



Community column: She's not a burden; she's our Auntie

*By Jeanne Wun
Community columnist*

Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter is noted to have said that there are four kinds of people in this world: those who have been caregivers, those who are now caregivers, those who will be caregivers and those who will need caregivers.

These words sum up my life and the lives of an increasing number of working, unemployed and retired baby boomers who have suddenly found themselves among the ranks of hands-on or long-distance family caregivers at this stage of their lives.

No one escapes the responsibility of being a caregiver or being cared for, unless you live under a rock. Americans are living longer, and baby boomers are members of this distinguished group. We're aging and graying seamlessly alongside a growing population of aging parents and aging relatives — all who one day will need caregivers.

Our longevity is attributed to a number of factors: advances in medical science; preventive care; and healthier lifestyle choices by patients and consumers.

The reality is if you are not a caregiver now, sometime during your lifetime you will become one. When you become a caregiver, your life will forever change. How it changes, how it shapes you, how it affects your life depends on how you embrace, adapt and accept it. In time, you will learn to forgive your own shortcomings and misgivings as a caregiver.

It took me awhile to appreciate my role as caregiver. I'm still learning. It's on-the-job training. There's no instruction manual, so I make it up as I go along.

Caregiving will test your character, your capacity, your patience, your faith. It will challenge what you know, what you think you know and what you believe in. It will test your ability to be flexible and to be in the moment and to be present and just be. Eventually, you will come to that place of calm chaos, a place of understanding and acceptance where you realize this caregiving thing isn't about you — it's about your loved one.

Just as you will find that this isn't easy for you, it's not easy for your loved one either. Not too long ago, our parents raised us, cared for us, bathed us, clothed us, provided a home and instilled in us our morals, values, customs and beliefs. What's different now is the parent-child role changes; it's the grown adult child caring for the parent.

My journey into caregiving spans 17 years. This entitles me to respectfully say: Been there, done that and got the T-shirt. In a heartbeat, I'd trade the T-shirts to have my parents back. Both of our parents received end-of-life care from our local nonprofit hospice. Its program provided everything our family would need to care for our parents at home. It was supportive and prepared us for what to expect in each situation. Mom died in 1993, at age 69, four months after she was diagnosed with lung cancer. In 2007, Dad died at age 86, six months after his cardiologist referred him to hospice.

Since our father's death, my sister Barbara and I have been the caregivers to Auntie, age 85, my father's sister. We've both evolved as caregivers and view the caregiving of Auntie refreshingly different. Auntie

speaks Chinese, has a sharp mind, is self-educated and self-determined. She is kind, bright and has a sense of humor. Auntie is the elder in our family now and holds the memories of our family's past. We enjoy her storytelling. We've become the student; Auntie the teacher. She honors us with her wisdom; we're making memories with her. We're glad Auntie is in our lives. She is not a burden; she is our Auntie.

This column is dedicated to the memory of our mother and father and honors Auntie Fu You Liu, who humbles me and inspires me to be a better person.

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