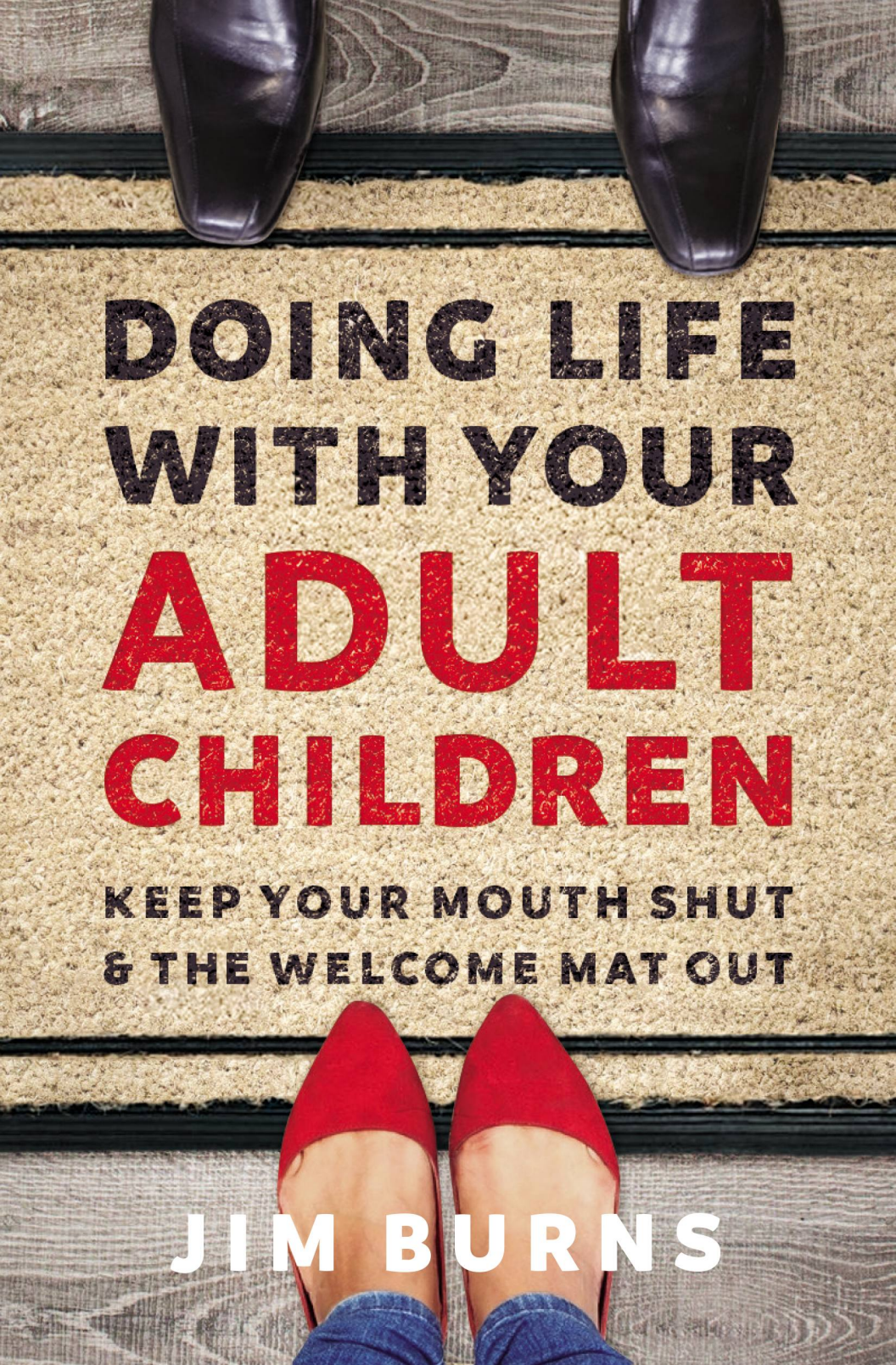

DOING LIFE WITH YOUR ADULT CHILDREN
KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT & THE WELCOME MAT OUT
JIM BURNS

If you have kids and they're grown up, or you think they might grow up, you gotta get this book. This is center-cut wisdom and prime guidance.

—JOHN ORTBERG, senior pastor, Menlo Church; author, *Eternity Is Now in Session*

If you have adult children (or you are about to), don't miss out on this timely message. It's inspirational, grounded, and immeasurably practical. We can't recommend it enough.

—DRS. LES AND LESLIE PARROTT, authors, *New York Times* bestselling *Saving Your Marriage before It Starts*

Jim Burns lives where you and I do. I love his practical, common-sense but biblical counsel. And he has a sense of humor to help us in the tough spots.

—RUTH GRAHAM, author, *In Every Pew Sits a Broken Heart*

Relating to adult children can be one of life's greatest challenges. For all who are looking for practical help, this book is a must read.

—GARY CHAPMAN, author, *The Five Love Languages*

In his latest book, Jim Burns offers practical, down-to-earth wisdom for the mom or dad who wants to journey through this transition in a healthy, biblically based way.

—JIM DALY, president, Focus on the Family

Jim Burns provides great solutions at several levels: engaging and vulnerable stories, biblical principles, and specific skills. You will change the way you relate to your adult kids for the better.

—DR. JOHN TOWNSEND, bestselling author; founder, The Townsend Institute of Leadership and Counseling

Jim Burns never ceases to amaze me. Yet another practical, encouraging book that you will turn to repeatedly to help you better love, listen to, and laugh with your young adult children.

—KARA POWELL, executive director, The Fuller Youth Institute; coauthor, *Growing With*

Healthy family relationships are the pearls of life; this book will help you not only to discover that but also to recover what may have gotten lost along the way.

—DR. WAYNE CORDEIRO, president, New Hope Christian College

This helpful, practical, and at times profoundly insightful book will help you either save or build your relationship with your grown children. You'll be immensely grateful you read it.

—CAREY NIEUWHOF, founding pastor, Connexus Church, Canada; author, *Didn't See It Coming*

DOING LIFE WITH YOUR ADULT CHILDREN

ALSO BY JIM BURNS

Confident Parenting

Creating an Intimate Marriage

10 Building Blocks for a Solid Family

Closer (with Cathy Burns)

Understanding Your Teen

Pass It On

The Purity Code

Teaching Your Children Healthy Sexuality

God Made Your Body (children's book)

How God Makes Babies (children's book)

Getting Ready for Marriage (with Doug Fields)

The First Few Years of Marriage (with Doug Fields)

Faith Conversations for Families

DOING LIFE WITH YOUR ADULT CHILDREN

KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT & THE WELCOME MAT OUT

JIM BURNS

ZONDERVAN®

ZONDERVAN

Doing Life with Your Adult Children

Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zondervan, *3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546*

ISBN 978-0-310-35377-5 (softcover)
ISBN 978-0-310-35776-6 (audio)
ISBN 978-0-310-35379-9 (ebook)

Published in association with the literary agency of WordServe Literary Group, Ltd., www.wordserveliterary.com.

Cover design: Brand Navigation
Cover photos: iStock / Shutterstock
Interior design: Denise Froehlich

Printed in the United States of America

19 20 21 22 23 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Two key experiences compelled me to write *Doing Life with Your Adult Children*—one at a Christian leadership conference and another in a series of focus groups.

My good friends Dan and Pam Chun, who lead HIM (Hawaiian Island Ministries), asked me to speak on "Parenting Your Adult Child" at their annual leadership conference in Honolulu. I must admit, as much as I love Dan and Pam, I laughed and said, "I have nothing to offer on the subject of parenting an adult child, and frankly, Cathy and I desperately need to *attend* that seminar." But the Chuns refused to take no for an answer, and I finally agreed to develop a seminar for the conference.

I opened my session with these words: "If you are anything like me, being the parent of an adult child is probably much more complicated than you ever imagined. Most of us have adult children—which is a bit of an oxymoron—who have violated our values and chosen a different path than we would have chosen for them." The crowd groaned in pained recognition. I have never had a reaction like that before. It seemed that nearly everyone at the seminar was navigating a complex story and living with mixed feelings about being a parent of

an adult child. After the seminar, I knew I'd hit a nerve when I spent two and a half hours listening to one story of difficulty after another.

A few years after the seminar in Honolulu, HomeWord held seven focus groups with parents of adult children. Our goal was to listen to parents and hear their felt needs. In six of the seven focus groups, at least one parent broke down and cried. Although not every participant was brokenhearted, I heard many painful stories of adult children who were violating family values and faith, cohabitating, struggling with addictions, divorcing, experiencing gender confusion, suffering financial complications, or failing to launch. These parents were filled with confusion, shock, and other painful emotions. Some blamed themselves, while others blamed spouses, ex-spouses, or the corrupting influence of contemporary culture. After experiencing the intense emotions and extreme interest of those in the focus groups, I knew my experience in Honolulu had not been a fluke. I needed to write this book.

I have spent the last several years researching this complex topic, listening to parents, and discussing these issues with parents and adult children alike. Cathy and I have lived out the principles on these pages with our own family. My goal has been to write a book that is both hopeful and enlightening, practical and life changing. You'll have to let me know what you think.

THANK YOU

To Cathy, for the amazing example you are to our children—and now to our grandchildren—of consistent faith and abiding love. I know I'm a very blessed man.

To Christy, Rebecca, and Heidi, for allowing us to "experiment" on you with our parenting skills! Even though the learning curve has been steep at times, you have become wonderful adults with whom we love doing life together.

To Randy Bramel, Tom Purcell, Rod Emery, and Terry Hartshorn: I look forward to being with you every Tuesday morning and I have learned so much from your lives.

To Cindy Ward, for more than fourteen years of partnership in ministry, for your tireless work ethic, and for the incredible example you are of a life well lived.

To Greg Johnson, for your friendship and for being a world-class literary agent.

To Sandy Vander Zicht, for your distinguished career in the world of publishing. I am so thankful and honored to have had the opportunity to work with you on this project.

INTRODUCTION

AN INVITATION TO KEEP THE WELCOME MAT OUT

Something wakes me up. I look at the clock and it is 2:30 a.m. I then discover what, or rather *who*, disturbed my sleep. It's my wife, Cathy. She is just lying there next to me with her eyes wide open.

"What's up?" I ask. "You okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay," she says. "I was just thinking about Becca."

"Is she okay?" I ask.

"I guess so," Cathy replies. "I just don't know."

I give her hand a reassuring pat. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No," she says, "just go back to sleep."

Most parents I've talked with have told me they lost sleep worrying about their kids when the kids were younger, but I've been surprised to discover how many parents of adult children tell me the same thing. I often hear statements like these:

- "My son's choices are breaking my heart."
- "I feel like I don't know what my role as her parent is anymore."

- "He needs to get a job!"
- "Every time I give my daughter some heartfelt advice, she bites my head off."
- "I'm still in shock that he doesn't go to church anymore."
- "Where did I go wrong?"

Can you relate? If so, know that you are far from alone and that the pages that follow were written with you in mind. Although this book can't magically take away any problem you have with your adult child, I hope it will give you the perspective, insight, and practical guidance you need to move your relationship in a positive direction. We'll tackle some of the toughest and most common issues faced by parents who are struggling with their adult children. And we'll explore nine principles that can help you through these thorny issues in productive ways.

It's important to me that you know these nine principles aren't just abstract theory. They were developed and applied primarily in the lab of doing life with my own adult children. Although my career has given me a platform to write and speak on topics such as parenting, marriage, and relationships, this is a much more personal book. I wanted to figure out how to be the best possible dad to my adult children, who are my deepest joy and greatest challenge. At this stage in my journey there is much more joy than challenge, but it hasn't always been easy.

The issues covered in this book come from our own challenges as parents, as well the challenges of thousands of other parents who have shared their stories with me. As I listened to story after story, I began to see patterns and commonalities. When I went looking for resources, I was surprised to discover that, compared with the literature available for the early years

of parenting, there is relatively little available about the challenges of parenting an adult child. Yet we will spend more time as a parent of an adult child than we will as the parent of a young child and adolescent.

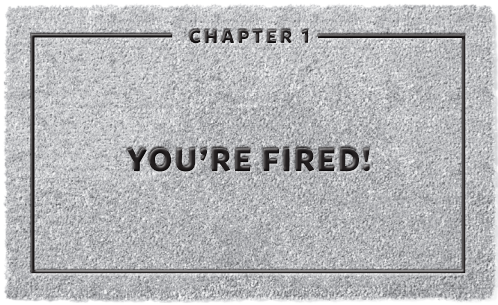
As I wrote the book, I kept an old Starbucks cup on my desk. It was a reminder that I wanted these pages to read more like a conversation between two friends talking about their kids than an expert doling out a monolog of advice. Friends tell stories and share dreams. Friends give ideas to each other and confess worries. Friends give each other hope and encouragement. I've often said that "people learn best when *they* talk, not when I talk."

If we were sitting together over coffee, we could have a great conversation. But since we aren't able to sit together, I've created questions for reflection at the end of each chapter. You can use them on your own or discuss them with your spouse or in a small group.[1]

My goal is to give you hope and encouragement on your journey. Like Cathy and me, you may have nights when you lie awake and wonder, *What in the world is going on with my kid?* Today, now that our kids have gotten older, we are experiencing the incredible joy of grandparenting and have made the transition from an adult-child relationship with our kids to our dream of an adult-adult relationship. Has it been easy? For us, not really. Have these principles helped us? Yes, immeasurably.

My prayer is that these pages will reassure you that life with your adult child can be the best years of your relationship.

Keep the welcome mat out.



PRINCIPLE 1: YOUR ROLE AS THE PARENT MUST CHANGE

"Be nice to your adult children. They will most likely be the ones who someday take away your car keys and usher you into the convalescent care facility."

I don't know about you, but as our three daughters became adults, we didn't see all the changes coming. When our kids were in their early twenties, they told us in one way or another that they were now grown up, even though—from our perspective—they weren't always acting like it. They wanted to be treated as adults but were still mostly dependent on our income and were making some lifestyle choices that collided with our values. "I thought life was supposed to be easier and less complicated when our kids became adults," my wife said.

Over the past decade, many people have told me that being the parent of an adult child was not what they expected. One woman quoted a line from the movie *Hitch*, in which the lead character says after a disastrous dating experience, "I saw that going differently in my mind." What parent of an adult child hasn't said something like that? Some kids who now live in adult bodies still act a bit like children. Or at least their parents think so.

Here is the good news: most adult children eventually do become responsible and independent. They may zigzag through their younger adult years, taking a few steps forward and a few steps back, and there might be a U-turn or some false starts

along the way, but it eventually happens. The challenge is that becoming an adult seems to be taking longer for this generation than it has for any previous generation. And that slower transition isn't easy for the parent or the adult child.

Although you and your child are traveling different paths, you're on a parallel journey of reinventing your relationship. It's better when you navigate it together, but neither of you have passed this way before, and even if you have made the transition with one child, the next child likely will approach the transition to adulthood differently. You might find yourself with some degree of day-to-day parenting duty that stretches past the eighteen-year mark—or even the twenty-five- to thirty-year mark, especially if your adult children move back home for some reason. You no doubt will experience bewilderment when your grown kids violate your values or live differently from how they were raised, but your goal must remain the same: to help your children transition to responsible adulthood. To do that, you need to first understand your old job description as a parent and then create a new one.

YOUR OLD JOB DESCRIPTION

When our kids were young, my wife, Cathy, and I felt fairly comfortable in our parenting roles. It wasn't always easy and there were some bumps in the road, but for the first two decades we were clear about our jobs. We were in control and it was our clear-cut responsibility to be our children's providers, caretakers, and nurturers. Even if our kids disagreed, they knew that ultimately we were the bosses.

Then adulthood abruptly showed up, and we weren't ready

for it. For us, it happened on the day each kid went away to college. Now they were setting their own hours, making travel decisions we didn't always agree with, and spending money on things and experiences we would not have approved of just a few months before. To them, church attendance was now an option rather than a commitment. Cathy and I realized we were losing a part of our parenting job description that we liked, which was the control. In a very short amount of time, we moved from having daily input in our kids' lives and doing hands-on parenting, to more of an intermittent and distant kind of parenting. Most transitions aren't easy, and we found the transition from our old job description to be especially challenging.

It's important to acknowledge your old job description as a parent so that you can set it aside. That's the only way to make room for your new job description. It's also important to know that this transition of moving from daily involvement and hands-on parenting to a more intermittent involvement will likely be an easier move for your kids than it is for you. Expect to have a transition period within your transition. In our case, we thought of it as a unique and somewhat awkward dance in which neither we nor our kids knew the right moves. There was plenty of stepping on toes and renegotiating boundaries until we found our rhythm with each other. And just when we thought we were dancing well with one child, the next child went to college and we had to do the awkward dance all over again.

YOUR NEW JOB DESCRIPTION

Since all children are different, there is no template for a new job description for parenting adult children. You may have to

redefine your role differently for each of your kids. But before you can create that new job description, or better yet a new kind of relationship with your adult children, there is one important thing you need to do. You must love them enough to let them go. Rewriting the script and establishing a new adult-to-adult relationship with your kids requires firing yourself from your old job of day-to-day nurturing and being "in control" of your kids, and embracing a new role that is not as daily or as hands-on as before. Hard as it is, the role you play in your children's lives must diminish in order for them to transition from adolescence to responsible adulthood.

If you are in or have already been through this transitional stage, you know that it's complicated, often messy, and can sometimes feel like you're walking on eggshells. One dad I know described it this way: "My son and I had been very close, even in the teen years," he said. "As he approached adulthood, I kept doing what I had always been doing, but my son reacted

---

A Prayer of Relinquishment

God, I relinquish my children to your care and watchfulness. Give me the courage to let go as they move—sometimes ever so slowly—toward responsible adulthood. Grant me discernment to know when to carefully intervene, and the restraint to do so only when absolutely necessary. I acknowledge that this is one of the hardest transitions I have ever had to make, and that I need your guidance and insight. In all things, help me to love my children as you love them—lavishly and with grace. Amen.

---

in strange ways. Most of the time, he didn't want my advice. I'm a pastor, and frankly, I give good advice. Regardless, he moved away from my control but still wanted my influence—on his terms. It took a few years and some bumps and ego bruises along the way to figure out what this new adult-to-adult relationship would look like." He went on to say, "Sometimes we still experience bumps in our relationship, especially when he is making decisions I'm not happy about. But I've had to realize that his vision for his life is different from my vision for his life. One of the most difficult things I had to do was relinquish my adult child to God and release my control over him." My friend eloquently described the idea of reinventing the relationship to help his son become a responsible adult.

Although there are no formulas or job description templates for making the transition to an adult-to-adult relationship with your child, Cathy and I discovered some meaningful strategies to help you along the way. We called these our guiding principles and needed to refer to them often, especially at the beginning of the transition. The quicker you can embrace your new role and, yes, even grieve the loss of your old role, the better it is for everyone. Here are four strategies to help you embrace your new job description.

1. Be encouraging but not intrusive. You are a consultant at their will. Your job is to be caring and supportive of your child, to mentor only when called upon, and to be your child's biggest cheerleader. Don't be like the mother who told her daughter, "Honey, put on your coat. It's cold outside!" Her daughter, who was vice president of a successful tech firm, shot back, "Mom, I'm forty-five years old and I can decide for myself when I put a coat on!" Her mother simply added, "I'm still your mother and

you need to listen to me." As well-meaning as the mom may have been, her daughter considered her intrusive.

Being intrusive means inserting yourself into your child's life in ways that are uninvited or unwelcome. Not being intrusive means promoting your child to full adult status and developing a new adult-to-adult relationship, while at the same time being encouraging and supportive. One of the ways Cathy and I learned to be encouraging was to hold our tongues and not say everything we thought. Instead of giving voice to whatever we disagreed with, we focused on cheering whatever we could affirm.

My friend Rob summarizes his approach to being encouraging rather than intrusive this way: "Earn the right to be heard." Rob was concerned about his daughter Angela's lifestyle choices. In one encounter, he pulled out a "dad list" of concerns and went through them one by one. Needless to say, it did not go over very well with his daughter. The result was tears and anger. The more he expressed his disapproval, the farther away Angela moved from what had once been a close relationship. So Rob changed his approach. One day he called her up and said, "How would you like to go snowboarding together for a couple of days?" Angela loved to snowboard and Rob thought she would jump at the chance, but she hesitated before accepting the invitation. It was clear she didn't want a repeat of their conversation.

The day before Rob arrived to pick up his daughter, he was tempted to write up another list of concerns he wanted to discuss. He decided instead to put all of his energy into simply enjoying and encouraging his daughter. Even though he still had concerns, he also had strong reasons to affirm her. Rob and Angela had a wonderful weekend together, laughing, sharing,

and eating good food. Even so, as Rob drove home after dropping her off, he wondered whether he'd done the right thing by not talking with her about his concerns.

Rob didn't have to wonder for long. Just as he pulled into his driveway, he got this text from Angela: "Dad, that was one of the best times I've ever had with you! Thank you so much for snowboarding and the great meals. I love you so much. Oh, also, I know you probably had your 'dad list' with you, and I wanted to give you a quick update." Angela went on to tell her dad that she was making some changes in many of the areas in which he had concerns. Today, she is happily married and still very close to her dad, who has become a mentor to her. He chose to be encouraging and not intrusive, and the results were twofold: he earned the right to be heard, and he developed a more positive and trusting relationship with his daughter.

Being encouraging rather than intrusive is one of those disciplines in which you might find yourself taking four steps forward and then a step or two backward. In our hearts we know encouragement is much more effective than intrusion, but it's not always easy to do. So go easy on yourself if you fall back into old habits, but practice the discipline of encouragement. You'll get a much more positive response with affirmation than with meddling.

2. Be caring, but do not enable dependency. There is a difference between caring and enabling dependency. Clearly, your new role involves loving care, but it can't be a form of care that keeps your child dependent on you. Some parents keep tight reins on their adult children because they are unknowingly struggling with their need to be needed. Their motives may be admirable, but caring that enables dependency isn't healthy.

Take John and Sylvia, for example. They took money out of their retirement savings to loan their son and his new wife the money to buy a very nice home. That may seem like a loving thing to do, but John and Sylvia didn't have the money to spare. Now they are suffering through some rough financial situations while their son and daughter-in-law enjoy a home that neither they nor their kids can afford. They are helping to make monthly payments to keep the kids from losing the house. John and Sylvia viewed their loan as caring for their son and daughter-in-law, but the truth is that they were enabling dependency. If they had it to do over again, they would not have used their retirement savings to buy their kids a dream house they couldn't afford on their own. It's a classic example of a generous act that backfired. It's what happens when we confuse caring with enabling dependency.

So what else might John and Sylvia have done? They could have allowed their kids to learn delayed gratification by saying no to the down payment. Or agreed to help out with a down payment on a more modest home the kids could afford on their income. The best decision is always one that does not enable dependence.

Your job as a parent is to prepare your kids for adult life and then let them go. You are still their parent and that will never change, but the relationship must transition from dependency into a place of greater empowerment and maturity for your child. Independence is the goal. This means your adult children take full responsibility for their finances, actions, relationships, and growth and development.

3. Invest in your emotional, physical, and spiritual health. Brenda and her husband, Ted, sat in my office brokenhearted.

Their daughter Lindsay had just moved in with her boyfriend. She had also confessed to something they had long suspected, which was her use of illicit drugs.

"What did we do wrong?" Brenda asked. "It seems like everyone else's adult kids are making better decisions than ours."

"Maybe we should have made Lindsay go on more mission trips," Ted said.

"Every year at Christmas when we saw the picture-perfect families in cards and on social media," Brenda lamented, "we had the same thought: 'What is wrong with our parenting skills?'"

Although they couldn't name it, Brenda and Ted were experiencing shame. As our conversation continued, we considered how to deal with Lindsay's problems, but I also asked them about a problem I wasn't sure they knew they had.

"Lindsay's actions must be devastating to you," I said. "It sounds like you are really depleted." Ted nodded and Brenda's eyes filled with tears.

"What are you doing to maintain your emotional, physical, relational, and even spiritual health?" At this, Ted's eyes welled up with tears and Brenda began to sob. Ted put his arm around his wife and said simply, "We aren't doing anything for us. And it's killing us."

My heart went out to them because I knew the pain of a troubled child was depleting them in so many ways. My counsel wasn't anything new, but it seemed to help them.

"I'm sure you've heard what a flight attendant says when you get on an airplane, right? If there is a need for oxygen, put on your own oxygen mask first and then help your child." The looks on their faces told me that they understood.

You won't be of any benefit to your child if you are gasping for air. Working on your emotional, physical, and spiritual health not only helps you to be stronger for your child but also helps you to gain a clearer perspective on any shame or regret you may be feeling.

When kids make poor or disappointing decisions, many parents experience the silent shame Brenda described. A friend of mine once said to me, "When your children are young, they climb all over you and step on your feet. When they are older and make poor choices, they step all over your heart." Of course, not all adult children break their parents' hearts, but the transition is still difficult for most and usually involves a great deal of loss. Author Judith Viorst is right when she says, "Letting our children go, and letting our dreams for our children go, must be counted among our necessary losses."[2]

Whenever we experience a loss, we need to grieve it. If we don't grieve the relationship we once had with our children, we won't be able to embrace the new relationship we want to have with them. When our children no longer need us the way they once did, that's a loss. I'm reminded of this every time I watch my grandson, James. I love how his mommy and daddy are the center of his universe—he needs them for everything. But it's also a bittersweet experience when I realize that I was once the center of my children's universe, and now I'm not. For my children to be healthy and independent, I had to release them and grieve the loss.

Being willing to put yourself in the back seat of your children's lives—and to grieve the loss of the front seat—is what gives you the chance to change the relationship and make it wonderfully different. But that won't happen if you aren't

emotionally, physically, and spiritually healthy yourself. That's why you must invest in self-care as your role with your adult kids changes. A friend of mine puts it this way: "Untended fires soon become nothing but a pile of ashes." If you put all of your energy into caring for your adult kids, you'll only end up depleted. "Self-care is not selfish," writes my mentor, Gary Smalley. It is perhaps the best thing you can do for yourself and for your family.

Self-care means being proactive in caring for your mind, body, and soul. That might include spending time with people you enjoy, engaging in activities that replenish you, being physically active, or even trying something new and exciting. If you have an adult child who is struggling, you will also want to surround yourself with a team of people who can be your support. Take it from Moses.

Remember the story in the Bible when the Israelites were battling the Amalekites? When Moses held up his hands, the Israelites advanced against the Amalekites, but when he grew weary and could no longer hold up his hands, the Amalekites advanced against the Israelites. So Aaron and Hur found a stone for Moses to sit on and each man held up one of Moses' hands. With their help, Moses' hands remained steady throughout the long battle, and the Israelites won a great victory against the Amalekites. As you navigate the losses and challenges of transitioning your relationship with your adult children, make sure you have a team around you to share your burdens.

4. Have serious fun. Transitioning to a new role isn't all loss and tears. There is also some serious fun to be had! You can't determine the outcome of your children's lives, so shift your focus to creating fun and enjoyable experiences you can share.

"A cheerful heart is good medicine," wrote wise King Solomon, "but a broken spirit saps a person's strength" (Prov. 17:22 NLT). Your attitude toward your adult children will go a long way toward determining your relationship with them. Families that laugh and develop happy traditions draw closer to each other over time. One of the principles Cathy and I have relied on is this: "Words don't always lead to connection, but enjoyable connections lead to words." What are the activities and experiences your adult children enjoy? Chances are good that engaging in those activities with them will enhance your relationship. For many adult children, the fun factor is what determines their desire to relate to their parents on a deeper level.

When I was in grad school, I studied traits of healthy families and later wrote a book on the subject.[3] One of the top ten traits is play. Come to find out, families who play together really do stay together. Play, fun, laughter, and the creation of lifelong memories are essential for keeping your relationship with your adult kids strong. Play is a "love currency" that makes a deposit into your children's lives no matter what their age. Having fun together also can open a closed heart (as it did with Rob's daughter Angela), reduce stress, and even help heal broken relationships.

How is the fun factor in your family? One of the great benefits of moving from a parent-child relationship to an adult-adult relationship is that you can begin a deeper friendship with your adult child. One of the strongest elements of friendship is having fun together. If you want to transition well, make initiating fun part of your new job description. And keep in mind that fun doesn't have to be expensive. It might be sharing enjoyable meals, playing golf, window shopping, or anything your family

enjoys doing. What are the fun experiences that will draw your relationship closer?

Embracing these four strategies for adopting a new job description can turn a tough transition into a meaningful transition. Too often we focus on how to manage our kids' transition to adulthood when the best way to facilitate their transition might be to change our job description. No one said it would be easy or that there wouldn't be bumps along the way, but changing your job description is a great way to start. The result is that your legacy continues to the next generation.

LEAVING AN IMPACTFUL LEGACY

During a time of tension or deep disappointment, it can be difficult to think about creating a positive legacy for your children, but don't give in to despair or minimize your power to create a positive climate of influence and leave a legacy in your children's lives. Your attitude, lifestyle, values, faith, and example impact your kids in ways you may never fully know. Author and pastor Chuck Swindoll summarized building legacy so well when he said, "Each day of our lives we make deposits in the memory banks of our children." I know that was certainly the case with my parents.

My father had his flaws, but he was a good man and I looked up to him. At the end of his life, he was quite feeble, and he fell and broke his hip while using his walker. The doctor told us he thought he could fix the hip, but he was concerned that if Dad didn't get up and move around after the surgery, he would die of pneumonia. Two weeks later, after a successful hip surgery, he was indeed placed in hospice care because he hadn't

gotten up and moved around. He eventually died exactly as the doctor forewarned—from pneumonia.

I was alone with my dad in his room at a convalescent hospital a few days before his death when an energetic physical therapist came into the room and asked my dad to get up because it was time for physical therapy. I thought that a bit strange given my dad's condition but decided to watch what would happen. Dad gave it a valiant try, but he almost fell out of bed in the process. I jumped up and caught him. The physical therapist seemed surprised at his frailty and then noticed she had the wrong chart!

"Bob, how did you break your hip?" the therapist asked.

"It was a motorcycle accident," Dad said without missing a beat. I smiled. The therapist looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"Actually," I said, "he fell from his walker, but he did have a motorcycle accident about forty-five years ago."

She smiled, looked back and forth between Dad and me, and then said, "Bob, this guy looks like he is your son. Do you have any other children?"

"Yes," Dad said, "his mom and I have four boys." He listed our names. He then added, "And I'm proud of all my boys." It brought tears to my eyes to hear Dad say that about us. "I'm looking forward to being with God soon in heaven," he added.

The therapist didn't quite know how to respond to that. She smiled again.

"I've lived a good life and I really have no regrets," Dad said. "God is waiting for me in eternity." At this point, tears again welled up in my eyes, and when I looked at the physical therapist, I saw she also had tears in her eyes. She lovingly put her

hand on my father's shoulder and said, "Goodbye, Bob. You are a good, good man. Thank you."

Later, as I reflected on what my dad had said, I was reminded of the studies psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross had done on death and dying. As a researcher, Dr. Kübler-Ross spent many years interviewing people who were near death. One of her findings was that at the end of life, most people think primarily about two things: a right relationship with God, and a right relationship with those they love.

This was certainly the case with my dad. In his final days on earth, he was at peace, and that taught me a valuable lesson: there is absolutely nothing more important in life than a right relationship with God and a right relationship with family. Ultimately, that's what defines the legacy you leave your children. As difficult as it is to raise children and then maintain that bond through the complexity of relating to them as adults, what matters most isn't the material legacy you leave behind but the legacy of love and faith you hand down to the next generation.

When our kids are younger, most of us are so busy with the demands of day-to-day parenting that it's hard to focus on leaving a legacy. But as your role and job description change, you can focus on what is most important, which is leaving your child a legacy of love.