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The Worrying Torch Passes

On my father's eightieth birthday I will drive to Arizona with a sheet cake in the trunk big enough to feed 80 people. I can't help but draw a comparison with the times my mom sent me off to school on my birthday with a treat for all the children in my class. It seems the circle is complete.

We baby boomers are watching our children grow up and move away to start families of their own. Amid our relief at the end of that responsibility, we look back and see our parents- aged, frail and in need. Having parents who are octogenarians is becoming the norm, not the exception.

My 80-plus parents now reside in a lovely retirement community where the staff is available 24 hours a day to help when needed. They went there kicking and screaming, but they went. Although I cannot imagine what it is like to give up a home and all it stands for, I can understand how an adult child feels when the world stands on its head and the parent becomes, not a child, but a dependent.

When my siblings and I were growing up, Dad said that the house was his castle and he was the king. He was a 1950's dad and his word was law. No one dared question his authority. He paid the bills and we towed the line. How, I ask, can a man like that accept help from his daughter?

After they retired, my parents moved to Arizona to be closer to my sister and me. We thought at the time that that they were ensuring that they would be cared for in their old age. Now that we have gained some wisdom and a better perspective, we know that they moved closer to make it easier for us.

My parents were born and lived in the Midwest. They raised five children and lived in the same house for 30 years. After pulling up stakes, they built their dream house in Arizona with a spectacular view of the mountains. They shed their winter clothes and enjoyed warm, dry weather all year. Dad took to wearing bolo ties and Mom wore turquoise jewelry. They traveled extensively and loved every minute of it.

After my dad's cancer diagnosis and my mother's decision to stop driving, my sister and I began to worry. After one harrowing night when my dad's temperature spiked, and my mother didn't have a thermometer and had to go to a neighbor's house for help, we really worried.

To our great relief, a state-of-the-art retirement community was built in their little mountain town. Instead of being as delighted as we were, they stalled and stalled and couldn't bring themselves to plunk down the \$1,000 deposit. "It's so much money," they complained. A small price for our piece of mind, my sister and I replied, if only to each other.

There is no worry like the worry of a parent for a small child. Terror is the province of the newly minted parent, standing helplessly by a crib and praying. There also is no worry like the worry of a child for an aged parent, standing helplessly by a hospital bed and praying. The desperation and fear of loss for the new parent are, for the most part, unfounded. For the adult child, it is very real.

I will drive with a trunkful of birthday cake for everyone at the retirement community with a grateful heart. I give thanks for my elderly, dependent parents who lived well into old age and accepted their final season. They let our roles reverse with grace. I will wish my dad well and silently thank God for the many blessings, often hidden in the midst of pain and frustration, that his 80 years have bestowed. I will carry the lessons his aging taught me and hope my children will learn them from me.