

A Story of Selflessness

This is a portion of a letter I wrote to a client who was caring for his aunt. Anna was in her late 80's, had no family near except her nephew, who lived 40 minutes away. He'd been making unplanned runs to her when she had multiple falls and emergency room visits for months. He knew his aunt had reached the point that she was no longer in a safe environment at home, but he also knew other family members wanted to allow her to stay at home. He was doing everything he could, while maintaining a full time job, and trying to be present for his wife and kids. I've changed the names to preserve their privacy, but the story is real.

"I suspect even you don't begin to understand how much of yourself you've given, and I'm also confident that your family doesn't grasp how much they owe you in gratitude. Then again, they can't really understand it because they haven't walked the walk you have.

Bill, we've had this running dialogue for quite some time now. I think I know you, and I hope you know that whatever I say is intended to be validating. I've always tried to be honest with you because I feel being less than that doesn't ultimately help you.

There's a lot to address from your story, but let me begin with you. It's clear you're still mentally and emotionally taking full responsibility for every aspect of Anna's care and life. That's laudable, but not realistic and not necessarily going to get you the desired outcome. You're afraid to make some decisions and take certain steps because your family won't be happy with you or your actions. Yet, I suspect those same family members haven't been sitting with her every Friday to get her

through therapy and haven't addressed her extremely difficult behaviors head on and face to face...repeatedly. Some can show up for a visit, but who's there when day after day, week after week the tough stuff continues, with little hope of change in sight. So you put yourself out there, you do what you know is the right thing, you agonize over your actions but also others perceptions of those actions, and in the end you can't win. And in the end, as long as you're willing to shoulder all the responsibilities, and your family isn't required to share the load, you've allowed them to have opinions and shape actions without having to get their hands dirty and lose sleep along with you. Decisions are always easier and much more black and white when made in the sterile environment of our own living rooms and not in the therapy room as someone's yelling, being disruptive and causing extreme chaos. So when they're ready to take their turn showing up repeatedly and talk with the angry staff and help her go to the bathroom, then they become a stock holder and they get a vote and a right to express their opinions.

Regarding Anna... in my professional opinion she clearly has a multitude of things going on. It appears she's reached a stage where she needs to have 24/7 oversight, which is not something you're able to provide yourself.

I don't think it's at all reasonable to have her return to her home. And any family member that thinks that's a good thing should have to be the one to get the first call when the next melt down happens. Again, opinions are nice, but make them put the responsibility for the results on their shoulders also, not just yours.

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If some family member (possibly your parents) legitimately aren't able physically or mentally to handle this stress, then you need to let them know that though you know they love Anna, and you know they want what's best for her, they owe you their support because you're doing everything possible and then some. If you feel there is anything I can do in terms of talking with your parents or facilitating a family conversation I'm willing to try. Or, if you want a phone call with me so I can help you with words or thoughts I'm happy to do that as well. You know your family, you'll know if any of that makes sense."

It can be incredibly difficult to recognize you've reached a crossroads when you're so deeply committed to someone. Taking a step back, seeking a professional who can help you to regain perspective and understand options can be so important to both the caregiver and care recipient. I'd like to extend my profound admiration and respect to all caregivers.

This article is a reprint of a blog posted by Adele Lund, Laureate Group's Director of Community and Business Relations