

ROLE REVERSALS - IT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BE THIS WAY

By: Tim Mitchell, Fund Development Coordinator, Senior Care Partners PACE

"It wasn't supposed to be this way. All the years I was bathed, dressed, fed, advised, disciplined, ordered, cared for, or had every need anticipated, I wanted my turn to come when I could command. Now that it's here, why am I so sad?" Those words penned by the late author and humorist, Erma Bombeck, to describe the uncomfortable role reversal between child and parent.

She went on to say, "You bathe and pat dry the body that once housed you. You spoon feed the lips that kissed your cuts and bruises and made them well. You comb the hair that used to playfully cascade over you to make you laugh. You arrange the covers over the bare legs that once carried you. You accompany her to the bathroom and wait to return her to bed. She has a sitter already for New Year's Eve. You never thought it would be like this." (*If Life is a Bowl of Cherries - What Am I Doing in the Pits?* by Erma Bombeck)

When Bombeck was on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson in the early 1980's she talked about the day she realized the roles had been reversed between herself and her own mother. "I had been caring for my mother in different ways as she was aging, but I always felt like I was just the daughter caring for her mother with great devotion. After all, that's what daughters were supposed to do. But on one particular occasion I was driving on a rainy day with my mother in the passenger seat next to me when, all of a sudden, a car stopped abruptly in front of my vehicle. I quickly stepped on the brake as hard as I could and instinctively threw my right arm in front of my mother to



prevent her from falling forward toward the windshield. It was in that moment when it became immediately very clear to me that our roles had officially been reversed. I was now functioning in the 'mother' role of our relationship."

For some, like Erma Bombeck, there is that defining moment when the child becomes the parent. For others, it's not quite so defined. Instead, it happens very gradually and eventually you find that you have evolved into the parent in the relationship. No matter how or when it happens, there is a certain sense of sadness to know that your parent can no longer take care of you, but you must take care of your parent. It's not a sadness based on a lack of desire to fulfill that role, but a sadness based on the understanding that your parent is no longer able to be the parent in the relationship.

As difficult as it is for the adult child, the aging parent experiences even greater anxiety over the role reversal transition.

No parent wants to be a burden to their children, nor do they want to lose any of their independence. Yet, in spite of the resistance to role changes in the relationship by both parties, the inevitable still occurs at some point. The child morphs into the parent and the parent, usually reluctantly, transfers to the role of

the child.

Senior Care Partners P.A.C.E. recognizes the difficulty of this stage of life and is designed to assist families facing such a dramatic transformation by helping seniors stay as independent as possible and working with family caregivers to ease the challenging tasks of caring for an aging loved one. This is done by providing the PACE (Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly) participant medical care, socialization, in-home services, transportation, and much more.

Most participants and family caregivers with whom we work have experienced the dynamics of this role reversal. The function of Senior Care Partners P.A.C.E. is to be there for the participant as well as each family member as they adjust to their new role. Frankly, the role of a caregiver can be overwhelming depending on the care needs of the loved one. One overwhelmed caregiver shared her personal experience, "If it wasn't for Senior Care Partners P.A.C.E., we would have had to put Mom in a long-term care facility. But with Senior Care Partners P.A.C.E.'s help she is able to continue to live at home just like she wanted and I'm very happy we can honor her desire to be at home."

Senior Care Partners P.A.C.E. is here to help families who are experiencing this time of role reversal. To learn more about how we can help you as you transition roles within your family, please call us at (269) 441-9319 or visit our website at www.seniorcarepartnersmi.org. We would be very happy to discuss your particular needs and show you how we can develop a care plan specific to your aging loved one.