

## Everyday Saints and Unsung Heroes

*By Lynn Webster, M.D. August 25, 2018.*

### **Caregivers Sacrifice Themselves for the Good of Others**

Religions call their holiest people saints. In secular speak, saints are people who are pure, honest, beyond reproach, and devote their lives to benefiting others. In our more common vernacular, we call those who sacrifice themselves for the good of others, heroes.

I have decided that my grandfather was either a saint or a hero. I have only come to that opinion recently, long after he has passed.

My grandmother had multiple sclerosis. She was in constant pain. Sometimes, it was severe enough that she would scream and wish aloud that she could die.

Grandma could not move from one position in a chair to another without assistance. From the time I remember, she sat frozen with her knees at a right angle to her hips. Her 90-pound frame – which looked like a skeleton – had to be carried from the living room chair to the toilet to the kitchen table to the bed. In bed, she had to lie on her side, because her legs had developed permanent contractures, preventing her from resting in any other position.

During the 18 years of my childhood and youth, my grandfather rarely left my grandmother's side except to work in the fields. He was a farmer. I never recall my grandfather speaking negatively to her or expressing anger at her dependence, nor did he ever ask anyone else in the family to help care for her.

### **My Grandfather Was Our Family's Hero**

Today, we would call my grandfather a "caregiver," but that strikes me as too clinical. His level of generosity requires a higher level of attribution. Saint or hero – take your pick.

People with acute pain may receive flowers, calls, and visits from outsiders. But when the pain becomes chronic, those connections soon fade, leaving the person with pain isolated. Family and friends drift away, either because their own schedules make demands or because they don't know how to make a meaningful contribution. The caregiver often shares this isolation. It is the daily responsibility that separates the caregiver from those who care about the ill person. Those who care may be sincere, but they are not in the foxhole.

### **Caregivers Are the Saints or Heroes of Our Society**

The caregiver is most often an adult child, parent, or spouse. Caregivers face innumerable challenges. They deprive themselves of a normal schedule. They forgo pleasures and other responsibilities to be there for the one in need out of duty, love, or both.

The role of caregiver for a person with chronic pain is not a sprint but a marathon. People who have chronic pain may live for years, and so goes the role of the caregiver. Responsibilities are never-ending. The duties include nursing, banking, cooking, house cleaning, bill paying, and all other activities required to exist in society.

Every day in my practice, as I saw patients with chronic pain, I would also see caregivers. I was always in awe of their spirit and generosity. They, along with my grandfather, are heroes — if not saints — in our society. I am not sure I can tell the difference.

