

Catching Up

Amy Halzel Willis

The birthday card featured a photo of two little girls, around age seven, dressed in white sundresses and hats and galloping across a field of wildflowers. The caption read, "We shared our childhood together..."

Nope, that's not the one, I thought, as I placed the card back on the pharmacy display shelf. While the photo was sweet, the message didn't resonate for me. My sister, Lois, is eleven years older than I am, so we never pranced around in frilly dresses together. By the time I was 7 years old, Lois was leaving our home for college.

My other sister, Cindy, is just two years younger than Lois. She and Lois *did* grow up together, whispering secrets in the bedroom they shared.

Like choosing a birthday card, living life with sisters who are always far ahead of me can be awkward. Whatever stage of life I'm in, not only have they "been there and done that," but they did it a long time ago. When I was in high school and college, they were married and having children. When I was planning my wedding, they were planning their kids' Bar Mitzvah parties.

But despite its peculiarities, being the youngest by a decade has its perks. My sisters and their childhood friends remember their excitement when I was born, and they still revere me as "the baby." Even better, my grown nieces and nephews affectionately dubbed me "the cool aunt," due, I believe, to my relative youthfulness.

Perhaps most importantly, it can be comforting to have siblings who, with years of experience, offer good advice and counsel. When my husband and I were choosing our first apartment, Lois encouraged me to go with a large unit that Ken liked, but was clearly dated with shag carpet and flowered wallpaper. As much as I loved the spacious floor plan, I couldn't get past the old-lady vibe of the place.

Lois came with me to take a second look. "Once you hang your prints on the walls it will look trendy," she explained, nodding her head with the conviction of a seasoned decorator.

Sure enough, it did.

When our daughter was born a few years later, I was a sleepless wreck of postpartum hormones and sweatpants. Anxious and a bit terrified of what I was getting myself into, I summoned my sisters in a panic.

Cindy came to the rescue, arriving at my home with a large bag of hand-me-down onesies and receiving blankets. She entertained Juliana by cooing with her, nose-to-nose, while I wolfed down a sandwich between diaper changes and general fretting.

"She's perfect," Cindy assured me, drawing upon her wealth of maternal wisdom.

Indeed, she was.

But the familiar and happy way I had always thought of myself -- as the mega-youngest sister -- began to change shortly after I had my second child. As I was deep in the throes of mothering young children, our aging parents both developed health issues. It started slowly at first. Our mother began to have episodes of fever that required hospital stays and blood transfusions. Our father became forgetful and was acting strangely on occasion.

While trying to keep a positive attitude, my sisters and I grew concerned as our parents became increasingly dependent on us to coordinate their medical appointments, help them fill out forms, and shop for them. Even when they were young, our parents had lived a delicate balancing act in which Mom did all

the cooking and Dad did all the driving. What would happen, we worried, if one of them were to become truly incapacitated?

It wasn't long before Dad turned the car keys over to us. Tuesday became the day, each week, when either my sisters or I would pick my parents up and accompany them to my mother's regular doctor appointment, which was near my home. When it was my turn, I would sometimes bring my parents back to my house after the morning appointment. After eating lunch -- tuna melts -- we would all play with my toddler, Daniel, while Juliana was at school. While I enjoyed this "special time," as we called it, with my parents and Daniel, I also grumbled to myself about having to chauffeur Mom and Dad around so frequently. Having left my job to take care of my children, I was striving to develop a home-based consulting practice. With the demands of my kids, and now my parents, I could hardly find the time to get it off the ground.

Things only became worse. Concern for our parents turned into dismay as our mother developed a fatal blood disorder and our father's disorientation worsened to the level of Alzheimer's. Mom took a serious fall from which she never really recovered, and Dad eventually needed round-the-clock supervision for dementia.

For more than six years, my sisters and I went full throttle managing our parents' care, chaperoning each of them through harrowing trials filled with hospitals and doctors, injuries and infections, nursing homes, walkers, and wheelchairs. Making small talk in the car, eating tuna melts, and playing with Daniel's toy trucks together eventually seemed like the good old days.

During those years, of course, the age gap that had always differentiated my life from my sisters' was still apparent, perhaps more so than ever before. As Lois was planning her children's weddings and Cindy was putting her girls through college, my days were mostly spent nurturing my young kids and struggling to grow my business. But when it came to assisting our ailing parents, Lois, Cindy and I shouldered the responsibilities fairly equally. We each called doctors, ran errands and refilled the pill boxes. We also took turns meeting Mom or Dad at the hospital at three or four o'clock in the morning, bleary eyed and shaking from the middle-of-the-night phone calls that had become routine.

Later, the three of us sat together at each of our parent's bedsides as the end grew near. Our mother passed away in 2011, and our father in 2013.

Throughout the difficult years my sisters and I spent caring for our parents, I suspected something was out of balance. For the first time in our lives, Lois and Cindy had no wisdom to offer me, and I had none to follow. Unlike getting married and having children, riding the roller coaster of our parents' slow decline was the first life-occurrence all three of us were forced to muddle through *in real time*. We each struggled mightily, relying on the support of our families, our friends, and each other to cope with the many ups and downs. But rather than my more experienced siblings guiding me along, this was the blind leading the blind.

And on the spring morning when our father died in his nursing home bed, so frail and weak he was nearly unrecognizable, my relationship with my sisters was transformed forever. As we sat holding Dad's hands and softly saying goodbye to him, Lois, Cindy and I were joined in an unfamiliar way. No longer trailing behind my sisters, I entered the next stage of life -- that of parentless adulthood -- at precisely the same moment they did. Not by age, but by the ordeal we had endured, and by our simultaneous loss and grief...I had caught up to them.

The years since my parents passed have been a mix of sadness and joy. While I am blessed with a wonderful and healthy father-in-law, life without my own parents has become an odd reality. I sometimes experience a lonely pause late in the afternoon, when I used to reach for the phone for a chat with Mom. Seeing my friends laughing with their parents on the beach, or multi-generational families eating together at the local diner, can spur quiet envy. I just can't help but notice, with the tiniest bit of resentment, that most people my age still have a parent or two to joke around with. Mostly, I miss my parents' dotting love for me, and for my growing children.

Yet while my sisters and I miss Mom and Dad, the circle of life has continued for our family. Lois' two children each had babies of their own and named them lovingly in memory of our parents. My children have matured as well. Juliana celebrated her Sweet 16, and Daniel will soon start middle school. With the burden of caring for my parents now lifted, my consulting practice and career are thriving as well.

"Mom -- you'll never believe this!" Juliana squealed recently, bounding through the front door and collapsing into a chair after her first hour-long driving lesson. "The driving

instructor was asking about my family -- he knows Auntie Loey!"

"No kidding?" I asked, bewildered. "How so?"

Juliana explained that the instructor, his wife, and Lois were all childhood friends.

"He and his wife remember you, too," Juliana continued. "He called his wife from the car and said, 'I'm driving with the baby's daughter.' She knew exactly who he meant."

The Baby. Clearly, I'm a legend.

I chuckle knowing I will be forever young to many people. But just as surely, my self-image has shifted ever so slightly since my parents' passing, and this change has been largely positive. I have realized that, although my sisters can't always walk me through difficult situations, their companionship on this unpaved road of life gives me great strength to weather the journey. And truth be told, the subtle parity I now feel with them has given me a new, grown-up confidence I never really had before.

"My sister, my friend..." read the caption on a birthday card with pretty pink roses, our mother's favorite.

Ah, that's the one, I concluded. Friends, yes. Always.

Amy Halzel Willis' creative writing has appeared in publications ranging from the Boston Herald to the Brandeis Magazine, to Covenant of the Generations: New Prayers, Poems and Meditations from Women of Reform Judaism. Amy is also a consultant writer specializing in proposals, reports, articles, and websites. With a background in health care and public policy, Amy helps clients from across the health care, non-profit, and business communities to achieve their goals through clear, focused writing. Amy's website, www.amywilliswriting.com, describes her business and contains links to her published pieces. Amy lives in Needham, Massachusetts, with her husband and two children.