



INSTITUTE FOR
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GROWTH

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***When the Child Becomes the Parent to the
Parent***

On the back of the bathroom door in the IPG main office is a poster called "An Eschatological Laundry List" and one of the first items on its catalogue of "eternal truths" is the statement "There are no mothers." I remember the first time I saw that poster, on the back of the bathroom door in my own therapist's office. I was shocked when I saw that sentence. It took me months to figure it out - in fact, I probably unraveled its meaning about the same time I was "cured" (at least until the next time).

This is the issue I see my own peers - friends, colleagues, and clients - confronting now. Most of the people I hang with in both my personal and professional life are gay/bi, middle-aged, or both. This makes us all at double jeopardy, not only for having one or more aging parent, but for being the family member most likely to be caring for that parent or parents. Sociobiologists think the "gay/bi gene" has existed over eons because it gives the family the gene occurs in greater reproductive and survival value. The way the theory goes, us queers are less likely to have children of our own and thus we help take care of other family members. Thus while we may not have kids, the kids of our siblings, cousins, etc. are more likely to live because we caretake everyone in the family.

Now who knows if this will change what with more queers raising children of their own, but at least for now we seem to be designated caretakers of our own aging parents more frequently than other siblings. And, in my experience, when that happens the psychological issues that can coincide with that event can be devastating and color all other behaviors, decisions, and interactions. Many people find themselves having intense negative emotions at this time and discover that their relationship with the parent changes in unwanted ways.

In a nutshell, here's what happens psychologically. All of us feel disappointed by our childhood experiences with our parents to some extent; it just comes with the territory of being human. Some people were truly tortured by parents, the rest of us just got less than we want or imagine we needed, and experienced some genuine deficits in some areas. Our parent may have sexually abused us or just not been as warm and nurturing as we needed. Most of us come to adulthood with a longing and need to try to resolve that wound by getting what they want/need from the actual parent and/or parent stand-ins (lovers, friends, bosses, etc.) And whether we feel good about our childhoods or not, we tend to see our parents as someone "there to take care of us" as a last resort. As Robert Frost said, "home is where, when you have to go, they have to take you in."

So when a parent becomes clearly infirm or close to death, at least two things happen instantly: we begin to realize we will never get from the parent what we didn't get as children - the last chance is already over; and we fear that with their death we will be alone and unprotected in the world. Beth, a forty-one year old physician, has weekly nightmares of her mother's death and cries openly with fear at the thought of losing her. Emotionally, Beth feels as though she is still a small child, who genuinely would be unable to care for herself if Mom died. On one level, Beth has never adjusted to the fact that her mother will never nurture her to make up for her coldness when Beth was young. On another level, Beth has not yet come to terms with the human condition - that we are all alone, finally, in the world. And, from a spiritual perspective, Beth has not resolved her spiritual beliefs in a way that she can see her own death as anything less than a tragedy.

Complicated? You bet. As complicated as any parent-child relationship, and that may be the most complicated thing in the world. Consider these situations. Joyce, for

example, had always had a difficult relationship with her mother. Joyce felt her mom had tried to control every aspect of her life since childhood, and her mother's illness and concomitant dependency felt to Joyce just like one more attempt to control her. She was shocked and then guilt-ridden about the degree of rage she felt towards her ailing mother. Only when Joyce got help to separate the past from the present did her rage subside.

Mark, on the other hand, was puzzled at his rage towards his mother, who was suffering from Alzheimer's Disease, because Mark's relationship with his mom had always been loving. Then he realized that her disease and the loss of mental faculties it entailed made him feel abandoned by her several years before her actual death. Fortunately Mark's strong spiritual side allowed him to feel he made contact with a part of his mother that was beyond material reality, and his anger dissolved.

Allen also had a mother with Alzheimer's. But instead of anger, he felt extreme pain when he was with her. An objective third person pointed out that Allen's mother did not herself seem to be in particular pain. This allowed Allen to realize that he was projecting himself into his mother's situation, imagining what he would feel like if he had Alzheimer's.

Tony was faced with the choice of whether to care for his aging and disabled father himself or to put him in a nursing home. Tony's father had been severely abusive to him as a child and the relationship had remained strained in Tony's adulthood. Tony had an agonizing time concluding that he simply did not have enough love for his father to compensate for the arduous tasks involved in maintaining him in his old age. As difficult as it was for Tony to put his dad in a facility, he eventually reconciled this better than did his friend Harold, faced with a similar situation. Harold cared for his father, whom he hated, secretly feeling that when his father died he, Harold, would inherit enough money to serve as reparations for both his abused childhood and the caretaking. Harold's father didn't leave him a dime, and Harold was re-wounded and permanently embittered. Others, however, in situations where they must care for a parent they do not love or like, have come to terms with their feelings and been able to give care without resentment.

If you find yourself faced with a parent who suddenly or gradually needs you to take on the caregiving role, here are some guidelines to keep in mind:

- Sort out your own feelings about the parent, with professional help if necessary. Ideally, you want to be at the point where you can honor the parent for what he or she gave to you, forgive her/him for their faults and deficiencies, and above all see them as simple human beings - not mythical 'parents' - who are products of their own backgrounds, culture, and history.

- Set limits on what you can and will do. Don't try to be super-kid. Do call on your siblings to help, even if they have children and you don't. In most cases, the emotional and physical strain of caring for a sick parent is overwhelming for one person unassisted.

- Recognize that you will have a multitude of complex and seemingly contradictory feelings, and they are all normal. You will feel sad, angry, detached, frightened, panicked about their death and hoping for it at the same time, grieved when they do die but also relieved.

- Join support groups when appropriate. Allen found a support group for people

whose family members had Alzheimer's Disease. The group helped a lot, and he found he was by no means the only gay person in the group!

Strange as it sounds, the experience of having a dying or ill parent is an opportunity more than it is a tragedy. The Buddhists believe that one cannot fully appreciate life until one has experienced and grasped the meaning of death. If you use this experience for growth, you may find that you become mature and self-reliant as never before, that you give up your myths about needing a perfect parent yourself, and that you have a heightened sense of the preciousness of life and a new set of priorities for yourself. Our parents are, after all, nothing more than imperfect beings who gave us a start in life but then have little real relevance to how we live that life. Their passing is perhaps sad but merely part of the way of things. For those with a strong spiritual sense, their passing is only a passing of the body, and we realize we can retain what is good about their gift of life for as long as we need.