



Caregivers

Strengthening the Hands of Those Who
Care for the Elderly and Special Children

Keeper'sBook™ series focuses on specific topics relevant to *Keepers at Home* readers. Our goal is to bring together talented writers who have passion for the subject and readers whose lives will be blessed by the information presented in each Keeper'sBook™.

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BRENDA NOLT

MOTHER'S HANDS



As a little girl, I would stand at Mother's knee while she worked, and watch her hands. I could never believe how fast they moved. Shelling peas, peeling fruits, snapping beans; whatever was in her hands got done quickly. As I became older and helped with the work, I would try to go as fast as she did.

But I never could.

A skein of yarn became transformed into useful pieces of clothing. In the garden and orchard, her buckets always filled the quickest. Dough became loaves, or pie shells, or doughnuts. A heap of clothing became organized stacks ready for drawers. Flats of tiny seedlings became neat little rows of plants in trays. Tangles of hair were transformed into straight, stiff braids, down our backs. Flowers were made into beautiful bouquets. So fast and so capable.

I would look at those hands and admire them. No, they were not manicured perfectly, but to me they were beautiful. They could do anything. They had the strength to milk many a goat by hand (and make the ornery ones obey), and the gentleness to move the strokes of a brush, creating beautiful scenes and pictures. How I loved my mother's hands!

The time came when I had a family of my own to take care of, and as mothers of little ones will understand, the days came when the work seemed like a mountain. That's when Mother would come, ready to work. It did not matter what the job at hand was, she would tackle it with a will. Six bushels of peaches, weeds in the garden, stacks of ironing, piles of mending, or dirty corners to clean. I was always so blessed and relieved when the day's work was over

and the mountain was a mountain no more. Not only was the day's mountain reduced to jobs finished, but there were usually loaves of fresh bread and other goodies in the pantry, thanks to Mother's swiftly moving hands.

One day she came to help butcher chickens. It was another job that she had always done so fast that I had a hard time learning how just by watching. Her fingers always moved too fast to follow. I was expecting her to take charge as usual. "Set this up here." "Have your cold water ready here." "Be sure you have a container that's big enough here." But today something was wrong. She stood back and watched me set up and get ready. She didn't even give me any pointers about how it should be done. She just couldn't seem to work as fast as usual. Her slowness made her extremely frustrated. She even cried when the chicken fell out of her hands, to the floor. And she was quiet. It took us much longer to butcher the chickens than I had expected it to. But of course, I still loved my mother's hands!

Was this the same mother that could do any type of work and keep up an interesting and stimulating conversation at the same time? Was something wrong with my mother? Maybe she was just having a bad day? Maybe she was upset at me about something? Maybe she didn't feel well?

But when I questioned her, she said she had not noticed that anything was wrong.

A half year goes by. I have a hospital stay. Always the helpful, serving mother, she offers to come do some of my housecleaning while I recover. I feel so unworthy and blessed when Mother and my sisters come and tackle the job. But what is wrong with Mother? Mother's hands move

slowly. My sisters work circles around her. Jobs are not done right. Curtain rods make her cry. When we encourage her to take a rest after lunch, she agrees, but then a pitiful cry escapes her lips.

“What’s wrong, Mother?”

“I can’t find your recliner,” she whimpers. We guide her gently there, to the same recliner where she always took her half-hour nap whenever she helped me for the day.

That day is the turning point for me. Mother is losing out. Fast. There is no more making excuses, or attributing her behavior to a poor night’s sleep, or a bad day, or aging. Mother’s hands are fast no more. We struggle against this revelation. Mother is way too young! Doctors don’t find anything else wrong, though. Her swift and intelligent mind that was always learning new things and doing new jobs is now losing out fast.

So we go and help Mother. She just can’t do her things right anymore. She falls. The food burns. Soon she is no longer safe alone.

Is it real? Is this the same mother who was always ready for another challenge? She sits and watches us work. She frets. “I need to do something. I need to work something. I can’t just sit here!” she cries. So we give her beans to shell. She is glad to do something and we are glad she feels needed this way. It works for a while. But too soon, she gets the pods and the beans mixed up. Her hands need to keep moving, and we let her, even though we know we will have to do it again.

How can it be that these are the same hands that used to shell peas? As I watch her and take care of her needs, my mind travels back to when I was a little girl. She had already picked bushels of peas before I was even out of bed, her buckets filling at an amazing rate. Then the shells were split open with exceeding speed and huge amounts of peas appeared. It did not matter how fast I went, my bowl just didn’t fill up like hers did. Sometimes I sneaked some of her peas out of her bowl and put them to mine. At least it made it look like I was going fast too. Sometimes when she set her bowl down I would pick it up and pretend I had shelled them all. But of course it was just pretending. No one I knew had hands as fast as Mother’s.

But her hands kept going slower and slower. It was heart-breaking to watch her eat. The no-longer-nimble fingers were stiff and slow. They would slowly grasp her spoon and try to scoop up some food. Then it would begin the slow ascent to her mouth. Sometimes she would be successful and

sometimes she wouldn’t. Too soon, they lay useless on her lap, and our younger hands, or Dad’s hands, would feed her.

Caregiving was a part of our days. One day as I was taking care of Mother, the tears fell down my cheeks as I washed her hands. They were so stiff and useless. Clutching at nothing. Closed. Slowly I pried them open and cleaned them. Her nails had made little imprints in the palms of her hands. “I’m going to clip your nails today, Mother, okay?” Her only response is, “Ouch, ouch, oh! Be careful.”

“Yes, I’ll be careful, Mother. I’ll try not to hurt you more than I have to,” I said. “You see, I always did love your hands.”

When I am done, I put two soft washcloths inside them, so she does not clutch them shut so tightly, then tenderly kiss them, still not believing that only two years ago they were still working quickly. I kiss her on her cheek too, then. When I tell her that I love her, a little smile comes to her lips. The tears flow unbidden down my cheeks. How I loved my mother’s hands!

The next time I touch Mother’s hands they are cold in death. As I stand there, the tears flowing for my own loss, I know that I cannot truly be sad. I know that Mother’s hands are now healed. Are they clasping our Jesus’ hands in a tender embrace? Are they picking the flowers she so loved? Are they holding my babies that I have not met, or are they clasping the hands of her brothers and parents? I know that regardless what Mother’s hands are doing in heaven, they are young and strong. They are soft and supple. They can again do everything that she desires. And someday, I will see my mother’s hands again. ❀

Treat Them Like They Are JESUS...

LIBBY BOLL



My grandpa suffered from Alzheimer’s for five years. Through those intensely hard years, my grandma treated him with such love and patience. Later she shared her secret with some of her granddaughters... “I decided to treat him like he was Jesus.” What a difference it made in her devoted, loving care to her husband who even forgot that she was his wife. ❀

Worn Tabernacle

ANONYMOUS

Stealing in beneath the curtain, a single shaft of sunlight pooled on Mother's folded hands. I halted in the doorway. The sensation was almost eerie. Semi-darkness swathed the rest of her bedroom; only those thin, clasped hands were highlighted on the worn brown coverlet.

I took a few quick steps forward. How still she lay! Was she...?

Then the frail fingers moved, and her eyes fluttered open. My voice echoed in the still room. "Good morning, Mom." Pushing a button to raise the head of the bed, I waited for her usual responsive smile. It didn't come. Her "Good morning" was feeble.

Deciding not to say anything about the missing smile, I fixed her breakfast tray into position. "We have porridge this morning. And some orange juice and toast."

"Thanks," she whispered.

I stayed for her prayer. Usually I lingered, chatting while she ate, but duties pressed this Monday morning. "Is it okay if I go start the laundry now, Mom? Both girls are away today."

Her lips barely moved. "Of course it's okay."

I headed out briskly, but her faint voice arrested me. "Mary...?"

I shoved all impatience far from my lips. "Yes, Mom?"

"That young man who was here yesterday... I should know who he is..." Her voice was troubled.

Pain knifed my heart. You'd think you'd get used to it. But it still hurt every time I was faced with evidence of Mom's failing mind. She used to be so sharp at knowing and remembering people. "That was Angus, Mom. Gina's boyfriend." I could have added, "How can you forget? He's here every two weeks or so." But of course I didn't.

"Ah. I thought there was something familiar about him." Then, tremulously, she added, "And they're getting married...?"

"Yes," I said shortly. "Enjoy your breakfast, Mom." My thoughts were busy as I sorted the wash. Had Mom wondered when the wedding would be? It was too early to talk about that. Walter and I had only known since New Year's.

And I had carried a burden ever since Angus and Gina shared their special plans. Like the galling straps of a too-

heavy backpack, it dug constantly into the shoulders of my consciousness. The more I thought about it, the heavier the pack seemed to grow!

But Mother, of all people, must definitely not know about this wearisome pack of mine. She must never guess that I grappled with it, trying in vain to get rid of its chafing pressure.

I'd shared the problem with Walter, of course. Man-like, he'd advised me not to worry. Excellent advice—but how to comply?

Perhaps because of the guilt I felt over that "backpack," I put forth extra efforts to be cheerful whenever I helped Mom that day. But by evening I'd added another worry to my collection. "I don't know what's troubling Mom," I confided to Walter. "She barely smiled today."

"Hmm," he said. "That's unusual."

"Definitely. Ever since she's bedfast, it seems she has tried even harder to be cheerful. As if she didn't want to add to our cares by being grumpy."

He nodded. "Though you can hardly blame her for feeling despondent."

"Indeed, no. Old age is no picnic. Especially not if there's so little you can do. She tried knitting again today, but it didn't go very well." So we prayed that Mom's faith would not wane along with her health as she trod life's last vale.

A few days later, we felt our prayers amply answered when brother Jonas and his wife came to visit. Since Mom couldn't attend church services anymore, Walter and I were more than willing to sit in on a little service our ministering brother held at her bedside.

I was a little puzzled at first when Jonas began to speak, because he launched into a description of the tabernacle constructed by Israel in the wilderness. Describing the poles, the frames, and the coverings, Jonas kept emphasizing how temporary this tent-like sanctuary was. "Over the years, no doubt some parts wore out and had to be replaced," he said. "And then at last, when Solomon became king, he built a glorious temple from materials far more permanent than those carried through the wilderness years before."

As Jonas began to explain his allegory, it all became clear. Of course. That wilderness tabernacle was a picture of our

earthly bodies, growing old and frail with use. And in our innermost being dwells God's Spirit, just like the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies.

On the other hand, Solomon's gold-plated temple symbolizes the new, eternal resurrection body God has in store for all who endure to the end. From II Corinthians 5, Jonas read these hope-inspiring verses: *For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven.*

After Jonas and Viola had gone, Mom looked at me and let out a happy sigh. The smile that was back on her face told me more than any words. How greatly this glimpse of eternity must have strengthened my mother's soul!

Yet the smile didn't last. After a day or two, whatever gloom had plagued her before returned in full force. Mother seemed to exist in a perpetual fog impervious to all efforts at cheering.

"Why don't you just honestly ask whether something is bothering her?" Walter wondered.

"Well... I suppose I could... Though I'm not sure what kind of response I'll get. Her mind isn't all that clear anymore," I hedged.

Walter encouraged, "Still, there'd probably be no harm in trying."

So the next morning while Mother slowly sipped her porridge, I followed his advice. "Is something bothering you these days, Mom?"

Her startled eyes met mine. "I didn't think you'd know."

"We wish you could be happy," I said simply.

To my surprise, tears welled from her eyes. She wiped them with trembling fingers. "When I was a girl... planning to get married..." She paused to collect her thoughts.

I sat there looking at those blue-veined hands with their parchment-thin skin...at the wealth of wrinkles on her face...at her sparse, pure-white hair...and tried to picture my mother as a new bride. Like Gina. Bubbling with vitality, full of plans for the wedding, every aspect of her life touched with the rosy hue of young love.

Suddenly, like the ebb and flow of waves on the seashore, the generations seemed to merge into one. This was the ceaseless story of human life: birth, marriage, new life, death—repeating itself, overlapping, forming an endless chain.

"In the week of our wedding," Mother began again, "my great-grandmother died."

That sent a jolt through me. Had Mom opened a zipper of my "backpack" a few inches and peeked inside?

"It made things so hectic. My parents had to be away the day before our wedding, so I was left to supervise the folks who came to help. The funeral was the day after the wedding." Mother's breath came heavily. For her, that had been a long speech.

Yet she forged on, anguish gripping her voice. "What if I should die over the time of Gina's wedding? It would be even worse for you than it was for us with great-grandmother, because I live right here."

There. She had ripped my "backpack" from my shoulders. Its contents, like a collection of sordid secrets, lay spilled for all to see.

Because those had indeed been my worries. Gina's was the first wedding in our family. Everything was new and strange, and looked like a mountain to me. The care of Mom compounded it all. How would we manage once preparations were at their height? Would the neighbors have to come and help Mom?

At the center of these worries lay the one I'd been almost too embarrassed to share even with my husband. What if Mom should die shortly before the wedding? Could one house hold both a funeral and a wedding within days of each other?

Lying spilled at my feet, how absurd these worries now looked! With a delicious sense of newly gained freedom I mentally kicked them aside and leaned forward to reassure my mother. "Oh, Mom, don't we sometimes have the most ridiculous worries?"

She blinked and gave me a questioning look, but I had no intention of letting her know about my own little "backpack."

"Why, all of this is in God's hands!" I bubbled on. "To worry about the timing of your departure is as senseless as..." I groped for an apt simile. Then a picture of Solomon's glorious temple flashed into my mind. "We wouldn't dream of fretting about what resurrection body God has planned for us. We just know it'll be glorious beyond imagination. Why fret about when we'll die?"

For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened... that mortality might be swallowed up of life, she whispered, partially quoting II Corinthians 5:4.

"It's all in God's hands," I said again. "Yet as long as we're in this tabernacle, there are small things human hands can do to help. You know what I thought when Jonas was describing the wilderness tabernacle? I thought of the many strong, young people who were needed to carry the components through the desert. Don't you think the younger generation felt honored to help carry the tabernacle?"

A beautiful smile lit my mother's face. "Perhaps," she whispered. "Perhaps they did." ❀

Living on the Bottom of the Barrel

SYLVIA YODER

Burnout. Read it out loud. Burnout. How does the sound of that word make you feel? Guilty? Exhausted? Relieved to identify what's wrong with you? Overwhelmed?

I have felt all of the above plus a few more: anger, at God and at the situation; betrayal, from God and other people; secretly ashamed that I am doubting God's grace to be sufficient.

Let's face it. Burnout is real, serious, and messy. Most of the time there is no quick-fix formula to get yourself going by tomorrow morning, or better yet, right now. This very hour, when you are struggling to get through the remaining hours of this day.

Webster's defines burnout as a state of emotional exhaustion caused by the stresses of one's work or responsibilities.

Caregiving is hard work and most caregivers are juggling multiple responsibilities besides caring for their patient.

In this article I would like to point out some signs and symptoms of burnout and offer a few tips I have found helpful.

Many times, by the time burnout is evident on the surface it has already worn a person down on the inside. One's physical, mental, and emotional tank is depleted. Outward signs are discouragement, depression, chronic fatigue, and more. These symptoms can be misread by well-meaning people as not accepting God's will in a situation, looking on the dark side of life, and being unsociable. This adds to the feelings of guilt and inability to cope which you are already facing.

If you have met up with pat answers to your distress when you have dared to share your heart, you begin to fear opening your mouth for risk of being criticized, misunderstood, or gossiped about. When we get into a state of exhaustion this severe, we also become touchy and unreasonable in our own minds. Even well-meant encouragement can be perceived as uncaring. We need to be gracious and reasonable,

recognizing that others are trying to care and encourage the best they know how. Touchiness is dangerous, because it leads to hurt feelings, grudges, and bitterness. Bitterness in itself drags us down and saps our resources. So guard vigilantly against touchiness and recognize it as a sign that you are wearing down in some area. Weariness of soul and spirit are different than weariness of body. Sleep can restore the body, but weariness of spirit can actually cause you to lose sleep. This starts a vicious cycle. As your body wears down, your mind becomes weak and vulnerable. Soon you are lost in a weary muddle.

This happened to me one summer. I don't know which came first, but soon they were chasing each other around and around. I remember driving through our small town and momentarily having no idea which way I needed to turn to go home. It scared me, and I realized that one way or another, I needed to get some rest, both in my spirit and for my body.

During this time God felt so distant. I struggled to see Him as a kind heavenly Father. I felt as though He was chastening without mercy. One stress followed another with little letup to regroup for the next round.

One day I was telling a friend how I felt, adding wail upon woe. Suddenly she interrupted me and said, "You are so worn out, your mind is playing tricks on you."

It was the jolt I needed. I was beyond sensible reasoning. In a less exhausted state of mind I could have more easily recognized the devil's attack of discouragement. He is a cowardly enemy who delights in attacking us when we are already down. This is not the way of our heavenly Father. He is an ever-present help in time of trouble if we call out to Him.

I also realized I was begging God to take away my trials instead of asking Him to be with me in them.

We can't give what we don't have, and when our caregiving extracts more from us than we have to give, we become

depleted. God has the resources we need, and if we ask Him He will bless and multiply the last crumbs we have and we will find them to be enough.

Consider the widow of Zarephath. She was literally living on the bottom of the barrel. You can read the account in I Kings 17:8-16. When she went out to gather sticks for her last meal her situation was impossible. There was nothing more in the house after the meal she was about to cook. This was it. The next step was death by starvation. She was not expecting a miracle. She was expecting one more meal before death.

But then she met the man of God...

God moving into this situation made all the difference. But let's take a look at the widow's part in this miraculous account.

First, she gathered sticks to make a fire. If she had stayed in the house, petrified at her lack of resources, she would not have been out where she could meet the man of God. When we are facing a "bottom of the barrel" experience, we must continue gathering sticks.

If we give up and sit in the house staring at the empty barrel, we will starve. Discouragement and despair creep in, followed by all their unkind companions. They feast on our last remaining crumbs, leaving us with nothing.

We must cast ourselves upon our heavenly Father and ask Him to move in. For where He abides, those dark foes must leave. They cannot abide in His presence.

Next, she obeyed. *She went and did according to the saying of Elijah.* Obedience runs contrary to human reasoning. We cannot wait to obey until we are able to reason the situation out in our own minds.

At this point, the widow had no idea how long the famine would last. She had to have faith that not one but three people could be fed with crumbs. And *according to the word of the Lord* there was enough.

She was also willing to give. Do you think she would have experienced the miracle if she had selfishly baked two cakes instead of three? We must continue to give, trusting God to multiply our crumbs.

I have found that I wear out quickly when I hoard my cakes. If I am constantly making sure I don't get taken advantage of and stay busy watching my own back, I end up frustrated and exhausted. But when I give freely, I am amazed how God can do a much better job of watching my back than I can. He provides the resources I need and even bails me out in unexpected ways.

When the barrel is almost empty, it is often more difficult to give (it is easier to give when the barrel is full).

Dividing the crumbs takes faith. But as we obey, we find that the crumbs multiply.

In the case of the widow, an impossible situation was turned on its head and not one but three people were sustained until the famine ended.

Amy Carmichael says, "But we have a God whose love is courageous. He trusts us to trust Him through the blind hours before we find our own pot of oil, which is indeed always in the house."

Indeed, it does take faith to continue gathering sticks. What if the man of God passes another way? What if the oil runs dry? Then what?

There there is God. It may be that He will choose to send rain and end our famine. But He may choose to let us exist on crumbs. But, no matter what, it is safe to trust Him.

When the barrel and cruse are full, we depend on them and our own ability to keep them full. "But in some way or other we must learn to trust the Giver and not the gift."

One of the hardest famines to endure is when someone you love is not out gathering sticks. They are not willing to share their crumbs, and their oil is disappearing fast. The situation is between them and God, and you can do nothing to change it.

It is a test of faith to commit this kind of famine to God. It is an impossible situation that God is not allowed to move into; it is painful to watch. But continue to pray. Our God is faithful and He will sustain you through the famine.

Concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl says, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

Symptoms of Burnout

Body:

- > low energy, feeling run down
- > sleep disorders
- > inability to focus and make decisions
- > increased or decreased appetite
- > headaches, indigestion

Soul

- > feeling alone and isolated
- > anger, depression
- > feeling unloved
- > not reading the Bible
- > no interest in prayer

Spirit

- > uninspired about life in general
- > overly irritable, weepy
- > constantly overwhelmed
- > no interest in getting out
- > refusing to socialize