

CONVERSATIONS WITH CAROL #4

Words of Wisdom
By Carol Abaya, M.A.

I'm a pack rat. I learned the lesson well at my mother's knee. She was a pack rat par excellence.

This is Carol Abaya.

When I started this series, I told those with whom I'm working, all you have to do is come over to my house. I have information on everything we want to do. I'm a pack rat. I save everything. And I do! Periodically, I used to clean out my files and papers. Then the next day, I would need what the garbage men had just carted away.

So now I just save everything -- moving files from my office -- and wherever else they are in the house -- down into the basement. Thank god for crawl space.

I always tell the kids that I feel sorry for them when they have to clean out my 10-room house. I've gotten to putting notes on boxes -- Ruth, just throw out. Ruth -- save and go through. This way, they won't have to spend time going through all of the boxes.

I diverge -- yet I don't. My family has a tradition of saving pieces of paper. When we cleaned out my aunt's apartment, more than 20 years ago, we found grocery bills from the 1920s, from when my grandparents sold fruits and vegetables door to door.

I started going through boxes in my parents' basement, when my mother first became ill. I found the original bills from my parents wedding, the invitation and menu, the newspaper clipping announcing their marriage, and cards and telegrams sent by friends. I found of congratulations cards sent to them when my sister and I were born. Invitations to weddings and bar mitzvahs over the years.

I'm glad she saved these. When we were planning a surprise 60th anniversary party, my cousin took all the originals, and made a giant standup poster with all of these items. It's truly marvelous!!-

After my father's death, my mother started going through more boxes. One of the things she found and passed on to me was a little brown book, "Quotations to Remember."

In that little book (only 2 X 3 inches in size) she had marked a number of quotes. From these, I had new insight into my mother's own thinking process and mind. Emphasis in these marked quotes seem to be on dreams, aspirations, hope, love, giving of self to others, and "self" itself.

Many of these are so profound -- yet so simple and basic in concept -- that I want to share some of them with you.....

Many deal with general philosophies of life and living, regardless of one's age. Others relate so marvelously to sandwich generationers and their new role on the stage of life.

Even though several years have now passed, I still flip through the pages. Many of these words still strike me as illustrating the essence of life. They are very applicable to elder/parent care scenarios. I hope these words can bring a sense of peace to you. And in helping you, they can also help your parents as they are..

Wear a smile and have friend.
Wear a scowl and have wrinkles.
What do we live for if not to make the world
less difficult for each other. by George Eliot.

What we're talking about is the stress from your caregiving responsibilities. Your parent may not be a happy camper. He or she has become dependent on you for those little every day chores -- chores that are so easy to do when we can do them -- and so difficult when we need help.

If you approach your loved one with a smile and cheery words, you'll get a more positive response. and you may not get wrinkles -- at least, not yet.....

"To accept good advice is but to increase one's own ability." by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

I think this next one is very appropriate when it comes to caregiving. Scientists say we only use 5% of our brain power. This means that 95% should be open to new ideas. Flexibility is a key word in caregiving. So do listen to others. You can make it easier for yourself and your aging parent.

"You give but little when you give of your possessions.
It is when you give of yourself that you truly give." by Kahlil Gibran.

From my own experience people value people more than they do things.

I receive so many letters about gifts -- what should I give my mother. She never likes anything. so I say, give your mother some of your time. take her to a favorite restaurant, the mall, the theater, or like my own mother -- to the horse races.

"Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards. by Soren kierkegaard.

I never heard this name before. I still don't know who she or he is. But I thought it appropriate at the time when we have to deal with aging parents, especially if there had not been a good relationship when you were growing up. Perhaps, we all have a second chance. Certainly, everyone deserves this.

I recently received a letter from one of the readers in California of my nationally syndicated column, called the sandwich generation^{©™}. She said "I just wanted to let you know how much your sandwich generation^{©™} has meant to me during this past year.

I was the primary caregiver for my mom for 2 years, and though I loved my mom, sometimes my patience ebbed a bit, and I found your column to be a life saver. Mom died 2 months ago, and my grief is still raw. but I wanted to say thank you for your knowledge and compassion. Because of your advice my Mom & I were able to fully enjoy and express our depth of feelings. I will always be grateful. thank you

I think this note truly illustrates how caregivers can develop a better relationship with a parent. And using some of these words of wisdom as guidance can make a difference.

Determine that the thing can and shall be done, and then we shall find the way.
by Abraham Lincoln.

How appropriate, I thought, when I first read it. Great advice. You may be overwhelmed caring for a sick spouse or parent. But you should note that Lincoln says "Then we shall find the way." He doesn't say you have to do it all yourself.

"The first recipe for happiness is avoid too lengthy meditations on the past"
by Andre Maurois.

How many times do people keep recreating an unhappy past, rather than letting go?-- You may never have been "close" to your parent or had a good relationship. You may live far away, and really not know your parent as a person.

Give yourself and your parent a second chance. Everyone needs to get on with the happiness of today and tomorrow.

"One can never pay in gratitude; one can only pay 'in kind' somewhere else in life."
Anne Morrow Lindbergh.

You should read some of her poems. They really are marvelous.

"Make it thy business to know thyself, which is the most difficult lesson in the world."
Cervantes.

How true. How many people try to live up to someone else's expectations? You need to know your own strengths and weaknesses. In elder care, you need to do what you feel comfortable and capable of doing -- not what someone else tells you to. There is no 'proper' way

of caring for someone else. There is no right way or wrong way. There is no magic wand. Caring and loving are just too personal.

I love this one. Remember our second visit when we talked about choices and protecting ourselves so that strangers won't make important decisions for us?

"In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility."
by Eleanor Roosevelt.

And then there is this one, which gets to the very essence of life.

"Those who love deeply never grow old; they may die of old age, but they die young."
by Arthur Wing Pinero.

I'm going to use the word 'passion' instead of love. I don't mean this in a sexual way. It's love of life, who you are, and what you do. A 96-year-old woman played duplicate bridge several times a week. She hadn't been too well for quite awhile. But she told me, "If I didn't have this passion for bridge (and she waved her hands in the air) I probably wouldn't get out of bed each morning."

My father's passion was his vegetable garden -- well into his 90s. He loved to see things grow. And he loved to dole out his amazing tomatoes to a select few!! In fact, I had vegetables carved into his tombstone.

My mother's passion was two-fold -- selling houses and children. She sold houses until she was 89. And at 90, she tutored disadvantaged second graders in reading.

Here's one by William James that I think is so profound.

"Believe that you possess significant reserve of health, energy and endurance and your belief will create the fact." by William James.

As your parent needs more and more help, you have to reach within yourself to find "the path." It's not easy. You're being pulled in various directions from your other loved ones and maybe a job. But somehow we do find the strength to go on. I was faced with multiple problems suddenly, and somehow found the strength -- both physical and more importantly emotional -- to do what needed to be done.

And here is another one pertinent to my own life and experiences of being primary caregiver for my parents for 6 years.

“Life is the only real counselor;
Wisdom filtered through personal experience becomes a part of the moral tissue”.
by Edith Wharton.

All of you who are caring for a loved one know that this responsibility is more difficult if you don't have other family members nearby to help. All too often, care is left to one person - that person may be you.

You may not get the support you need from other family members. but there are others out there who can give you the support you need. You must not lose faith - and you must seek help from others. So, here is another very appropriate theme.

As Mahatma Gandhi said

“You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.” .

And this last saying from that little brown book, is very, very important to everyone -- whether you are an elder caregiver, or just someone trying to deal with the speed of life today.

“Get away from the crowd when you can.
Keep yourself to yourself, if only for a few hours daily.”
by Arthur Brisbane.

Besides saving pieces of paper, I collect refrigerator magnets. I picked up 3 at an aging conference in Washington several years ago. As today is my day for sharing profound thoughts, here are the words of wisdom from those 3 magnets.

“Stress -- is what happens when your gut says ‘no’ and your mouth says “Of course, I'd be glad to.”

I think this second one explains the many dilemmas sandwich generationers face. Remember our first visit? We talked about the fact that there are no societal guidelines for us as we become a parent to our parents.

“This life is a test -- it is only a test. If it had been an actual life, you would have received further instructions on where to go and what to do.”

Do remember that there is no one right way -- or wrong way -- to give care. There are only some more effective ways, given the people involved and the circumstances. As none of us have received ‘further instructions’, we all need to develop our own strategies.

And this last one is so appropriate to myself
“God put me on earth to accomplish a certain number of things.
I’m so far behind, I’ll never die.”

Well, our visit today is coming to an end. I do hope you’ll replay this tape so you can remember at least one or two of these words of wisdom. And I do hope these words will have meaning to you in your own life. I know they do for me.

Until tomorrow -- when even words of wisdom may not help make that tough decision of whether it’s time to stop driving. After all, driving, independence and self esteem are like a glove, going hand in hand.



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