

RUNNING RAGGED: SPIRITUALITY AND THE DEMANDS OF CAREGIVING

Andrea Hollingsworth, Ph.D.

“Wild and Unlikely Places”

In the late 1920’s, Minnie Tallulah (Grant) Walker, mother of Pulitzer-prize winning novelist Alice Walker, ran away from home to marry a sharecropper named Willie Lee. By the age of twenty-five, she had birthed eight babies. Walker describes her mother as a “large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home.”¹ Each day, from dawn to dusk, Minnie made quilts, grew vegetables, plowed fields, and tended to her many children.²

Walker says that although her mother’s spirit, like the spirits of so many black women, was muzzled and overworked, there was a vibrant creativity, an intense spiritual expressiveness, that burst forth in “wild and unlikely places.”

What places, you ask?

[M]y mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until night came and it was too dark to see.

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena... and on and on and on.

[...]

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have.³

I begin with the story of Minnie Walker’s tenacious insistence on being “involved in work her soul must have” because my goal in this essay is to ask the following question:

What does the spiritual journey look like for women juggling the multiple and ever-proliferating responsibilities that go along with intense caregiving?

¹ Alice Walker, “In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens,” in Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1983): 231-243, at 238.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 239, 241.

This is a profound and personal question for me. As I will soon explain, caring for dependent family members at both ends of the life-spectrum is the current backdrop of my faith journey. This little essay, then, is written for women like me – women whose search for God takes place amidst a cloud of physical and mental exhaustion. Women who, immersed in the labors of the daily and the practical, refuse to ignore the call of the Holy that beckons them in the midst of the overwhelming stress. Women who, although they feel pressed by societal expectations to “do it all” – to be an attentive mother, loving partner, successful career-person, supportive daughter, resourceful homemaker, and to look good doing it all – nevertheless manage to turn their hearts and faces toward the light of divine grace, and to seek solace and wisdom there.

If such descriptions apply at all to you, then I’m guessing that your way of pursuing spiritual sustenance is a bit different from, for instance, the methods Richard Foster describes in his well-known *Celebration of Discipline*: meditation, study, solitude, and the like.⁴ Instead, it might look something like the watering, pruning, and replanting practiced by Minnie Tallulah (Grant) Walker.

Running Ragged

Or, to take a personal turn, it might look like a contemplative diaper change. You might be chuckling, dear reader, but I’m being entirely serious. In her book *Elevating Childcare*, parenting educator Janet Lansbury describes watching a diaper change that made her cry:

It was a scene from a film about The Pikler Institute, the highly respected orphanage in Budapest, Hungary, founded by a pediatrician and infant expert Dr. Emmi Pikler. The camera focuses on a 3-week-old new arrival being welcomed with a diaper change. We hear the caregiver speaking slowly and see her gentle touches. The subtitles read: ‘Now I will lift your legs. I will move the diaper under you.’ She pauses after she explains each action, giving the infant a few moments to respond and anticipate what will happen next.

Several minutes later, the delicate task completed, the caregiver says quietly to the tiny, trusting person: ‘I think you will like it here.’⁵

Deliberateness. Love. Attention. Aren’t these the ingredients of pretty much every spiritual practice you can think of?

I grew up in a Christian tradition in which the Bible nourished my spirit. (It still, for the most part, does.) As a formerly avid runner, I’ve long found illuminating the Apostle Paul’s comparison of the spiritual journey to a race that’s run in the face of anxieties and obstacles. Moving ahead with this metaphor, I ask: Doesn’t a deliberate, loving, attentive diaper change count as a step in the race toward the goal of the divine call (Phil. 3:14)?

Absolutely it does. I’ve fully embraced diaper changing as a spiritual practice. I’ve needed to; I’m in a life moment in which prayer, meditation, and worship are pretty much not going to happen unless they happen in the midst of everyday life.

⁴ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

⁵ Janet Lansbury, *Elevating Childcare: A Guide to Respectful Parenting* (N.p.: JLML Press, 2014).

I'm running all right, but I'm running ragged, and I need new and creative ways to tread the track of faith.

My raggedness comes from being part of what's called the "sandwich generation." I'm the slice of salami between a new baby over here, and a very ill father (and full-time caregiving mother) over there. I'm also attempting to maintain a professional identity with some part-time teaching, writing, and preaching. This is a sea change from the life I was living just a few years ago as a busy tenure-track professor in Boston, with no time to even call my friends and family, and no space to provide care to anything except my writing projects and lecture prep. I chose to leave that life so as to be available for a family that sorely needed my presence and support both physically and emotionally.

Believe me when I say I'm happier now. This is true from the depths of me.

That said, studies have shown that the stress of being a sandwich generation caregiver causes premature aging, and can take as much as 20 years off a person's life. The stress comes from, as one research summary recently put it, "simply not having enough time in the day to accomplish [the] multitude of responsibilities."⁶ (Other recent research reveals that the sky is, indeed, blue.)

Sandwiched caregiving, and the fatigue to which it gives rise, is mainly a dilemma for women. Despite changes in social norms, and despite the fact that men are doing more caregiving than ever before, caregivers of all kinds are still more likely to be female. And so today, as ever, women bear the brunt of the depression, loneliness, financial hardship, and career curtailment that comes with caregiving.

I am lucky to have a spouse who is sandwiched right along with me, and who shoulders a ton of childcare and parent-care responsibilities on top of his full-time job. If I'm the salami, he's the cheese, and we're both feeling the smother. But even with the massive amounts of help my husband provides, it remains the case that recently when I came across Cynthia Bourgeault's beautiful instructions for centering prayer, I was crestfallen at the first line: "It's very, very simple. You sit[.]" Sit? Hmm. Okay. Can there be a pulsing breast pump involved? What about a moving vehicle with groceries in back? My despair was complete by the description's conclusion: "You do this practice for twenty minutes, a bit longer if you'd like, then you simply get up and move on with your life."⁷ Would that I could sit for twenty minutes, "maybe a bit longer," in prayerful silence! On a good day I can seize five or ten.

It's more, though, than just being unable to find time to "fuel up" (in conventional ways, at least) for my spiritual race. It's the embarrassment of being asked 'what are you reading or thinking about lately that's life-giving?' and needing to dredge up stale insights from the sole book I was able to read, *last summer*. It's the colossal effort it takes to move from the choppy surface of dish washing and laundry-folding to the cool, clear undercurrents in my mind where thoughts of God, life, truth, death, meaning, beauty, and love flow gracefully. It's the shame that attends the

⁶ <https://www.aplaceformom.com/blog/10-05-15-what-is-the-sandwich-generation/> Caregivers also report financial hardship, depression, and changes to jobs and/or careers (usually in the form of scaling back).

<http://workplace.care.com/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-sandwich-generation>

⁷ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2004), 6.

exhaustion-driven choice to cruise Facebook and Quora and Zillow during my seven free minutes instead of [insert spiritually/intellectually virtuous activity here].

Could it be that women throughout history have been deemed sub-par thinkers and spiritual leaders simply because they're constantly pulled in a hundred directions except center, and because when they are able to find center, they go straight to sleep (as well they should)?

Pressing On

So what does pressing on in the spiritual race mean for sandwiched women? For exhausted caregivers more generally? For ragged runners everywhere?

First, as I've mentioned, there's a huge need to think anew about spiritual practices. Here is my advice from the trenches: Take one everyday activity, and do it with deliberateness, love, and attention. Boom. A new spiritual practice has just been born.

Second, if you are a ragged, breathless runner, you must pause for self-care. You must get a break to attend to your spirit. There is no substitute for soul-rest, and if you neglect it long enough you'll look up one day and find you've wandered far from the track. It's often said that self-care is crucial, and it is. But here's the other true thing that rarely gets mentioned: As a stressed-out caregiver (or overwhelmed person in general), my self-care is somebody else's other-care in which the other they're caring for is me. Most caregivers, especially sandwiched ones, have a very difficult time figuring out how to recognize and meet their own needs without dropping the ball on one or more major caregiving responsibilities. And these are balls that cannot be dropped. You can't *not* pick the kids up from school. You can't *not* cook the parents their dinner.

If the caregiver is going to get respite, then one of two things has to happen, preferably both: (1) the caregiver seeks out helpful souls, (2) helpful souls notice the caregiver's predicament and go out of their way to provide assistance. To return to the biblical metaphor of the race of faith, other runners must gather round the limping, parched, stymied runner. As they tape her sprains, quench her thirst, and remove her obstacles, she'll soon remember how to walk, then run, the race set before her.

I close with a personal story that illustrates exquisitely both the point about spiritual practices and the point about self-care. About six weeks after my son was born, I found myself needing, yet again, to nurse him in the gathering room just off the sanctuary during Sunday service. (I've no qualms with nursing in public, but the sanctuary seats at our church are unbearably uncomfortable for this particular activity.) That particular Sunday, the sleep-deprived loneliness was intense. I was desperately hungry for community. Yet even having made it to the same building where so many of my friends were also present in the flesh, here I was again, alone with my baby.

Our church does communion once a month, and it was a communion Sunday. If I close my eyes, I can still feel the heartache of hearing the musicians begin to softly sing and play as people lined

up to receive the elements. My baby still had a long way to go with his meal, and I needed to stay put.

After several minutes, I heard gentle footsteps. When I turned, I saw a young couple walking toward me and my baby with the bread and wine. They had noticed me slip away during the sermon with my crying son, and had come to find me. There I was – weepy, lonely, and quite exposed. They approached me without hesitation and served me the elements. As I received the bread along with the words, “Christ’s body, broken for you,” and then the cup along with the words, “Christ’s blood, shed for you,” I fixed my tear-filled gaze on my son. My son born just weeks prior in a wash of my own blood. My son was now eating and drinking from my own body. And this even as I ate and drank of Christ’s body, even as I was being served by members of the church body, even as the worshippers sang a song called “Drink You Deep” softly in the background. In that moment, Christ was made real in a way I’ve not experienced before or since.

Such embodied love, given and received, is the entire point and end-goal of the race.

I close with a prayer for exhausted caregivers:

God, we’re running toward you, and we’re running in you, for you are both the goal and the way. But some of us are out of breath. Some of us have lost the path. Others are chapped and parched. Still others are facing major roadblocks. A few are about to give up. For weary runners, I ask that you make us attentive to your presence in the wild and unlikely places of our journey. And I ask that you come and give us what we need so that we can take the next step toward the life to which we’re called. Amen.