

BY SIGRID BATHEN

▼ Why is it that we often end up handling the tumult of adolescent children and the unsettling changes of aging parents all at the same time?

Driving



It's after 6 on a Friday evening when my daughter and I arrive on the outskirts of Chico. As I survey the familiar terrain off Highway 99 south of town, I'm thinking that although we have made this drive countless times before, on this occasion the scene seems almost surreal. ▼ Before we left

our Sacramento suburb, where we have lived since she was 11 months old, my brown-eyed pal, now so tall and aggressively grown-up, insisted she be allowed to take the test for her driver's permit.

"And then," she said firmly, with the brash self-assurance peculiar to 15-year-olds-going-on-42, "I can drive us to Chico."

Right.

We visited four—*four*—stations at the Department of Motor Vehicles—the information counterperson who advised us where we needed to go (the line next to hers), the clerk who processed the forms, the proctor who handed out the exam, and the man who corrected it.

As I watched her standing by the test area, I wanted to reach out and reassure her, but there was a nasty sign: *Do Not Talk to Visitors!* And I remembered my own driver's test in Chico, driving my parents' 1961 gold Cadillac—long, with fins. I nearly knocked over the parallel parking poles. I always avoided parallel parking after that.

My mother, who was the principal driver of that car, used to let me take it to school occasionally at Chico High, and I would park (illegally) off campus so that during lunch I could zip down to the printer who published the school newspaper. I was consumed by newspapers in those days, and I regularly battled the class advisor over the content of the paper. She would change my inspired prose; I would borrow my mother's car, drive to the printshop at lunch, and shamelessly change it back.

Occasionally, the vice principal called me into his office, barely able to contain his amusement, and reminded me that students were not to park off campus.

"So how do you *know* I parked off campus?" I inquired belligerently.

"It's pretty obvious," he said. "I don't know too many students who drive gold Cadillacs."

Oh.

Once, I scraped the side of the Cadillac as I exited the Second Avenue parking lot behind my father's store. My parents, always meticulous about repairs, never fixed the gash, leaving it for me to see every time I walked into the garage. In retrospect, it seemed an entirely effective, even ingenious, punishment.

I'm thinking about all that as we cruise into town in our reliable Japanese-American compact. My daughter passed the test, but she is not driving. Yet. We tried a few harrowing turns around the DMV parking lot, and in the interest of family harmony I figure I'll ask my dad to take her out to the old roads by Chico Municipal Airport, where he taught me to drive 30 years ago.

And I know that when we arrive at my parents' house by Bidwell Park, I will be no more prepared for the "Sold" sign in the front yard than I am for my daughter's driving.

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Where is it written that one should be expected to handle the vagaries of adolescent children and aging parents at the same time?

Although my parents have attempted to prepare us for this reality, I fully expect the sign to be gone when I arrive. This is, after all, *my* house too!

In the recesses of what passes for long term financial and career planning in my life, I had always harbored the view that I would somehow end up in Chico at the appropriate time, find a suitably rewarding (and financially reasonable) career option, and *buy the house*.

In this fantasy, my daughter would graduate from Pleasant Valley High School, built after I graduated from old, overcrowded Chico High. My husband and I would maintain this vast piece of real estate (he would also find a suitably rewarding Chico job), and we could all embody Eudora Welty's vision of family continuity—ignoring for the moment that Eudora Welty never married, and never had children who expected to finish high school in the communities where they were raised, and inherit their parents' house after they died.

My parents had sold the house where I was raised because it was too big, and bought a lovely small lot on which to build an appropriate, smaller house in one of the new subdivisions that had cropped up south of town.

The house where I grew up, where my parents have lived for nearly 40 years, is an exquisite place, and it will be preserved forever in countless photographs. They have sold it to a family with young children—who I earnestly hope will appreciate it as much as we did—growing up, as my sister and brother and I did, by the natural treasure of Bidwell Park.

I know it is acutely more difficult for my parents to leave it than it is for me to lose it.

I marvel at my parents, now 75 and 72, who still play golf and dance regularly at the country club they helped found, who enjoy a rich social life in the community they love, and who maintain the capacity to grow, to adapt, to change.

They even bought two stunning modern couches for the new house. I had expected staid, traditional florals when they took me to the furniture store.

I plan to rent a U-Haul in Chico to bring the old couches back to my house, because I can't bear to see them go to strangers. I will stash the kitchen table in my attic—perhaps for the nearly 16-year-old, who in a few years may be looking for something with which to furnish an apartment. She and a Newport Beach cousin have long said they plan to "take care" of their grandparents when they go to Chico State.

I wonder who exactly will take care of whom. ▼