

GRACE AT WORK

Adopting Dad Into the Busy-ness of our Life

Part 1 of a 3-part series on balancing care for elderly parents with professional and family demands

by Christine Valentine-Owsik

My husband and I were making a typical Saturday trip down to my 77-year-old dad’s house – about an hour away – to help with groceries, cleaning, and organizing his bills.

Mom died five years prior, and dad’s attention to detail was waning. He’d stumble around with his canes, or “drive” through the house in his wheelchair.

Stains blanketed the carpets, curtains were drawn, junk-mail was piled everywhere, and refrigerated food was swimming in rot-juice. He wasn’t doing his laundry, not bathing regularly, and ate hot dogs and cupcakes as “meals.” He’d wash his medications down with Southern Comfort or yesterday’s coffee.

His lifelong vigor was fading. When we’d point out how messy the house was, he’d bark, “the hell with it.” He told us we were full of you-know-what and didn’t see any “spots” on the rug or mouse droppings on the kitchen counter. He was depressed at outliving my mother, and stopped “living” for anything – both in mind, and by his outward mess-rebellion. Dad was heartsick.

The Saturday visits were inadequate to keep him in order. Dad needed a change, and we knew it.

Driving back home, I told Joe that I couldn’t watch my wonderful father – who’d sacrificed everything for us – live in squalor. We needed to move him closer, so he could get timely help.

After investigating several seniors’ communities, Joe suggested we just move dad in with us. “Heck, by the time you

drive back and forth delivering groceries and taking him to doctors, he might just as well live here.”

I panicked.

What about our privacy, impromptu weekend trips, evening cocktails on the back porch? And my client work? We’d



Owsik family (l/r) Andrew, Joseph, Christine, Nicholas and (seated) dad, Victor Valentine

be trapped, on the hook round-the-clock, just as our kids were entering college and becoming more independent. We were married almost 20 years, and had “paid our dues” with being home-bound. *Do it all over again now with dad?*

Canvassing friends and relatives for consensus, we were shocked at their response. “Don’t do it. It will ruin your marriage, your lives, your attention to your kids.” Crushing. Though I was fighting losing my perceived freedom, I couldn’t bear their cold assessments of my father. The more they told us to run, *the more I felt pulled toward taking him in.* These were pro-life Catholics telling us to turn away our dad in his frailty. Something didn’t square.

A good priest-friend, Fr. Simon Shaner, whose family had gone through the same scenario, advised us differently. But I protested, telling him I had a business to run – after all, I did Catholic communications work. How much did God expect from me? I needed quiet time in my home-office for writing and media work. I was under enough stress. The local senior communities had social activities, and were equipped to deal with dad’s physical limitations. Senior complexes existed for this purpose. But Fr. Simon wouldn’t budge.

I consulted a final Source, which slammed me to the wall.

“A man’s glory comes from honoring his father ... Help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if he is lacking in understanding, show forbearance; and do not despise him all the days of his life. For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and against your sins it will be credited to you – a house raised in justice to you” (Sir 3: 11-15)

So, we talked to dad about building a small apartment onto our house for him. He jumped at it – something he said he’d never do ... “move in with his kids.”

But, was I ready for what God had in store?

Christine Valentine-Owsik is President of Valentine Communications (Doylestown, PA) which specializes in communication for Catholic organizations.