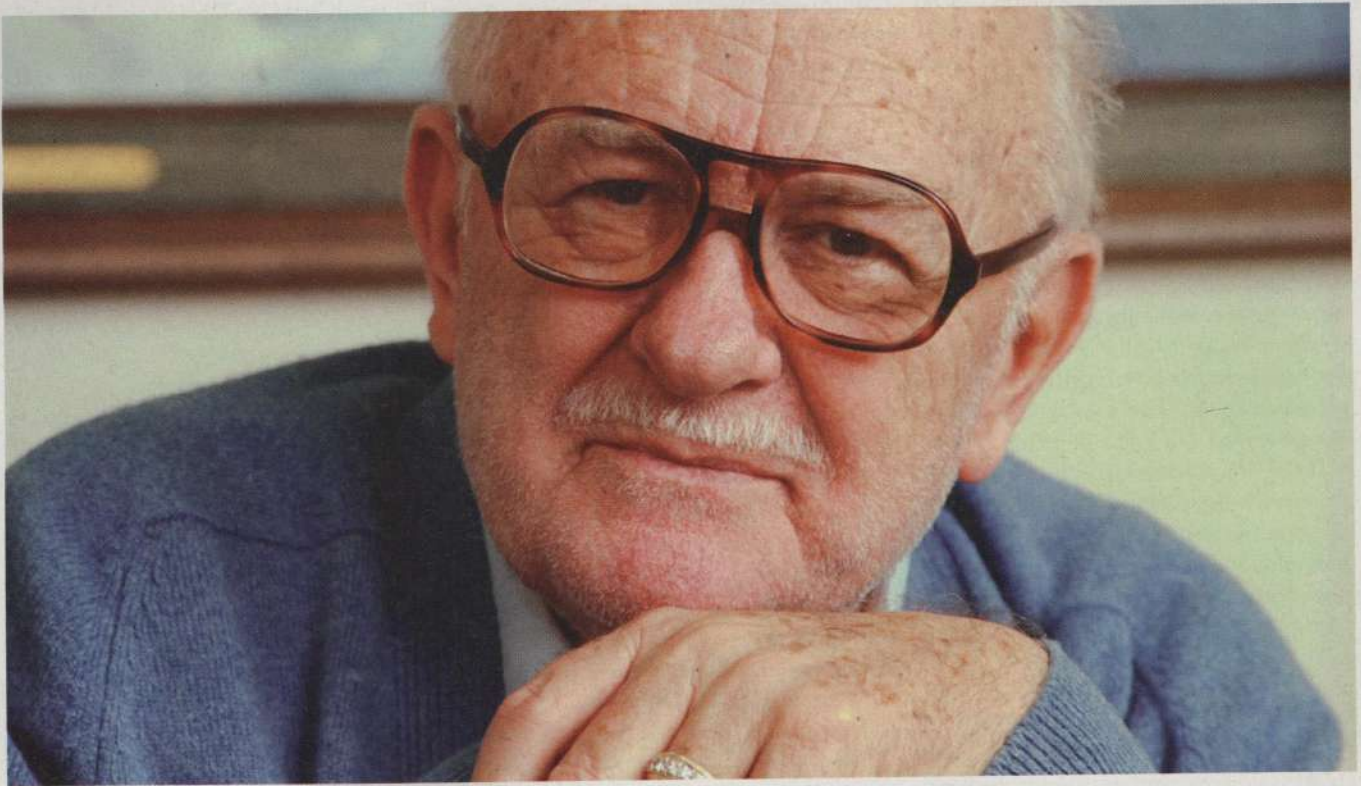


My Father the Toddler

By: Elizabeth Barr, writing as (By Karbyn Eilde)



I'd like to start this conversation with a flashback to 20 years ago, when I was still living "on the farm" at a rural income-sharing community. Although the "income-sharing" part is what usually gets the most press, the "community" part was the most important to me at that time in my life, as I was deep in the throes of toddler-dom with my first child.

She was sweet-natured and happy, easy to get along with and eager to help out however she could. She loved to paint and draw and take things apart to figure them out, and in general she was a creative and intelligent little girl who was an interesting conversationalist from a very young age. In short, she was delightful, and she was adored and doted on by all.

All that notwithstanding, young children do require constant attention, especially during infancy, toddlerhood, and the early years of childhood. It is a life stage that is both physically and mentally exhausting for the parents and so I say *thank goodness* for my community during that time in our lives, or we might not have made it safely through the fog of exhaustion that is typical for parents of toddlers.

Now skip ahead 20 years from those days to my life now, and I find myself in a similar caregiving role, only this time with my aging father. He has been staying in my home for the past month and the similarities are numerous and poignant.

My father is also sweet-natured and easy to get along with. He's content to hang around the house most of the time, but he likes to

go out for ice cream now and then, too. He has interesting stories to share and he likes to sit and talk with whoever will take time to listen and visit with him. He has always been a kind and loving father to me, and I love him very much, too. I'm willing, and even glad, to be there for him during this time in his life.

Other things are also true, though.

He rarely sleeps more than a few hours at a time, so we are back to the 24-hour day that is common with infants. His vision is blurry most of the time because he misplaces his glasses often. He's "lost his teeth" again, after accidentally throwing away his dentures one evening, so we must make sure to serve soft foods or cut up tiny bites at every meal. He sometimes drools and he loses things and he leaves a trail of tissues and washcloths throughout the house. I'm reminded of tripping over a toddler's toys in the old days. He's unsteady on his feet and wobbly when he walks, but as determined as toddlers who are just learning to walk; we can only encourage him to hold on to a nearby wall or chair, since he insists that he is fine and therefore refuses to use the several canes and walkers that are available around the house.

Sometimes he falls and we make another pilgrimage to the emergency room. I can already foresee a time when he will need more (ahem) "personal" assistance, though we are not at that point quite yet. For now, I'm grateful that we only need to remind him to bathe...although we do stay within earshot in the house while he does so, just in case. His frequent medications schedule is relentless

and has much the same effect on our lives as having a nursing baby did previously.

In terms of his mental status, things are much the same. Most notable is his sense of immediacy—everything is Important for him and needs to happen Right Now, much the same as with young children who simply don't quite yet understand that "later" and "tomorrow" are even real things that can occur. And so, we are re-teaching Dad how to wait. His memory is okay, but not quite reliable enough anymore for me to be confident he can handle the details of modern life on his own, such as paying bills on time, monitoring his spending, calling the utility company, or even reliably knowing what day it is. But he is quite aware enough to remember that he should know all these skills, and in fact he is confident that he still *can* do all that, so it's a delicate balance for me, to keep him involved as a decision-maker, but still help him with making appropriate decisions. He wants to live on his own, and has rented a house close by me to do that very thing, but I'm not sure that he should, or even that he will be able to live independently. We have compromised on a six-month lease as a trial.

All in all, our "new normal" is very much like having a young child in the home again, and I'm not nearly as young and energetic as I used to be, nor do I have the same level of patience or interest in full-time caregiving that I used to have for a baby. I think back to when there were 10-15 adults willing to share the work of intensive caregiving, and I long for it in a new way now, when there's only myself, a housemate, and one teenager to help out. It's not nearly enough. More importantly, I know what I'll be missing in terms of having someone who is close by and readily available to help out during a bad moment or talk to about how hard it all is, and depressing, too, on some days. Sure, I could phone someone, but anyone who has lived cooperatively or communally for very long

at all knows that a phone call is not the same as having someone a shouting distance away when needed on short notice, or available late at night, when there's finally some quiet time for recovering and processing the emotions of the day. We in the house are working well together as we face this, and we talk things through every day, but meanwhile, we're all the same amount of exhausted.

We are only one family, with one aging parent in our home, but there are about 75 million other baby boomers facing similar situations, either now or soon. As those 75 million people start reaching this stage in their lives, where will they go? How will they and their families cope? Residential care facilities are exorbitantly expensive and can drain an entire lifetime of savings within a year or two. Personalized in-home care costs even more. Adult children with full-time jobs and children still in school can realistically be pulled in only so many different directions, and for only so long, before they are bound to crack under the pressure—will it be the Child or Adult Protective Services who end up being called in...or both?

Intentional Communities and Elder Care

Can intentional communities help with these situations? Should they? And if so, how? I think the answer is yes, they both can and should. Communities have led the way for encouraging all sorts of cultural shifts in how we eat, what we wear, who we support, what energy we use, how we communicate and care for the environment and all sorts of other areas. They can do the same for elder care, too, if they will. Here are some ideas about the "how":

First, stay open and welcoming to adults in late middle-age. With active lifestyles into the 70s, 80s, and 90s increasingly common, those visitors and potential members in their 40s, 50s, and 60s could very well contribute many long years of productive work to your community, before they would begin to need assistive care.



It's also likely that if they come to community later in life, it's because they have already fully explored and lived "out there" and they do indeed know what they are missing and are glad to be rid of it. Now that their children are grown and moved out, they are free once again to seek out a different life for themselves. They will bring extensive real-world experience and skills to the group and have great potential to be solid steady long-term members.

A reasonable concern, though, is to wonder if being a support for an aging population might become a financial drain on your community. I think, instead, it can be an income-producing situation, in much the same way that good things like organic gardening or clean energy have become. The world needs kind and loving people to help with caring for the elderly and communities need income. Based on our experience, I can suggest several ideas that would meet immediate real needs and provide a new source of income for your group at the same time. Families are already paying someone else for these services, and they could just as easily pay you, instead. There are opportunities for nearly all types of community-minded people.

For the more physically oriented community members, a great way to connect with the aging baby boomers and their families, while generating income for your community at the same time, is to offer a packing/moving service. When the time comes for an older person to move from their three-bedroom home where they've been collecting a life for 50 years, there's a LOT to pack and move and do and it can be overwhelming for the family to deal with all that STUFF at the same time they are assisting their loved one with the mental stresses of the transition. Just think what a relief it would be for them to see a truck full of friendly communitarian faces arrive on the scene each morning to sort and pack and clean and move, and with several people to help, the work is certainly more manageable and goes much faster. If someone from your group is ready for a road trip, then driving the moving truck to the new home could be another win-win bonus.

The process-oriented people in communities can fill an important role in helping families with the emotional issues that come with watching Mom or Dad regress from the confident, strong, and knowledgeable Parent into the shuffling uncertainty of advanced age. Granted, not everyone's aging experience is like that, but most of us will reach that point eventually. With young children, you know they are learning more all the time and you can look forward to their eventual independence. With your aging parent, however, the exact reverse is true. You know to expect only less and less as time marches on to its foregone conclusion. It's heartbreaking, truly, and hard to face these changes on your own.

Intentional communities, by and large, place a high value on communication and emotions and managing those effectively, and families need a safe and welcoming place to go for those kinds of conversations. Won't your community consider hosting a caregiv-

ers support group at least once a month, either for "donations accepted" or a small fee to cover the costs? And while you're at it, will you serve a meal, as well? It would be so nice for caregivers to have at least one night off from cooking each month.

After some time making connections in the extended area in these ways, it might be time to consider some type of more complete assistive care service as a community business. "Elder daycare" is a growing area of need. Many adult children feel comfortable caring for their elder parents at home just fine when they are home, but they are usually away at their jobs during the day and it's not always clear that Mom or Dad are safe to be alone on their own for so many hours. It's reasonable to charge a fee for your services, as any regular daycare for children would do. Or perhaps consider forming a separate nonprofit organization so that you can seek out grant monies for funding.

Providing elder daycare could work well both on-site and as an

in-town business. If your location is within a 20-30 minute drive of a town of any size, you can be fairly certain that there are elderly people there who would be glad to make that ride (on your bus, with your driver, since many of them no longer

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drive) in order to spend the day at your Center doing various fun activities with their peer group. There's a tendency, I fear, to think first of endless games of BINGO, but clients would probably also enjoy art or gentle yoga classes, classes in other new skills, book study groups, helping with preparing garden produce or basic office work or any of many other similar tasks. And if your location is too far from town to bring the clients to you, then it's worth it to consider renting or buying a suitable space in town, and sending a few community members in to run a similar program. It need not be every day, at least not at first while you build up your reputation for providing a high quality program, but it's likely to grow quickly and soon be worth it to offer programs more often or every day.

When you extend your reach into the local area, everyone wins. Your community can diversify your sources of income while making more connections locally, leading to greater understanding, more support, and meeting more potential new members. Families get the help they need, and with more people helping, no one needs to be so entirely exhausted by the experience. Aging parents have a wider circle of supportive friends to help them stay physically, mentally, and socially alert and active for as long as possible. The world needs the leadership, influence, and example of how to care for elders that the communities movement can provide. 🐦

Karbyn Eilde lived at a rural community for several years in the 1990s and intends to get back to the farm (somewhere!) as soon as she can. The "little girl" mentioned in this article is now a young woman in her 20s and she is still wonderful. She is currently majoring in Engineering at a university in Texas. Visit Karbyn at www.karbyn.me.