

Caregiver's Corner Column (September 2014)

Living and Loving Together: A Gift for all Generations

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In the fall of 2013, it became clear that my mother-in-law could no longer live on her own. She was born and raised in the Detroit area and had been living on her own since her husband's death in 1986. She did not want to move to Grand Rapids, even if it meant living with her son and four grandchildren. We convinced her to come for a few weeks, just to spend time with us. She came with a small suitcase and a firm conviction that she'd be returning to her home in a few weeks. A short stay seemed to be an easier sell than to make a permanent move. While she never gave up hope that she'd return home, she seemed to accept and enjoy living with us.

Initially, we thought we were doing her the favor by bringing her into our home. Now she was taking her medications, receiving enough nutrition, and had the company of a busy household. What we soon came to realize is that it wasn't us who was doing us the favor, she was really giving us some of the most precious gifts we would ever receive.

It is not easy having multiple generations under one roof. In fact, if someone had told me almost 20 years ago that my mother-in-law would live with us, I would have told them they were crazy—she probably would have too. We were like oil and water. We did almost everything differently. I learned that when someone helps you, you don't discount their efforts because they don't do it the way you do. I learned to be gracious and grateful for small gestures of help, whether they were helpful or not. I learned that my way is not the only way to fold a towel, wipe a counter, or display pictures on a shelf. Life is too short to sweat that stuff.

With grandparents living with their children and grandchildren, discipline can become complicated. Weekend grandparents generally see their grandchildren for short periods of time, so their behavior is not an issue. When everyone is together 24/7, it is a different story. My mother-in-law was not shy about disciplining our children. However, we didn't want her to have to be the disciplinarian. We wanted her to have a "weekend grandparent" relationship with our kids.

It was on my husband to broach this subject with her. It was better coming from her son. This was a fine line to walk. She was very sensitive to what she would perceive as criticism, yet we had to establish boundaries. To complicate matters, her memory was failing her, so who knew if she'd remember the conversation. My husband, used to being the "son", had to learn new ways to communicate with his mom. I won't say that the conversation, and many on the same topic that followed, went perfectly. But each conversation got better. My husband became better at understanding his mom's perspective and how to phrase things. We also talked with our children about understanding what their grandmother was trying to communicate when she would discipline them. It was a learning process, but in the end, we all felt better about how we interacted and lived in "almost harmony".

We saw our children wait on their grandmother, clear her dishes, and ask her to play card games. Certainly, as she lived out her last months, she was very happy to be surrounded by her grandchildren and loved the time together, even if it was just playing "go fish". They learned to put down their electronics and spend time with grandma. I like to believe that she taught them that the gift of self and time is more precious than all the world's riches. This may not be a gift they fully realize today, tomorrow, or in the coming years, but it is a precious gift from their grandmother that they will have forever.

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