

Caring Not Coercing

This may seem like an odd topic for reflection, but I have had several opportunities over the past couple of months to wonder what the motive is behind some of behaviors related to caring for a loved one. There seems to be a fine line between caring and coercing. I fear many families are falling into a trap of believing they are providing the best care for their loved one regardless of their loved one's wishes or personal beliefs. I see paternalism being used not from a caring perspective, but rather from a coercing perspective.

According to Wikipedia, "paternalism is action limiting a person's or group's liberty or autonomy (in other words-independence) which is intended to promote their own good. Paternalism can also imply that the behavior is against or regardless of the will of a person, or also that the behavior expresses an attitude of superiority". Why would I provide you with this definition? This definition helps us to identify the fine line between caring and coercing.

When we care for an individual and make decisions on their behalf we make them with their best interest in mind. However, when we begin to think we have the power to influence them, ignoring their wishes and limiting their freedoms we essentially force our decisions on them and they lose their independence. We coerce them. The dictionary defines coercive as "something related to the act of convincing someone through threats, force or without regard to what they want to do".

I frequently see this in the care of elderly parents. Families will come to me looking for assistance in protecting their parent from an overbearing family member(s). Adult children claim to know what is best for their parent, but often fail to include the parent in making decisions. Often discussions center on the expenditure of the parent's money. An adult child may insist their parent stay in their home because it will cost too much for them to move. People who work a lifetime and save their money should have the right to use it when they are elderly and live their life the way they want to live. When their children dictate where they will live based on claims like "they will lose everything" they are missing the key component of caring, selflessness.

Is there rather something to be gained in leaving their family home? The potential gain should not be overlooked. Their social circle

might grow. They will likely find encouragement from others in the same chapter of life. When a family member influences them to stay secluded in their home to save their money the loss is deeply spiritual. They lose their independence and feel helpless, their decision making power and feel hopeless, their desire to live and experience despair. .

God loves us more than we can possibly know and wants what is best for each of us. He loves us enough to give us free will. He allows us to make our own decisions and then promises to be there with us if things don't turn out the way we hoped. He will be there to pick us up and help us work through our struggles. Every one of us throughout a lifetime!

We must remember the golden rule found in Matthew 7:12, "Do for others what you would like them to do for you". If you are currently in a position of caring for a loved one respect them enough to entertain their decisions along with the potential consequences. If they are willing to risk the consequences of their decisions allow them their independence. (Please do not misunderstand me in this statement, clearly individuals that do not have the capacity to make safe decisions need caring family members to make informed decisions that are in their best interest.)

Allow your loved one to exercise his/her free will. Put yourself in their shoes and ask yourself what you would want your family to do for you in this case. Remember God cares for them even more than you do. Go to him in prayer and he will guide your actions to come from a place of caring not coercing.

Questions to ponder:

- What are the wishes of my loved one?
- How can I best honor their life and their wishes?
- When do I have the right to overrule their decision?
- How is God asking me to care for my loved one?
- What would I want if I were in their shoes?

*May God's Peace Be With You,
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*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
The Golden Rule*