

Giving Back

Written by Gayle Nobel
Friday, 04 March 2011 16:18 -

My guest blogger this week is Carrie Bell. Carrie is a writer, editor, and parent.

I'd like to share a few things I learned about giving from my mother-in-law, who passed away last August. For most of her life, my husband's mother was a strong, independent, high-energy person who was better at giving than receiving. She couldn't do enough for me and other members of her family, but when we tried to reciprocate, she would say she had everything she needed. I felt I would never be able to repay all of her kindness to me. You might be thinking, "What a good problem for a daughter-in-law to have," and it was. But I am a giver, too, and the imbalance between us made me a little bit uncomfortable.

Then along came dementia, the brain disease that slowly robs people of their memory and ability to perform activities of daily living. In the early stages, my mother-in-law knew something was wrong. During visits, we noticed lists all over the house intended to remind her of things she had easily remembered the year before. When to put out the trash cans. How to start up the computer. The steps to prepare a dish she'd cooked a hundred times. There were also changes in her mood. Always energetic and confident in the past, she became increasingly anxious, paranoid and depressed.

I had never seen my mother-in-law so vulnerable and so in need of assistance. This was a terrible and unexpected turn of events, but it was also my opportunity to finally "give back." At first, her independent nature made her resist my efforts to help. She had never let anyone cook for her, clean her house, or take her grocery shopping. Over time, though, the resistance fell away. Her face lit up when I arrived at her door. We went on walks, shopped together, and drove to her doctor's appointments. She told me fascinating stories about growing up in Germany between the First and Second World Wars.

In that sad and difficult time, as my fiercely independent mother-in-law became completely dependent on others, the two of us became closer than we had ever been. I never expected that she would allow me to help her eat, dress and attend to her personal hygiene, but eventually she did. I discovered that I could set the tone for our interactions by approaching her with a smile and a note of enthusiasm in my voice for whatever we were about to do. I learned not to correct her mistakes in memory or behavior and not to focus on what was being lost to her disease. I also learned to be patient, not to rush, and never to be angry with her. She hadn't asked for this disease, after all.

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Our best times came when we were both “in the moment.” When we sat in a gazebo in the backyard of the group home where she spent her final days, I often saw her find joy in the smallest things. An airplane flying over. A flower in full blossom. A bird in a tree calling to its mate. By staying “in the now,” I found myself enjoying those simple things, too.

On reflection, I realize that during the period of my “giving back,” my mother-in-law may have still been giving more than she was getting. And I am grateful.