

Priceless Gifts for Caregivers

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It was the day before Thanksgiving. People everywhere were loosening their belts, drinking diet shakes, and preparing to binge on the biggest meal of the year. Women were cooking all snug in their kitchens with visions of browning birds and chestnut dressing

dancing in their heads. We, however, hadn't planned quite so well – so I sent Mom out to the store for a few last-minute staples – canned pumpkin and refrigerated pie crusts for, well, you know, “homemade” pie.

Mom stashed her few must-haves into her cart and got in her favorite checker's line. As she wished her friend a "Happy day-before-Thanksgiving," Mom asked casually, "Are you cooking this year?"

Her friend teared up—right there at her register, "I've done it every year of my marriage. But this year with my husband shut in and fighting to recover from cancer surgery, and with me dividing my time between caregiving and working here, my niece asked if I wouldn't mind letting her cook the bird and host the family this year. All I have to do is show up tomorrow. She doesn't know what a gift this is to me."

As a sometimes caregiver myself, I teared up when Mom relayed the story to me. I know too well the fact that caregiving requires juggling, time management, and shedding all tasks except the absolutely most essential. Non-essentials like shopping for Christmas gifts, planning for (and attending) holiday parties, and preparing a holiday meal go by the wayside leaving a harried caregiver



feeling a sense of loss to add to every other emotion she's experiencing. And at once, the holiday season becomes another source of guilt, another source of pain, and another source of sorrow.

Give a caregiver a gift card, and chances are it won't get spent--because she can't get out to shop for herself. Give a caregiver the gift of time, though, and you've given her the most valuable present you could buy. What do I mean? Here are four gifts of time you could give to the caregiver you know and love.

The Gift of a Meal

This is the gift our checker-friend received from her niece. But it doesn't have to be so extreme or so elaborate--or so tied to a national holiday. Carrying in a nice, home-cooked meal (complete with throw-away dishware and utensils) any day of the year, delivering it hot, and leaving the family to enjoy it is a tangible gift of one of life's necessities to an overwhelmed caregiver. It's also a way of telling her you're "with her" in spirit – and a demonstration of your thoughtful care. It's easy to give her a quick hug and tell her you're praying for her, but in this way, she'll know you took time and thought to ease her burden, while allowing her to check one must-do off her endless to-do list.

The Gift of Sitting

Many caregivers are tied to their ailing loved ones 24/7 and can't leave without arranging for a sitter. If your caregiver friend is in this situation, a thoughtful gift of time is for you to sit with her loved one for a few hours so she can do something that will refresh and rejuvenate her.

A real splurge is to give your friend a gift card for dinner, a movie, a massage, a makeover, even an overnight stay in an area hotel—and then give the gift of time so she'll be able to use the card on a day when she needs relief from her burdening responsibilities. Church small groups or care

teams can pitch in for overnight stays. You might be giving a caregiver her only full night's sleep in as long as she can remember. Talk about a gift of time. This can be one of the most beneficial.

The Gift of Housecleaning

If housecleaning is a spiritual gift, I can tell you I don't have it. But I know that when caregiving gets most intense, things like vacuuming and dusting, laundry and cleaning bathrooms lose any luster they might otherwise have for even the cleanest freaks among us. So, a perfect gift for the caregiver on your list is the gift of housecleaning.

One option is to do cleaning for her yourself. I have a friend who spends a day each week doing an elder friend's laundry. This same gift can be especially meaningful to a harried caregiver who may have confided in you that she is unnerved by her household's multiplying pile of dirty linens and unmentionables.

Another option is to give the gift of a cleaning service to work for your friend when it's most convenient for her. Prepaying or having the cleaning service bill you for the work are two ways to make this fit into the caregiver's schedule.

The Gift of Nearness

One of the saddest byproducts of long-term caregiving is that caregivers often feel detached from special events—like church Christmas concerts and family holiday gatherings. But, with technology, it's easy to “be there” even if you're not really there.

Making a digital video recording of a play where your friend's child or grandchild is performing is one way to share the event with



her, even from a distance. So is setting up a web cam and letting everyone at the event talk to her live. Even making a simple telephone call during a Christmas party can make her feel more part of the festivities. Just be careful to ask whether it's a good time to talk (when an ailing father is calling out for his dinner or a recovering surgery patient needs a bandage change, a phone call wouldn't be a welcome gift of time).

The bottom line is that caregivers are easy to overlook in the busyness of the holiday season. Their circumstances may not allow them to fully participate in festivities, but they'd welcome the thoughtful gifts of time from a compassionate friend like you who hasn't forgotten them.

Julie-Allyson Ieron has cared for her ailing grandmother and her heart-patient father. Order a personally autographed copy of her book: [The Overwhelmed Woman's Guide to ... Caring for Aging Parents](#) from her ministry website: <http://www.joymediaservices.com>

