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Natalie V. Youngquist

Cedarville University, nyoungquist@cedarville.edu

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Natalie Youngquist
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Dr. Deardorff
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Introduction

The concept of young caregiving is hardly well known, either by the general public or the healthcare community. It is an uncomfortable notion, the idea that children shoulder the responsibility for their family's wellbeing. A generic definition of young caregivers is "individuals under the age of 18 whose lives are affected by the care needs of another person, who may have any long-term illness or indeed disability" (Gray 96) whose roles may include, but are not limited to, "help[ing] with personal needs, meals, household chores, shopping, paperwork, medication, getting around, or visiting regularly" (Hunt 3).

Instead of depending on the parent to provide emotional and physical support, the child, for one reason or another, is the provider. The film *Winter's Bone*, directed by Debra Granik, provides a short, detailed, and intense look into the life of seventeen-year-old Ree Dolly. She is a young caregiver who looks after her younger siblings and mentally ill mother while trying to protect her absent father from the authorities.

Ree as a Young Caregiver

Though Ree exhibits an extraordinary amount of forethought and responsibility as she leads her family, these characteristics are directly influenced by her birth order, not just her situation. A birth order study done by Joan Pulakos shows that oldest children are more responsible than middle or youngest children, and oldest female children are almost twice as responsible as oldest male children (Pulakos 323). However, it also shows that Ree's situation is not so unusual, given that "the large percentage of people seen in the Responsible role indicates that one or more children in the family are very frequently called upon to play this role" (Pulakos 325). Though this study was conducted over thirty years ago, it shows that the stereotypes for

oldest children have some grounds in fact. Thus, Ree's sense of responsibility toward her family is not merely caused by the extenuating circumstances; it is also encouraged as the result of her birth order.

Because oldest children are usually more responsible than other children, they are also more cognizant of their surroundings, particularly other people. They have learned to be aware of the needs of those around them, a practice influenced by their feelings of responsibility toward others. Ree's awareness of others is particularly evident in her treatment of her mother, the person who is supposed to be caring for her. Her mother has an unnamed mental illness. However, her behavior is similar to someone with catatonia. Catatonia was characterized as a subset of manic-depression by Swiss neuropathologist Adolf Meyer in 1910, after he observed hospital clinic patients.

There are two forms of catatonia, retarded and excited, and Ree's mother exhibits symptoms of the retarded form. Retarded forms are marked by "posturing, rigidity, repetitive action, mutism, and a lack of response to stimulation" (Fink 441). The last two characteristics are particularly evident, as Ree's mother says less than ten words the entire film and has to be coaxed to move anywhere, even from the house to the yard. Otherwise, she remains sitting wherever she was left, usually in a chair in the main room. Ree leads her mother from place to place, and gently washes her hair, an activity her mother clearly enjoys.

Because her mother's behavior is so affected by her mental illness, Ree's home situation is unlike the stereotypical home life. Her mother is almost entirely uninvolved. She performs none of the tasks a normal mother or housewife would do, like feeding her children or seeing them off to school. Ree's father, Jessup, is often absent, usually because he is cooking meth, but this time he seems to be hiding from the authorities. In addition to Ree, there are two other children

in the family, Sonny, age twelve, and Ashlee Dawn, age six. Thus, even though she is just seventeen, Ree is the only person within the immediate household who is capable of trying to hold the family together.

In order to take on familial responsibility, though, Ree has to give up elements of a typical adolescent life. Adolescent caregivers are usually not prepared to take on a main caregiving role. Often, they do so because they are the most available, most capable person, which is what happens in Ree's case. However, once they have taken on this new role, they rarely have the resources to continue developing as normal adolescents. They simply do not have enough time to do both. Caregivers have to spend "a lot of time" fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities, and they may sacrifice classroom or homework time for their families' well being (Siskowski 66).

Ree has already had to choose between her family and school before the film begins, as indicated when she drops her siblings off at school but does not go to class herself. The film does not explain when she had to make this decision but shows the mundane, necessary household responsibilities that fill her former school time. It is clear that she dropped out of school to compensate for her mother, whose only visible contribution to the family is to fold laundry, when it is on the table beside her, where it is easily accessible and requiring minimal thought.

Sometimes dropping out of school can have lasting repercussions on a girl's life. Some problems "include early, unplanned pregnancy, an unsatisfactory marriage, and inadequate parenting of offspring" (Barnett 152). However, "Girls were also noted to be more assertive and independent. It was noted that they grew up in families with 4 or fewer children where there was a gap of 2 or more years between the index children and the next sibling" (150). Though the film does not show how Ree adjusts as an adult, her behavior throughout the film shows that she is

indeed assertive and independent, and by calling her siblings her “children,” in a deleted clip from the film, Ree shows that she has chosen to avoid a relationship with a man because she has enough to worry about as it is (*Winter’s Bone*).

Taking on parental responsibilities forces Ree to become self-reliant, and interviews with children suggest this is usually what happens to young caregivers. If the mother sleeps late on the weekend, for example, her ten-year-old daughter learns to amuse herself (Venkataraman 101). While this is not as extreme an example as Ree’s, it indicates that children whose parents have mental illnesses begin to control the smaller details of their lives at a young age and this can lead to greater responsibility as they grow older. “Research has shown that young [caregivers] usually undertake a wide range of responsibilities within the home, including domestic tasks, personal and intimate care, emotional support, general care and childcare,” responsibilities carried by the parents of a typical family (Warren 136). Thus, the child is, by practical definition, almost a parent.

Within the parameters of normal life, before the sheriff comes and tells Ree about the bond on the house, Ree and her family seem to be surviving, while she is in charge, though clearly struggling to do so. The family is shown eating just potatoes for breakfast, a meal Ree cooks after giving her sister stale food to feed the dog, all they can afford to give him. Later, a neighbor offers the family wood if they cut it themselves, and Ree has to take their horse to the neighbor’s because they cannot afford to feed her. Food and warmth are Acts of Daily Living (ADLs) and “child caregivers who help with ADLs see themselves as having more responsibility than do caregivers who do not help with ADLs” (Hunt 31).

Ree’s sense of responsibility influences her ability to adapt to her situation and become the leader of the family, and this is common for children whose mothers have mental illnesses. A

few years ago, the *Journal of Family Social Work* released a study done by Meenakshi Venkataraman on children's perspectives of having mothers' with mental illnesses. Though the mothers had bipolar disorder, not catatonia, the adaption process and cognitive understanding of the children are applicable in situations where mothers have other mood-affecting mental illnesses. In this study, four children from three families, between the ages of ten and fifteen, were interviewed about their experiences. Though these children are younger than Ree, the experiences and adaptations they faced were probably similar to what Ree faced at the same age.

The main and important difference between the study participants and Ree is that the mothers in the study were high functioning and Ree's mother is not. However, the interview with the oldest participating child gives some insight into the possible experiences that Ree faced when her mother began to draw inward. The oldest participant found the role reversal between herself and her mother difficult. Forced to give up her own plans in order to stay at home while her mother slept, the participant explained, "It doesn't really bother me, [it] just [feels] like I have lot of responsibilities sometimes" (Venkataraman 101). The participant's feelings are probably similar to Ree's own perception in her situation. While she never complains or tries to avoid responsibility, caring for her mother, siblings, and hunting down her father requires intricate balance that Ree has down well now, but probably took some practice to achieve.

Because her mother is mentally absent and her father is physically absent, Ree does not have any adult figure in her life that she can rely on for help. Children with parents who are mentally ill often experience unpredictability, and this causes them to create order in an area of life they feel they can control. Often, "a sense of control over the environment is seen as important to an individual's feelings of competence and well-being" (Harstone 16). Harstone suggests that children who are isolated from the world and trapped within the family and home

can feel a lack of control. It is important to note, though, that the way a child interprets an event is far more important than the event itself (16). In Ree's case, she seems to have adapted and created her sense of control through her home situation, thereby giving herself stability instead of the usual instability.

Because young caregiving places so much responsibility on minors, young caregivers like Ree are often highly distrustful of authority, regardless of its form. They see authority as the looming figure that can destroy whatever semblance of family they have left. This belief is only compounded by the way health care professionals treat young caregivers. Doctors do not know how to handle young caregivers, and often feel compelled to report them to child services, feeling inadequate and unable to help them cope with their situations (Gray 101).

Knowing this is the usual response to the discovery of a young caregiver, young caregivers do not seek outside help of any kind for fear of destroying the family unit. Young caregivers learn to adapt to whatever support systems they have but do not actively seek them out. In Ree's case, the neighbors occasionally drop by with food or advice, but she does not completely trust them because they often have underlying motives, such as finding out how much Ree knows about the meth cooking in the area.

Though young caregivers may be the functioning parents of the household, it is also important that they continue to develop a relationship with their ill parents. They do not develop the same kind of trust that most children have in their parents; they have to adjust their expectations based on the parents' capabilities. In one study, children rated their mentally ill mothers highly as parents and the researchers suggested that it could be "because their mothers do have some positive characteristics, or their relationship with their mothers is important to them regardless of their mother's parenting practices" (Venkataraman 104). It was also noted,

though, that “it might also be that the children know no other ways of parenting and, to them, these parenting behaviors are normal” (104). Nevertheless, having a relationship with the mother is important to a young caregiver.

Ree’s mother provides no support for her daughter. She is detached and stoic, and this forces Ree to provide emotional support to the family, in addition to providing for the basic necessities. “Emotional support, in this context, is defined as a diverse range of emotional caring tasks that are undertaken in response to a careful observation of the emotional state of the person with care needs, to help in building and sustaining their emotional wellbeing and, where necessary, providing supervision” (Warren 141). Her mother is unable to carry any emotional weight because she was so overwhelmed by an undisclosed incident before the beginning of the film that she emotionally detached and has remained so ever since. Her detachment is particularly obvious when Ree tearfully begs for advice on whether to sell the timber acres or not and her mother stares straight ahead, no movement of her body indicating that she even noticed her daughter’s plea.

In addition to the basic life necessities that Ree is working to provide, without the vital support of her mother, she is also faced with a larger problem. The family is about to be forced off their land because Jessup put it up for bond but has not shown for his court date. Ree has to navigate the boundaries between clans, a young girl in a male-dominated society, as she tries to find out where her father is from people who do not want to tell her. How does she manage to keep the family together through all these obstacles? What does she do to improve the situation?

In the film, Ree develops her relationships with her friend Gail and her uncle Teardrop, and these two eventually provide support at times when Ree is helpless to support herself or her family. Ree does not realize the significance of these relationships until almost halfway through

the film when she is beaten up by the opposing clan and prevented from returning to her family. Teardrop is the only person who is able to get her out of this situation, and he does, bringing her home to Gail, who nurses Ree and looks after the children while she is resting. Up until this point, Ree has tried to solve the family's imminent land loss by herself, after unsuccessfully trying to convince Teardrop to help her. She needs Teardrop, and her situation could have been much easier for her if she had been able to enlist the help of her uncle earlier. Through extensive research, Dr. Gordon Grant observed that young caregivers benefit from external relationships with adults and peers, and these benefits could be further utilized if the young caregivers realized how much they need these relationships and learned to pursue them, as exemplified through Ree's relationships in *Winter's Bone*.

Independent Survival

In order to understand how it would have benefited Ree to develop a relationship with Teardrop earlier, it is important to see her position when she tries to function as the head of her family without regularly incorporating outside help. Throughout the film, Ree is shown performing the tasks of her young caregiver role, like chopping wood and walking her siblings to school. At some point, Ree transitioned from being a typical adolescent to being a young caregiver. It may have come gradually. It may have hit her all at once. The film does not explain. It depends on the regression process that her mother experienced, whether she slowly receded into her mind over a period of months or years, or if it happened in a shorter span of time.

Ree's situation was also affected by how involved and consistent the father was during that time. It is suggested, though, that her father is as inconsistent as her mother in that he is physically absent. Ree does not suspect that he is dead until several days into her search for him,

indicating that he is often gone and his whereabouts are usually unknown. He is the one who puts the house up for bond and has to appear in court or the family will lose the land. This is particularly worrying for Ree because she is the one who is currently keeping the family together.

After Ree gets the news about the bond on the house, she tries to enlist the help of her uncle, Teardrop. He is the first person she goes to, but he threatens her, ordering her to stop looking for her father because of the dangers it would bring on her and the family as a whole. To ease his conscience after turning his niece away, Teardrop gives Ree money, which is virtually useless when compared to Ree's desperate need to keep the land to sustain the family. When Teardrop comes by a few days later and advises Ree to sell the land, Ree thinks he is more interested in himself than the family and therefore does not completely trust him. When he offers her powdered meth, she leans back, refusing to touch it. He snorts it himself, but her denial showcases her stamina and strength and also the wisdom her position as young caregiver has given her. It is very likely she has seen the damage this addiction can cause, not to mention the cost involved, and she is avoiding it, even though most of the adults around her indulge.

Despite her uncle's advice to leave the situation alone, Ree realizes she does not have this luxury. She is only able to support her family because they have land; she can scrounge up food and wood, but not a house. Unwilling to beg for help, a mentality that appears when she commands Sonny, "Never ask for what oughta be offered" (*Winter's Bone*), Ree determines to find her father without her uncle's assistance.

Teardrop's behavior and Ree's mentality are factors that can lead to young caregiving isolation. In a study comprised of fourteen young caregivers, the results showed that "among the participants of this study, it was not uncommon for the young [caregivers] to discuss feeling unsupported and therefore isolated both within their immediate family and from outside of the

family support. This lack of support may reinforce in the young [caregivers'] minds that they are expected to provide care without help" (Chalmers 40). Thus, Ree's behavior may be grounded in her belief that it is her responsibility to protect her family, especially given Teardrop's response to her request for help.

Ree's focus on keeping the family together shows that young caregivers are extremely aware of their surroundings. They have taken on some of the responsibilities of a parent or adult caregiver, and this gives them a new perspective. Instead of seeing the world exclusively from their own perspectives, they have trained themselves to see how others will be affected as well. Some young caregivers become so aware of others that they feel that they must control the environment to protect them, and this sense of control is "seen as important to an individual's feelings of competence and well-being" (Kyczynski qtd Harstone 16).

Other times, young caregivers feel a sense of shame in their role because it separates them from their peers. At an age when uniformity is key, being a young caregiver can be difficult for an adolescent to handle and thus they prefer to hide their roles, preventing people outside the home from helping them. "There are many reasons for this secrecy, which have been discussed by previous researchers: Frank (1995) comments on the embarrassment some young [caregivers] feel about their caring responsibilities, and the fear that their parent may be perceived as inadequate" (Thomas 42). Ree seems to have accepted her role as young caregiver and is more focused on how other people respond to her position rather than her personal response to it. She needs the men around her who know where her father is to listen to her and tell her what has happened to him. She does not have time to be embarrassed that she has taken on a parental role. She needs to get the land back.

Though Ree interacts with people outside the home, young caregivers often isolate themselves from the rest of the world, whether by their choice or not. If they choose isolation, it is usually because they realize the precarious hold they have on the family, and do not wish to bring in any outsiders who might report the family to authorities, leading to the removal of the children. By striving to keep up a good front, young caregivers are trying to protect their family unit, making it very difficult for them to trust outsiders' interests in the family. Other times, they feel forced into isolation because of the impact they have on the family and dedication they have to put forth to keep the family going; "without their contributions, it would be likely that their families would not be able to function" (Charles 27).

Though it may be a conscious decision to isolate themselves, young caregivers still suffer the effects of this sacrifice because they lose the identity being an average adolescent would give to them. In one study,

"The participants struggled to explain why they had caring roles. They stated regularly that they had 'no choice' in taking up their current caring role. Their descriptions indicated that this lack of choice creates ambivalent and equivocal feelings that are difficult to reconcile. There was a marked contrast between their simple and direct explanatory models of practical caring and the predominant features and motivations of caring they described.

Claire's account of her situation suggested that despite having a clear understanding of the meaning of the practical tasks of caring, comparing it to 'shifts' of a job, she found it difficult to explain why she was a [caregiver]. Claire's statement that 'I haven't got a choice really' was not a simple account of obligation, but a complex mix of motivations that she failed consistently to resolve in attempt to make sense of her caring role" (Bolas, 835).

Being unsure of who they are or why they have so much responsibility can put added stress on the young caregiver, as they are trying to care for the family while understanding the role they have within it.

Ree develops her understanding of her role in the family throughout the film. She wants to join the army, indicated by her longing looks toward the high school students drilling in the gym and when Victoria, her uncle's partner, asking if she still planned on joining up. Though she

puts her family before herself by caring for them instead of trying to join, there is a point in the film where it seems that Ree will be able to join the army and provide for her family at the same time. The army is giving \$40,000 to new recruits, and this money would cover the bond fee on the house and allow the family to keep the land. Ree plans on taking Sonny and Ashlee Dawn with her to training, but the recruiter gently but firmly tells her that money is not a good reason to join up and that her siblings could not join her during basic training or combat duty, making it impossible for her to be part of the army. Ree accepts this decision, but does not initially seem resigned to it.

Even as Ree is developing her understanding of her role as a young caregiver, she still has to provide basic necessities for her family, like feeding them, but is also faced with the enormous and pressing task of finding her father. She has no time for herself. Young caregivers are often forced to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of the family unit. Because they are usually under the age of eighteen, young caregivers do not have the experience or preparation for the role that they take on for the family. They may find themselves overwhelmed emotionally or even physically. As young caregivers, adolescents often find it difficult to create lives for themselves, apart from their families. In “later adolescence (ages 15 to 17), teens emotionally separate further from family and are better able to understand the implications of illness” (Siskowski 71). At this age, they begin to understand the lasting ramifications caregiving could have on their lives.

Unlike most young caregivers, Ree not does emotionally distance herself or visibly release stress throughout the film. Her shoulders sag and she does look defeated for a second when she states that her father is dead, but she straightens up and continues her search for his body, a token that will prove his demise to the authorities and allow the family to keep the land.

Ree may not visibly react because she has learned to hide her feelings or because she does not perceive the situation as stressful, and perception is more important, in this case, than reality. Some young caregivers may feel more stressed in a situation that other young caregivers would see as less stressful. Also, young caregivers who perform Acts of Daily Living (ADL) “tend to feel it is no use letting their feelings show more than do non-ADL caregivers (23% vs. 12% feel this way *a lot*) and to feel that they cannot depend on anyone else (49% vs. 31% at least *sometimes*)” (Hunt 7). As Ree is the main provider for the family, it is highly probably that she learned to control her emotions through dealing with the difficulties associated with ADLs.

Even though young caregivers have built up an internal strength, sometimes the pressure of caregiving can overwhelm them. Because Ree has not built a support group for herself, she has to release tension while still maintaining her family role. “Most young [caregivers] report a great deal of stress in their lives as a result of the adult responsibilities they have to take on in their caregiving roles (Butler & Astbury, 2005). This stress can be the result of worrying whether they have the skill and competency to run a household or worrying about the health of the people in their care (Aldridge & Becker, 1993; Armstrong, 2002; NobleCarr, 2002)” (Charles 27). Young caregivers are then forced to find an acceptable way of releasing their pent-up emotions. Helen Bolas interviewed young caregivers on how they dealt with stress, and some of them used physical aggression to relax. One young man “admitted that he can be so overwhelmed and frustrated with his caring role that he becomes ‘really angry’ and says that he can ‘fly off the handle and start kicking things . . . stuff like that’ and that he has ‘killed a settee’” (Bolas 836).

Despite the emotional hardships that young caregivers face, they stay to protect the family. For Ree, this means that in addition to fighting through various inhibitors to get the land back for her family, she also has to spend time with her younger siblings. She is the only person

who is consistently available to teach them basic life skills, like showing them how to make stew and cook potatoes on the stove. These skills are especially useful in this particular stage of life, when Ree is worrying about getting the land back and is less reliable than usual. When she is pulled out of the house by a neighbor who wants to show her a burned up meth lab, Ree commands her siblings to finish cooking dinner and then turn the stove off. While the film never shows if they obeyed her or not, the house does not burn down and the children do not die of gas poisoning, suggesting they completed her orders.

Ree also teaches her siblings how to protect themselves. As the tension between Ree and the opposing clan builds, Ree teaches both Sonny and Ashlee Dawn to shoot a rifle, setting up worn milk cartons and tin cans on a picnic bench as targets, and tells them to never point it at each other. When she is momentarily distracted talking to Gail, she leaves the children and the rifle but sternly orders them not to touch it. After she leaves, the children amuse themselves in the dirt, giving no thought to the rifle their older sister commanded them to ignore. Their behavior indicates how much control she has over them, and also how much they trust her.

Ree's constant care of her siblings emphasizes her care for her family. She is aware of her surroundings and the ramifications of the situation, and how these could negatively affect her family. She provides basic care for them, like teaching them how to protect themselves, but also specialty care, such as keeping the land. Ree's sense of responsibility feeds her tenacity as she tries to find her father. She is the only one in her immediate family who can do it.

Grounds for Mistrust

Young caregivers tend to struggle alone because they have a grounded mistrust for authority figures. Within the healthcare profession, young caregivers were often "ignored and

ostracised [sic] by professionals because they are viewed as too young to be involved with services, even though there is an increasing number of young [caregivers] providing round-the-clock care who require professional support” (Gray 98). Though healthcare professionals had deemed them too young, this does not stop adolescents from functioning as young caregivers. The lack of communication between the professionals and caregivers can be a disadvantage for all three parties involved, professionals, patients, and young caregivers. The professionals do not convey their treatment plans to the people who are going to carry them out, the young caregivers, and thus the patient suffers. The young caregivers are left to follow the treatment as best they can, given the resources and knowledge they possess, while the professionals are left to wonder why their orders are not being followed carefully.

Because of this ostracization, “young [caregivers] feel marginalised [sic] by society and by professionals, and this is somewhat compounded by the propensity of services and professionals to instigate child protection responses instead of working closely with young [caregivers] in partnership, to give young [caregivers] more autonomy, information on coping strategies, a say in the services that are provided for them and a voice (Aldridge & Becker, 2003; LeFrancois, 2007)” (Gray 101). Thus, young caregivers not only feel ignored by health care professionals but also threatened, because the professionals’ first reactions are to bring in child protection services, who could possibly separate the family.

While Ree does not interact with health care professionals, she does interact with people in authority who reinforce her tendencies toward isolation, illustrating why young caregivers draw inward so often. The sheriff who comes to tell the family about the bond on the house asks to see Ree’s mother. Ree obeys because he persistently asks for her, allowing him to see how unresponsive she is before saying, “You’d better just tell me” (*Winter’s Bone*). After hearing the

predicament, Ree sets her teeth and says, “I’ll find ‘im” (*Winter’s Bone*). The sheriff counters, “Girl, I been lookin’” and Ree repeats more firmly, “I said I’ll find ‘im” (*Winter’s Bone*). In this exchange, the sheriff is underestimating her skill and does not acknowledge her as the leader of the house. Situations similar to this one, where authority figures do not see the skill and responsibility that a young caregiver has taken on, have influenced the distrust and frustration young caregivers have for authority.

Fear of authority is another emotion young caregivers experience, and this also leads to lack of trust. In Ree’s situation, the neighbors occasionally drop by with much-needed food for the family, but their offerings serve to veil their true motives for visiting. When neighbor Sonya brings the family deer meat and vegetables, after the sheriff explain to Ree about the bond, Sonya asks why the sheriff was here and what Ree had said to him, leaving only she is satisfied that Ree did not disclose information on the area’s illegal activities. Another time, Sonya offers to take Sonny and raise him, and Ree swears at her, emphatically refusing the offer. Relinquishing her little brother to a neighbor would be a signal to herself and those around her that she cannot hold the family together, which is what she has strenuously fought to sustain. Such examples of the uncertainty of external offers often make young caregivers wary.

Minimal Support

Ree does have a friend, Gail, who is about her age, but Ree does not fully utilize Gail’s support at the beginning of the film, relying on her presence rather than using it practically. However, just having the relationship is important because young people need to develop relationships with their peers in order to develop social interaction skills and have the opportunity “[to extend] themselves beyond their family to build a life of their own” (Charles

27). If a young caregiver understands the difference between her experience and the experience of her peers and wants what her peers has, she may become frustrated and angry, and this can lead the young caregiver to further isolate herself. “This vicious circle of isolation leading to further separation is often made even worse because of the stigma that can be associated with the illness or condition of their family member” (Tisdall qtd Charles 27).

Ree and Gail have a particularly strong bond because they are in similar situations. Young caregivers often have a difficult time relating to non-caregiving peers because their lives are so different, and it helps having a friend in a similar situation; “through association with their peers living in similar circumstances, a number of the young people commented how useful they found this in contextualizing their own circumstances, in appreciating that they were not alone or unusual” (Grant 278). They can talk about their experiences and their struggles with someone who can empathize. This is a psychological technique called coping, where a person deals with the discomfort of a situation by learning to release it in a non-harmful way. Also, young caregivers tend to be “oriented to adults. . . These children often complain that they do not ‘fit in’” (Jurkovic 57), emphasizing the novelty of this friendship.

Gail is in a type of forced situation like Ree is because she had to get married after Lloyd got her pregnant. While their situations are very different, the kind of support Ree and Gail have to provide to the other people in their house is fairly similar. Gail’s baby is completely dependent on her, just as Ree’s mother and siblings are dependent on her. Motherhood has forced Gail to develop a new set of skills, just as Ree has had to learn survival skills. When she and Ree travel to the Arkansas border, she knows to buckle the infant carseat in backwards, something that surprises Ree and Gail has to explain. Carrying responsibility allows these girls to bond. They can understand the other person’s situation because they are in a similar one.

When Ree first finds out that her father put up the land for bond, she goes straight to Gail's house. Gail takes her to the master bedroom, where girls lay on the bed with the baby and Ree tells Gail about the land. Gail repeatedly called Ree "sweet pea," the only nickname or term of endearment that Ree is given in the entire film (*Winter's Bone*). Gail reacts sympathetically but without drama. These girls do not have the time or resources to sit and bemoan their problems. Ree asks Gail if she can borrow the truck to try to track down her father, but when Gail asks her husband, he says no. Gail tries to explain why she accepted his answer and that Ree will understand if she is ever married, and Ree retorts that marriage really much change a person "because before you wouldn't take no shit from nobody" (*Winter's Bone*).

Despite this rocky introduction to Gail and Ree's relationship, the film reveals its strength when Gail eventually gets the keys from her husband and brings the truck to Ree. The girls embrace upon seeing each other, suggesting that though they did argue, they are used to having disagreements and getting over them. When Ree goes to the Arkansas border, Gail comes with her. They go at night, when Ree's siblings are home from school, protected by the numerous dogs on the property. This seems to be the safest and soonest time to take the trip. While it is possible that Gail is going to protect the truck, this seems highly unlikely as she comes into Jessup's ex-girlfriend's house with Ree. Gail stands in a corner, clutching the baby carseat, eyes roving the room. She is clearly uncomfortable in this situation, but she does not complain. Instead, she follows Ree and listens to the ex-girlfriend talk about Jessup and his questionable set of new friends. Her silent acceptance is all the support she shows until about halfway through the film.

Rendered Helpless

Young caregivers are often resilient enough that they can handle the weight of their position for a long time; it depends on the caregiver and the situation. In Ree's case, the catalyst that causes her to see her weakness and inability to support her family alone is a beating by the opposing clan's women. Already commanded to stay away by Merab, Thump Milton's woman, when Ree came to talk to Thump the first time, Ree makes the trip again after she tries to get Thump's attention at a cattle auction and he refuses to acknowledge her. Because she ignored Merab's warning, Merab and her sisters drag Ree into the barn and beat her up.

Once Ree comes to, she finds herself in a circle of Milton's people as they are trying to decide what to do with her. She suggests they kill her, an indication that she knows the clannish crime she has committed. Having already discarded that idea, the clan is still considering when the mechanical door goes up and Teardrop is standing outside. He has come to take Ree home, making it clear that he has no quarrel with the clan and is not there to avenge Jessup's death. Teardrop is able to hold this conversation because he is speaking as the authority of his clan with the men of the other clan, the kind of conversation Ree was unable to have because she is a young woman. Ree is only released when Teardrop vouches for her, "She does wrong, you put it on me" (*Winter's Bone*). By vouching for her, Teardrop has promised himself as recompense if Ree violates any rules of the opposing clan.

In this way, Teardrop saves Ree when she is incapable of saving herself. Despite her ability to adapt to situations, to scrap by alone, there are situations Ree is in where she needs support or she will not be able to keep going. If Teardrop has not shown up, Ree may not have been able to get away, and even if she had, she was so beat up that she would probably not have made it back to her house. In the meantime, her siblings and her mother would have to fend for

themselves. This situation, and her own helplessness within it, allows Ree to see that she needs the support of other people.

Teardrop develops Ree's trust by treating her as an equal. While taking her home, he explains that Jessup is most likely dead, killed by other meth cookers who found out that Jessup was preparing to turn them in to the officials in exchange for a plea bargain. Teardrop's eyes are misty and his voice cracks slightly, showing his vulnerability as well as his love for his brother. Ree responds by reaching over and squeezing his arm. Teardrop does not react, but the information he has shared, coupled with his emotion, shows that he trusts her enough to reveal some vulnerability, and her response shows that she is beginning to trust him more.

In contrast to Teardrop, Ree's mother is cognitively and emotionally absent. This is a great contrast to the experience that other young caregivers often have. Bryanne Barnett and Gordon Parker noted:

“A display of attachment behaviour [sic] on the part of the child evokes anxiety and distress rather than a comforting response from the parent. Distressing the parent results in guilt and fear of abandonment for the child. To achieve and maintain closeness to the parent, to avoid passivity and helplessness, the child must offer rather than solicit care; must not expect to receive help in containing and processing anxiety but, on the contrary, must give such assistance. Later on, such children may appear very self-sufficient and choose a partner who is as needy as was the parent” (147-8).

Thus, the child feels compelled to protect the parent emotionally. This behavior seems to have a large and lasting impact on young caregivers, to the point where they may choose to marry people with the same tendencies as their dependent parents. They no longer know what it is like to have a healthy relationship with another person. Because it is one of the greatest, most lasting problems of young caregiving, it is important to note that Ree does not seem to be on this negative trajectory, particularly because of her developing relationship with Teardrop.

When Teardrop deposits Ree at her home, Gail comes out and helps drag her inside. Gail is the one who cleans Ree up. The gentleness she provides is reminiscent of a mother's care, a stark contrast to Ree's own mother, who is nowhere to be seen. Gail is calm, unperturbed by Ree's injuries, wiping away the blood, having her rinse her mouth, and guiding her to bed. Gail takes frozen vegetables and places them over Ree's ribs, showing that Gail has had some experience with this kind of nursing. She takes control of the situation when Ree is unable to do so herself.

Gail listens to neighbor Connie's directions on how many pain pills to give Ree, and then Ree asks Gail to stay with her until she falls asleep. This is the first request Ree has made that is completely personal. Using the truck would ultimately benefit the whole family, but having Gail beside her would bring Ree comfort without helping or hurting the rest of the family. However, as though apologizing for this selfish request, Ree hastens to add that Gail should check on Sonny and Ashlee Dawn afterward to make sure they are doing their homework. Though it is a short scene and a quick moment, Ree's request shows a new level of closeness in her relationship with Gail, that she can make personal and almost childish requests without judgment, and also how much she needs this relationship for emotional comfort. Ree falls asleep almost instantly, likely a combination of medicine and fatigue, but the ease with which it occurs shows that she trusts Gail to look after her siblings while she is unable to do so herself.

Ree continues to use the emotional support Gail provides, even after she is out of bed. As Ree watches her siblings play outside, she confesses to Gail that she does not know what to do now that the family will have to move off the land. Ree reveals that she has protected her siblings' innocence; twelve-year-old Sonny does not know his father cooks meth unless someone outside the family told him. The innocence she has cultivated would not be protected if she had

to give her siblings up, and Ree knows this. Sonny would have to go the neighbor Sonya, and Ree would have to convince Teardrop and Victoria to take Ashlee Dawn. Ree does not vocalize the depth of suffering this would cause her, to have to give up her younger siblings, but Gail reads it in her voice and says, “I hope to god it don’t come to that, sweet pea” (*Winter’s Bone*).

Ree is voicing to Gail a young caregiver’s greatest fear: separation from the family. No matter how stressful the home situation is, young caregivers do not leave because they realize the kind of control they possess. Some young caregivers are forced into their role at such a young age that they do not remember when they were free to be children. Others, while they may remember, know that they have no control over their situation. “The possible consequences of not caring or a breakdown in their caring arrangements are perhaps greater for them than they are for adults [caregivers]. For many young [caregivers], their greatest fear is that they will be separated from their families” (Becker 24). They would rather sacrifice their freedom than sacrifice their families. Vocalizing a fear is revealing vulnerability, something a young caregiver would not do unless they felt safe to do so, because such a confession could make them seem weak, and young caregivers cannot afford to let anyone see them as weak.

Developing Support

Because Ree sees the support that Teardrop offers to her, she is willing to go with him to an undisclosed location even when his explanation, “We’re gonna stir things up” is vague and slightly unsettling (*Winter’s Bone*). Ree is Teardrop’s partner in their escapade to the bar. She serves as watchman outside in the truck while Teardrop is inside the bar. When she sees a group of three men by a convenience store, she walks into the bar, catches Teardrop’s eye, and jerks

her head toward the door, letting him know that the men he is looking for are here. Ree returns to the truck; Teardrop has the authority to talk to the men, not her.

The four men mutter together, and whatever they say makes Teardrop furious because he kicks the building with his boot, stalks back to his truck, and pulls out an axe. Ree murmurs, “Oh no,” as Teardrop marches back to the other clan’s truck, and closes her eyes as he brings it down on their windshield (*Winter’s Bone*). She has an adult awareness that comes from being a young caregiver, of having to function within an adult society, to know the negatives effects Teardrop’s reaction will bring, but she is also aware that he knows what he is doing, and therefore does not try to stop it.

After this encounter with the opposing clan, Teardrop further strengthens his bond with Ree when he pulls a rifle on the sheriff, the same sheriff who came to tell Ree’s mother that the house was put up for bond. The sheriff means to search the vehicle, suggested when he points the flashlight toward the covered back, but Teardrop refuses to obey the sheriff and get out of the truck. Instead, he shows his rifle through the side view mirror, making the sheriff’s pistol seem minuscule and useless. “Is this our time?” Teardrop threatens (*Winter’s Bone*). The sheriff knows his pistol is no match for Teardrop’s rifle, and Teardrop speeds away.

This interaction shows the Teardrop has the same feelings of mistrust toward certain authority figures that Ree has. However, because of his position, Teardrop is able to threaten the sheriff while Ree could not because of her age and also her gender. Seeing this exchange, though, helps Ree to unite more closely with her uncle and allows her to trust him more.

She shows this trust when, once they are back at Ree’s house, sitting alone in the family room, Ree confesses, “I feel so ashamed for Dad” (*Winter’s Bone*). Until this point, she has not spoken of her dad other than to acknowledge his absence, her quest to find him, and his death.

Her statement to Teardrop is based in emotion, feelings for her dad that she has not expressed before, partially because she has had no one to express them to. She understands the necessity of having power and holding on to it, as a young caregiver who has a precious grasp on the family situation, and her father abused his position as a meth cooker and paid the price. Instead of siding with the rest of the dealers, he betrayed them to the authorities and they killed him.

As she watches her uncle snort meth on her couch, she makes another candid statement, showing just how much trust she has in Teardrop, that he will not harm her because of it; “You’ve always half-scared me” (*Winter’s Bone*). “That’s ‘cause you’re smart,” Teardrop replies (*Winter’s Bone*). This is a short exchange demonstrates the mutual respect the two have gained for each other through their shared pursuit of Jessup’s remains. It also shows how these two, both the heads of their families and forced to keep up tough appearances in order to be respected by the outside world, have feelings, even if these feelings are not often expressed.

Teardrop is present when the bondsman brings Ree Jessup’s bail money. He does not interact with the bondsman, but he is present, wary and watching, leaving Ree to carry out her role as head of the family. He respects Ree as the leader of her family, but at the same time he understands that his power as a man may be needed. In this particular case, Ree is able to handle the situation alone. While he is there to see the family’s windfall, Teardrop leaves abruptly when he realizes he knows who killed his brother. He walks away without saying good-bye to Ree, but he walks with a purpose. He knows that Ree is able to support her family, under normal conditions, and that it is up to him to kill this person who has wronged the family by killing Jessup. In this way, he is continuing to provide support to Ree and her family by removing the cause of their pain, potentially preventing the murderers from returning to the family.

While Ree develops a relationship with Teardrop that allows her to heavily rely on his support, there are other relationships that are useful for temporary or specific support, but should not be relied on continuously. One of the strongest examples is Merab, the opposing clan's head female. She tries, in her own way, to protect Ree from the clan by telling her go home, but because Ree disobeys, Merab and her sisters beat her.

Ree proves her mettle by keeping her mouth shut about what they did to her, but when Merab arrives on Ree's front porch, Ree comes out with a shotgun. Merab's most recent interaction with Ree was to beat her, and Ree is determined to protect herself and the family this time. Merab, though, tells Ree that she and her sisters will take her to Jessup's body, but only if she puts down the gun. In this particular situation, Ree is forced to trust Merab because she needs proof of her father's death in order to keep the land. Also, Merab has no motivation to trick Ree because she stated that they are coming to end all the gossip that is going on against Merab's clan. Tricking Ree would not quell such rumors, and these rumors, if not silenced, could get out of hand and harm Merab's clan.

Ree has to have some kind of temporary trust in Merab because she is blindfolded and driven to a remote location, put in a canoe, and rowed to the middle of a stream. In the dead of winter, Ree is commanded to plunge her hands into the water, where she finds the decaying remains of her father. Merab starts up a chainsaw for Ree to cut off the hands. After Ree cuts off one hand, she drops the body back into the water and is so shaken by her experience that she cannot cut off the other one; Merab has to do it for her.

Though these three women are helping Ree for personal reasons, this almost makes them more trustworthy. In trying to clear their own names, it is unlikely they would make any attacks toward Ree, which would just incite more rumors against them. In this case, Ree accepts their

support, but does not appear to want to voluntarily interact with them again. When she brings the hands to the sheriff and he asks where they came from, she tells him that someone threw them on the porch. Merab and her sisters' support was dependent on Ree's silence before and after, and they made sure to cover their tracks as best they could by blindfolding her and commanding her not to tell anyone where she got the remains.

Downfalls of Misplaced Trust

Ree chooses to trust the external sources that support and help her. Young caregivers are often extremely wary of outside help because if they do not choose, or have the opportunity to choose, people who understand their situations and actually help them, they may be faced with people who believe they are helping but are really doing them a disservice. Because social workers and other authorities are so concerned with the stress of the young caregivers, they often forget that the purpose of the young caregiver's work is to keep the family together. In fact, "fear of professional mediation is prevalent among families and that is still the 'biggest factor affecting the identification of young [caregivers]' (DoH, 1996b: p.42)" (Becker 64). Other times, external sources are so focused on the parent with mental illness that they forget to evaluate the situation with regards to everyone involved, not just the patient. Worst still, sometimes those who seem like they could provide the most support are the ones who are the least helpful.

Ree experiences counter-support during her search for her father through her seemingly helpful neighbor, Blond Milton. Blond Milton drags her out of the house, without telling her where he is taking her or why she needs to come, forces her into his truck, and takes her for a drive to the shell of a burned-out house. Blond Milton explains that when this meth lab blew, Jessup died. Ree counters with, "He never blew no lab before . . . He's known for never fucking

up labs or cooking bad batches” (*Winter’s Bone*). She jumps out to look for her father’s remains, even as Blonde Milton tries to stop her, citing the amounts of toxins in the area.

Ree examines it closely, and the film focuses on the floor of the charred frame, foot tall weeds poking between the floorboards. She is silent until they return to her home, and then she lashes out, saying the place blew at least a year ago. Though Blond Milton seemed to be trying to help Ree, he was actually undermining her. Not only was he trying to trick her, he actually thought she was dense enough to see a meth lab that had blown awhile ago and believe it had just happened. His belief that he could fool her is more damaging than the act of showing her the lab. In order to function as an effective young caregiver, Ree needs to hold onto as much control as she can, and she cannot do that if the adults she has to interact with do not respect her as the head of the family.

The difficulty of finding true support is what often makes young caregivers isolate themselves: they do not know whom to trust and rely on for support until they have tested a person, and this could have disastrous results on the family if they choose wrongly. They would rather struggle alone than face the possibility of exposing their position to the wrong person and shattering the family.

Conclusion

In order to completely understand the necessity of external sources, it is important to understand Ree’s situation, to see the elements in Ree’s life that make her a young caregiver. There are resources that Ree has that other young caregivers often do not, particularly with the support of her uncle, that allow her to adapt to her position better. Seeing the positive effects of this support indicates that carefully picked external sources are helpful.

Despite the usefulness of external help, young caregivers are extremely good at blending into the background and becoming difficult to find, so much so that “it is likely that the estimate of caregiving children in the United State is conservative” (Siskowski 66). They fear the break-up of their families, and this intense fear drives them inward. They isolate themselves from the rest of society until they are no longer able to see the benefits that could be gleaned if they were more involved in the world outside their home. This forces them to rely on their own efforts, and as adolescents, this is limited and puts a strain on the normal development they should be experiencing.

They may be physically, emotionally, or mentally unable to support their mentally ill parent, but because they have cut off external resources, they either have to rise to the occasion and develop these skills, or leave the parent to survive with whatever they can provide. Ree isolates herself from her surroundings at first because she is concerned with how she will be received, but then learns that she is incapable of consistently providing for her family. She is physically incapable of rescuing herself from Merab, and as she is the source of stability for her family, her death or disappearance would have drastically affected the family.

Ree does open to external sources when she appeals to Teardrop for help and though he does not positively respond to right away, it makes him aware of her need. By exposing her need, Ree is making it easier for her uncle to help her because she has explicitly stated where she needs help. It is because of Teardrop’s intervention that Ree is able to continue functioning as the young caregiver of her family. He is the one who comes to get her and brings her back home because he has the kind of authority needed to get her out of the hands of Thump Milton’s clan. She is only able to utilize his authority because she had previously made him aware of her need.

While young caregivers would be able to utilize external sources if they exposed their needs to others, mostly because they are so good at hiding the needs themselves that others cannot see them, they need to be careful to ask the right people for help. There is some potential help who may hinder a young caregiver's position, so the young caregiver does need to choose their sources carefully. Opening to the wrong person could have detrimental affects on the family, and this is often why young caregivers prefer to press on alone and work so intensely to hide their parents' mental illness. They are afraid the wrong person will find out. The problem is, they may not be able to continue carrying the full weight of the family, and observant outsiders may begin to suspect an adolescent's role in the family and report them to authorities. If a young caregiver chooses their own help, they will hopefully be able to continue to serve their family by taking some of the pressure off themselves and cementing their position as an effective family leader in the eyes of other people.

There are certain mentalities that external sources should have to allow them to be helpful to young caregivers. The best strategy for external help is the relational perspective because it "focuses on how a parent's mental illness influences his or her relationship with their child. This view considers how a parent's illness affects the environment in which the family lives and the possible implications for children and the family as a whole (Byrne, 2003)" (Harstone 16). Unfortunately, because most mental illness or child protection services focus only on the client, the young caregiver feels that it would do more detriment to the family as a whole to bring in any of these particular sources.

Despite the stress of young caregiving, there are positive outcomes from the position, but these are largely determined by whether or not the young caregiver has external support. "One of the most significant determinants of a positive outcome appears to be whether the young person

has someone to turn to for support and guidance (Tatum & Tucker, 1998). The more young [caregivers] can activate their own internal strengths and coping skills, the more they are to be able to experience positive outcomes from their experience. Their ability to do so is increased when they have someone in their lives who acknowledges their circumstances and attempts to support them in their struggles” (Charles 28). Gail is Ree’s peer support, providing emotional comfort. Teardrop also provides support for Ree, and the importance of their relationship is compounded because neither of her parents can support her. Her mother is mentally ill and her father is gone. Teardrop is the only semi-consistent adult support available to her, and he understands the balance of support and independence that Ree needs.

After the family gets the bond money and Teardrop leaves to find Jessup’s killer, Ree is sitting with her siblings on the porch when Sonny asks if she is going to join the army now that the family has enough money to keep the land. Ree replies, “I’d be lost without the weight of you two on my back” (*Winter’s Bone*). The film ends with a shot of Ree, Sonny, and Ashlee Dawn sitting together on the porch steps. Ree’s explanation and the final shot indicate she has accepted her position as a young caregiver and parental figure for her siblings, and that she understands this role cannot include a position in the army. When given the proper support from external sources, Ree is able to effectively function as a young caregiver and enjoy the benefits the closeness can afford her with her siblings. These benefits would develop sooner if a young caregiver was able to find supportive external help and enlist it, rather than wait for help to find them. If they wait for help to find them, this help could be supportive or counter-supportive, thereby leaving the fate of the family in another person’s hands. External support would help young caregivers keep the family together and also allow them to protect themselves against the emotional and physical problems that could arise if they try to lead the family alone.

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