



The LEADERSHIP LOG

More than 40 years of informed opinion about issues facing elders today.

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From the Desk of James F. Seagle, Jr. President, Rogerson Communities



It was winter 1980, our used Volvo station wagon, packed to the gills with child support paraphernalia, started acting up. Barbara, our three kids and I were on the Mass Pike on the way to her parents house in Connecticut. It was blowing and cold. Kronk – Kronk – Kronk - the engine noise spelled fatality and we limped into a service area. (Remember – no cell phones). At 10° outside, checking the damage, calling for help, then moving all the stuff to a friend's smaller car (a high chair lashed to the roof) was no picnic. But, the tow truck driver would only take cash and he took every dollar I had. No one loves car trouble; the vulnerability of it makes me nuts – I would rather a hot poker in the eye. As I eased the friend's car back onto the Pike, I had a death grip on the steering wheel, jaw clenched; I could have bitten a nail in two. From the backseat came the words from a Bob Dylan song, "Close your eyes, close your door, you don't have to worry anymore, I'll be your baby tonight." It was Oliver, our three year old, singing in perfect pitch from his car seat. All the poison drained out of me.

My message to you is about the value of caring, or taking care with others. Part of caring for Oliver was to read stories and sing songs every night as the bedtime routine. We all have a host of others for whom

we have some caregiving role; some formal, some informal with a wide range of intensity and duration. Oftentimes, you may not even count the smile you bestow on the stranger or the offer to help someone with car trouble as caregiving – it really counts. Caring for others goes all the way from a pat on the back to a kidney donation and everything in between. The value is often more obvious to the one for whom care is given than to the caregiver; but, the value goes both ways. Acting in a caring way for others reassures the caregiver that benevolence is at work in the world. An early onset Alzheimer's patient at Rogerson House told us that simply watching the careful treatment of the other more advanced day program participants moderated his fears about his personal future with the disease.

Caring for others is, I believe, embedded in instinct as well as a learned behavior. When done with good intention and respect it can be helpful for all people involved. It becomes a problem when the motivation is wrong or the demand for care unreasonable. It is especially dangerous for elder caregivers who, when stressed by the caregiving role, suffer twice the rate of clinical depression as their cohort and die at a 60% higher rate. Our programs aim to alleviate that strain in the families we serve. The most helpful caregiving exchange is where care is actively requested by the individual and then freely given by the caregiver; and, where the caregiver has the resources to adequately provide the needed support.

The positive energy set in motion from taking care with others, I believe, is never exhausted in the world. And, it just may come back to the caregiver in another form at another time. I invested that song with Oliver and it came back just when I needed it. He finished the whole lyric, "Kick your shoes off, do not fear, bring that bottle over here, I'll be your baby tonight." I'm pretty sure he was thinking of warm milk in that bottle.

Please, take care -