping, these people have become what the literature calls "fictitious kin." They are taking on the roles and services we used to provide for one another: tending our grounds; cooking our meals; cleaning our halls; fixing what breaks; moving what doesn't; listening to our stories; pushing our wheelchairs; answering our calls in the night. They have joined our lives in a unique way. Their mission of caregiving is now intimately entwined with ours as we join to proclaim, "it's all about love."

We hope you enjoy *Engaging Aging's* focus on caregiving. As we ponder together our invitations in care, we join with you to recognize and applaud in gratitude the caregivers in our midst. May all be well!

## Mark your calendars. . .

### 2008

- September 23-25: NRRO Consultant In-Service, Darien, IL
- September 30: Special Assistance Grant Applications Due
- October 9-12: CMSWR Assembly, Belleville, IL
- November 3: Grant Review Board Meeting, Washington, DC
- November 18-21: NATRI Conference, Denver, CO
- December: Special Assistance and Supplemental Grant Distribution
- December 13-14: Retirement Fund for Religious National Collection Date
- December 31: Direct Care Assistance Application Forms for 2009 Mailed to Treasurers of Religious Institutes (and also available online at [www.usccb.org/nrro](http://www.usccb.org/nrro) )

### 2009

- January 16-18: Planning and Implementation Workshop, San Antonio, TX
- February 18-19: Person-Centered Care Seminar, Baltimore, MD (tentative dates)
- April 15-16: Person Centered Care Seminar, Chicago, IL

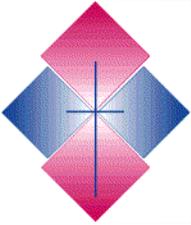


## Announcements



**NRRO has received another generous grant from the Retirement Research Foundation. This grant will enable us to offer two more sessions of the Person-Centered Care Conference that was presented in Chicago in November, 2006.** Person-Centered care is an approach that respects the dignity and individuality of older adults by striving to furnish them with autonomy in their daily schedules, greater meaning in their activities, and involvement with their choices. Please watch for the flyer with registration details which will be mailed within the next few weeks.

**NRRO is making some changes in the processes for distribution of funds.** For more information on these changes, please visit our website at [www.usccb.org/nrro/](http://www.usccb.org/nrro/) and download the booklet, *Bread for the Journey*, which explains these changes. Click on Grants, and then on "Planning for 2008-2017." You can also go directly to the booklet at [www.usccb.org/nrro/nrroplan08-17.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/nrro/nrroplan08-17.pdf)



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3211 Fourth Street, N.E.  
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Fax: (202) 541-3053  
Website: [www.usccb.org/nrro](http://www.usccb.org/nrro)

*The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these monies in grants to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs.*

*The National Religious Retirement Office supports, educates and assists religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.*

### **National Religious Retirement Office Staff**

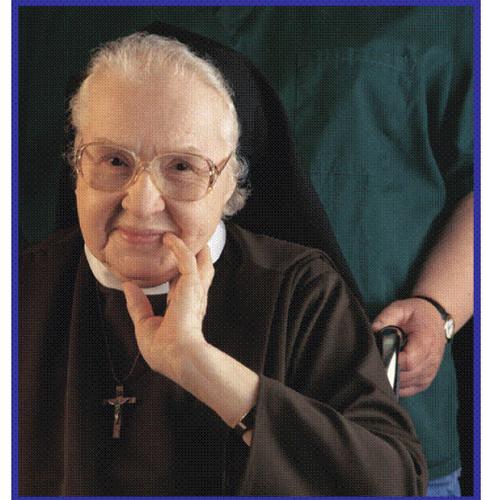
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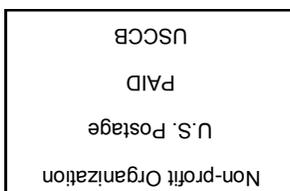
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