

CARING FOR DYING PARENTS: AN EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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SUMMARY

The death of one's parents, irrespective of the age at which it occurs, is generally regarded as a life experience of considerable significance. The last few years of an elderly person's life are often characterized by increasing frailty, declining health and loss of independence. Responsibility for the spiritual and physical care of parents during that period is undertaken by many adult children. Current research in this area is generally informed by the requirements of social policy, which, by identifying and addressing the inherent difficulties in this so-called informal caring, is designed to support carers in the community. The research reported in this thesis represents a departure from this mode of inquiry and seeks, rather, to explore the existential aspects of caring in this particular situation, from the carer's perspective.

To achieve this objective, an existential phenomenological approach informed principally by the philosophies of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and the adaptation of these philosophies by Schutz, Giorgi and van Manen to social science research, was developed to suit the particular requirements of the topic. In addition to the author's autobiographic material, primary sources include conversations with five people who had been principal carers for their parents during their final illnesses. In all cases caring had ended with the parent's death at least one year before the conversations took place. The principal secondary sources are Simone de Beauvoir's memoir, *A Very Easy Death*, and Philip Roth's account of his father's illness and death, *Patrimony: A True Story*. In addition, the argument is supported throughout by reference to other literary works. From these sources a number of major existential themes, including temporality, hope, suffering, and knowing the body, have been explored in depth, in conjunction with relevant existential theories. Synthesis of these topics suggests that in this particular circumstance, for the people involved in the study, the phenomenon of caring can be understood as an unconditional engagement with the life and concerns of their parent at the end of life, and can be interpreted within an existential framework as representing an authentic way of Being.

* * *

STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis for any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the text of the thesis.

The thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the La Trobe University Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Approval Number FHEC 96/200

Signed:..... **Date:**.....

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I thank the participants who have so generously contributed to the study, and without whom research of this type is not possible. Their experiences as carers cannot be quantified, and in this thesis I have attempted to present them in a form which celebrates caring as a feature of the human condition. I have benefited in many ways from our conversations during which they told of their experiences of caring, and trust that their inherent reflective attitudes serve them well in their future lives.

Finally, this thesis commemorates the life of my mother. The ultimate legacy of the experience of caring for her for the last few years of her life is that I have, through this study which was initiated in that experience, reached an understanding of the value of a phenomenological approach to life.

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

T. S. Eliot: Little Gidding