

Two Seniors

A close friend said if it were not for his wife, he would not have been a very good father. He specifically attributed his success as a parent to two of his wife's qualities: her ability to stay calm when their children were making mistakes, and her inner strength when their children were disappointed by life events. And then he told me about his gratitude to the "two seniors" in his life.

The first senior is his 85-year-old mother and the other is his 23-year-old daughter. Both face major life transitions. His mother finished a year of rehabilitation following a serious car accident, decided to sell her home, and is planning her move to a less independent living situation. His daughter is graduating college and is moving out of state to begin the first step of her new career. Both are sorting through boxes of files and photos, making collages, deciding what to take with them and what to leave behind. And although they are both fiercely independent, his offers of help are occasionally accepted.

The 23-year-old's move includes her pickup truck and a trailer. And when she needed a topper for the pickup, he was invited along (after all, you never know who is on the other side of an advertisement on Craigslist). When they found the right topper and he and the seller were lifting it onto her truck, she called out, "Dad, don't hurt yourself." He told me that those words made him smile because just a few years ago, when she was a teenager, she would have been more concerned about the wellbeing of the topper! And now, there it was, fully developed and right on time. The time parents invest in worrying about much of adolescence is unnecessary. Often, what leads a parent to worry is the impatience for certain skills, traits and characteristics to be fully in place while they are still being developed.

His 23 years of parenting may seem worthy of note, but it pales in comparison to the other senior's 58 years. In her life, she demonstrated that parenting does not end the day the children go off to college, get their first job, or fall in love. And while we know deep down that parenting is for all time, when we deal with a moody child or an impossible schedule it can feel as if we barely have enough energy to deal with the short-term and certainly do not have the perspective we need for the long-term.

It helps to step back from the day-to-day battles over getting out of the house on time, homework, manners, or trying to teach them to be nice to their siblings, and "zoom out" the way we do when we use Google Maps.

We can *choose to view* the map in many ways. We zoom in to see the names of individual streets and we zoom out so we can see stretches of highways, smooth for miles at a time, intersecting with roads and rivers and taking unexpected twists and turns. By zooming out we have a better view of where the road leads. In our parenting we can zoom out, see the

certainty that their road will lead them where it will, and our role is to be there for them during both the smooth times and the detours. We promise them to ride with them through it all.

My friend told me the 85-year-old senior taught him about unconditional love, what it looks like and how important it is. And that it could not possibly be a fluffy platitude when it is so hard to provide unconditional love when it is needed the most. Many parents can be great parents when their children are well-mannered or bring home great grades, but children need to feel their parents' love for them at all times. They need to hear our one voice, the soothing loving voice, at the times they are cooperating, behaving and achieving, and the times they are not. Our presence is one of unconditional love, even when we take away a privilege or give a consequence.

The college senior taught him that children will find and build their own road to the future if they are allowed the dignity of their own experience. How tempting it was for him to think he knew better than she what was in her best interests! And now, as she is about to launch herself on this adventure, he appreciated her insistence on doing things her way.

This makes sense for all of us. After all, would we have appreciated it if our mother or father thought they knew what was best for us when we were teenagers? Did your mother know who you should date? Did your father know what courses were right for you in high school and what major was right for you in college? Were you allowed the dignity of your own journey when you were in high school and more importantly, will you allow your teenagers the opportunity to look deep inside themselves and find the road is best for them?

After listening to my friend's story, I decided to put aside my list of things-to-do and asked my wife to do the same. We went for a walk on a beautiful fall day, talked about parenting and children and appreciated the day in front of us. After all, we both knew time was passing and that soon the Minnesota winter would take this option away from us.

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