

## CARING AND GIVING – THEY’RE FUNDAMENTAL!

A Reflection on Jonathan Evison’s *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving: A Novel*  
(Algonquin Books, Chapel Hill, 2012; Kitsap Regional Library’s 2015 “One Book, One Community” selection)

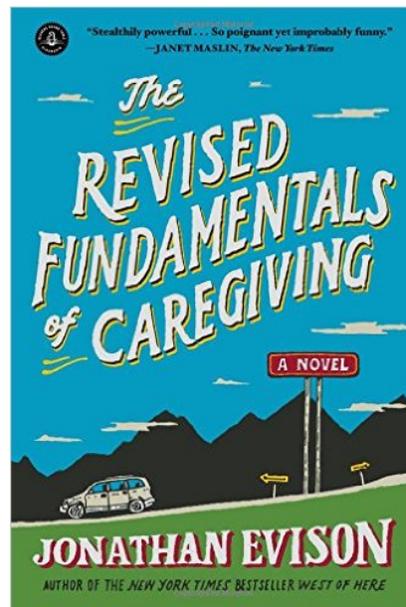
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### *Call to Worship*

I am a big reader. I usually have at least two and sometimes three books going at the same time. I loved it when we moved to Kitsap County seven years ago and discovered that the Library does an annual “One Book, One Community” program as a way to get everyone talking about the same writing; it’s rather like a ginormous book group!

I have read almost all the selections chosen by the library over the past seven years and have occasionally preached on the chosen book. When I read Jonathan Evison’s novel *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving* I knew I had to share my thoughts on this extraordinary work...



### *Sermon, Part 1:*

I invite you to do something that will be, I think, rather challenging. I want you, for a moment, to think about the worst possible thing that could happen to you. Maybe it’s the loss of a job, a fire in your house, or the death of a loved one. Just think for a moment about what that might be and allow yourself to linger in that place. (*Pause...*)

It’s extremely painful, isn’t it, to imagine something awful happening. Trust me, I know. I am a very practiced worrier and I can imagine many terrible things happening to people I love.

Jonathan Evison, in his novel *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving*—this year’s “One Book, One Community” selection for Kitsap County—does just this. Through short chapters with evocative titles like “when does now begin?” and “another long haul,” Evison tells a story about a man named Benjamin Benjamin. Ben is the narrator of this story and Evison introduces him to us this way in the first two sentences in his book.

*I was broke when duty called me to minister to those less fortunate than myself, so maybe I’m no Florence Nightingale. And maybe in light of all that happened with Piper and Jodi, I’m not qualified to care for anybody (p.1).*

Immediately we wonder: what happened to Jodi and Piper? And we wonder why Ben, now 39 with a wife who left him and no serious job prospects, becomes a caregiver to a grumpy teenager named Trev who has Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, a progressive disease somewhat

like ALS which has tied Trev “*in knots, twisting his spine and tightening his joints so that his ribs all but rest on his hips*” (p. 7).

Ben has to work. But he was a stay-at-home dad before everything happened and he has no skills in any other area. So he takes a class called “The Fundamentals of Caregiving” where he learns such things as how to put in a catheter, change a bed and take a pulse. This allows him to work for a small hourly wage taking care of Trev in his home.

Ben’s heart is absolutely broken. I’m not going to tell you what happened to Piper and Jodi except to say that they were his children and that something akin to the worst possible thing I asked you to imagine earlier happened to them and to him. In the book, Evison doesn’t let his readers find out the truth until almost the very end. He leaves us wondering but knowing from the very first sentence that it was bad and that it almost destroyed Ben.

It is out of the ashes of that tragedy that he finds his way to Trev and to professional caregiving.

Trev is a sad case himself. Duchenne’s Muscular Dystrophy is ruining his body but he’s still a teenage boy with all the angst that entails. Mostly he just wants to stay at home and watch TV and think about girls he’ll never kiss. His mom is overly protective but has to work to take care of him as his ne’er-do-well father is in Utah, unwilling or unable to be a part of the family. Trev dreams about travel, exploring maps of odd roadside attractions, but refuses to go anywhere or do anything differently. His world is very, very small. This infuriates Ben. He pushes him and wonders why.

*Could it be because we both know he’s stuck with me, and that quality care is hard to find at nine bucks an hour, that I push him so? Do I make it my business to force Trev’s hand daily because I care about him deeply or because it vexes me that he refuses to live when Piper & Jodi no longer have the chance? I suspect it’s neither, but because I know that no matter how safe one plays it, no matter how one tries to minimize risk, to shelter oneself or one’s charge from the big bad world outside, accidents happen (p. 21).*

Accidents happen. How true. We’ve all had accidents—a fall that leads to a broken ankle or a concussed head; a car accident that causes whiplash and leads to umpteen stitches; a tree limb that crashes into our house. If we’re here today, that accident didn’t kill us. But accidents do kill. Car crashes and falls down stairs and tree limbs kill people we love. Accidents happen. And the definition of an accident is that happens by chance. It is no one’s fault. Things just sometimes happen.

Of course what we do in response to accidents is what gives them meaning. And this book explores how Ben Benjamin along with young Trev and an assortment of other characters finds, if not hope exactly, at least a reason to go on.

Part of the going on is found later in the book when Ben, against the will of Trev’s mom, decides to take Trev on a road trip to see his father who, like so many of the characters in this book, had an accident and is laid up. Along the way they pick up a young woman who is (sort of) running away from home, and they find another who is pregnant with a husband just out of jail

(only to end up back there almost immediately). This road trip, like so many in literature, allows the characters to experience themselves and their lives through a different lens.

Most of us have been on road trips and we know that they can be a way for conversation to happen, for new experiences to be had, and for the best and sometimes worst parts of our personalities to emerge. And that's what happens in this novel. As Ben and Trev and their companions drive the many miles between Bainbridge Island and Utah (and yes, this book is set on the Island and in Kitsap County), first kisses are given, a baby is born, and healing happens. Or, as Jonathan Evison puts it much more poetically in his afterward,

*Baggage is collected. Hearts are won and lost.  
Mistakes are forgiven. Futures are realized (p. 283).*

Evison calls his novel, *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving*, because throughout the journey of this book Ben discovers that caregiving is not so much what you do for others but what the doing does for you. He learns that despite a broken heart he can still care, he can still give.

I want to talk a bit about what that means for us, but before we do, let's sing a song about caring and giving. It's one of my favorites in the hymnal supplement:

Hymn #1012, "When I Am Frightened"

From *Singing the Journey* (Boston: UUA, 2005) Words and music by Shelley Jackson Denham.

*When I am frightened, will you reassure me?  
When I'm uncertain, will you hold my hand?  
Will you be strong for me? sing to me quietly?  
Will you share some of your stories with me?  
If you will show me compassion,  
then I may learn to care as you do, then I may learn to care.*

*When I am angry, will you still embrace me?  
When I am thoughtless, will you understand?  
Will you believe in me, stand by me willingly?  
Will you share some of your questions with me?  
If you will show me acceptance,  
then I may learn to give as you do, then I may learn to give.*

*When I am troubled, will you listen to me?  
When I am lonely, will you be my friend?  
Will you be there for me, comfort me tenderly?  
Will you share some of your feelings with me?  
If you will show me commitment,  
then I may learn to love as you do, then I may learn to love.*

## ***Sermon, Part 2:***

If you show me compassion, I may learn to care; if you show me acceptance, I may learn to give; if you show me commitment, I may learn to love.

Shelley Jackson Denham's beautiful hymn says in a few lovely words the meaning of Evison's book. What Ben Benjamin discovers in this heartbreaking novel is that the most devastating hurt and loss can only be healed by caring, giving and loving. He discovers on his road trip (one both internal and external) that though he can never undo the awful tragedy that broke his heart, he can move through it to a new place of hope and maybe, someday, happiness.

As I read Evison's novel, I couldn't help but think about all the people I've known throughout my 30 years in ministry who have had to deal with awful, terrible loss and tragedy. Jaco and I were in Washington, DC, during the 9/11 attacks and you've heard me speak of having to bury an entire family who went down in the plane that hit the Pentagon. I have dealt with the tragic results of suicide. I have seen young people's lives ruined by drugs and reckless living. You can't be in this line of work and not know tragedy and extraordinary loss.

There are so many stories I could tell that resonate with Evison's novel. But, let me tell you one in particular. When we lived in Maryland a very active woman in our church took me aside and told me that her son was in prison, having foolishly used a gun (unloaded but still a gun) in a robbery that allowed the judge to give him a very long sentence. His mom asked if I'd visit him in the prison with her. I told her, of course.

After I visited him with his mom I then went in on my own. He was a good kid who had done some stupid things. But, like many young people, he was pretty sure that a lot of it wasn't his fault. He was stubborn and unwilling to see his part in his own dilemma. He truly thought of it as an accident—something that just happened to him. But, over time his attitude changed and he began to work in the prison library, then as a tutor to other inmates who were trying to get their high school diplomas.

His imprisonment might seem like a bad enough thing to happen to a family but it gets worse. His lovely mother suddenly disappeared and was found wandering the roads in West Virginia. After many misdiagnoses, it was determined she had a very rare form of ALS, which would kill her within the year. As time passed her condition worsened and her son was unable to do anything to help her. I helped to get her into the prison to see him one more time but then she died, leaving him and the rest of their family broken-hearted. The prison wouldn't let him attend her funeral and though I visited him a few more times, when we moved here in 2008 I lost touch with him.

Fast forward to *this* past summer. I was at the annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Portland, when a handsome man approached me his wife and child by his side. "Do you remember me?" he asked. At first I didn't and then it hit me like a flash of lightening. Here was that young prisoner standing before me, free and full of joy and love with a family by his side. He told me of his journey out of the hole he had dug for himself. I learned of his new life and how he was doing service not only to his family, but also to those in trouble like he once had been.

Out of the darkness of his loss he had found meaning and hope. All I could do was weep as he told me his story. Because his mother, his friends and his church has shown him compassion, acceptance and commitment, he had learned how to give and to care and to love. Wow.

If we learn anything in life it must be this: Loving hurts. It hurts because everything we love we stand a great chance of losing.

If we learn anything in life it must be this: Caring brings healing. We heal because the act of caring and giving to others reminds us that there is more to life than our own pain.

It is true that many people never find a way out of a big tragedy. We've all heard stories of families that break up when something awful happens. We know folks who are unable to ever move through tragedy and find a way to the other side where hope dwells. Perhaps we've even lived that story.

But, I believe that the act of caring for others is the greatest and most effective way we can find healing in the face of devastation. It doesn't change the past but it can shape the future so we can move through the pain and find new meaning in life.

Ben Benjamin doesn't become a saint as he moves through his pain in Evison's powerful novel. He still hurts and he knows he will never forget the great loss that broke his heart. But, through the act of caring for others he remembers that everybody has pain and struggle, everybody hurts and suffers, everybody knows tragedy and loss. And he also learns that everybody has the potential to make a difference, to offer themselves to others in caring ways, and that everybody, even he, himself can find healing and hope in odd places and in unexpected ways.

Listen to these words written to close Jonathan Evison's powerful novel:

*I'll never stop caring. But, the thing about caring is, it's inconvenient. Sometimes you've got to give when it makes no sense at all. Sometimes you've got to give until it hurts.*

And sometimes you have to give even when you are hurting. In fact, I'd say that the very thing you must do when life throws pain and suffering at you is to find a way to care anyway. And he's right when he says that caring is inconvenient. Caring is hard. And yet, I believe it's the best way to move through life. It truly is fundamental to our very being.

As we move into the fall when the season reminds us that summer is fleeting and that death lives always in the seed of life, let us make a commitment to reach out in loving ways to each other. Let us commit to care and to give to the best of our ability. Let us commit to bless the world with our love.

### **Closing Words**

Caring may be inconvenient and we know it can be hard. But, my friends, it truly is the only way to move through this challenging journey called life.

May you find hope along the way, and maybe even a little love and companionship.

And may you remember that the act of caring and giving teaches you, and those whose lives you touch, compassion, commitment and love.

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