



My Two Sense

Commentary
By Lori Hicks

Mutual Dignity

Caring for aging parent has rewards for both sides

NOTHING CAN BREAK the heart quicker than the realization that an aging parent is beginning to decline. In a perfect world, it is at this time that children step up to take on some of the burden of caring for their loved one. But it isn't a perfect world. Being a caregiver is not easy, and for gays and lesbians it can be even more complex.

After recently seeing the movie *Beginners* — about a son dealing with his father's coming out and cancer diagnosis — I had to look no further than my group of friends to realize how many of us have stepped into the role of caregiver.

I have countless lesbian friends in their 50s who are battling finances, struggling with careers and fighting weight and health issues, all while maintaining the job of primary caregiver for an aging and ailing parent.

According to a study by MetLife Mature Market Institute, the percentage of Americans who provide care for their aging parents has tripled since 1994. The research showed women still provide the bulk of family care, especially intimate tasks like bathing and dressing. Caregivers lose an estimated \$3 trillion in wages, pension and Social Security benefits when they take time off work to help their aging parents, the study found.

There can be some mixed emotions when it comes to caring for a parent, but it can be especially difficult if they haven't been supportive of your lifestyle. But for many of us, obligation will take over before we sort through our feelings of rejection and abandonment. Often members of a family just don't see eye to eye, and being gay or lesbian isn't always the reason.

My partner Toni and I took care of both of her parents until their deaths. And I am committed to honoring my mother in the same way, should she need my help — even though she is a right wing, socially conservative Baptist, Tea Party supporter who

will insist on watching Fox News on her deathbed. As a caregiver of a loved one who is outspoken or disagreeable, you learn to disengage rather than argue.

However, if you're a primary caregiver it's difficult not to feel occasional anger. But the resentment can tear at you emotionally. It can often seem as though you are doing all of the work — especially if other family members live nearby but are content to leave the details to you.

Within my group of friends, predominantly women who have had this experience, many complain that their brothers are treated like heroes just for showing up. Somehow they are not held to the same standard.

Caring for an elderly family member is difficult, if not impossible, to manage alone. Don't wait until you are at your wits' end and begin to berate others for being selfish, compassionless or self-centered. Rather than build resentment, you must enlist help from others — siblings, partner, children or other relatives.

Put your differences aside and work together to ensure your loved one receives the care they need. You have choices, and even in unhealthy circumstances it is often possible to choose healing and forgiveness instead of resentment and martyrdom.

Don't wait for your brother to show up. Ask him to be there and tell him what needs to be done.

Forgive the sister who has kids and expects you to do all the work with your parents because you don't have children. Remind them that caring for a parent is a good way to reinforce positive values in their children.

Solicit the help of family friends, paid professionals and hospice.

Ask those who live far away to contribute financially or provide you with occasional breaks.

When faced with the heavy demands and responsibilities of caring for my partner's parents I honestly thought of all the things in my life I would have to give up, including privacy, openness and spontaneity. The reward of caring for a loved one was something that never crossed my mind.

Caregiving, whether motivated by love, compassion or duty, has an underlying moral quality to it, and can be very satisfying. For some, caregiving is an opportunity to give back to a friend or family member in return for gifts received over a lifetime. For others, it is a simple gesture of devotion.

Reflecting on my caregiving, I have a sense of accomplishment for sticking with it, despite the sadness, stress and extreme fatigue.

I have beloved memories I wouldn't have had if I not helped out. Serving a loved one in their dying days helped me to grow spiritually. It made me feel more connected to a person than ever before. When it comes to kindness, compassion and dignity — straight or gay, we all deserve respect.

Caring for an elderly parent or an ailing friend is hard. It can be a burden, but it can also be a great gift of love and respect — not only for them, but also for us. **-E**

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