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The New Old Age

Caring and Coping

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Moving Murray

By *PAULA SPAN*

Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times Paula Span with her father, Murray Span, 88.

I spent a recent weekend in southern New Jersey with my father, carefully labeling his entire wardrobe — every sock, pajama top and handkerchief — with a black Sharpie. The continuing care retirement community he's moving to will do his laundry weekly, and it wants his name on each garment.

That wardrobe was shrinking. We rummaged through closets and drawers and filled six trash bags with rarely worn clothing, which I brought home and arranged for a charity to pick up.

"Is this hard for you, Dad?" I asked as I bagged polyester sport jackets circa 1986 and Western-style shirts from long-ago winters in Arizona. He was watching the gradual dissolution of his home. Why wouldn't that be tough?

But he said it wasn't. "I don't attach to clothing," he said. (Attach? Has he been having extensive conversations with his yoga teacher?) "It's people that I'll miss."

My father, Murray, will turn 89 in September. He has been living on his own in an apartment building that a gerontologist would call a N.O.R.C., a naturally occurring retirement community. It was never designed for senior housing, but a cluster of old people have aged there together, sharing rides, passing around extra containers of soup and schmoozing in the lobby while waiting for the mail to arrive. This small community has meant a lot to him.

During our many conversations about the future, he'd always been clear that when he eventually faltered, he wanted to move to an assisted living facility. He's a gregarious, outgoing guy who likes to be around people; he thinks home care would be too isolating. We'd actually visited assisted living places that might serve, one day.

But he had chugged along, healthy and lucid and not really in need of much help. He could have stayed in his N.O.R.C., if he wanted to — and sometimes he did want to.

Last fall, when some of his buddies were in the hospital or moving closer to family, he had told me how his cohort was thinning, how nobody played bingo in the rec room downstairs anymore. Most days, folks no longer convened to await the mail. And shopping and cooking (defrosting, mostly) was getting bothersome.

“It sounds like you think it might be time to move, Dad,” I’d said cautiously, not wanting to push him. He was sounding a little lonely.

“I think maybe so,” he’d said.

So of course I’d sprung into action, assembled a team, started looking for facilities. Not only did I want to make this transition as easy as possible for him — though it’s never easy — but I felt the pressure of having written about elder care for several years. I’m the one who’s supposed to know how to do this! I can’t blow it!

Dad wavered, though, and decided he’d rather wait until spring. He didn’t want to spend so much money. He didn’t want to leave his friends, his volunteer work, his congregation. Maybe it wasn’t time, after all. I backed off.

For several months, every time a neighbor went into the hospital, he thought about moving. Then, when things stabilized, he figured, what’s the hurry?

Now it was spring and we were preparing for his new home, probably his last. What had changed?

It was a dreadful, snowy winter, for one thing, and getting around was hard. (Dad uses a walker because a bout of Bell’s palsy messed up his balance.)

More important, he had had a minor traffic accident, misgauging a left turn. Nobody was injured — Dad, the friend he was ferrying to a doctor’s office and the other driver were all fine — but it troubled him. After a restless night, he’d called to say that he thought he should stop driving before he hurt someone.

Brief digression: Yes, my sister and I do know how lucky we are. My father is Mr. Rationality, and that makes everything simpler.

He was right to give up his nearly totaled car, no doubt, but it made him dependent on friends for rides to the synagogue, to yoga class, to the supermarket. For years, he’d gone out in the morning to buy the newspaper, which then got passed around the building the rest of the day. (Why would you pay 75 cents for your own copy when you could read Murray’s?) Now, he had to relinquish his paper route.

Besides, Mr. Rationality has always been the guy who advocates doing things before a crisis hits.

He and my mother had sold their bungalow, divesting themselves of 40 years worth of stuff, and had moved into this elevator building when they were both still in reasonably good health. A year later, she had cancer and they were thankful they’d coped with the multiple headaches of moving when they did.

The current situation, I’d told my father as he vacillated, was much the same. He could stay in his N.O.R.C., 125 miles from his daughters, for months or maybe years. But the odds were that at some point he’d need more care. (I left out the part about some people waiting

until they're too sick for assisted living.) It made sense to move while he still had the vigor to adjust to a new environment.

"I hate leaving everybody here," he'd finally concluded. "But it's only a matter of time, and then we'd have to do it after something happened, after I fell or something. And that would be more difficult."

Yes. Much.

So the move is on — to an independent living apartment in a facility that also offers assisted living and a nursing wing and is 3.8 miles from my home. With my father's permission, I'll be writing about the process, which is just as stressful and fraught as everyone here probably knows, even for Mr. Rationality.

Here we go. Wish us luck.

Paula Span is the author of "When the Time Comes: Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions."