

Published in the *Los Angeles Daily News* on July 19, 1998

Boomers should accept caregiver role for parents

A fellow baby boomer told me that our generation will be the first to care for our aging parents longer than our parents spent caring for us. It is a frightening thought for most boomers, who are now in middle age. I wonder if we are up to it.

My friend spent several years caring for his father, who suffered from dementia and spent the last several years of his life in a nursing home. His parents divorced when he was young, and his elderly mother lives alone in an apartment near his home. He looks after her.

Responsible parents who bring children into the world expect to care for them for the first eighteen to twenty years. They drive them to lessons, help with homework and provide guidance and love. As each child reaches adolescence, all parties involved begin to accept the idea that the child will soon be an adult and on his way.

These days it is not unusual for a couple to become parents, grandparents and even great grandparents, watching three generations grow up. Advances in medicine keep senior citizens alive for many more years than just a few generations ago.

A child growing up today will be cared for by her parents until she is an adult. After she has raised her own family, she can look forward to taking care of her parents indefinitely. When their responsibilities end, hers begin.

I sat by the bedside of both my parents they struggled through major surgeries – one for cancer, one for heart trouble. I always thought I would turn and run when my parents got needy. Indeed, three of my four siblings have.

My sister and I are our parents' caregivers now. Even though we are grateful that our parents have enough money to hire help with medical and custodial care, emotionally the complete role reversal is unsettling and hard to accept.

The people who had all the answers when we were young look to us for answers now. The parents who stood tall when we were children shrink before our eyes. We find them asking for advice, seeking our guidance. We are the ones who consult with doctors about their care.

I hope my fellow boomers will consider the challenge of caring for elderly parents to be an opportunity for growth. After her surgery, my mother was on life support for three agonizing days. During that time I grew in ways I never imagined.

In cardiac intensive care, my mother was on a respirator, with her mouth taped shut. Tubes sprouted from all four of her limbs and a really nasty one went right into her guts. Desperate, I asked her if she'd like me to swear for her. Her lids lifted, our eyes locked, and she nodded, "yes."

Bent over her bed, I began to swear like a sailor in loud, salty language, under fluorescent light in the tiny hospital room. I voiced her frustration and expressed the indignation she felt but was unable to express.

Five years later my mother is going strong. She tells me often that my swearing pulled her through. I gave vent to my mother's fear and gave her my confidence and strength, which reinforced her own will to survive.

Parent and child relationships are never easy. For most of history, parents were dominant. After leaving home to start their own families, children often buried their parents before they reached their own middle age. Having parents around for several generations may be a mixed blessing.

Hopefully, parents and children will rise to the occasion and learn to love one another in ways none of us could have imagined mere generation ago. Most of us will someday be that be elderly parent, feeling displaced and in need of love. May we learn as fast the changes demand and provide our parents, late in the day, the patience and love they require.