



Caregiving Lessons from the Oscar Winning Film, Amour

By Mary Otte

If you have not yet seen the French film, *Amour*, you should. This is a suggestion that I've made to several friends, especially those who do not work in the field of aging, yet live life in an aging body like the rest of us. The usual response as to why they haven't seen the movie goes along these lines, "It looks depressing," "Why would I want to watch what I'm in for all too soon anyway?" "Who wants to watch people aging/dying? It's depressing."

Depression seeming to be a top concern, at least in my circle of friends, I'd like to address this apprehensive and misguided view, along with the reasons why one should drop fearful preconceived notions and give this film the heartfelt watch both it and its viewers deserve.

According to a 2011 Gallup Poll, more than one in six Americans, most of whom already have demanding jobs, will be a caregiver for a family member, significant other or friend at some point in their lives. Previous Gallup polls also show that caregivers have worse emotional and physical health than non-caregivers.

One of the biggest reasons that caregiving is such a stressor—aside from the obvious grief that someone close has begun to falter—is that it so often comes as a surprise, as was the case in *Amour*. When our lives and those of our loved ones are still going along fine, with a little forgetfulness here and an insignificant slip or fall there, it's much easier to turn a blind eye to future days barreling down each of our lives' pathways. Having conversations with aging parents, and even us, regarding long term care plans are awkward, period. Especially so "before the fact." But an early conversation paves the way to an easier transition, and that's a big deal for mental health. Even with plans in place, transitions of this nature will inevitably come with snags and jolting problems. The easier the transition, the lesser the depression and feelings of being overwhelmed or even hopeless.

Having a care plan in place is crucial for the holistic wellbeing of you, your parents, your children and/or your partner.

Reminded of a quote I saw in the social media universe recently, "Most of the problems in life come because of two reasons: First, we act without thinking. Second, we keep thinking without acting," I implore you to recognize its relevance to end of life planning and to take action steps toward thoughtful proactiveness.

Amour's protagonist, Georges, couldn't have been less prepared. Though he and his wife Anne were in their early 80's, they still had their health, cultural drive, talents and the respect and admiration of those with whom they were close. Shock and a desire to deny were aptly

displayed on Georges' face. (The brilliant acting is another great reason to watch!) Their daughter seemed even less prepared, caught in the bubble of her own full and complicated life, she could not wrap her mind around the saddening developments, just like the majority of us in boomer, gen x, gen y and millennial generations will find or have found ourselves. Her parents were doing just fine, until they weren't, and she had no tools to deal with one of life's most significant game changers: the onset of detrimental aging issues in someone we hold dear.

Amour does not glaze over any part of Anne, the beautiful golden ager of the film's focus, and her journey, nor that of Georges'. To me, this is not depressing, but refreshing. True, Amour is difficult to watch at times and I found myself looking away during a smattering of uncomfortable scenes, but found these reactions to be affirmations of directorial skill and actors' art, not disturbances that called to question, "Why did I come to see this again?" The film is heavy, I did get a glass of wine after and also found myself in reflection for the rest of the evening, but aside from films we go to for sheer pleasant escape, isn't contemplative reflection a positive byproduct of the best art has to offer?

Without trying to convince you to watch Amour any longer, following is some advice on how to break the chains of the far more depressing Gallup polls in order to not let chance caregiving impact your health in a negative way: physically, mentally, spiritually, holistically.

Start talking about it now, don't wait for a crisis. Having to figure out if Mom or Dad can stay at home and who is in the best position to care for them on the fly means doing quite a bit without being able to think it through. A debilitating stroke, heart attack, cancer diagnosis or damaging fall takes all of the important spotlights of your life, from soccer carpools to career demands, and shines them on the crisis at hand. This is not a juggling act you want to perform, and on top of it you'll feel like all eyes are on you at that glaring spotlight, wondering which ball will drop first. Now that's depressing—and greatly avoidable.

Get all family members on board. In Amour, Georges was isolated in his struggle, whether by conscious or subconscious choice. The daughter felt left out and out of control, her pleas for a second opinion unheeded. Anne herself wasn't able to truly express her wish to not be in a hospital until after having been in the hospital. It's not to say that preparedness makes these situations totally easy, but a family rallied together is in a much better position to enjoy the time they have left together, rather than arguing about it and feeling as if positive options don't exist. Need help? The website PREPARE is easy to navigate, understandable and assists greatly in end of life planning.

Carefully hire aides as needed. Though Georges was able to hire two caregivers, when one turned out to be less than sensitive and more than rude, he fired, but didn't replace, her. Being overwhelmed and preoccupied can easily get us in the loop of thinking without doing. Avoid this pitfall by looking into local agencies now. Schedule appointments to meet formal caregivers at organizations nearby and feel out the vibe between workers and employers. Visiting Angels is one of many reputable resources for in home care assistance.

Be ready to safeguard the home, and have safety supplies bookmarked on your computer if not yet ready to make purchases. Research items like safety and assist rails—which may have saved Amour's Anne from a harrowing fall trying to get from bed to wheelchair, bathroom and shower grab bars, toilet seat risers, stairway rails or lifts—and be on top of smaller things like reach extenders and bedside caddies. Check for loose carpeting, shin height obstructions, uneven stairs and slippery outdoor surfaces. Be sure that fire alarms and carbon monoxide detectors are functional and have replacement batteries nearby. Night lights and flashlights, stocked medications, incontinence supplies, drinking water, fresh food and nonperishable nutritional should all be on your checklist.

Have medical records and lists of medications at the ready. It's easy to think, "Well, the doctor has all that information if we need it," but the hard truth is that a crisis can happen anywhere and at any time. Your parents' primary care physician may be out of the office, on vacation or your parents themselves may be on vacation. There are many great digital options these days for keeping this type of crucial documentation on hand at all times.

Prepare for feeling stresses. Get mental health counseling before you reach a crisis. If there are more family members nearby, see if a group session is feasible. Just remember, this is an ongoing process, not a "did it, done, good" task. Feeling stress is natural in these types of extreme emotional times and allowing yourself to experience stress and frustration without self-deprecation is a must. Whatever it takes: scream at the top of your lungs in the car—radio blaring, cry into a pillow, breathe and meditate, talk to a spiritual leader, just be sure to let yourself experience the feelings and then let them go. There will always be more to feel—and especially more to be done.

Kick fear to the curb. There are many things in life we cannot control. Luckily, no matter how it feels, fear can only control us if we let it, and having Captain Fear at the helm is a Titanic mistake. Take action today to enhance the measures that are within your means and abilities. Smile as much as possible, for everyone's sake. Remember that the lessons learned will likely be applicable to your own life someday, but don't let that get you down! The human experience isn't always easy, but it is unique to being human, and a wonder to behold.

To read more about the movie itself, Parentgiving.com reviewed Amour for CaregivingCafe.com, which can be found [here](#), as well as for FamilyScholars.org, [here](#), prior to its Oscar win.