

Greenfield: Discovering the dynamics of relationships as we age

By **Carol Greenfield**/ Guest Commentary
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Last fall as I channel surfed through early-morning broadcast TV, I happened upon a familiar face and a discussion that caught my attention. Seated across from "NBC Today Show" host Katie Couric was Judsen Culbreth, former editor of Working Mother magazine, discussing her newfound passion - online dating! Culbreth was promoting her recently published book "Boomers Guide to Online Dating," in which she successfully combines her personal experience of looking for a soul mate in midlife - and finding one - with her writing and editorial skills to advance the cause of mid-lifers seeking new relationships.

From this interview, as well as discussions with several single mid-life friends, the seeds of a Discovering What's Next Library Forum were sown. We quickly learned, however, that although a Google search on the word "Relationship" leads to a preponderance of dating services, the concept of relationships at mid-life is one of much more complexity than finding a date or one's next soul mate.

The nature and type of our relationships changes as we age. On a personal level, relationships with family - grown children and perhaps even grandchildren, with spouses and with elderly parents - intertwine in new and unexpected ways. We lose friends, we make new friends and sometimes, with the help of the Internet, we even try to reconnect with friends from the distant past. As we leave the workforce, we may lose our colleagues either gladly or sadly, but often find new collegial opportunities through volunteer work in the community. Often our relationship to God evolves as we approach life's changes and challenges and seek out spiritual guidance. On May 18 at 7 p.m. at the Newton Free Library, Discovering What's Next will present a lively forum on the changing dynamics of personal and professional relationships and use both passages from great literature and real life stories to frame the discussion.

In reflecting on this upcoming program, I realized that the recent death of my beloved father, Bernard Cohen, taught me a lot about relationships, and as a result has become my own "story" about relationships and aging.

In my dad's last year of life, in particular, I learned the significance of developing new relationships even at the end of life. For 65 years, my parents had been constant companions and caregivers to each other. For the last nine months of his life, my mom was no longer physically able to be his primary caregiver. This was extremely difficult for her to accept and she struggled with that. However, our family was most fortunate to have found Ray Madrid, a Philippine aide, who not only became my dad's full-time caregiver, but also my parents' new best friend. What Ray did for my dad, and the way he did it, was extraordinary. Ray brought joy to my parents' lives while they were utterly consumed with the frailty of my dad's condition. He shared stories from a culture halfway around the world as well as discussions of the challenges that immigrants like Ray face on a daily basis. But he never let his own problems affect his caring for my dad and in fact welcomed his insights as to how some of these problems could be remedied. Although Ray had only known my dad as a very frail 94-year-old man, there was an obvious mutual respect that was truly beautiful to observe.

On March 27, as Ray finished feeding him breakfast at Long Beach Medical Center, my dad reached out and shook Ray's hand and said, "Thank you, I'm very tired and I want to go to sleep now." Shortly after, he died.

When I reflect on my dad's last year, I think that the final gift he gave to our family was that very simple "thank you" and the privilege of experiencing one's ability to create new and important relationships even at the end of life. And I say "thank you" to my dad for providing us with that wisdom.

Carol Greenfield is founder and president of Discovering What's Next: ReVitalizing Retirement. For more information about DWN and the upcoming May 18 library forum, call 617-796-1419 or info@discoveringwhatsnext.com.