

A watercolor illustration of a path winding through a forest. The path is light brown and leads from the bottom center towards the middle ground. On either side of the path are various trees and bushes with green and some autumnal foliage. The background is a soft, hazy light green, suggesting a misty or bright day. The overall style is soft and painterly.

Being the Parent of Your Parents

BY ROBIN R. RINKE
AND LORI R. SCHULTZ

On the other end of the phone his voice was quiet and shaky, "Julie, She's.....She's gone." And then there was silence.

I took a deep breath, "Oh Dad, I'm so sorry. I'll call John and Amy. I will be there shortly."

It wasn't supposed to be like this. I don't know how it should be...but it wasn't supposed to be like "this". "This" was too soon, too fast. Expectedly unexpected. I'm not ready, but I have been mentally and emotionally preparing for months. As I drove to my parents' home, my grief was numbing and yet a tsunami of emotion. I needed to hold it together for him. He needed me more than I needed him for the first time in my life.

Dad always had a file for everything. Mom said he organized his organization to stay organized. His happy go lucky attitude, organization, and being a master storyteller made him a great leader in business and a great leader of our family.

He's had many successes in his 85 years of life along with many heart aches, but by far his greatest heartache was losing his wife, Joanne. He would call her "My Jo-Jo".

Mom was diagnosed with heart failure years ago. She had stints placed at first followed by a bypass surgery, but last year she went downhill fast after a bout with pneumonia and never fully recovered. Her blood pressure could not be regulated, and her veins had given up.

She was placed on hospice about six months ago after her specialist said nothing more could be done for her.

They had decided together to keep her home and comfortable. We supported their decision.

The living room became her bedroom, and he did the best he could to take care of her with the help of us three children and the hospice team. The last few months have actually been a beautiful combination of love and heartache. We had some great talks and shared memories in their living room/her bedroom. Her hospice team shifted the burden of day-to-day care away from us and onto them. It allowed us to assume our roles as family, not caregivers...I'm so grateful for that.

I'm the oldest daughter, Julie, and live the closest to our parents.

My brother, John, is two years younger than me. He lives four hours away but has set up his work schedule to be able to visit every other week. Then there is Amy, the baby. I don't know how old she needs to become before we stop calling her the baby. But being five years younger than John, she will forever be our baby sis. She lives out of state.

Experiencing my parents needing more and more of our help was hard on us all. It was new territory.

They always took such good care of us. We leaned on them for advice and support. They have always been our first call with “hey, guess what” and our first call with “you’ll never guess what happened now”. Those calls were always met with wisdom, humor, and above all love for us and wanting only the best for us.

When Mom started getting sick, Dad began to lean on us kids more and more for advice and support.

I guess that’s how it goes. We just take one day at a time. Nobody really wrote a manual for adult children when their parents age.

About three months after the funeral, I stopped in at Dads after work. I did this a couple times a week and once on the weekend.

He was outside in the garden picking weeds.

Being the oldest, living the closest, and being the POA, I have more interaction with them than my other two siblings.

Now it’s just Dad. And I find myself in a whole new arena.

“Hey Dad.” I waved as I slammed the car door.

Dad looked up with the setting sun in his eyes, “Hi Honey”. He proceeded to take his gloves off and walk to the shade of the sidewalk.

His messy hair and drops of sweat on his brow made me smile. “Looks like you’re getting some exercise. Good for you. How’s the garden coming?” I gave him a big hug.

He wiped his brow with his handkerchief that has always resided in his pocket, he responded “Oh, you know...I’ve cut back the past few years. It’s just a little garden, but those weeds don’t care. They pop up overnight.” I noticed the tomatoes that would be ready in a day or two. He loved when Mom would make him a BLT for lunch with those fresh tomatoes sliced nice and thick. My stomach growled just thinking about it.

“Did you get dinner started yet?” I was curious to ask because two days ago when I stopped in he still had not eaten and that was 7 O’clock at night. I can tell he has lost some weight. It is not to the point of concern, but it is at the point of noticeable.

He sheepishly grinned, “No, haven’t got to that yet.” He opened the front door, and we went into the kitchen.

I took note of the same large pile of mail that was still sitting on the counter. The sink had a collection of coffee mugs and glasses.



I opened the refrigerator and took a quick glance at the items to put together a meal. “Well, let’s do something about that.”

Mom always cooked fabulous meals; Dad could boil a hotdog and make a sandwich, but that was about the extent of his culinary expertise.

When Mom was on hospice we had a meal service for them, but when she died he wanted it canceled.

“Dad, you have to eat. You can’t just live off of crackers, cheese and salami.” I pulled out some ingredients to make spaghetti, figured that was quick and he would have leftovers.

He grabbed a glass of water and sat down at the small breakfast table in the corner by the window and let out a sigh.

“I just don’t have the energy and cooking for one is a waste.” He took a long gulp of water.

He looked sad. We all were grieving the loss of Mom, but today he looked lost.

They had friends but with some passing away, some moving away to be near their children, and the stupid pandemic, friendships had dwindled to the occasional phone call. His lack of friends to have coffee or go fishing with, coupled with grief, has left him...well, not himself.

Dad washed up before dinner, so I decided to stay and eat dinner with him. I called Tony, my husband, to let him know I wouldn't be home.

At first we chatted about his garden, paying the pile of bills on the counter and some maintenance needed on the house.

"I worry about you Dad. You're all alone, you're not eating well and it seems like you're overwhelmed." I touched his soft wrinkled hand and gave it a squeeze.

His deep blue eyes looked at me in such a way that my heart hurt.

"I'm lonely. This house is big, and I just don't have it in me anymore. It's hard to get old, Honey." He tried to grin.

How could I make this better? I'm a natural problem solver and he needs a solution! My heart is hurting but my mind is telling me it's time.

Us kids have talked about the possibility of senior living for a few months, but whenever we have brought it up in the past Dad would shut down the conversation saying he doesn't need and "Old folks home".

I was sensing that the timing was right, and it was again time to approach Dad on the subject. But not tonight. I needed John and Amy to help with this conversation.

I made it a point to have a phone call with them on Sunday and talk through the situation. We had already looked into some senior living communities via the internet over the last few months.

It's odd to be the parent of your parents. Especially in such huge life moves.

John and Amy were both on board with presenting a few communities to Dad and just got the ball rolling in the right direction. We made a plan for all of us to be together next month and to have a conversation with Dad.

I did my due diligence and stopped by two communities that stood out to us that would meet Dad's needs at this time. Being honest, I was impressed with what I saw. The main issue for us kids was to make sure Dad had good meals, someone to clean, do his laundry and social interaction to help his loneliness. He may not agree, but it's what we were seeing.

Gathering the information was easier than I thought. I felt ready for the big conversation.

"Wow, you kids are putting on a feast!" Dad sat down in his chair at the dining room table next to John. Many conversations had happened around that table over the years. Yet another big one was to happen tonight, but this time as parents of our Dad.

Amy and I had stopped at Dad's favorite restaurant and picked up Lamb Kabobs and the whole ball of wax. John popped open a bottle of white wine and poured us each a glass. I think that was for courage with what we were about to embark on with the conversation.

I started, "So Dad, we have gathered some information to go over with you." I took a sip of wine.

He wiped his mouth with his napkin, "What kind of information?"

Amy looked at me as if to say, "go on...."

"It's information on a couple of really nice senior living communities that we would like you to have a look at." I pulled the brochures to the table that I had tucked on the seat of the chair next to me.

Dad looked puzzled and said, "Why would I want to look at those, I'm not an invalid."

I was thankful John spoke up, "Of course you're not an invalid, Dad, that's not what we are saying. What we have found might surprise you. Heck I'd live there if I could."

John had an excitement in his voice that help with the mood. Dad seemed to settle down.

"What do you mean?" John seemed to have Dads attention, so we let him roll with it. It seemed like a man-to-man kind of moment.

"I mean, you should see these places. The apartments are beautiful, a chef makes your meals, they clean, do laundry and have tons of social things to do every day. It's like a resort." John ended his sentence with his hands in the air like a pro.

Dad asked a few more questions and agreed to "take a look". I saw that as a good sign, the open door we needed. I told everyone I would set up the tours with Dad and we could go from there.

That was about all of the excitement for the night Dad could handle, so we finished dessert, Strawberry Shortcake, in the living room and purposely changed the subject.

John and Amy were a big help. In the driveway we all agreed to talk after the tours.

On Monday, I didn't want to waste any time, and got busy securing tours for the end of the week.

After the first tour Dad sat in the car just staring out the window at the community's front door.

I decided to just go for it and ask him point blank. "So, what did you think Dad?"



He rubbed his chin and mumbled, "It's nice. Seems expensive."

"Well, let's head over to the other one I think fits the bill and we can compare...sound good?"

He sighed, "Whatever you think is best."

What I think is best? That's a big one. Again, the absurdity of being the parent of my parent is felt. It's usually "Father knows best." Role reversal is a real thing, and it feels strange.

After our next tour Dad seemed a bit more relaxed. I wasn't sure if it was the community atmosphere, or if he was leaning in a bit more with the whole idea?

What really got his interest was the raised garden beds to grow vegetables and the Bistro for morning coffee and breakfast. He's always loved a big breakfast.

I was happy to see him ask questions about the apartment and conversing with the sales gal, Maria.

Maria was full of life and we both felt her excitement about her community and what it offers to seniors. I liked her.

We decided to take the invite to have lunch and had a seat in the dining room with all the other residents.

A couple of the residents came up and introduced themselves to Dad and I, which I thought was really nice. He seemed to like that as well.

Price never came up in the conversation with this community like it did with the first one. Dad seemed to see the value.

He was a shrewd enough businessman to see apples to apples in either owning and caring for his home or living in a senior community.

He knew what the better choice was for his age and needs.

He was in a very jolly mood when we were driving back to his house after our two big tours and lunch. That made me happy. I was excited to tell John and Amy.

I pulled into his driveway and put the car in park. I wasn't going to go in because I knew he would probably nap and he probably wanted some alone time.

"Thanks, Julie. I enjoyed my time with you. I have a lot to think about." Dad took off his seat belt and smiled at me.

I tilted my head and grinned, "You bet, I think you already know which community you liked best. I guess we just need to see when and how to do all of this."

"It's a lot, the house is big, and I am old." He laughed.

"We will get through this together. You are not alone." I gave him a hug and he went in the house.

I sat in the driveway and watched him walk up the sidewalk and open the front door.

Now, where to start? I needed to call my siblings while this was all fresh.

John and Amy were happy to hear that Dad selected a community that he could remain independent, but should any needs arise, they could care for Dad.

This helped us all take a big, deep breath. He would only have to move once.

After talking with my siblings, I called Dad, "Hi Dad, how are you today?"

Dad cleared his voice, "Hi Honey, I'm good. Just cleaning up the mess I made in the kitchen."

"Breakfast?" I said with a chuckle.

He responded, "Well, if that's what you call it. I attempted to make fried eggs and burnt them to a crisp. I got sidetracked with the darn fire alarm beeping over the stairway.

I was imagining him on a ladder replacing the battery. "Oh, no! What did you do?"

"I stood on the kitchen step stool and smacked it with that cane your Mother used and just knocked the whole thing off the ceiling. It took care of it, but I burnt my eggs." He again cleared his throat.

"Well, I guess that's one way to stop it. Probably not a great idea to be on a step stool swinging a cane." I tried to make light of the situation. "Sorry about your eggs."

"Want me to call you back in a bit?" I waited.

I could tell he sat down to talk, "No, it's ok. I'm fine. What's on your mind?"

"Well, I need to put a deposit down on an apartment to get this in motion. You want me to do that today?" I bit my lip waiting for the response.

When I heard him say, "yes", I let out a silent sigh of relief. I could have actually cried. I was so relieved and happy and excited for him.

We managed to hire a company that only moves seniors. Best 2K we ever spent. They handled our situation so well. They packed what he wanted and helped us set up for an estate sale for the rest. I was so busy at work during that time, John was traveling for work, and Amy's youngest had just had an appendectomy. None of us could have handled a move right then. We were so grateful for their facilitating the move so seamlessly.

Dad moved into his new home in less than a month, we had the estate sale and then we staged the home to sell.

It worked out nicely that way. We did not want Dad to have to leave every time there was a showing.

A new chapter started and an old one ended. It's bittersweet, but the weight of worry lifted off of us all, including Dad.

John, Amy and I are thankful that he is well cared for and has new friends to help brighten his day.

About two months after Dad moved in we were all over at his new apartment and John asked him, "So, Dad, what do you like best here at your new place?"

He smiled and said, "Every day I have someone that says to me, "Good Morning Mr. Johnson. It feels good to have someone to talk with again."