

Most of the time we act like we're going to live forever. It's a powerful jolt of reality when a serious illness makes us realise we're not. When one of you gets sick, it's as if you're unwittingly bound together in a three-legged race heading for an unknown destination. Yet everything that happens to us is a call for something to be developed. Instead of denying or turning away from the great uncertainties in life, you enter into a path of discovery together with a sense of urgency. The meaning of marriage comes into sharper focus as egotistical strivings and petty disagreements

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drop away. You set
about finding the level
of strength required
for what lies ahead
and share a profound
understanding of the
poetry of fate.

A task for all of us in later life is to grow the capacity for solitary reflection. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke says, "The highest form of love is to be the protector of another person's solitude." When one person steps back to inwardly observe the struggles brought on by an illness, the other steps forward into the role of caregiver. The caregiver protects this solitude, which allows the person who is sick to focus on what capacities need to be strengthened or what qualities need to be transformed to get well. Wellness might mean a return to physical health. It is always a quest to become whole.

Nevertheless, there are people who become impossible and demanding when they are facing a health catastrophe and they treat those around them badly. Physically debilitating diseases are a slow annihilation of the body and many times, the person is never free from pain. Yet it's amazing to witness that when a person's body is falling apart, their spirit is set free.

Despite the physical suffering,
many experience moments of
heightened awareness into the
meaning of one's existence.

A serious illness separates those who care from those who can't or won't handle it. The caregiving partner might feel like there are times when walking out the door and never coming back is the only option to get free from the fatigue, grief or isolation. These feelings are inevitable, yet they also come and go. Values on the other hand, give an enduring meaning and purpose to life. Our values are the guiding principle we use to confirm the truth and validity of our actions. They support us to act with integrity in spite of the difficulties.

Whether caring for a partner with cancer, Alzheimer's or another one of the illnesses that become more common with age, caregiving isn't easy. It exposes our weaknesses, prejudices and failures. If the illness is prolonged, it consumes time and energy and drains financial resources. But if what according to the Confucian tradition is true – that we are not born fully human but only become so by cultivating ourselves and our relations with others, then caregiving is potentially one of the best experiences to bring out our humanity.

Very few of us know yet what it feels like to face the last months of life. At some point, and we don't know when, there is a transition from wanting to live at all costs to surrendering to the dying process. Often it can bring on an intense loneliness that is different from any other. It's critical for the caregiving spouse to get their own suffering in perspective so they can truly connect with their partners and help to ease their partner's sense of loneliness.

Many of us in Western society remain reluctant to talk about death with those we are close to for fear it is a sign of giving up on life. But a practicality that needs to be addressed is the end-of-life choices you want to have in place. It is a way to ensure a greater quality of life if ever you are faced with a life-limiting illness or tragic accident. Planning ahead with an Advance Health Care Directive gives your partner peace of mind when it comes to making decisions about your health care.

When one of you gets sick, it is an invitation to embrace the great paradoxes in life. Sorrow for what has been lost shares the same space as the joy for love's remembrances. Consolation from friends is appreciated alongside a feeling of utter desolation. Strength you didn't know you were

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capable of arises
in the midst of
profound weakness.
Life and Death sit
side by side.

If you are the one
with an illness,

it's an opportunity to strengthen capacities you will need to live differently, no matter how long that might be. The caregiving spouse will encounter the true meaning of empathy. And it's possible that through this experience, the deepening of love in your marriage over the years will finally make perfect sense. ■