

PARENTING

Our Parents

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How to Transform This Remarkable Challenge Into a Journey of Love

That Christmas vacation when I first caught sight of my folks, who'd aged unrecognizably since my recent visit, and then saw the dirt and disorder that had taken over their immaculate home, I knew two things. The first was that **my parents needed assistance**. But almost as clearly, I saw that **I, too, would need help and lots of it**.

Although I had no idea then how much help I'd need nor where that help would come from, I did sense that something very different was happening and that major changes were ahead. As events unfolded, that prediction proved disarmingly accurate. It was a life-changing moment, and neither I nor my mom and dad would ever be quite the same again.

It seems unimaginable that my parents would conceal their health, home and how they'd been living from me, but it's not at all uncommon for older parents to do so. Like my parents, Jack and Lillian, your parents may also have feared the unknown consequences of inviting their family in to help them and, instead, resorted to hiding things from you.

As featured in **GUIDE FOR SPIRITUAL LIVING**

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Once I saw for myself what was really happening with my folks, I had to play catch-up for not having planned better, as well as deal with my grave concerns for their ill health.

When I was able to deal with the shock, slow down, respond rather than react and look more deeply, I discovered that my parents' needs were vast and pressing. It became apparent I would not only need to make sense of what was happening medically but step in to repair a whole laundry list of non-medical items for them.

I was beginning to understand that I would need to take on a different role ahead with Jack and Lillian, one requiring skills and qualities I generally associated with good parenting. This was new, however — it was parenting that appeared in a radically different context. It was by adult children who had turned around now to care for elderly parents who, so long ago, had cared for them.

I could even see ahead to the day when this role reversal would be fully realized: Many of us would quite naturally be "Parenting Our Parents™" (or doing POP™ for short). Here are a few of the vital lessons I learned while doing POP.

The Importance of Faith

One way POParents (my term for those of us parenting our parents) have more confidence is by relying on faith, having a notion that there's something bigger than yourself or what you can see. When life seems to be spinning out of control, your beliefs can be the source of relief and strength.

Many research studies validate the positive effects of prayer, affirmations and meditation in how people fare after illnesses, surgeries and other trauma.

Experiencing a beneficent force, a caring God or a kind universe may offer you a great deal of comfort and even some confidence during the most challenging POP days and nights. Whether or not your faith can change the outcome, you'll certainly function more effectively and feel better as POParents when you allow your positive attitude to keep you and your parents stronger.

Resetting Your Happiness Thermostat

In the early 2000s, I spent time studying with Dr. Martin Seligman and his extensive network of researchers and clinicians I named the "Happiness Scientists." Their rigorous studies validated some

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conclusions I'd also reached while working with patients in my office: Doing certain practices regularly and repetitively can and will retrain a brain's connections.

I learned that we can expand our capacity for real joy in life by consistently engaging in three activities: being grateful, granting forgiveness and savoring the good in our lives. As a result of doing so, we can reset the level of our "happiness thermostat," that internal mechanism that operates to regulate our emotions much like a thermostat regulates the temperature in our homes. One thermostat "raises" our environmental temperature and the other our internal happiness level. It was apparently up to me to move that dial.

Once Mom and Dad moved into my world in California, I reminded myself that I could — and probably should — adopt this happiness formula for myself. So on a daily basis, I began to invoke all three: gratitude, forgiving my parents and myself — mainly for being human — and delighting in the gift of this moment. I made the conscious choice to focus on the sweet side of the bittersweetness while doing POP.

While not denying my real sadness, especially when I anticipated the future of our POPcycle, I didn't see much utility in bathing in it

either. I would remind myself: Live in the present, Jane! Your parents are very much alive! After 35 years of living apart, I now had the chance to become closer and more loving with my family, and to accentuate the positive in all of that would add to its sweetness.

The POPcycle starts when the older generation begins to cede some decision making and control to the younger generation.

The younger generation — adult children — simultaneously find themselves taking on more and more responsibility for many aspects of their aging parents' (and other beloved relatives') lives.

POPparenting as an Opportunity

They'd been generous as parents, Lillian and Jack, sharing all they had with me: their time, their love and themselves. Now with this do-over, I asked myself if I could show my parents even more generosity and benevolence in my POPparent role than I'd yet shown them or even my kids. The second time around, now as the POPparent, could I do even better?

If I could parent my mom and dad with the best of what I was today (the more mature, spiritual woman I'd tried to become), maybe my mom and dad would receive better POPparenting from me now than the parenting my step-kids had gotten decades before.

Now I possessed more patience, compassion and even more humor than years before. Maybe at this point on my journey, I could do an even better job POPparenting Lillian and Jack than they'd done parenting me. What a crazy thought that was!

I'd long felt POP held the potential to be transformative, both to the POPparents and to the aging generation as well. As I more immediately anticipated my parents' mortal end and my own, I saw even more clearly that doing POP could absolutely change the participants' lives!

Healing Old Wounds With Forgiveness

To act as lovingly and generously as I wanted meant discovering the place in my heart where I was whole and unconditionally accepting of these two people I'd chosen to POPparent. My years of counseling and spiritual work had shown me that to know that kind of love I'd need to place forgiveness at the entryway to my heart.

To become a nonjudgmental and consistently generous POPparent, I would need to repair whatever wounds still remained unhealed from my own childhood. I began to envision how to do that, how to create a clean slate. I wished to discover if and how I could use all my thoughts and feelings, even the "unwanted" ones like sadness, anger and abandonment, in support of my goals. I understood that the road to the kind of loving state I hoped to offer them and myself was through forgiveness.

As odd as it sounds, I saw that I would need to forgive my parents — for just being human and making those "mistakes" that parents often make. At some time all parents neglect, scold, embarrass or even reject their offspring. My parents had. When I was parenting, I too did some of those things. To be able to lovingly and fully POPparent them now, I saw I'd need to forgive my parents for doing whatever unfortunate things they'd done all those years ago.

It wasn't long before I saw that there was someone else I'd need to forgive first. I would need to forgive myself even before my mom and

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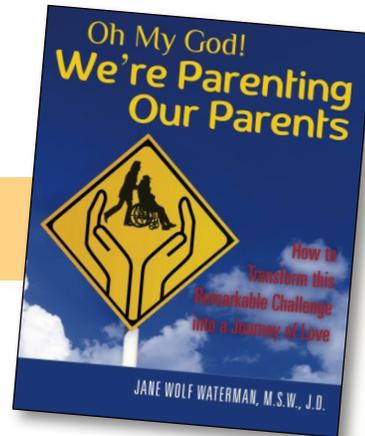
dad. I had learned over time that, when doing work on forgiveness, the first party to be forgiven is ourselves.

Forgiveness has been called “an inside job” because, after taking inventory of all our acts of commission and omission, it’s ourselves we must forgive first before we can truly forgive anyone else. Why? I have my theories but can’t say for sure. What I can say is that witnessing this happen hundreds of times has warranted the conclusion: Forgiveness starts with ourselves.

I knew that to become the POParent I aspired to be, I’d need to discover how to forgive myself — and thereafter my folks. ❧

Excerpted from the book
 “Oh My God! We’re Parenting
 Our Parents — How to Transform
 This Remarkable Challenge Into
 a Journey of Love.”

For more information, visit
ParentingOurParents.org.



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As featured in **GUIDE FOR SPIRITUAL LIVING**

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