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I'M NOT READY FOR MY PARENTS TO BE OLD

Conversation with Richard and Celia

Celia: So I had lunch with mum and dad yesterday, and I just realized how much they've aged. They've been the ones looking after me, and suddenly I'm thinking I'm going to be looking after them and I'm not ready for the change!

Richard: It can be difficult to navigate the changes and challenges when our parents are getting older. There can be grief, but there can also be celebration. I'm Richard Fox, and this is Messages of Hope.

We hear a lot about the fact that we're living in an aging society. But what about when it becomes personal and it's your parents that are getting older? Celia, I know your parents are in their early eighties now, and there have been some health issues in the recent past. What's it like for you?

Celia: My parents have always been really strong independent people, and they're in their eighties now. I was round there the other day and at the end of the meal, mum's gone off to make a cup of tea, she's come back into the room and she's wobbling, and the plates and cups are clinking. And I'm thinking this is going to go everywhere! It looked like a disaster about to happen. And I realized that my mum's got old. It started making me think about all the things that - okay, so what do we need to put in place? Are they going to be able to live in their home for much longer? What sort of help do we need to get them?

I'm jumping the gun here and going down a million miles an hour, but I'm realizing that things are changing. And I'm not ready for the change. They've been my parents forever, they've been the ones looking after me. And suddenly I'm thinking I'm actually going to be having to make some decisions about looking after them and they're so fiercely independent, Richard, you know? How do I navigate this?

Richard: I know, and it's difficult seeing your parents, who you've looked up to for your whole life, they've been your parents, they're almost like a superhero at times as you grow up together, and you're learning from them, and they're teaching you all sorts of things.

Celia: And they always know everything, you know?

Richard: Yeah, that's right.

Celia: The phone calls that you make, what about this Dad? This has happened, and what do I do? And they always know the answers.

Richard: Yeah, I think it is difficult to go through that transition. My parents are a little bit younger, and so they're still quite heavily involved in our lives. But I can foresee that things aren't going to be easy down the track, so what does that mean for us and our relationship?

Richard: So, hearing you share about your parents and where they're at, I'm going okay, maybe I'll have to start thinking about where am I going to go with my parents at that stage?

Celia: Yeah, it's that change in dynamics I guess. How do you navigate this change in relationship?

When are parents are aging, there can be all kinds of tensions. How much should we support them? Maybe they're too independent to want help. And how do we balance our own family life with spending time with our parents? I guess one of the first signs of reaching this stage with your parents could be their ill health, or that milestone of retirement. Richard, how have you and your parents adjusted to their retirement?

Richard: Well I grew up on a dairy farm with my family, and we've been able to keep a little bit of the farm. And it's actually great to see dad go up and treat it as a bit of a hobby farm. We've got a few animals up there, and it's just great to see him go up there and enjoy it.

Celia: Because that's the dad that you've always known, is the farmer dad, isn't it?

Richard: It is. And so he gets involved in the gardening, even around our house. There's lots going on in our life, and he comes along and looks at it, and says, "Ah yeah, I'll help you with this and that." Mum is the same with cooking and all sorts of things, and looking after the kids. It's just great to see them still be a part of our lives and our world.

Celia: And it makes them feel we're still useful, you know? I guess as a parent you still want to be able to help your kids and be there for them. So, yeah, making those times for them to be able to be involved is really important.

Richard: Yeah, and making those memories. Like the time I remember spending up there with dad on the farm, even just taking the hay out, or doing those things. They're memories that I hope to hang onto even as we progress in our relationship and journey.

Celia: But also with your kids, it's really important for them to see your relationship with your dad and your mum. But also to create that relationship between them. I know how important it is for me now that my kids have lost one set of grandparents, and the memories are a little bit hazy because they lost them when they were quite young. And now I'm so aware, super aware that I want my kids to have that really strong relationship with their grandparents. And they do. My son drove down there the other day, he said I haven't seen them for such a long time, I want to ask papa about this. And he had a lovely afternoon with them. And that's so important that they have their own relationships with my parents, or with their grandparents. And I just feel like I know that there's limited time.

Richard: And so it's trying to find also those memories where ... you know, like your son driving down and just spending that afternoon. So, not the times where we're wrestling with getting old, or having those worries and concerns about what could

happen or be, but actually just to enjoy the moments, and to create those moments with each other, whatever interests we have, isn't it?

Celia: Yeah.

Richard: So, my dad was gardening and farming, mom cooking and the kids and things like that. And so it's just involving them in our lives still. Thank God that we can have those moments still.

Celia: It's a hard thing to conceive, isn't it? Because when you're young, your parents are forever. And getting to that stage where you're realizing that they aren't forever, it does change your relationship, and I find it difficult. I'm not ready to let them go, you know? It's almost like I'm grieving before I'm grieving.

Richard: Yeah, and I suppose it's one thing to help remind us not to get ahead of ourselves, but to enjoy the steps and the journey that we're on. And each stage of life has its different things to worry about, enjoy, and the like. And I think that's something to take heart in is those moments, and have those moments, and cherish those moments for what they are and what you're living in.

Celia: You're so right.

Richard: Because they will sustain us hopefully when they aren't here anymore.

Celia: You're so right.

Richard: So far today we've been talking about adjusting to the time when our parents are getting older. Trying to find the balance between worrying and planning for all the changes that will come, whilst still celebrating the moments we have together. Inevitably though, we will have to face the fact that they'll die. How can we prepare ourselves for that moment in time?

Celia: So, a few years ago, Richard, you know how my dad was really sick and in hospital for months. And we got to the stage where actually he was dying. And I wonder whether that's why I'm so aware, or super aware of my parent's mortality?

Richard: It's not easy to talk about our parents. Especially in this light. And having to say goodbye is probably one of the hardest things we'll ever have to do. It shows you how close we are to them, and how much they mean to us. And also the love and special friendship and relationship that they have with us.

Celia: And I guess it's one of those relationships where it has been the constant in your life. Your friends come and go, but your parents are always your parents. And no matter when you lose them, or what your relationship is like with them, they are this constant in your life. And when I think about that constant of my parents in my life, the only other relationship I've had like that is that one of God in my life being that constant. And I think even though I'm struggling with that changing relationship with my parents, it's actually really comforting to know that that doesn't change with God. I'm not going to have to parent him ever, he's always going to be my father. And I feel very lucky and glad that I have that constant there as I'm navigating this change with my parents.

Richard: Yeah, God puts these special relationships in our lives, and he is a constant there. And he does love us, and care for us, and gets us through. There is hope. So, even though we have to say goodbye to our parents at some stage, we don't ever have to

say goodbye to God. And he has a generous love, a very compassionate God, who cares for us, and can nurture us on this journey.

It's reassuring to know that we're not alone. There is God there with us giving us hope and a direction that he's always going to be there for us, caring for us, and giving us a love for each other. Reminding us of memories of each other, enjoying each other as we go through those transitions in life.

Celia: And intellectually, I know that what happens for mum and dad at the end of their life is going to be great for them. It's hard for me, but I know that God has got me. He's got them, and he's got me. And while I'm grieving that loss of being cared for and being looked after as a child by my parents, I can still be a child with God, who's caring for me and covering me. He's the person we can all run to when we need help.

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