

When It's Time for Dad to Give up the Keys

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Plus Two More Rituals for the Later Stages of Life

Ben was 85 years old with a list of known woes that included ongoing back pain, congestive heart failure, and depression. His days were numbered, and his daughters could accept that, but what kept them awake at night was the fact that he was still driving — and wouldn't stop. For men and women whose lives were transformed by the Age of the Automobile, nothing more boldly symbolizes the American idea of flexibility, freedom, and independence than driving. To Ben, it seemed that not driving was tantamount to giving in to dying; meanwhile, his daughters fretted over how many others he might accidentally take with him.

But one day, Ben confided that he'd had two near-misses while driving. Once, he had even blacked out for a few seconds on a hairpin turn. He was frightened, and his daughters saw an opening to finally get their father to relinquish his license. They came to us to learn how our program, Transitional Keys™, could help to ease this tough transition.

Transitional Keys (TK) is a groundbreaking program that uses the elements and structure of ritual — symbols, storytelling, music, prose, poetry, and food, in a choreographed and intentional manner — to ease people through whatever transition is occurring. In our programs, we believe that the structure of a ritual should mimic the process of the transition. The ritual should identify and reflect on what is being left behind; it should

acknowledge and accept the new phase, stage, or vision in life, and it should help the person integrate and move into that change. When enacting ritual, the feelings associated with change should be explored and expressed, allowing the participants to better understand and make peace with change.

Creating rituals for people like Ben presents a special challenge and opportunity for us because, as a culture, we lack rituals for the transitions that occur in the second half of life. Between retirements and funerals, as anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff once noted, “there is a universe of differentiation that remains a cultural wasteland for each to calculate and navigate alone, without the aid of ritual, ceremony, or symbol.” So we set out to create some ritual mileposts that we could share.

1. Giving Up the Keys First, we talked with Ben’s daughters and identified that this was indeed a major life-turning point for him. Then we agreed upon an intention: to help Ben transition from being independent, with his driver’s license and his own car, to accepting interdependence with the support of friends and family to help him get around. We decided that the appropriate ritual event would be a party, both to recognize his change in status and to set up an alternative transportation plan with the support of family and friends. With those goals in mind, his daughters began to gather symbols to support the transition.

The invitations featured a photo of Ben in his favorite car—a 1960 red convertible. A room in his apartment was decorated with more photos of Ben and his cars, ranging from his youth to the present. As guests entered the party, they honked a horn that had been placed at the entryway; background music included car tunes from the many eras in which Ben had driven around in his car.

Each guest was asked to bring a special IOU gift. The IOUs stated how the guest would assist Ben with his new transportation needs. Sarah gave him a gift certificate for five “taxi” rides; Dorothy and Jacob gave Ben a written agreement to drive Ben to the doctor and for his groceries; Susie agreed to be his “bus buddy” and ride public transportation with him. His daughters gave him a car-service certificate. Ben’s 18-year-old

grandson, Eric, was a special guest, and he agreed to share all of his car stories with his grandfather.

Storytelling was a big part of the event. The daughters recorded Ben as he described all the cars he ever owned, as well as some of his favorite car stories, including youthful indiscretions, family road trips, meditative drives in the countryside, and even boring commutes to work. On a table was a blown-up photo of Ben and his blue-and-white convertible. Nearby was a stack of colored markers for everyone to use for writing their wishes for Ben and signing their names.

To consecrate the turning point, the daughters gathered some of Ben's car insurance bills, repair receipts, and garage bills, and then — with great fanfare — all the paperwork was torn up to symbolically "let go" of the financial burden of car ownership. Ben then happily handed over his car keys to Eric, and everyone shared some car cake and handed Ben their special IOUs. Eric went last, thanking his grandfather and agreeing that the two of them would always share car stories. We knew immediately that this was a party worth sharing.

2. Downsizing Gracefully For the elderly, moving from one's family home is another extremely dramatic transition, fraught with deep feelings that are all too often downplayed or ignored. Much like giving up one's driver's license, the process of packing up or relinquishing treasured objects and belongings is often a difficult step into interdependence and mortality. Nevertheless, with people like Susan, we have found ways to ease the process.

Susan lived in the same home where she and her late husband raised their son and daughter. When she was 78, however, her adult children realized that the house had become too large for her to manage. While she did not have to move immediately, they came to us to develop a ritual plan that would take place over time.

Over a series of weekends, Susan, along with her children and friends, first organized her mementoes, heirlooms, and other belongings. Some things were identified for sale on eBay, some

were selected to go to charity, and special, significant, and treasured objects were selected to be distributed to family and friends at a culminating party.

The theme of the ritual party was to establish continuity, express gratitude, and build community. Everyone gathered together for a special One Last Time meal of favorite dishes, cooked and prepared in the kitchen “one last time.”

After the meal, everyone gathered for the distribution of gifts. Every object carried a story that was recorded and became part of the family oral history. Giving a blue flowered teacup to her daughter, Susan shared, “This is the flowered pattern I chose when I first married your father. Now it’s yours.” The album of photographs of all the pets who had lived in the house went to her granddaughter, who embraced it and said, “I’m going to be a veterinarian when I grow up!”

63The teakettle went to Susan’s best friend, and the large roasting pan used for Thanksgiving turkeys for over 35 years was given to her son, an aspiring chef.

Months later, just before the big move, Susan and her children walked through the house, going from room to room, saying good-bye to the house where they shared so many memories. With a feeling of gratitude, they left a “Welcome Home” note on the refrigerator for the new owners. As they walked out the front door for the last time, they turned the welcome mat around.

3. Creating a Caregiver’s Sanctuary While we have created many transitional rituals for families to support older adults, some of our most important work involves restorative rituals for adult children who are caregivers for their parents. Perhaps the most basic of these is the ritual creation of a sanctuary — a peaceful place to go to and return to for restoration and renewal. You can create a simple sanctuary in your bedroom or in your office by using a corner of a table or a shelf in a closet, outside on a patio or in a garage, or even in your car — any place that you can easily reach. Your sanctuary may be where you are caregiving or elsewhere; it can be wherever you can find

some space to claim for yourself.

Here's how to build a sanctuary:

1. Select a space. 2. Arrange something you can sit on comfortably — a chair or a cushion. 3. Sit comfortably. 4. Close your eyes. 5. Consider the objects that give you comfort; that rekindle your inspiration. What gives you sustenance? Which objects give you a sense of peace and well-being — these can be from nature, books, poetry, photographs and pictures, charms, decorations, or other things of beauty.

6. Assembling the objects and symbols that are meaningful to you will create your sanctuary.

Return to this place when you are able and need to find peace and quiet. Use your sanctuary as the place for reflection, journal writing, meditation, and prayer. The objects in your sanctuary will probably change with the seasons, the circumstances, and your moods and needs.

You may benefit from spending time in your sanctuary early in the morning or just before you go to bed; at the time of a critical medical procedure; or when you are especially tired.

As you continue as a caregiver, use your sanctuary as a sacred space where you go to connect with and care for yourself.

Centering Meditation in Your Sanctuary

This meditation will help you get centered and balanced within the sanctuary that you have created.

- Sit in a chair or on a cushion. - Breathe easily. Begin to be aware of your body. - Settle into your body with a sense of relaxation and quiet. - Close your eyes - Direct your mind to your spine. - Place your feet flat on the floor. If on a cushion, comfortably fold your legs. - Rest your hands in your lap. Palms can be open or closed. - Take in a full inhalation. - Exhale with a

sigh. - Once again, take in a full inhalation. - Exhale with a sigh. - Repeat at your own breathing pace. - While you bring your mind to your breathing, you may hear the ticking of a clock, or the distant sound of the television, or the breathing of the person for whom you are caring. - Let those sounds dissolve. If your attention gets captured by them, gently bring your attention back to your breathing. - Take in a deep, full inhalation. - Exhale with a sigh. - Let your eyes relax. They don't have to work now. - Release the muscles of your face. They don't have to work now. - You don't have to smile to anyone. You don't have to gesture to anyone. - Release your jaw. It doesn't have to work now. - How is your neck? It doesn't have to strain now. - How are your shoulders? You don't have to lift anything now. You don't have to shoulder anything here, now. Let them drop down, and relax. - Can you be still? - Can you be comfortably still? - You don't have to be ready to spring into action — not now. - Sitting quietly, comfortably, calmly, take in a deep breath. - Exhale with a sigh. - If your mind becomes concerned for the person you are caring for, gently bring your mind back to your breathing. - If your mind gets busy reviewing all the tasks that need to get done, gently bring your focus back on your breath. - Appreciate the calm and peace that is possible in your sanctuary. - As the demands of caregiving pull you off your center, remember that you can return to this centered place — your inner sanctuary.

Andrea Sherman, Ph.D., is a gerontologist, with an added special interest in the role of creativity and aging. Marsha Weiner, M.A., is a seasoned writer, producer, and educator. Both have previous careers in modern dance and are active yoga and meditation practitioners. For more information, see TransitionalKeys.org