

Voices: Lessons from the nineties

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When a couple has a child, they begin a lifelong vocation of teaching. Sometimes the lessons are intentional: how to tie a shoe, read a story or do algebra homework. But, very often, the teaching is unplanned as parents offer lessons by simply living.

My parents, Ray and Nancy Ellis, have been teaching me for all of my 62 years. Sometimes the lessons were intentionally taught, but, even more often, they were just caught. My parents, now nonagenarians (in their 90s), are living out before me lessons as valuable as they have ever taught me.

My father is a Baptist minister, most of whose career was spent teaching Greek and administering graduate studies at Hardin Simmons University. In fact, he was my Greek professor for two years as an undergraduate at HSU.

My mother was a public school teacher for a number of years, and, even now at their retirement center, she continues to teach the Bible, which I estimate she's done for over 80 years in one context or another.

My parents are still my teachers, too, as senior adulthood sneaks up on me. I've got so much to learn from them.

Realism and optimism

About three years ago, my mother decided on her own that she and my dad, who struggles cognitively after a stroke, should move from the house they've lived in for almost 50 years and relocate to a retirement home. Not

all adults can make this difficult decision on their own, but a strong streak of pragmatism, along with the wisdom to know what was beyond her capacity to do for my dad, pushed her to make this significant life change.

It was a good decision.

Since then, my dad has had a second stroke, and they've had to move to another facility where he has skilled nursing and Mom has an apartment a floor above. Yet again, my mother is demonstrating, by her decision to move where there's more help, how to live into reality and lean into the hard thing that needs to be done.

Grit. She's got grit, and I hope I'm learning the lesson.

Mom's strong streak of pragmatism is accompanied by remarkable optimism. Like many in the Greatest Generation, she typically chooses to push back against discouragement and self-pity, usually *deciding* she will be happy, even when it's hard. To be sure, there are complaints natural to a constricted lifestyle, but Mom looks for the good in every day.

In Dad's current circumstances of little short-term memory, he's more often mentioning experiences from the distant past, like recalling what it was like to be an 18-year-old soldier in Calcutta during WWII. Recently, he commented about being a private in the army. "The best thing to do is to shut up and do as you're told, even when you don't like it."

Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he said, "That comes in really handy around here, too," gesturing toward the nurses' station. Then he followed with, "I'd rather be home, but it's good to have places like this when you need them."

Choosing to embrace realism mixed with positive good humor: that's a valuable lesson to give your children.

Love and service

My favorite time of the week to visit my parents is on Sunday afternoons when they've wheeled Dad up to Mom's apartment where they eat sherbet together, chat and watch TV. They are so gently felicitous to one another, and the tender good-bye kiss before dad returns to his floor never fails to melt me.

They are profoundly in love as they approach their 70th wedding anniversary this December. They live out the words of Paul: "Love never fails."

Dad is a humble, brilliant man with an unflagging minister's heart. About a year ago, he said, out of the blue, "I was wondering how I can be of help to other people. I can't teach or preach anymore. I've got to have assistance just to get around; people have to do so much for me. And I've been thinking about whether I can serve Christ here. Then it came to me: I can be kind to everyone who comes in my room. I can say something to lift them up and let them know they are important. That's what I can do."

The aging process can be cruel. Vitality slips away as life seems to shrink to such a small space. Yet my father shows me that the Imago Dei within the true servant of God simply finds another way to shine, another way to be the presence of Christ.

May I learn the lesson, too.

Gratitude and hope

On Dad's 92nd birthday, my mom, who's always been a creator of fun, planned a party for him with family and a couple of friends. When everything was ready, I went down to wheel Dad up to the parlor. He was lying on his bed, dressed for the party by the nurses, with his eyes open —

a rarity since he falls asleep so often and easily.

“Hey, Dad, how are you?”

“I’ve been thinking about what a remarkable life I’ve lived. I’ve seen so much, and I’ve been given a wonderful family, so many good things to enjoy, and good things to do. It’s been a wonderful life — not that I’m ready for it to end right now. But someday it will, and then it’ll get even better.”

At 92, he’s teaching me how to live well, with gratitude and hope.

My gray hair and sagging face lead acquaintances to periodically ask if I’m thinking about retirement. The answer is an unqualified no.

I’m a doer, and my work gives life a lot of value. In fact, retirement looks to me like the most boring job ever. But it will come eventually, as will declining health. And my parents are showing me how to navigate it with grace.

My parents are also teaching me about living well now, as they always have, for they are giving witness to

- Leaning into reality and courageously making hard choices
- Choosing optimism in the face of challenges and uncertainties
- Knowing the value of pushing everything else aside in order to love those who are most precious and to be loved by them
- Seeing the goodness in everyone around and affirming the dignity of each with kindness
- Receiving joyfully and giving gratitude for the countless good gifts of life, now and forever

As disciples of Christ, we are lifelong learners and also lifelong teachers.

Thanks be to God for the lessons of our elders. May we learn them well so that we may live well.

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