

Giving Care

Category: Stories

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | June 26, 2009

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When I was six, my family and I spent a week in Atlantic City. I loved the Boardwalk with its saltwater-taffy aroma and colorful sights, but I feared the pier that jutted far out into the Atlantic. One moonless night, my big brother bet me a bag of taffy that I couldn't walk to the pier's end by myself. Never one to back down, I accepted his bet. But the farther out I walked, the more frightened I got. It felt like one more step would send me off the pier's edge and into the bottomless black water. My parents rescued me by dashing to the end of the pier and carrying me back to safety.

I spent the next half-century living under two illusions: one, that nothing in my life would ever be as scary as that dark pier; and two, that my parents would always be there to save me. In school, when my Lilliputian classmates mocked my five-foot-eight-inch stature, Ma and Dad talked to me about inner beauty and strength. After the rice strewn along my wedding aisle disintegrated into sharp slivers of divorce, Ma and Dad gave me the financial and emotional support I needed to raise my son and daughter.

When after thirty-five years I returned to my hometown of Pittsburgh, I hosted Sunday-night dinners for my parents and ran errands for them. Yet they still saw me as their little girl; whether stocking my refrigerator or slipping mad money into my wallet, they made sure that I was okay. I found a balance between spending time with them and going out to dinners, movies and plays with my new circle of friends. Life was good.

Then, four years ago, like Alice, I tumbled into a topsy-turvy world. My eyes finally saw what my heart had refused to acknowledge: Ma was losing her mental edge. No longer was she the formidable woman who'd kept a spotless house and worked at a children's furniture store. And Dad, on our long walks, was leaning more and more on his cane and my arm for support.

My parents, once my constant caregivers, now needed me to be theirs.

As a result, I've spent the past four years feeling as if I'm once again tottering towards the pier's end—this time with no rescue in sight. To make room for Ma and her dementia and Dad and his aging, I willingly relinquished the starring role in my own life, feeling that as they had so willingly given to me, I should give to them.

Being an educator, I initially tried to embrace caregiving as a learning experience: Trying to feed Ma pieces of chocolate-chip cookies, I immediately halted when she whispered, "I can feed myself"—reminding me that, even with dementia, she was still my mother, not a child.

I quickly realized that caregiving can be a harsh teacher. I had to make

difficult decisions: placing Ma in an assisted-living facility; giving up my apartment to move in with Dad.

And day-to-day caregiving, I discovered, is a powerful mix of deep satisfaction and profound irony. As Ma passively let me change her dirty diapers and urine-soaked bedsheets, I found myself resenting the distasteful tasks and mourning the feisty, capable woman I'd so admired. And when she mistook me for her sister, or a total stranger, I couldn't rationalize away my hurt. Other times, we would enjoy a moment of grace when she held my face in her hands and called me by name.

When Ma died in my arms in March 2007, a part of me rejoiced that she was finally at peace. Another part wondered if I myself could ever find peace and whether I'd done my very best for her.

Life with Dad—physically weakened but mentally sound at ninety-three—offers its own highs and lows. Often my one and only wish is that our life together would never change. I love taking him to the mall for lunch or to the park for an afternoon of people watching. Every night I massage his arthritic legs; every Saturday we travel back in time together, watching *The Lawrence Welk Show*.

Although Dad encourages me to spend time with friends, he gets despondent and frightened when I do make plans. So I've had to ask friends' understanding for my dwindling availability, and my once-full calendar is now rows of blank spaces.

I loathe my friends' emails describing "must-see" movies or plays that I probably won't. And I resent my brother when it feels like he's able to visit Paris and London but somehow can't manage the twenty-minute drive to see Dad.

At night I toss and turn, as if trying to claw my way out of this rabbit hole that has swallowed my life. I sometimes vent my pent-up feelings with a therapist-friend or use my iPod music or treadmill walks to calm down. But, like a child worried that stepping on a crack will break a parent's back, I try to avoid complaining for fear that some avenging angel will take Dad from me.

And time, like Alice's White Rabbit, keeps racing ahead.

Sometimes I fantasize awakening one morning to discover, like Alice, that my experiences have been a dream, and that Ma and Dad are their old selves again. But deep down I know that, instead, someday I'll find myself truly alone at the end of the pier.

When that happens, I hope that the lessons I've worked hard on as a caregiver—patience and perseverance, acceptance of unplanned moments, tolerance of change, kindness towards myself and others—will stick with me and help to steady and support me as I step forward into my new life.

About the author:

Ronna Edelstein is a part-time English Department faculty member at the University of Pittsburgh, where she works as a consultant in the Writing Center and teaches a section of freshman programs. Her work has appeared in [*Quality Women's Fiction*](#); [*SLAB—Sound and Literary Artbook*](#); [*The First Line*](#); [*The Road to Elsewhere*](#) (Scribes Valley Publishing) and [*Ghoti*](#). Many of her personal narratives, essays and poems have appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Ronna dedicates this story to Dad, Ilana, Jonathan and, in memory, Ma.

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