

perspective

Parenting has come full circle for boomers

By Chuck Reyman

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In one defining moment, a handrail — more precisely, the lack of one — placed the issue of aging, the physical and emotional deterioration that is its signature and a society's uneasy relationship with it in stark relief.

Not long ago, my 95-year-old father-in-law and his 92-year-old wife arrived at our home to celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary. The lack of a handrail leading down our stairs and into the backyard — where family, a barbecue and the couple's favorite music awaited — posed a serious threat to the day. As my father-in-law stood uneasily at the top of the stairs, he despaired. "You've got no handrail," he said. "I don't think I can do this."

I could hear strains of "The Tennessee Waltz," one of his favorites, from the CD player set up in the yard. With the help of my son and me, my father-in-law, assuming a modified backward crawl position and accompanied by our encouraging yet uncertain chorus of, "We're almost there, dad," worked his way down the stairs, expelling groans of discomfort each tortuous step of the way.

The scenario is a familiar one to many baby boomers. As we engage fully in the role reversal that defines the "sandwich" generation — parenting not only our own children, but also our parents by helping them negotiate stairs, counseling them through the inevitable surrendering of their driving privileges, doing their grocery shopping, managing their finances and, in too many cases, turning them over to someone else for the kind of continuous, intensive care we no longer can provide — we are at once witnesses to and participants in the unfolding of our own futures. For 50- or 60-somethings, it's a hard truth to admit: "We're almost there."

The culture both born of and shaped by our society provides little relief from the indignities experienced by aging parents or from the sobering awareness of what lies ahead for us, their children. Our collective obsession with youth continues to dominate virtually every nook and cranny of Western civilization, suffocating any inclination — governmental or personal — toward the kind of respect and honor commonly afforded older adults in many Eastern cultures.

Yet, I read and hear much about the growing influence that more than 77 million baby boomers exert on cultural perspectives and social policy regarding age and aging.

Through the strength of our growing numbers and the volume of our collective voices, the phrase "baby boomers are pushing back the boundaries of aging" has become a familiar refrain. It's a shame it's not true.

Those same 77 million voices and the folklore they generate have not moved the nation to reshape its relationship with the aging members of our society. The voices, through the strength of their numbers, can crank up the volume, but they can't inspire change. For example, the arenas in which the influence of sheer numbers speaking with one voice would matter (such as meaningful health care reform) have not been accommodating to our nation of aging voices.

Instead, those same voices are uncomfortable reminders of the ever-increasing burden the nation's older adults impose on society's diminished capacity and willingness to help, as the nation's bullheaded refusal to address meaningful Medicare reform demonstrates. Regardless of their number and their decibel level, the older voices among us are also irksome and so are relegated to the margins by a society that orients its resources and tilts its full attention toward the young.

This long-emerging national paradigm, wherein the sheer size and scope of the need represented by our aging population outstrips both our will and capacity for meaningful intervention, holds true within the microcosm of individual lives. Our own aging parents present ever-increasing challenges to their aging "children," who often find themselves physically and emotionally diminished in their ability to help.

For me, the coalescing of an age-dismissive culture, the hard reality of aging parents, and the increasing awareness of my own mortality is an unnerving and bitter cocktail. Try as I might, I can't locate the "bright" side of aging. We're told that experience is the great liberator, that as the decades roll by we gain in understanding of what matters in life and dismiss the rest.

That's exactly the problem. As I grow older, I don't find my increased levels of understanding, particularly as that understanding relates to dying and death, to be a comfort. On the contrary, while perhaps heightening our sensitivity and shoring up our emotional preparedness, the increased understanding that comes with our own aging and with each passing of a parent also heightens awareness of our own mortality, slowly and inexorably sapping us of the strength we must summon to support ourselves and the next parent in need.

As is often the case, recognition of a complex issue, followed by the first glimmer of understanding, comes not in the form of theory, commentary and analysis, but from simple, sensory experience. While the absence of a handrail temporarily put the issue in doubt, my father-in-law made it down our back steps that day into the embrace of his family and accompanied by Patti Page's rendition of "The Tennessee Waltz."

Since then, as I climb or descend those same stairs, I'm reminded of how that missing handrail brought home to me my father-in-law's and my own physical state and our shared and diminished capacity to help one another.

I'm also reminded of my own fast-approaching future.

We're almost there.

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