

Generations of Givers

Category: How Can I Help?

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | October 2, 2019

My parents spent their lives as givers, not receivers. Buying them a gift that they would graciously accept and use always proved challenging; they, however, never stopped gifting my older brother and me, their grandchildren, and even my paternal grandmother. Whenever I had a problem, my parents always responded with an encouraging “How can we help?” response.

Then, time took its toll. My once feisty Ma suffered from intense back and leg pain, forcing her to quit her job of forty-one years as a salesperson in a locally owned, baby furniture store. My dad turned eighty and, in a blink of an eye, found himself in his mid-nineties. These changes in my parents inevitably led to changes in my relationship with them. I became the giver, the one asking, “How can I help?”

I learned that giving is both fun and rewarding. While I would rather read than spend time cooking in the kitchen, I taught myself to make meals that appealed to my parents. I prepared enough food for our shared Sunday night dinners—and for their freezer so Ma would not have to cook. Sometimes I drove my parents to the grocery store, but then they gained trust in my ability to select the items they liked. Doing laundry, choosing library books, even dusting and vacuuming—all of these activities became my way of giving back to the two people who had devoted their lives to giving to me.

My parents never asked for my help, and I often think that they—especially Ma—had some resentment in our reversal of roles that made me the parent of my parents. It is painful and humbling for independent people to ask for help, so I tended to be the one who offered without waiting to be asked.

My parents are both gone now, but their “How can I help?” legacy survives. My two adult children, who observed how Grandma and Grandpa always supported them and how I later supported their grandparents, have become my givers. I can call them at any time of the day or night to share a fear or a sadness that has mentally depleted me. Although they are busy with their own lives—and dealing with their own challenges—they always respond to my calls with, “Ma, how can we help?” For that, I am eternally grateful.

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