

CARING IS EVERYTHING

Getting to the Heart
of Humanity, Leadership, and Life

By David Irvine



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Contents

Preface: Caring is a Path to Authenticity xv

Introduction xix

Running Out of Time 1

Part I The Many Dimensions of Caring 9

It's in Our Bones 11

What Caring Looks Like 27

The Uncomfortable Part About Caring 45

Allowing for Caring 60

Part II Anatomy of Caring 71

A More Human World 73

Important Relationships 80

Choices and Accountability 92

An Authentic Life 102

A Radical Notion 112

The Joy in Caring 120

What Home Means 128

The Gift of Adversity 142

Our Shadows 153

Allowing for Hope 160

Part III Cultivating Caring 169

- Gratitude 171
- A Caring Universe 179
- Forgiveness 195
- Your Fundamental Purpose 202
- The Art of Tending 211
- Caring for Nature 217
- Taking the Time 223
- The Caring Muscle 232
- Health and Wellbeing 236
- Cultivating a Practice of Self-Care 242
- Finding Beauty in the Beast—Caring Through Darkness 247
- Care of the Soul 257

In Search of Caring 265

The Footprints of a Great Physician Leader 273

Appendix A Making Caring in the Workplace Real 277

Appendix B Putting Caring Into Action 281

Appendix C Becoming Real: A Journey to Authenticity 285

Appendix D Character Inventory 292

Appendix E Getting the Ball of Human Goodness Rolling 294

Appendix F Honoring the Shadow: Shining a Light on the Hidden
Aspects of Yourself 302

Appendix G Strengthening Your Caring Response 307

Appendix H Sticking With an Exercise Program 312

Appendix I Self-Care Inventory 316

Acknowledgements 325

Editor's Note 328

Select Bibliography 330

About the Author 332

Running out of Time

So it's true, when all is said and done, grief is the price we pay for love.

E. A. Bucchianeri, *Brushstrokes of a Gadfly*

Man was made for Joy & Woe
And when this we rightly know
Thro the World we safely go
Joy & Woe are woven fine
A Clothing for the soul divine
Under every grief & pine
Runs a joy with silken twine

William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" (1863)

As I write this, my brother is still alive.

His quality of life is poor. Hal cannot get out of bed on his own. He is essentially paralyzed on half of his body, but he remains able to feed himself. Although he is fully cognizant of everything around him and he understands others, his speech is jumbled and mostly incomprehensible. The doctors are working hard to balance his medication to prevent—or lessen—seizures. He sleeps most of the time, and his only remaining pleasures are being with his family, having visitors, getting outside for a stroll in the wheelchair, and watching the birds at the feeder outside the kitchen window. Through the caring presence of his loving and dedicated wife Dianne, his adult children, and his devoted caregiver Val Sarsons, Hal is able to remain at home.

In November 2013, Hal flew to Vancouver, joining his colleagues from every province in the country, to receive the Canada Family Physician of the Year Award for the province of Alberta. Seventy-two hours before the award ceremony, he had a seizure in his hotel room, mere blocks from where he was to be honored. A few days later, the diagnosis was delivered. Grade III Anaplastic Astrocytoma—an aggressive, inoperable tumor intersecting three lobes of his brain. The prognosis was grim. With no treatment, he would live an estimated three to four months. With radiation and chemotherapy, one to three years. With a miracle, perhaps a little longer.

The ensuing months have led me through a journey Hal has called his “Adventure with an Astrocytoma.” After the seizure, my normally fluent brother had trouble with speaking and communicating, “a mild but frustrating receptive and expressive dysphasia/aphasia” as he termed it. Because of the aphasia, Hal was forced to quit all committee and clinical work. With the help of family members, he started a blog titled “Adventure with an Astrocytoma” and began chronicling the personal impacts of his diagnosis and treatment. This so-called “adventure” was a grinding mix of aggressive radiation and chemotherapy with accompanying aphasia, memory loss, itching rashes, bloating, dreadful weakness, seizures, headaches, nausea, diarrhea, and so little energy that just putting his feet on the floor in the morning was a measure of success.

In the months since my brother’s diagnosis I have discovered just how much, as a healer and leader in his community, Hal has made a difference to many, many hundreds of people.

When I push him in his wheelchair around the neighborhood, the same neighborhood shared by the hospital where he worked for thirty-one years, we inevitably run into one of his patients or a patient’s family member who stops and tells a story of the positive impact Hal has made in their life. One afternoon on one of our walks together, we met a young woman pushing a toddler in a stroller. It turned out that Hal had helped give birth to this woman twenty-five years earlier. Two decades later, he also helped give birth to the two-year-old she was pushing beside us. This mom expressed a heartfelt appreciation for Hal’s care for her when she was growing up in this community, and for his care for her young son after he was born.

I think it's fair to say that people here have been stricken by Hal's diagnosis. It just makes no sense to anybody.

After his seizures and in emergency care, Hal stayed for periods in the hospital across the street from his home. This was the same hospital where he used to be "the doctor," and there I discovered how absolutely cherished he was—by his colleagues, the nurses, custodial staff, and his patients. Tenderness was obvious in these health care providers as they devoted their attention to him with impeccable dedication and love. Tears would so often fill their eyes.

Hal continues to be adored by his staff and patients, but not because he was "the doctor." He is loved and valued because of who he is as a person. Inside his core, Hal has always cared. About his patients. About his work. He cares about his community. He cares about people. And now all that caring he's given out has been coming back to him. The love that so freely flowed through him in his personal life and in his work, as a husband, a father, friend, and healer in the community, now surrounds him as he faces his difficult prognosis.

In the days spent with Hal during these remaining months, and being inspired by his caring presence and his caring legacy, I was inspired to write a book about the power of caring. It is to my caring brother, Hal Irvine, that I dedicate this book. May the inspiration I received from spending time with Hal during the last months of his life be reflected in the stories I have gathered here.