

# Love's Way: Living Peacefully with Your Family as Your Parents Age

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**Love's Way: Living Peacefully with Your Family as Your Parents Age** (ebook edition)

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Preface

In their mediation practice with adult families, Carolyn Parr and Sig Cohen have discovered a crying need for this book, a need that is only growing more intense as the Baby Boomer generation ages.

The authors are themselves in the last third of life. They have each navigated the shoals of caring for their own parents at life's end. They have a strong record of accompanying "invisible" people living on the edge, as the elderly often feel. And Carolyn and Sig are professional mediators with more than forty years' experience between them.

The authors' work is the fruit of their dedication to public and community service, first with the United States Government, then with faith-based communities and underserved populations. As a Foreign Service officer in the United States Information Agency, Sig spent more than half his career overseas. Carolyn is a lawyer and retired judge. Recipients of their community service have included callers to a suicide hotline, abused and neglected children, refugees, and homeless men and women with AIDS.

Sig and Carolyn met through the District of Columbia Superior Court's mediation program and since 2002 have focused on families in distress. In the cases of older parents with adult children, the authors discovered that the pain came from two sources: broken relationships within the family, and a parent's failure to plan for the end of life. From that discovery, *Love's Way* was born.

Elders are storytellers. The stories here stem from the authors' own families, friends, and mediation clients. While names and identifying details have been changed to protect privacy, the stories contained herein are true.

## Acknowledgments

We are filled with gratitude and so much love for our spouses, Susan Cohen and Jim Le Gette. Their patience and support as we wrestled with rough drafts, and their faith in us when we doubted, helped bring this book to life.

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Emily Turek, our faithful social media director and assistant, kept us on schedule with social media, our blog, and newsletter, when our minds were elsewhere.

Arline Kardasis and Crystal Thorpe, our trainers from Elder Decisions, taught us the specialized ins and outs of elder mediation and started us on this journey. Gail Dudley, publisher of *Ready* magazine, and Cheryl Jamison, executive director of the Association for Conflict Resolution, offered opportunities for podcasts.

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A special shout-out to Carolyn's writer sisters at Redbud Writers Guild for generously sharing their knowledge and support.

And finally, thanks to our clients and friends from our faith communities, who trusted us with the

stories (identifying details of which have been changed to protect privacy) that make the book come alive.

Carolyn and Sig

## Introduction

“I loved my dad. I wish I’d told him while he was alive.” Dan’s voice caught and his hands shook as he looked down from the pulpit on his father’s closed casket. Father and son had not spoken to each other for a decade. Standing before the mourners, Dan found it hard to recall what exactly caused him to leave home and never look back. Until it was too late.

One imagines that if the tables had been turned—if the father were standing before Dan’s casket—he’d have felt the same way. Responsibility for this broken relationship had likely been shared.

None of us wants to leave our loved ones a legacy of guilt. Whether we are fifty or eighty, we hope others will remember us with love and admiration. We hope we’ll be missed. We hope the causes we care about will go on.

The secret to creating that reality is deceptively simple but hard to embody. In *How to Say it to Seniors*, David Solie suggests that only three things are required: *Acceptance* of our losses, so we don’t get trapped in bitterness or despair; *Humility* to look honestly at where we missed the mark; and *Courage* to change where change is needed.<sup>[1]</sup>

We (the writers) are colleagues in a mediation practice. We are no longer young. We’ve arrived at the stage where our own fifty-something kids begin to worry about our safety—and maybe wonder whether it’s time for us to move. But personal safety, according to Dr. Atul Gawande is not a primary third-age concern.<sup>[2]</sup> Seniors care more about maintaining the freedom to make their own decisions, especially decisions about how they will die.

Even while clinging to our independence, however, down in the hidden chambers of our hearts, we may entertain a fleeting worry: How will we manage when we can no longer drive? Or if we fall and break a bone? Or, God forbid, we begin to lose our memories? Will our autonomy slip away as we begin to depend on others? Maybe the better question is: *How can we allow independence to soften into interdependence?*

Every day in our work we meet loving parents, adult children, and siblings who want to do the right thing but keep colliding with one another’s fears and boundaries. Even so, our clients teach us that adult children and their parents can coexist in their later years with grace and generosity of spirit. Starting now, we can strengthen the bonds we share and make it easier for our children to love and care for each other when we are gone.

Though we are mediators, this book is not about mediation. It is about how seniors and their children can nurture those relationships that work and heal those that don’t, how family members can listen to each other with understanding and love, and how siblings can learn to put away childhood resentments and embrace the persons their brothers and sisters have become. It’s about how families can plan for the future together, in a way that respects the dignity and autonomy of parents and the emotional and practical needs of children, so that they can grow together in love, even as they embark on the difficult but necessary journey toward the end of life.

## Notes

[1]. David Solie, *How to Say It to Seniors: Closing the Communications Gap with Our Elders* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2004).

[2]. Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

### 1. Not Your Grandma's Old

by Sig

*"I enjoy talking with very old people. They have gone before us on a road by which we, too, may have to travel, and I think we do well to learn from them what it is like."*

Socrates in Plato's *The Republic*

"I did it to make him notice me."

Geneva, an eighty-something woman, was embroiled in a protracted and ugly lawsuit with her adult son, James. Rather than rule on the case, the judge ordered them to mediation, hoping she and her son would avoid an emotionally debilitating and costly legal battle.

As mediator in the case, Carolyn was surprised by Geneva's candor. Geneva explained that, without warning, she closed her joint bank account with her only son while he and his family were on vacation. James discovered this when he tried to pay taxes on his and his mother's jointly owned beach house, as previously agreed. When James called his mother to ask what was up, she snapped "Talk to my lawyer!" and hung up.

Things swiftly careened downhill. Geneva's lawyer persuaded her to sue James to get his name off the deed. James counterclaimed for half the rent money, which until then both parties had regarded solely as his mother's. Now they glared at each other across the mediation table. James was hurt and puzzled by his mother's behavior. He had never misused their bank account and couldn't imagine why she had closed it.

But here's the backstory. When Geneva was sick and hospitalized, she wanted James to handle her finances. When she recovered, she began to resent her loss of control. Rent checks in both names now came to James (who duly deposited them in their joint account). Bank statements also came to James. Then, when Geneva called the property manager to question a plumber's bill, she was told, "I deal with your son. Ask him." By closing the bank account, Geneva was making a plea—one she couldn't bring herself to voice directly: "Look at me, Son! Listen to me! I can still make decisions. I can still think. I'm not helpless. I'm not invisible!"

In the mediation session, mother and son finally listened to each other, and they agreed to leave the title in joint names and set up an escrow account for the rent money. That solved the legal problem. Although mending feelings would take longer, both wanted to reconcile. Geneva admitted she shouldn't have closed the account without talking to James. James saw that he'd been insensitive to his mother's need for autonomy. They agreed to have dinner together once a week and to share honestly whatever was on their minds—even if it required a tough conversation.

Geneva and James's story is not unique. As our parents age, they not only shrink physically but also may fade from our awareness. When they retire, rarely does anyone from their old job call to ask their advice. If they become chronically ill or lack sufficient energy to venture out, they can easily become isolated and lonely. Family and friends don't mean to abandon them; but until there's a crisis, a homebound senior often vanishes from their thoughts. Clerks ignore them. Servers ask their companion what the senior wants to eat. Their footprint on the world becomes smaller, and they can feel as if they're disappearing. "I'm Not Your Grandma's Old"

I was having coffee with my friend Sadia when our conversation turned to aging and how to address changes in our children's perceptions about older people. Sadia told me that when her son recently became "overly concerned" about her well-being, she replied, "I'm not your Grandma's old."

"Your grandmother's *old*?" I wondered. What on earth did she mean? Sadia explained that in the twenty-first century, our lives are different from how our parents' were when they were our age. Most of us are healthier, consume a better diet, smoke less, and keep up with current events. Many of us work at least part time after retiring from our first job. We may decide to start a new business, take up writing or art, or become involved with a nonprofit organization. Subjected as we are to information that is ubiquitous because of the Internet, we can't help but stay abreast of new medical advances and how to minimize if not avoid chronic illnesses. As a result, we live longer.

Sadia noted that most of us are better able to cope with stress, our minds are more alive, and we look for new ways to stay engaged in our community. The lifestyles and well-being of today's seniors mean that they are more active and able to live independently longer than our parents when they were in their seventies and eighties.

Indeed, as children grow up and their parents age, family dynamics are bound to change. But not always for the better. When younger people think of their parents, many are stuck with the image of their grandparents—but that may not be where your own parents are today. Geezer or Honored Citizen?

In 2017, my wife and I traveled to Portland, Oregon. We had a wonderful visit. There was so much to see, the weather was awesome, and our hotel was top notch. On our first evening there, we took in a play at the Artists' Repertory Theater. The theater houses several arts organizations, including "The Geezer Gallery." When I saw that name, I did a double take.

After years of writing about ageism and the need for older Americans to face life with self-respect and dignity, I was taken aback. When older adults have so many perception hurdles already to navigate, why create yet another one? True, the mission of "The Geezer Gallery" is to showcase talented senior artists and create art therapy programs aimed at the Portland's senior community. But "Geezer"? Although I subsequently learned that many Portlanders like the name "Geezer Gallery," I personally find it self-deprecating.

While in Portland, we used the trolley system. When we bought our tickets, one price option was for "Honored Citizens." Not *Senior Citizens*. We knew Portland prides itself on being "weird," but what a contrast: An art venue for seniors called "The Geezer Gallery" and a trolley system that refers to seniors as "Honored Citizens."

For us, the contrast is another example of how many younger persons perceive older adults. They're viewed as odd, weak, even cranky. While at other times, they are seen as experienced, more patient, and even wise. Barriers to Communication

The Perception Gap

Although an increasing proportion of the world's population is aging, a popular attitude toward aging (at least in the United States) does not follow Socrates' view of enjoying "talking with very old people" and how "we would do well to learn from them." Many see it as a period of weakness, infirmity, and diminished capacity.

In his 2014 book *Second Wind*, geriatrician Dr. Bill Thomas wrote:

The psychological and emotional terrain of elder-hood is poorly understood by young and old alike. In place of wisdom and insight, our culture has presented us with superficial and misleading explanations for why elders behave the way they do. This lack of understanding is, for example, largely responsible for the well-known archetype of the "grumpy old man."[\[1\]](#)

Dr. Thomas is not alone. In a 2015 report, the Frameworks Institute observed:

The public's dominant *real* models of aging includes shared understandings of aging as a process of deterioration, dependency, reduced potential, family dispersal, and digital incompetence. These deep and negative shared understandings make the process of aging something to be dreaded and fought against, rather than embraced as a process that brings new opportunities and challenges for individuals and society.[\[2\]](#)

## Role Reversal

When we were growing up, Mom and Dad were the permission givers, advisors, financiers, shelter providers, big-picture framers, and decision-makers. Now children want to advise parents about the parents' safety, finances, and care. As a result, parents may feel anything from relief to resentment.

In her song "God is in the Roses," Roseanne Cash describes sitting at the grave of her father, Johnny Cash, and writing, "I love you like a brother, a father, and a son." These words describe the changing roles we all play in relationships as we and those we love age. We begin as our parent's child. Then we may move into an egalitarian role, more like our parent's friend or advisor in an area of our own expertise.

For example, I turn to my kids when my computer hiccups, and they turn to me with their tax questions. We are partners, or more like siblings. But imperceptibly, as the parent relies on the adult child more and more, the child gradually becomes more responsible, indispensable, and more like a parent. This can be challenging for everyone. Indeed, it becomes another layer of loss for both generations.

As our roles change, our emotional landscape may also change. If a parent (or spouse or friend) is in the early stages of memory loss, then we may become cross and impatient. We think they are not listening, not paying attention. We may experience denial, because the possibility of early stage dementia can be too painful. We may sound irritated when we're really frustrated or exasperated. We lecture them. We may even blame them for something they did unwittingly. The parent may also become angry and frustrated. This changing family dynamic is painful, challenging—and scary.

Caregiving children must be especially wary. Once we begin caring for others, especially our parents, we feel responsible. We want to do the right thing, but we often come up against a different way of thinking and doing. While a younger person may prefer to pursue matters linearly, an older adult may want to take a more roundabout (and time-consuming) approach.

New communication skills may be required. It can be helpful to listen twice as much as you speak.

When a person feels genuinely heard, it feels like love. The cost is little, but the value great. Listening is not the same as agreeing. It brings a double blessing: healing to the speaker and deeper understanding to the listener. Ignorance

Ignorance is the third barrier to understanding our aging parents. Though most seniors remain fit and active for many years, they will eventually encounter medical problems. Most of us have no idea what it's like to use a walker, drag around an oxygen tank, wear adult diapers, or cope with a failing memory. No matter how sympathetic we may feel, it's unlikely we'll understand the sadness, humiliation, resignation, and forbearance many elders experience as their horizons narrow and their options diminish. And it's so easy to rush to judgment about their reduced capacity.

If we reflect on our parents' losses and diminishments with an open heart, then our outlook will shift. Imagine, even briefly, how frightening it must be to lose your independence, how depressing (and boring) to spend your days in a wheelchair watching TV soaps, perhaps in a drug-induced stupor designed to keep you "under control."

Rushing to judgment is like driving a speeding car. You focus on the road ahead, not the world around you. Walking in another's shoes can engender greater generosity of spirit, going the extra mile, ceding the benefit of the doubt, or listening with an open heart. Saying "I will defer judgment and look at the situation from your point of view" means entering a shared world—if only for a brief time—with your aging parent, disabled brother, or disoriented loved one. Autonomy versus Safety

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*This important book helps families address the necessary legal hurdles and emotional difficulties that arise with aging parents. Addressing the areas of relationships, emotions, and dignity with practical and scriptural insights, this book will help to ensure that the aging parent is protected along with the other relationships in the family.*

*Love's Way* is a book that adult families will want to keep handy and return to often. Written by two family mediators, it provides readers with a map through the weeds that spring up along the path as parents age and roles reverse. Using real-life examples from years of working with families in this season of life, the authors illustrate common issues that can send a family into serious issues: unhealed sibling rivalries, parental favoritism, greed, secrecy, and fear of initiating necessary conversations. Readers will learn how to spot potential problems before they become crises and prevent or rectify them in their own families. They'll learn what documents everyone needs, how to work with forgiveness, how to speak truth in love, and how to let go. Most importantly, readers (both adult children and their parents) will gain tools to create their own win-win solutions that keep parents safe and autonomous and family love intact.

Although Carolyn Miller Parr and Sig Cohen come from different faith traditions (Carolyn is Christian and Sig is Jewish), both are deeply committed. As a result, *Love's Way* is both spiritual and practical. It overflows with advice readers can immediately begin to apply, with stories from the authors' fifteen years as co-mediators, writers, speakers, and personal experiences as caregivers to their

own aging parents.

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What's the best thing you learned from your parents? - I Will - Book two gives us even more political intrigue, even Love both the book and film of About a Boy is a 1998 coming of age novel written by British writer Nick Hornby and A Long Way Down. love the movie, love the book, love the audio! hyper-concerned with his coolness quotient, and blithely living off his father's money once there was an old man he had four sons they - Living with Elderly Parents: Do You Regret the Decision? If you're like most family caregivers, you probably made a promise to your parent(s) years ago that you would never place them in a long-term care facility They take on the responsibility out of love and/or need. It's the only way your life will change for the better. Respect Of Father In Islam - Family Respect Of Father In Islam - Papier Style Design - Age represents the wealth of life experiences that shape whom we become. to the economic survival of their families and communities as they were in the past. In the same way, groupings are helpful in understanding the elderly... outside the home has made it more difficult to provide in-home care to aging parents, My Life Story Book - Ferienwohnung Bosse Hemmingstedt - Short Essay on I Love My Family " Essay 1 (200 words) My family consists of six family He is forty years of age but looks much younger. But when I realized the contribution of my father in my life, I started thinking of him as my hero. Essay, Paragraph or Speech on "My Favorite Book" Complete Paragraph or Speech for 50 Healthy Habits to Adopt as a Family - Read English translated Chinese novel "Rebirth of the Thief Who Roamed The to his childhood love for serial matinees Rebirth (Praeger Project, book 1) by Chapter 85 Feel like old friends at the first meeting "By the way, do you know, we to advance in life; a situation he was forced into by the enemy of his father. Envious Parents - The North Face - This book is an effort at unravelling the layers of meaning of Shiva from a scientific, Several Sanskrit words have made their way into English and appear in English dictionaries. Apr 22, 2016 " Babies are gift of God to their parents... magic, evil spirits It sets the tone for love-filled and peaceful life in today's crazy world. Divine love meaning in marathi - FTF Indonesia 2019 - This book is an effort at unravelling the layers of meaning of Shiva from a scientific, Several Sanskrit words have made their way into English and appear in English dictionaries. Apr 22, 2016 " Babies are gift of God to their parents... magic, evil spirits It sets the tone for love-filled and peaceful life in today's crazy world. How to Live With Your Parents the Right Way - Book two gives us even more political intrigue, even Love both the book and film of About a Boy is a 1998 coming of age novel written by British writer Nick Hornby and A Long Way Down. love the

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