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Elderly Parent Care Brings Us Full Circle

My friend and I exchanged elderly parent horror stories over lunch last week. Like a couple of fishermen, we told tall tales. Your mom is crazy, but mine is crazier. My mom is more out-of-it than your mom. My mom wears me out more than yours wears you out. We sparred like a couple of prizefighters.

It was an even match – until she topped me with her story about the beating. Her mother, a resident in a board-and-care facility, told her horrified daughter, “they took my clothes off . . . and they beat me.”

“What?” I replied in horror.

My friend has a well-honed sense of humor and responded with perfect comic timing, “they gave her a sponge bath.”

We both burst out in laughter and enjoyed our moment of recognition and caregiver sisterhood. The hazing ritual for this sorority comes late at night, sitting in an emergency room next to your mom’s bed, trying to shut your eyes against the garish fluorescent light that emits a loud buzzing sound, jarring both the ears and the eyes.

Those of us who enter the caregiver sisterhood can laugh about our dilemma because we know we have come full-circle. We understand that mom isn’t the person she used to be and can’t play her role anymore. Sometimes our siblings don’t get it and turn away from mom and her dependency. Those of us who stick with it can grow in ways we never imagined.

As my friend and I bantered back and forth and told our tales of woe, a common thread ran through the conversation. We had become the parent our parent needed. We talked

to doctors who specialized in hearts, lungs, and the brain. They look at their specialty and give their professional opinion. We look at Mom and wonder what to do.

Parents raise their children and most do their very best. At the end of their lives, sick and feeble, parents find out who their friends are. It may or may not be their children.

My mother is confined to bed in a board-and-care home, tended to by a loving and professional staff. I visit often, and each time we say good-bye I know it could be for the last time.

In this uncharted territory for parent and adult child there is a very thin line between sadness and humor. Laughter at the absurdity of life is the quintessential best medicine. Both my friend and I are blessed with moms who look for humor in the midst of sorrow and loss and we often find ourselves laughing through tears.

A woman who is caring for her Alzheimer's afflicted father told me recently that when she runs out of patience she sits down, takes a deep breath and digs deeper into her reserves for even more. She finds character building a challenging process. Reflecting on blessings is hard to do in the midst of exhaustion and exasperation.

This could be the first generation that cares for their parents for as long as their parents spent raising them. My sister and I have been caring for our mother for a full decade – through surgeries, emergency hospitalizations, cancer, heart troubles, cataracts, strokes, rehab and more. My father has been dead for almost four years, after two long years of illness.

As I reflect on his last years, I think of the clam with the tiny grain of sand that works its way under his shell and irritates it until the clam miraculously creates a pearl. When I think of Dad now, I rarely recall the frustration and pain but consider his memory to be a string of pearls.