

Caregivers need to be careful

Pete & Shelley Aarssen - January 2025

So how was your Christmas and time off over the recent holiday period? Ours was filled with multiple family and friend gatherings, multiple events were often needed to balance our adult children's in-law's plans and everyone else's crazy but delightful efforts to see one another and to celebrate the reason for the season. Perhaps your holiday visits included extra time spent with your aging parents? Much has been written on the trillion-dollar wealth transfer of aging baby-boomers approaching the passing of their historically high-valued estates to their children soon, but not so much has been written on those children, and the aging baby boomers' responsibilities to care for their aging parents in the final years of their lives. Did you know that it is against the law to not care for your aging parents? Section 32 of the Family Law Act in Ontario states:

Every child who is not a minor has an obligation to provide support, in accordance with need, for his or her parent who has cared for or provided support for the child, to the extent that the child is capable of doing so.

Now, we don't recommend holding that fact over the heads of your children, to care for you as you age, in order for them to earn the right to inherit your estate one day but... What we're trying to point out is that over the holidays, we had the opportunity to visit many aged people. Pete's mom was in hospital for over eight weeks and has now recovered well, thankfully. All four of his siblings and their spouses along with ourselves made visits to see mom as much as their schedule allowed but we experienced many of the aged in chronic and long-term care beds seldom saw visitors or even their own children. They did see them, but it was quite seldom, and that seemed to leave a gaping hole in the hearts of these elders as they simply spent entire days lying in their hospital beds or in the common room staring out the window downcast and sullen. In defense of the caregiver, proximity matters as do the very real demands of their own familial and professional commitments but having said that, are we really 'self-less enough' to make time for the people in our lives who gave us life and spent years doing uncomfortable things in support of our diapered years and those difficult periods of adolescence that followed?

This is a challenging and personal issue needing much more said about it than this brief column affords. It's just that now that we are retired and in relatively good health, we have the luxury of proximity, sharing out the caregiving duties among multiple siblings and we have no fear of work-related consequences rising or the child-care needs that younger families may have to balance. It just seems to us, and maybe because we can imagine being in that hospital or long-term care bed ourselves in the all too proximate future, that children (ourselves included) can sometimes overstate their commitments and find difficulty freeing themselves up to visit their own parents. Look, it is sometimes an unattractive task; hospitals, observing one's mom or dad in a state of greatly diminished personal health but we, their children, are often all they have. It could be said that the bravest thing one can ever do is to do the thing that is the most uncomfortable and frankly, undesirable. It's not about to get a whole lot easier in the coming months and years ahead in our own familial situation and then sadly it will, albeit after we then mourn the loss of an irreplaceable person in our lives. Then, the shoe is on the other foot and we ourselves will be the 'elders' hoping to see our children choose to support us as we age, whether it is aging in-place with home and yard-care needs or should we have demanding temporary health episodes requiring their support, or should we be in a long-term care facility awaiting our last days. Think about the new year, if you have someone aged that you love, consider making a new year's resolution that you will never ever regret.