

A Reckoning at 10,000 Feet

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The text message came from my daughter, “Don’t forget your walking sticks.” I read it while my husband and I ate breakfast in a charming café in Breckenridge, Colorado. We were looking for a short hike because the historic mountain town sits at 10,000 feet in the Colorado Rockies, and we were feeling the lack of oxygen in our seventy-something lungs. And . . . we had forgotten our walking sticks.

The role reversal between adult children and their parents starts with gentle reminders from the children. It can set the stage for a mutually satisfying relationship or create roadblocks that can lead to anger and estrangement. When I cared for my parents as they grew older, it was a rocky road at times for both sides of the generational divide.

My husband and I looked at the visitors’ map in the café and faced facts. We didn’t want to go back to the hotel to get our walking sticks. The map showed many historical and cultural attractions in town in addition to stunning views of the mountains, so we decided to stay. The reminder from our daughter led us to reconsider our plans and not foolishly push forward, ignoring our age and lack of preparation for a hike.

Breckenridge didn’t disappoint. Its National Register Historic District status requires the preservation of historic structures. The lone Starbucks was in a little yellow house shaded by trees with the iconic sign nestled among the leaves at eye level. The Breckenridge Historical Museum displayed a rich and colorful history, including the 1859 Gold Rush, with booms and busts. We walked along the Blue River with the majestic mountains as a backdrop. We had a wonderful day together with no mishaps.

Role reversal began with my dad when he and Mom drove over from Prescott, Arizona, for one of their frequent visits. He was in his 70s and told me he didn’t want to drive in Los Angeles anymore. This was huge for him because his job required a lot of traveling, and he was proud of his lone-wolf profession behind the wheel.

It was surreal the first time we went out in the car together, and I looked at Dad sitting quietly in the passenger seat. The last time he sat in the passenger seat was forty years

earlier when he taught me to drive. He wasn't as relaxed back then.

I now sit in the passenger seat when I go places in town with my son and daughter. I enjoy looking out the window and telling my grandchildren in the back seat tall tales of when I was young.

My sister Anne and I cared for our parents for ten years before they died, and our roles changed substantially. As time passed and they grew more frail, we stepped up and became the adults our parents needed. Most of the time, they graciously accepted our help. Role reversal is a two-way street.

Many people tell me their parents won't use a cane, won't wear a medical alert device, won't leave the home they can no longer maintain, and won't face their infirmities and limitations. Role reversal is a mutual recognition of the reality of aging. It isn't easy, but it can be done.

When Dad went into hospice, it was excruciating for all of us. Under the direction of the hospice nurse, I got Mom and Dad's retirement community apartment ready with all the medical equipment, supplies, and multiple medications before he came home from the hospital.

I wanted to hire home health aides and a prescription service offered by the retirement community's nurse. They told me no, it was too expensive, they didn't need it. I knew they did and ordered both services despite their objections. When Dad got home and saw that all his medical needs would be met, he wasn't mad at me; he was relieved. And then he thanked me.

Twenty-nine days later, he passed peacefully from this world in his own home, in his own time, on his terms. I am grateful for his example of allowing my sister and me to help him when needed.