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Letting Go of Entrenched Family Roles

Caregiving for aging parents can help us adapt our roles from childhood —by Francine Russo

The permutations of our family roles are many and multilayered. You may have been the child appointed to raise the family banner high—because you were smart or good-looking or great at sports—and so you got out of doing things the others got stuck with. Or maybe that was your brother. Perhaps you were the steady, responsible one that everyone could rely on. Or the hapless little kid who always needed rescuing.

The assignment of these roles can be arbitrary: which kid was born first or reminds Mom of her sister (whom she either liked or resented), or who is most like Dad (and how Mom feels about Dad), and on and on. Whatever their origins, they tend to stick. And whenever the family gets together, you all slip automatically into your old slots. It's the most natural thing in the world.

Changing Roles as Parents Age

Nowhere is this truer than in the long-running family drama that revolves around aging parents.

Family roles that may have worked when kids were kids and parents were parents are not likely to function well in this new dynamic. Families work as a unit, with each person's role complementing and supporting the other. After decades apart, however, everyone is changed. If Mom was the decision-maker, for example, she may be too frail or have dementia. If Dad was the peacemaker, maybe he's gone. So families need to adapt.

But these roles are so deeply ingrained that examining and adjusting them can be daunting. When challenged, many people tend to get defensive and tend to cling—usually unconsciously—more tightly. But working toward adapting these reflexive behaviors even a little can yield a big payoff



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Entrenched Family . . . continued from page 1

in personal growth and family dynamics.

The Challenge of Shifting Family Dynamics

Here are two contrasting examples, culled from years of interviewing families for my book, *They're Your Parents, Too! How Siblings Can Survive Their Parents' Aging Without Driving Each Other Crazy*. (Names have been changed.)

At 64, Rhoda held fiercely to her family position. The eldest child, she became a "little mother" to her siblings starting when she was barely five, ultimately taking care of seven others.

As the family kept expanding, Rhoda's "little-mother" role grew in stature and responsibility, with her brood of siblings looking up to her and obeying her. Like a lot of children thrust into this leadership role, she learned to suppress her own needs and get her satisfaction and sense of worth from taking care of others. And, whether or not she realized it, she also deeply resented that no one was taking care of her.

Forty years later, when Rhoda's widowed mother began to show signs of dementia, she automatically took charge. But over time, several of her younger siblings noticed something disturbing. Rhoda was exercising a tyrannical control over their mother's daily routines that bordered on abusive. After these now grown-up sisters and brothers conferred, they reluctantly allowed themselves to see flaws in the big sister that they still looked up to. They realized that she was acting out her old resentments of no one taking care of her under the guise of being a super-efficient manager.

Working together, and trying to spare Rhoda's feelings as best they could, they shifted arrangements for their mother's care to make it more of a group effort. Unable to see why she should not take charge as always, Rhoda felt dethroned and became bitter. She bowed out of day-to-day decisions and never fully forgave her siblings. Today, seven years later, she still harbors deep resentment.

Letting Go, Stepping Up

In a family of four girls and two boys, Lauren was one of two older sisters. The girls, especially the eldest, had always ruled in their family. The younger boys were seen as less competent, and they showed little inclination to lead.

For years it had been assumed that Lauren, a nurse living in Maryland, would eventually take care of their widowed dad in upstate New York. She lived closer to him than her sisters and had medical expertise. And she'd always been looked up to by her siblings as one of the "ruling sisters."

But when her father needed care, two unexpected things occurred. First, Lauren had to deal with some health issues in her own immediate family and had no time to take care of her father. Then her youngest brother, a blue-collar worker still living in their hometown, began to step up—for the first time in his life. Lauren was taken aback. Everything in her fought to reclaim her position. But when she came to see that her "little" brother, now in his 50s, was both well intentioned and capable of helping out with their father, she realized it was time to let go of being the leader.

It wasn't easy for her to do, but it felt right for her and her siblings. Lauren took on a secondary role, advising and helping when needed. Over time, she and her brother grew closer than they had ever been. As their dad's care went smoothly, she appreciated her brother more. The way Lauren and her brother were able to cooperate also produced a stronger connection among all the siblings as they each adjusted to the new order. Instead of re-enacting childhood roles, everyone was now acting as a full adult in order to best serve the interests of their father.

New times and new realities demand a loosening of those ill-fitting old roles. When done right, the results can be nothing short of liberating for all concerned.

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Love Works

By Jody Mishan

So many tender moments pass us
When I pour love out to Daddy
So unconditionally and hugely
That it slowly caused him to glow.
He is my creation.
Before I was his.

I speak the limited language he still
understands.

I learn his basic vocabulary.

He still knows the familiar.

He says one day, "I like you very
much."

On another morning he
enthusiastically asks,

"I'd like you to marry me."

I laugh and tell him I'm his daughter.

I point to the photograph of mother
in his room.

"See Daddy? That's mother,
your wife—

You were married, remember?"

He says nothing, hoping to get by

With yet another non-response

To mask his total lack of
comprehension.

I like it best when my love for him
Is not poisoned by the horrible
behaviors.

When love wins out,

When patience replaces anger.

When he pees in his pants, or all over
the rug,

I try hard to see him as a helpless child
Desperately in need of dignity,

A man whose feelings can still be hurt.

I feel so sorry for him,

Knowing the grave losses he has
suffered

An has yet to endure.

He seems so unaware of them,

Not depressed, just smiling a lot.

The caregiver and I

Smile and laugh with him frequently.

He makes us laugh.

Our laughing seems to lull him

Into a belief that everything is good.

He's in a bubble of comfort

That I pay for at a very high price:

My own freedom.

The hourly wage to the caregiver.

My independence and free time.

My regular exercising at the times
I would like.

Meditating without interruption.

Going out at night.

So much has been suspended

To accommodate his illness.

I pretend that life is somewhat normal,
When it's far from that.

But when I see him content
and relaxed

I feel suddenly deeply gratified

That I have taken all these moments
in time

And filled them with love and support
for him.

Downplaying his disabilities.

Helping him do so many things
every day;

Eating, toileting, washing his face
and hands.

Adjusting his pillows and blankets.

Moving his legs and shoulders in bed
So he doesn't lie diagonally with his
feet dangling.

All the necessary comforts

That make him feel secure.

I am sometimes filled with such
peace and joy

Knowing that what we share
Is God's Presence.

Spent

By Dorene Fanning

At the end of the day when the soft colors of light begin to
dim, I am weathered. I pull my shoes off and touch the
bottoms of my feet; they are appreciative.

My shoulders begin to sag as they sink back into the chair
cushion. Awe...

My hands are curved and kind. They serve with love so well.

My mind rejoices in the quiet comfort of the fan blowing
through the warm air.

My loved one ruffles in her sleep, her breath heavy and
labored.

Whiffs of sour scents linger in the house. The dishes are
piled high with impatience.

The night is not over.

I'll pause now knowing i deserve this loving moment of rest.

Soon the stillness evaporates, and the buzz of life summons
me, even though i'm spent.

Self-Care

By Melody Beattie

I don't precisely know what you need to do to take care of
yourself. But I know you can figure it out.

Rest when you're tired.

Take a drink of cold water when you're thirsty.

Call a friend when you're lonely.

Ask God to help when you feel overwhelmed.

Many of us have learned how to deprive and neglect our-
selves. Many of us have learned to push ourselves. Many
of us have learned to push ourselves hard, when the
problem is that we're already pushed too hard.

Many of us are afraid the work won't get done if we rest
when we're tired. The work will get done; it will be done
better than work that emerges from tiredness of soul and
spirit. Nurtured, nourished people, who love themselves
and care for themselves, are the delight of the Universe.

They are well-timed, efficient, and divinely led.

Today, I will practice loving self-care.

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Please submit your contributions via email to crc@deloro.org. Please be sure to include your source(s), unless it is your own work. Additionally, please share how this information was beneficial to your caregiving journey.



ON JUNE 20TH, Del Oro Caregiver Resource Center held our 13th Annual Cruise Around the World Cook-off and Fundraiser in Orangevale. This fun event supports the efforts of Del Oro, allowing us to expand much needed services to family caregivers in our community.

At the heart of the event is a cook-off competition between local senior care providers. There were two phases to the competition—professional judges and crowd favorites. The professional judge panel consisted of Keith Breedlove, Culinerdy Cruzer, Tina Macuha with Good Day Sacramento and Teresa Urkofsky, Chef and Culinary Faculty at American River College. The panel of judges scored each participant on presentation of the food, taste, originality, and authenticity to the region or country the culinary partner chose. We are pleased to announce this year's winners:

First Place—Atria Senior Living with their truffle meatballs

Second Place—Almond Heights with their saganaki, pita and hummus

Third Place—Alpha One Ambulance with their smoked brisket tacos and potato salad

The event attendees chose Eskaton as the overall "Crowd Favorite" with their sconset crab cake with seared chive oil and sweet chili aioli; seafood chowder shooter with grilled leak, red pepper, and smoked pork belly, and a shrimp bite with crispy bintje potato and sweet corn salsa. Congratulations to all of our winners!!

Thanks to the generous support of our sponsors, culinary partners, and attendees, Del Oro raised just over \$50,000 to provide vital services to family caregivers in our community! We appreciate your support of our mission and goal to improve the well-being of family caregivers throughout their journey.

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